

True witness, absurd violence

From the Editors in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [presidencia.gov.ar](#).

Pope Francis's response last month to the killing of a French Catholic priest by Islamic terrorists caused consternation inside and outside the Catholic Church. Critics were dismayed that Francis refused to place the brutal murder of Father Jacques Hamel into a narrative of religious or civilizational conflict. "If I speak of Islamic violence, I must speak of Catholic violence," he said. And in condemning the murder, the pope avoided the term *martyr*, calling the killing an act of "absurd violence."

Francis's use of the word *absurd* was puzzling to some. The pope seemed to be willfully or naively ignoring what—to others—was the obvious meaning of the deed. One observer declared that the murder was a "purposeful act of war on Judeo-Christian civilization." *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat concluded that the pope is so attached to the progressive ideology of religious tolerance that he cannot grasp the threatening realities of our time, which "promises something more complicated and more dangerous than the liberal imagination, secular and Catholic, envisioned 50 years ago."

But Francis was not indulging in wishful thinking, and his statement did something even more significant than resist lumping all Muslims with terrorists. To recognize a murder as absurd requires a special kind of theological courage, the courage that comes from faith in a God who transcends the narratives by which humans so eagerly seek to endow violence with meaning.

In doing so, Francis was reminding Christians of the true nature of Christian witness. Many people are devoted enough to a cause that they are willing to die for it; Christians are not unique in that respect. What marks a true witness to Christ is that their suffering imitates Christ's passion by absorbing violence rather than exciting it or provoking more of it. Christ's suffering and death was not meant to be avenged or to be the basis for more—and even more “meaningful”—violence; it was meant rather to show the emptiness of such killing and spell the end of such sacrifices.

Islamic terrorists dream of a messianic struggle that will transform the world. But for Christians, as Francis understands, the world has already been transformed by the sacrifice of Christ, and so they are called to resist such dreams and counter-dreams. That's what Francis is doing, and his witness helps us better understand the witness of Father Hamel.