

**"A Reflection on September 11" from Rev. Scott R. Pilarz, S.J.**

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A REFLECTION ON SEPTEMBER 11

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On September 11, 2001, I stood on the rooftop of an apartment complex in Washington, D.C., overlooking the Potomac River surrounded by college students. Smoke was rising on the Virginia shore. For several minutes, the source of the smoke remained a mystery. Eventually, it became clear that the Pentagon had been attacked. An eerie silence settled over the city for the rest of that day and for days to come. In the silence, people began struggling to find meaning and significance. That struggle has continued for five years as Americans and all people of good will wrestle with a wrenching tragedy, the reasons for it and an appropriate response.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, reasons were difficult to discover. That fall semester, I was teaching a course on Renaissance poetry, and the words of John Donne, though centuries-old, seemed especially apt: "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone." Donne was reacting against scientific discoveries that forced him to abandon his long-held worldview. What we discovered on that tragic morning forced the same for us. Our understanding of the world and our place in it were rendered inadequate. In particular, our sense of invulnerability was shattered every bit as much as New York's grand Towers and the center of our Nation's defense. Suddenly, all was risk and uncertainty.

Five years later, it is somewhat easier to articulate what we have been learning in the wake of that awful day. The answers remain partial, and we await the perspective afforded by an even longer view. But in the meantime, we are increasingly aware of our interdependence and the need for international and intercultural understanding. Any sense of standing alone in the world, as individuals or as a nation, has been dispelled. If coherence is to be recovered, the first step lies in a commitment to building community, both locally and globally.

This fall I am teaching the same course, albeit on another campus. As the semester begins I am surrounded again by students who struggle to understand the world and their place in it. Perhaps they are less naïve than were college students five years ago. But they are no less hungry for meaning. And in their hunger, I find hope. Growing up in the shadow of 9/11, they are more aware than members of previous generations that they bear a responsibility for making the world more gentle and just. They cannot take for granted the sense of security, false or genuine, that perhaps made others in years past more complacent. 9/11 was and remains a crack in time as well as a call to action. Five years ago, we came together as never before in communities large and small, supporting and sustaining one another. Five years later, in the press of our lives and world events, we run the risk of renegeing on that generous response. Today's memorials and reminders can invite us to a recommitment to the common good and the world's well-being.