

War: in the Crosshairs

Since I am an only child having neither brothers nor sisters to fight with, my first experience of war came in the card game of the same name. It was thus that I first experienced the all-too-human drive for competition, the desire to “beat the pants off of” an opponent. This desire, however, put little Jimmy at risk, for it not only provided an opportunity for what Jim McKay used to call “the thrill of victory”, but also opened him up to “the agony of defeat”. The reality therapy thus inflicted, as well as the idealism which formed me in the late sixties and early seventies, followed eventually by my courses in moral theology, have dissuaded me from being an unquestioning war hawk. The proliferation of wars in the headlines – not only in Ukraine, but also in Africa and the Middle East – have led me to revisit the question.

Whereas my baggage of experience includes Edwin Starr's musical protest “War, huh, what is it good for? Absolutely nuthin’!”, it also includes the “just war theory” studied and debated in the seminary and in community. An accurate picture cannot be found solely by polling bellicose hawks or pacifist doves - as, some would say, is the wont of some media moguls : each constituency has a distinct vision providing it with a bit of the truth, but either extremist view, taken in isolation, at best provides half-truth – which, by the way, is the definition of heresy. Please be patient as I try to do a tightrope walk so as not to fall into such heresy.

The preservation of life is the strongest of our God-given innate instincts. Believe it or not, there is a correlation between God's will and our deepest longings, whence the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”. I believe strongly that the Holy Spirit leads the Church to an ever-fuller understanding of this indissoluble link between God's law and our personal and communal well-being; for this reason, the fostering of life needs to be at the basis of the Church's teaching and of our preaching. All of this shows that God is decidedly “Pro-Life” - except, of course, that God's “Pro-Life” stance is not limited to the unborn. Jesus said, “I have come so that you might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10: 10), and so anything or anyone restricting this fullness of life for any person or any group can be seen to violate the fifth commandment. Jefferson's right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” seems consistent with Jesus' teaching, since it makes any violation of this right not only a sin but also a crime.

The injunction against killing is further broadened by the second great commandment singled out by Jesus: “Love thy neighbor as thyself”; in other words, love of neighbor should not trample an equal love of self. This healthy love of self, in addition to our self-preservation instincts, sometimes demand drastic preventative measures, such as when we are confronted with those whose love excludes us. In this regard, I am reminded of a radio interview with a peaceful man in Sanaa, Yemen whose life was being threatened; when asked how he reconciled his non-violent stance with the gun in his hand he said: “Non-violent – yes; but, you don't have the right to kill me!”

Moreover, we must remember that love isn't all roses and chocolates and warm fuzzies: sometimes “tough love” is required. For example, I doubt the genuine love of parents who allow their children to run wild because they “love them too much” to correct them; truly loving means risking to confront the misbehavior of others in the hope of changing bad to good. A case in

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point: amid all the vengeful, hate-filled invective flying around, I try hard to refrain from sending tyrants and oppressors and invaders to an early grave or to hell; rather, I wish them an appropriate “salvific punishment” since, it seems to me, this is the only thing which will convince them to change their ways, and thus to save their souls. After all, as Christians, this must be our ultimate concern for all human beings.

So much for “just war” theory; the reality of blood and guts warfare often gets lost in theoretical camouflage. Where can one find salvation in all of that? At this point, I can think of only two saving graces.

The first of these can be found in the example of those who can legitimately be considered martyrs – i.e., those who have knowingly and willingly put themselves in harm's way, risking their lives for a cause greater than their own longevity; freedom-fighters and soldiers defending human rights against oppressors and invaders, both in Ukraine and throughout the world, fit the bill. John 15: 13 tells us that “There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.” In this way, these unselfish people are offering their lives in the same way that Jesus did on the cross; they are truly martyrs in the sense that martyrs are witnesses to Christ, writing their testimony in their own life's blood.

Not all the dead are martyrs who give their lives; others are unwitting victims whose lives are violently taken from them. Where is salvation to be found in their deaths? I draw your attention to a cross which may be found in your parish church - perhaps a hand cross which the priest uses, or maybe a processional cross. On such a cross, there are often images on both sides: on one side is pictured the crucified Jesus, while on the other side is shown the Risen Christ. These are the two faces of the same saving mystery: one cannot have crucifixion without resurrection – and vice versa. If God can bring salvation from the horror of the Cross, we can trust Him to open the door to grace through the hole in our hearts brought about by the loss of those we are called upon to love.

This month, followers of both calendars celebrate this same life-giving Cross, whose glory shines more clearly through the self-offering and the tears than through the flowers and decorations. I am reminded of two lines of a song I heard not too long ago, “Venusia” by Patrice: “Once you're ready to die, you'll live for ever; once you're ready to cry, you're truly alive...” Isn't this what the Cross is all about? Only our faith in the gracious goodness of our merciful God allows us to remember that life lurks where only death is evident, and this life is ready to surprise us, to awaken us from our torpor, to bring hope to our despair and joy to our sorrow, to supplant hatred with love, to bring unity to our divisions, to bring to our war-torn world the peace of which the angels sang at Bethlehem.

-fr. Jim Karepin, op