

ASH WEDNESDAY, 2014

It's no secret that among the many issues that divide our country these days is that of firearms. Many hoped that in the aftermath of the Newtown massacre there would be more stringent laws enacted, but so far that has come to naught. More generally, we sometimes hear people recommending that children, especially boys, not be given toy guns to play with or that they not play violent video games, on the theory that such games will incline them toward harmful, aggressive behavior as they grow up. Whatever side one takes in this debate, we have to recognize that images of battle and warfare are prominent metaphors in many religious traditions, including our own. The Collect for this Mass of Ash Wednesday begins with the following words: "Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up the battle against spiritual evil, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint." In that single sentence, there are militant references to "campaign," "battle," and "weapons." St. Benedict is also wont to use such language. Already the second sentence of the Prologue to his Rule says that the monk should be "armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord," and a few lines later our holy legislator writes that "we must ... prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to [the Lord's] instructions."

Even if someone might feel a bit uncomfortable with the military imagery of the Bible, the Holy Rule, and so much else in Christian literature, all of us must at least admit that such language does bring home in a very forceful way the seriousness and difficulty of being a follower of Christ. This is not a calling for softies. As we go through life, we inevitably suffer various wounds on what might be called the battleground of life, many of these wounds being self-inflicted. This is why Pope Francis was quite correct when he spoke of the Church as being

a kind of field hospital, even as today's Prayer after Communion asks that our Lenten practices may be for us "a healing remedy." And if at other times in the course of the year we may have become somewhat casual about fulfilling the very real demands of our call to discipleship, St. Benedict is again realistic and to the point when, in his chapter on the observance of Lent, he admits that since few have the strength to live anything like a Lenten observance throughout the entire year, then we ought at least "wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times" (RB 49.3).

What this might entail for any of us will surely vary from person to person, for just as St. Paul tells us in First Corinthians that there is a variety of gifts (1 Cor 12:4), so too we must say that there is a variety of weaknesses. I want to suggest that here at the beginning of Lent it would be salutary for each one of us to ponder carefully what seems to be his or her primary weakness and to work on that in particular during these precious forty days. For one it might be envy, for another pride or vainglory or lust or gluttony or any other of what John Cassian, that great monastic forerunner of Benedict, called "the eight principal thoughts."

Such focus on one principal failing or sin could itself be understood with the help of martial imagery: rather than taking what might be called a somewhat haphazard shotgun approach, hoping vaguely to strike the target with one or another pellet, we aim rifle-like at one particular weakness, trusting always in the ever-present offer of God's help to help us strike the target or meet the goal. Indeed, in a few moments we will pray that God will bless "with the abundance of his grace" the ashes that will be placed on our foreheads, knowing that the real recipient of the grace will not be the inert ashes but the living beings on whom they will be placed to the accompaniment of the words, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

May this repentance for past sins and failings be sincere, and may we never forget that this "believing in the Gospel" is not primarily a matter of the mind but of living and acting in a certain way. Long ago Pope St. Leo the Great said in a Lenten homily: "What the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion, so that the Lenten fast ... may be fulfilled not simply by abstinence from food but above all by the renunciation of sin." And he went on to say: "There is no more profitable practice as a companion to holy and spiritual fasting than that of almsgiving, which embraces under the single name of mercy many excellent works of devotion.... The person who shows love and compassion to those in any kind of affliction is blessed, not only with the virtue of good will but also with the gift of peace." May we be truly zealous in showing that mercy to others during this holy season and thereby become ever more open to the healing mercy of God as we continue this "campaign of Christian service,... this battle against spiritual evil."