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Memorial Day

Michael Sean Winters | May. 26, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Growing up in a small town, Memorial Day was a big deal, the day our town hosted its own parade. When I was very little, I was mostly excited by the fire trucks that always took part in the parade down Main Street. Later on, Memorial Day?s focus was on making sure my trombone was polished and oiled, so I could join our school?s band in what I am sure were some ear-splittingly painful renditions of the national anthem and other patriotic songs.

The parade was always led by veterans. It finished at the center of the old green, where a flag was lowered to half staff and a wreath was laid at the town?s monument to those who had served our country as soldiers. A prominent townsperson would give a brief speech about the significance of the day. It was very homely, and while I would not say that the ceremony in anyway glorified war, it did make this young man aware that those veterans had done something brave and heroic. Indeed they had.

We have come to learn that not all of America?s foreign wars were noble or, even if they had begun as such, as in Vietnam, they quickly descended into the kind of bitter conflict from which no one can claim much in the way of glory. We know that American statesmen, and it has mostly been men, supported cruel regimes, armed very bad actors, terrorized innocents. But, none of this can be set at the feet of the men and women in uniform. Perhaps not all joined the military out of patriotic fervor; Some may have believed the television ads and wanted to ?be all that you can be.? But, they all knew what they were getting into and what they were getting into was war. When called upon to put themselves in harm?s way on orders from our constitutional government, they did so. That still counts as brave and heroic to me.

Since my days playing trombone in our high school band, I have learned about a different kind of bravery and heroicness, belonging to those who embrace the pacifist tradition within the Christian faith. Pacifism has never been the dominant tradition in Catholic moral theology, but its witness remains an import sign of the Kingdom, like the witness of celibacy and evangelical poverty. I do not share the pacifist objection to all wars and violence, but I am glad that they are present within our tradition, keeping the rest of us honest.

I have also learned a fair amount about military history. It turns out that many large, civilizational issues really were decided by the outcomes of battles and many of those battles were close run things. The Battles of Midway, the Atlantic and Stalingrad all could have gone the other way, with consequences too dreadful to imagine. As horrible as all the killing in World War II was, and it was very horrible, the consequence of a fully Nazified Europe was a yet more evil prospect. ?War is an ugly thing,? said General George S. Patton, ?but it is not the ugliest of things.? I recall the first time I heard that quote, sitting in what had been the general?s living room, the quote coming from the lips of his son, also a general, and it struck me as a morally sound statement then and it still strikes me as a morally sound statement today.

Last week, I mentioned a recent article in America by David Carroll Cochran. [1] I did not really engage his arguments, and apologize to him and to my readers for what amounted to a drive-by shooting, mentioning Cochran?s article in passing while moving on to the main object of my ire that day, an article by Margot Patterson. I have re-read Cochran?s piece and I still find it very unpersuasive and not just unpersuasive but

somewhat insidious. I do not see any pastoral value in making soldiers think that they are committing a mortal sin when they kill an enemy soldier who was conscripted and, just so, does not bear the moral responsibility for his being there. Cochran?s use of a young Joseph Ratzinger, impressed into service by the Nazis, as an example of what he thinks if the wrongful killing of young people forced into an army by a regime with which they have no sympathy is the rhetorical equivalent of a low cut dress: It intrigues but it does not promise anything. It was not the fault of any U.S. soldier opposite a brigade of Hitler Youth that the Nazis had armed these young people, anymore than it is the fault of the Israeli Defense Forces that Hamas likes to place its arms depots in schools and hospitals. The moral fault belongs squarely, indisputably, with the evil men who placed these children and innocents in harm?s way. Nothing in Cochran?s article should lead us to spread the blame around.

I am glad that some of my old neighbors in our little town in Connecticut went to Europe and fought the Nazis, and that some others went to Korea and prevented the most evil regime on the planet from gaining control of the entire peninsula, and that we Americans have come to distinguish between the valor of our soldiers in Vietnam and the moral repugnance of the political leaders who failed to perceive that the only way to win that war was to commit genocide and we should have probably never been there in the first place. I am glad, too, that the veterans who return from Afghanistan and Iraq will never be expected to shoulder the blame for the rationales of those respective wars. I am glad, too, that about thirty minutes from our little town in Connecticut, in Norwich, there is a monument to the French soldiers who came during the American Revolution to help us gain our independence. I am grateful when I walk the fields of Gettysburg that the Yankee line held firm on Little Round Top and at the Angle. And, I am very, very grateful that I have never been called to go to war myself. Shame on me if I did not, today, with prayer and gratitude, reflect on those who have served our nation when duty called.

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/killing-soldiers