

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 26 April, 2009

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Happy Easter-season!

It's getting to be a time of beauty, of warmer temperatures, of renewed hope, of blossoming trees and flowers.

But YOU might be missing it all because you're so busy.

If that's true, then pray with me now and restore your balance:

O God,
this is a HARD time,
a season of CONFUSION,
a frantic RUSH to fill my notebooks
my schedule and my mind...
only to find myself empty.

Give me HOPE Lord,
and remind me
of your steady power
and gracious purposes
that I may live FULLY.

Renew my FAITH
that the earth is not destined
for dust and darkness
but for vibrant life and deep joy.

Set me FREE
from my anxiety about the future
that I may take the risks of LOVE today.

Amen!

A THOUGHT FOR EASTER:

Standing on a London streetcorner, GK Chesterton (a British Catholic author, died 1936) was approached by a newspaper reporter.

"Sir, I understand you recently became a Christian. May I ask you a question?"

Chesterton replied: "Certainly".

The reporter went on: "What would you do if the Risen Christ were standing behind you at this very moment?"

Chesterton looked the reporter squarely in the eye and said: "He is".

And this is the most real fact about our spiritual lives: the Jesus who walked the roads of Judaea and Galilee is the One who stands beside us. The Christ of history is the Christ of faith.

The Gospel proclaims a hidden power in the living presence of the Risen Christ.

For me, summoning the courage to say YES to the present risen-ness of Jesus Christ is the most radical demand of the Christian faith. This YES is scary because it is so personal. In desolation and abandonment, in the death of a loved one, in loneliness and fear, in the awareness of the “pharisee” in all of us, YES is not a word to be spoken frivolously.

This YES is an act of faith, a wholehearted act of confidence that my faith in Jesus Christ provides security not only in the face of death, but in the face of my own malice. And YES must be said not just once but repeated over and over in the ever-changing landscape of life.

And how does the life-giving Spirit of the Risen Lord manifest itself? In our willingness to stand fast, in our refusal to run away and escape into self-destructive behavior. RESURRECTION-POWER enables us to confront untamed emotions, to accept pain. And in the process, we discover that we are not alone, that we are more than we previously imagined.

As Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jew who died at Auschwitz in 1943, wrote: we are able to safeguard that “little piece of God in ourselves”. We make it through the night. Darkness gives way to the light of morning.

DID YOU KNOW?

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PONTIUS PILATE?

The figure of Pilate has intrigued people since the time of Christ, but when all is told, there is very little known about him with certainty. He was a Roman equestrian of the Samnite clan of the Pontii (hence his name – “Pontius”). The meaning of his cognomen “Pilate” is not known, nor does anyone know his first name.

In AD 26, the Emperor Tiberius appointed him “procurator” of Judaea, Samaria and Idumea, subject to the Roman legate (governor of Syria), and according to the Jewish historian Josephus, he offended just about everyone. He outraged the Jewish population by having his troops carry their military standards bearing the Emperor’s image into Jerusalem (in Jewish eyes, this violated the 1st Commandment). He financed an aqueduct with money taken from the Temple treasury; he slaughtered some Galileans (over whom he had no jurisdiction); he minted coins bearing pagan religious symbols (violating the Roman government’s custom of respecting local religious sensibilities).

Another historian (Philo) records a letter from King Herod Agrippa to the Emperor Caligula, describing Pilate as inflexible, merciless and corrupt...and claimed that he executed people without a proper trial.

On the other hand, there is a whole body of apocryphal literature (writings of questionable authenticity) which was supposedly written by Pilate to the Roman emperor, in which he describes Jesus and his trial, and there is even a legend that toward the end of his life, he converted to Christianity. This can't be proved.

In another tradition, there's the legend that he committed suicide in AD 39 on orders from the Emperor Caligula. Seems to me that I once heard of a mountain in Switzerland named "Mons Pilatus" ("Pilate's Mountain") and that it was supposedly the mountain where Pilate killed himself by throwing himself off a cliff.

In Christian tradition, reaction to Pilate is mixed: the Western Church has always thought negatively of him, but the Eastern Church (under the influence of some of the apocryphal literature that I mentioned) has kept a more positive picture of the man. The Abyssinian Coptic Church, for example, considers him a saint, while the Greek Christian tradition honors his wife – Claudia Procula – as a saint.

Granted, we tend to see Pilate as "having his hands tied" by the religious authorities when he conducted Jesus' trial, but historically, this didn't seem to be the case. Pilate may have seemed confused in the Gospel stories, but the facts of history portray him as being very much in charge and not being too worried about whom he stepped on.

Hard to say.

Anyway, that's what we know about him.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, could you comment on the idea of "Spiritual Warfare", with respect to its existence, nature and how it affects us...or just the spiritual world of evil and good in general?

A: The concept of one's personal spiritual life comes from several sources, and one of the principal ones is St. Paul's "First Letter to Timothy" in the New Testament. He says things like "...fight like a good soldier with faith and a good conscience as your weapon" (1:19) and "Fight the good fight of the faith..." (6:12).

These types of references occur at various places in Paul's writings.

His use of "military terms" to describe "spiritual life" was based on the belief (very common in his day) that each Christian is surrounded by hostile forces which are constantly seeking to undermine goodness in the Christian believer and that "warfare" is the most accurate term to describe the process.

In addition, he believed that there was a definite distinction between the "flesh" and the "spirit". In Romans 7:23, he said this: "In my inmost self, I dearly love God's law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law that my reason dictates." And in Galatians 5:16ff, he says this: "...if you are guided by the spirit, you will be in no danger of yielding to the flesh..." In that same passage, Paul lists the "works" of the flesh and the "works" of the spirit.

So for him, if a person wanted to live a Christian life, he or she would have to constantly work to discipline the urges of the "flesh". It's important to realize that the word "flesh" doesn't just mean "the physical body"; the word is used to describe all those urges of the human personality that tempt us to ignore the call of God. The word "flesh" is NOT a synonym for "sex"; it refers to every temptation that comes to us from the fact that we are "human beings who have been warped by sin".

And in addition to our own sinful urges, we also have to deal with the objective “powers of evil”. See what he says in Ephesians 6:12: “For it is not against human powers that we have to struggle, but against the spiritual army of evil in the heavens”.

It makes sense, then, for Paul to use the military references that he does, simply because he saw the spiritual life as a real warfare – first, against the warped part of human nature, and then, against spiritual powers of evil that are all around us.

Interestingly enough, Jesus didn’t use the “warfare” terminology very much – Paul was the one who popularized it – but it became a favorite of spiritual writers over the centuries, and it remains a legitimate one – because “resistance to evil” does indeed become a type of warfare, and the battleground for each Christian is his or her own spirit.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

DISSENT:

The word “dissent” has become a dirty word in lots of circles these days.

In the Catholic Church, “dissent” has arisen in several areas: ordination of women as priests, priestly celibacy, and so on.

And some Catholics are opposed to the official policy of the Church.

And other Catholics are upset by such “dissent”, feeling somehow that “dissent” is the same as “lack of loyalty”.

As always, history can give some perspective, and here are some examples from the past of people (several saints among them) who were “dissenters” in their own day but whose ideas were eventually accepted by the Church.

So “dissent” doesn’t always mean “disloyal”.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 350-428):

A bishop and theologian.

His writings about the divine and human sides of Jesus were actually condemned at the 2nd Council of Constantinople (AD 553), but since the 7th century, his position has been taught as the true and correct view.

Hincmar of Rheims (AD 806-882):

A French bishop.

As the popes were gaining unlimited power, he maintained that bishops were not dependent on the pope for their authority but were true successors of the Apostles. His argumentation got him into trouble with three popes but became official Church teaching at the 2nd Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Hildegard of Bingen (AD 1098-1179):

A German abbess, mystic and writer.

Contrary to long tradition (notably St. Augustine), Hildegard taught that sexual pleasure between husband and wife is morally good and desirable and that women are in some ways superior to men. Her views have been echoed by other spiritual writers, including

the late Pope John Paul II.

Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274):

A priest and theologian.

In his day, he used the philosophy of the Greek Aristotle in his teaching at a time when at least three popes had expressly condemned Aristotle as a “pagan” teacher.

But just 100 years later, other popes expressly directed that Aristotle’s complete works be mastered by those earning advanced degrees.

Bridget of Sweden (AD 1302-1373):

Wife, mother and Church reformer.

She warned Pope Urban V that if he left Rome to set up Catholic Church headquarters in France, “he will be struck with such a blow that his teeth will shake in his mouth, his sight will be darkened, and his limbs tremble”.

He refused her message and died in France three months later.

Orestes Brownson (AD 1803-1876):

Catholic editor and publisher.

In the years before the Civil War, he was the sole influential Catholic who insisted that slavery was intrinsically evil and had to be abolished.

This brought him into bitter conflict with his bishop, who argued that the practice was “a divine permission of God’s providence”.

After the war, popes and bishops condemned every form of slavery.

Cardinal John Henry Newman (AD 1800-1890):

English theologian.

Cardinal Newman concluded that authentic church teaching comes about through a kind of cooperative enterprise on the part of both laity and church officials.

For this, a prominent church leaders called him “the most dangerous man in England”.

He was investigated by Rome and lived under a cloud for six years.

But later, he was made a cardinal for a lifetime of contributions to the Church, and his approach was recognized by the 2nd Vatican Council.

He is currently being considered for canonization.

So, “dissent” doesn’t always imply “disloyalty”.

As a matter of fact, it is often the impetus that provides new understanding of issues.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

If we really belong to God,
then we must trust in God.
We must never be preoccupied

with the future.
There is no reason to be.
GOD IS THERE.

Mother Teresa

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!

Best wishes as we get closer to the final days
of academics.
Know that you're always in my prayers.

Woodie