

Veterans Day

Nov 11, 2021

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We gather today to honor our Veterans. Although these days the term “honor” is rarely used outside of the military, those who are or who have been in the military immediately know what it means. We have honor codes, honorable discharge from service, the medal of honor (over 600 awarded posthumously), and when we remember former comrades we speak of them in a way that honors them.

Why is it that outside of the military so few recognize an occasion where the term “honor” is the only one that will do? One reason might be that in our modern egalitarian culture, everyone is supposed to be equal, so equal that we often don’t recognize or mention the qualities about a person that make him or her superior to the rest of us. When you honor a person you have to look UP from where you stand, and I think there may be an aversion today to “looking up.” To “look up” to someone, for many, feels like looking down on yourself. After all, we’re all equal. No.....we’re not. Not in this sense. What would life be like if the price for protecting our fragile self-esteem was that we were never allowed to “look up” to anyone? — We won’t keep score and all shall have prizes. — No, that is not real life. If I try to imagine a life where I never admired, respected, and honored anyone, where I never “looked up,” it sounds, to me, like a miserable life.

The 4th commandment says “Honor thy father and thy mother.” Is that the only time we are allowed to look up? One of the many reasons I enjoy spending time with Veterans is that they’re not averse to “looking up.” They are proud of their service and the rank they earned.

This was brought home to me in a striking way not too long ago. I’ve worked in several men’s prisons for more than 20 years. A few years, some of the Veterans in one of those prisons asked me to celebrate Mass in the prison as close as possible to Veterans Day. They had somehow discovered I was a Veteran and that is why they asked me. Of course I said yes. I asked the organizer if I could recognize the Vets who would be there. The organizer of the event, one of the inmates and a Vet, said, “Father, I think we’d prefer that you don’t mention us specifically. We’re all proud of our military service, but we’re not proud of being here. As Vets we shouldn’t be here. Just the Mass is fine.” So, naturally, I did what I was asked to do. But *after* Mass, each of the Vets came up to let me know, in private, that he too was a Vet. They at least wanted another Vet to know. These men had a sense of honor.

But what is honor? When Aristotle considers the various ways of life and the kind of fulfillment and happiness appropriate to each, he considers “a life of honor.” Although he considers such a life high and noble, he doesn’t think it is the highest form of life. And he notes in passing that it is better to be “*worthy* of honor” than to *be* honored. This seems right to me. We have all known and served with honorable men and women who weren’t publicly recognized or honored. We consider it a privilege to have served with them. We honor them when present, and if they’ve gone before us we honor their memory.

If you think of the men and women you honor the most, they probably were not most concerned with honor. Rather, they did their duty in a way that made them “worthy of honor.” It wasn’t about them, and they recognized that. If you’re trying to live an honorable life, you’re not at the center of it. It’s about your duties and responsibilities to others.

If you read medal of honor citations, you immediately notice that almost all of them involve the recipient having risked or given his own life to protect others.

In the Church calendar, today is *also* the memorial of St Martin of Tours, a roman soldier and later bishop of the 4th century. St Martin is often depicted using his sword to cut his officer's cloak in two and giving half as clothing for a shivering beggar. That, I'm sure, is why we read in today's gospel, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." It is reported that Martin had a vision that evening of Christ himself, saying, "Martin, it's me you clothed with your cloak."

After the vision Martin immediately asked for baptism and decided at that point he could no longer serve in the military. So this presents something of a problem with preachers on Veterans Day, though I don't think it should. There are reports — I can't sort them all out— that he spent another 2 (some say 20) years in military service at the pleading of his commander. But at one point he did say, I now serve God and will no longer fight. He was arrested and imprisoned for cowardice, but he offered to stand in front of his own troops in an upcoming battle armed only with a Cross. It couldn't be tested, because the following day, just before the battle, the opposing troops surrendered.

St. Martin is recognized as the patron of soldiers, and in particular of the Quartermaster Corps—I think the cloak has something to do with it.

But Martin is also a reminder that as noble as military service is, it is not the highest life. But the life of honor does open one up to another way of life where once again we are not at the center, it is the vocation of every Christian. We are called to become holy, and when we look up, it is to the Cross.

Soldiers, like all Christians, are *in* but not *of* the world. In times of threat and danger they are called to stand in the breach. Perhaps the dual citizenship, if you will, of the soldier is best represented by the chaplain. He's on the battlefield, like Fathers Kapaun and Capodanno, but he's not armed. Those chaplains gave their lives helping those who were protecting us. If you look up in faith, what we see beyond even honor, is the Cross of Christ.

Martin, toward the end of his life, now frail and weak, prays, as a bishop, as follows:

"Lord, if your people still have need of my services, I will not avoid the toil. Your will be done. I have fought the good fight long enough. Yet if you bid me to hold the battle line in defense of your camp (he's referring to the Church), I will never beg to be excused because of failing strength. I will do the work you entrust to me. While you command, I will fight beneath your banner."

And St. Ignatius, also a veteran, wrote this as the founding document of the Society of Jesus:

"Whoever wishes to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society, which we desire to be designated by the name of Jesus...."

Military service is honorable, and it is entirely compatible with living a Christian life, one that strives toward holiness. And one need not—one should not— wait until the end of one's military service to look up in that way.

I had the privilege last week to meet the commanding general of the First Infantry Division who was on campus. I discovered that the motto of the division is, "Duty First, No Mission too Difficult, No Sacrifice too great."

That's something every veteran and every Christian can understand.