

A Single Precious Life

It is a truism to say the cost of our recent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq has been high – stupendously so, and not only in the countless billions of dollars. The body count climbs as the worst fears of so many anxious families are tragically realized. Many more are the wounded who return as heroes, too briefly, and then face the lonely challenge of productively reintegrating into a forgetful society.

And for all the families of our own wounded and dead, allied and Americans, how many more families must there be on the other side of the battle lines, even if grieving misguided zealots.

The decisions to take up arms in Afghanistan and Iraq were complicated ones, in my opinion decisions made in good faith by trustworthy executive and congressional leadership. There are some who, in good faith would take issue with that assessment. It was the opinion of our U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that, given the complexity of the countless elements and arguments on either side, people of good faith could arrive at differing conclusions as to the moral justification of our armed interventions. Still, the war is a tragedy.

Even the strongest supporters of our action would have to have severe regrets that negotiations failed and that such “radical surgery” (“benevolent severity” is St. Augustine’s just-war description), had to be the last resort. One can hold firmly to the just war theory, be convinced that it has been appropriately applied in Afghanistan and Iraq, and still feel deeply troubled by the necessity of taking even a single human life.

The decision to go to war must always be the last resort and for one basic, incontrovertible reason: every human life is sacred, made to the image and likeness of God – even the life of an enemy. And the fact is, no one in our military that I’ve ever met wants to go away to war, much less to pull a trigger in self-defense. Thanks be to God, relatively few have had to fire their weapons to disarm lurking terrorists. When they do so and wound or kill, a psychological scar, deep and lasting might well result.

And victims are not only weapons bearers: the very atmosphere of continual, high-stress violence will inevitably test many family relationships as husbands and fathers (and yes, wives and mothers) return to tranquil households with turbulent memories.

What a privilege it is for me and my collaborators in our Archdiocese to serve our military's culture of generosity. The extraordinary spirit of self-sacrifice of our younger generations during my recent visits to Iraq and, many years ago as chaplain in Viet Nam, continues to impress and inspire. As it does for most America, I think.

As I offer Mass for our young peacemakers far away from home, the depth and sincerity of their prayerful solidarity with our Church universal is almost tangible, as just prior to Communion I pray, "Deliver us Lord for every evil, and grant us peace in our day".

Please Lord, grant us peace in our day.

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