

"Why Does God Permit War?"

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish, March 9, 2003

In the book of New Church doctrine *about Divine Providence* we find a chapter titled "Evils are permitted for the sake of an end, which is salvation" (DP 275-278). After an introductory explanation the chapter is divided into four headings:

- I. **Everyone is in evil, and must be led away from evil that he may be reformed.**
- II. **Evils cannot be removed unless they appear.**
- III. **So far as evils are removed they are forgiven.**
- IV. **Thus the permission of evil is for the sake of the end, namely, salvation.**

There is a lot in these few sentences, and much that needs explanation. But before we get into that let's give a little thought to all the wars and other evils that are described in Scripture, and especially note the fact that the Lord very often urged the Israelites to make war against their enemies. Not only that, but even in the New Testament the Lord said He came not to bring peace but a sword (Matt. 10:34) and He told his disciples to go and buy swords for battle (Luke 22:36). This of course contrasts with our usual picture of the Lord forsaking violence of any kind, but it is nevertheless part of the bigger picture. In Revelation, too, the opening vision is of the Lord with a "sharp, two-edged sword" coming out of His mouth, and this is followed later by John's account of "war in heaven" (Rev. 12:7).

So let's not deceive ourselves, or be deceived. Even though it is an evil - a horrible evil - not to be provoked under any circumstances, clearly there are times when it is unavoidable, as described in Scripture, when an enemy attacks, or when it abuses the innocent.

Of course the wars in Scripture are all symbolic, that is to say, they *correspond* to the battles of temptation that we must fight if we are to overcome the enemies of our spiritual lives: evils, falsities, resentments, jealousies, laziness, vindictiveness; whatever they may be. We read about these correspondences in our third lesson this morning (DP #251). Note that the context there is the argument of some that there is no such thing as providence, otherwise God would prevent wars. But the passage shows that wars are permitted so that evils can be seen,

acknowledged and addressed, lest they lie festering beneath the surface in human hearts and minds.

In this connection it is important to keep in mind that there are natural evils and there are spiritual evils. The Lord clearly distinguished them when He declared in Luke, "My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:4-5). This is reinforced in another teaching in the book about providence where we read that "the Divine providence regards *eternal* things, and *not temporal things except so far as they accord with eternal things*" (DP #214-220). In short, we must be willing to lay down our natural lives if necessary in order to preserve and provide for our spiritual lives and the lives of others, "For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26, John 14:27, 15:13 & 16:33).

Today, this week, we are facing the almost certain reality of a truly awful international conflict. And to make matters worse, it is not only the peace of a given region or of the several potential combatants that is at stake, the very fabric of the United Nations seems to be about to unravel. What is our appropriate response to this situation? How can we reconcile it with our faith in a wise and merciful, loving God? **Why does the Lord seem set to allow all this to happen?**

Well, of course we have our responsibilities as citizens - not just of our nation but of the world - to do all that is in our power to prevent this atrocity. We have our duty to try to understand, not just the outward circumstances but the more profound issues involving human freedom, order, judgment, good or bad government, and fair opportunities to obtain the basic necessities of life. And we need to be respectful of opinions based on facts as they are understood by those on both sides of any debate about war. No one wants to be responsible for any more death or destruction than is absolutely necessary, but it is an eternal truth that evil people will do everything in their power to deceive the good, and sometimes a failure to take up arms can result in even greater loss of life and freedom than to do so.

This is the fundamental principle of all temptation. The hells - or those representing the hells in our lives - will do all in their power to make us think that something wrong is alright or even good, and if we lose our

focus, our nerve or our faith in the Lord we will give in to their arguments and suffer far more than we would have in the battle to resist.

Now the doctrines are clear that we must "do good" to everyone, but in the case of those who are either evil or hurting others, particularly innocent others, the way to do good to them is to encourage - or even force them through punishment - to change. So in a summary we read, "Doing good (that is, giving aid) to the evil is doing evil to the good," for it gives the evil the opportunity to continue hurting others. To use an analogy given in the doctrines, it is like putting a knife into the hands of a killer.

One reason, then, that the Lord permits war is that by means of it the evil, or those who are hurting others, can be stopped, if not reformed. In this connection the teachings are very clear that wars of defense are entirely justified - IF it is the good of the society or nation that is being defended (TCR #407 & 414). On the other hand wars of aggression which are not necessary to defend the innocent but are waged for purposes of theft or domination over others cannot be condoned. The challenge for the citizen, obviously, is to determine the real reasons for war, and then act accordingly. But this is never easy!

First, **"Everyone is in evil, and must be led away from evil that he may be reformed."** Note, we are not born evil, nor are we responsible for any hereditary *tendencies* to evil, but we do all have such tendencies and it is true that if we don't identify them and correct them they will remain in us and we in them to our eternal detriment. "For," as we read, "those who give no thought to the evils in themselves, that is, who do not examine themselves and afterwards refrain from evils, cannot but be ignorant of what evil is and then love it from its delight. For he who does not know evil loves it, and he who neglects to think about it is continually in it" (DP #101).

When war breaks out, for whatever reason, we are given endless opportunities to see the evils first of all in others, as we like to do, but then, also, if we are thoughtful about it, in ourselves. For we can see obviously the real impact of the loves of self and the world when they are allowed to go unchecked. So we can see the dreadful nature of our own hereditary inclinations if *they* are allowed to go unchecked, and maybe get enough of a shock to inspire some reformation.

Second, we read, "**Evils cannot be removed unless they appear.**" Why not? Well, the obvious reason is that if we can't see them we can't recognize them or appreciate their real hurtful nature. Let's take an example: you really dislike someone or you bear a grudge because of something that happened between you and that other person. As long as you don't say or do anything horrible to the other person it may seem like there's no harm done. In fact you may not even realize how strongly you feel, but still it eats away at you. Then one day unexpectedly you blurt something out and the air turns blue. The damage is done, fists fly or tears are shed, more angry words are exchanged and you suddenly realize you are out of control. But you can't just "take back" your words or actions; something real has just spilled out of you and now you have to deal with it.

This is an opportunity for change - real change on the inside, as you can now see the real consequences of the attitude that caused this outburst.

It is the same with war. Typically war exposes underlying inequities in government policies, economic circumstances and other material or spiritual needs. These situations are almost all caused by decisions made in some degree of human freedom, and just as the Lord gives us freedom to make dangerous and foolish decisions so He also gives us freedom to make wise and constructive ones. *We must be free, otherwise there's no point to anything we do, and no reason for any of us to take any responsibility.* But when we actually see the impact of our foolish decisions, or the foolish decisions of others, then quite possibly for the first time we can see the need for change. And that, clearly, among other things is what we are seeing on the world stage right now.

The third heading in the chapter on Providence informs us that "**So far as evils are removed they are forgiven.**" This follows clearly and can be seen clearly in any conflict you may consider - for example the ongoing strife between the Palestinians and the Jews. As long as inequities or fears or hatreds continue unabated there can be no forgiveness, but *when the evils are removed* then there is at least the hope of some resolution.

A lot of people don't understand what forgiveness is, by the way. The Latin word in the doctrines is actually *remittere*, which means to send away. Forgiveness doesn't eradicate an evil or "wash it away," it is a process of *sending it away*, and **this the Lord Himself actually does for us**, working on our internal states as we do what is in our power to

do in external life by *shunning* evil feelings, false thoughts and hurtful actions (DP #100, etc.).

You know, all evil really comes from hell. It is not "built in" or created by society, as if that were some corrupting force in its own right. And in so far as it comes from hell it can be rejected and sent back there by a mindful effort. "If (we) believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, (we) would not appropriate good to (ourselves) and account it meritorious, nor would (we) appropriate evil to (ourselves) and account (ourselves) responsible for it" (DP #320). Still, it is up to us to make a conscious decision about what we will embrace, shunning and refusing to accept what is wrong. When we do this the Lord does the rest, forgiving, or sending away, the evil, keeping it under control.

How does this work - or apply - in evils of international proportions, i.e., literal wars? Well, every nation is made up of large states or provinces, local communities and individuals. Every army is made up of large divisions, units, groups and finally soldiers, one after another. So the whole business of war ultimately rests on the shoulders of individuals who must make individual decisions in free will according to an informed conscience. The simple act of voting, the choice of an occupation or life style, whether we are open- or closed-minded about other cultures and ways of life - all these things can add up to a nation's need or decision to go to war. So we must be careful what we think and want, and what we ask our nation's leaders to do for us.

"Thus," finally, we read, "the permission of evil is for the sake of the end, namely salvation."

As we've noted, evil lurks in the hearts of all people, some of it as hereditary tendencies, some as acquired inclinations, but unless we were allowed to think about it we would never recognize or acknowledge it. And as we think about it we are allowed to propose it to ourselves and consider how we might enjoy it or benefit from it. It is at this point - in our rational minds - that we have the opportunity to weigh the arguments against it, arguments, the Writings say, that come from civil, moral and spiritual considerations, "three graces" that provide for the healing of the will (DP #283).

In effect, we have the power to think and talk ourselves out of evil if we will just apply ourselves to the task.

Do we therefore also have the power to think and talk our way out of war? Well, most certainly we do, but in the case of war, obviously, it is a collective, public, mutual decision. So we have to work *with others* to achieve the right outcome. This is hard. And what we can't change we must accept - with eternal life in mind. But the Word and the doctrines are clear: in the case of war that is truly fought for the protection of life and the defense of the innocent, we must not equivocate or we will all suffer - the whole world will suffer - in the end.

What goes around comes around. Appeasement of tyrants doesn't work, any more than appeasement of evil thoughts and feelings works in our private lives. But by the same token we cannot allow ourselves to **become** tyrants or to be duped into supporting them in wars of aggression, any more than we can try to fight evil with aggressive, selfish attitudes. Only the Lord in His perfect love and wisdom can bring real peace within our own lives, in our consciences **and** on the world stage. Therefore let us pray this morning that our hearts may be open to the leading and government of His providence, and to the instruction given in His Word.

Amen.

*Lessons: Psalm 34: selections, with a children's talk about seeking
peace & the Lord's protection.
Matthew 10:34-39. Divine Providence #251:1-4, selections.*