



Te Absolvo—You Are Set Free: Offering Spiritual Healing and Reconciliation to Combat Veterans

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I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower¹

When he asked me to consider contributing to this project, the *Word & World* editor asked if it would be too painful to go back to the times that brought me to where I am at this point in my life. I hope that I can rise to the task. While I can claim some knowledge of the discipline of theology, I am not an expert on the theology of war and peace nor am I a pastor. I am, however, a retired career soldier. My last tour of combat was the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991. I want to be very clear: I served without any claim to honor or distinction. In fact, I feared for my own life and for the lives of the soldiers who served under me. Warfare, through the ages and up to today, is a complete breakdown of all the morals, norms, and rules present in a peaceful and well-ordered society. In the midst of war, one can easily lose sight of the fact that God lives. War is an incubator for despair, for both

¹Dwight D. Eisenhower, Address before the Canadian Club, Ottawa, Canada, January 10, 1946; at http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/quotes.html (accessed August 13, 2014).

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the combatants who conduct the war and for the innocent civilians who are put in harm's way. War is a state of existence when it seems that humanity is attempting to rend to shreds the goodness of all of God's creation.

My purpose in this article is to address the challenge of dealing with those soldiers who return from combat and are seeking reconciliation with God, the church, and society. This is a pastoral challenge and a challenge to the local congregation that requires us to help these broken men and women to realize that they are still children of God. They merit the forgiveness and healing that only God and the local faith community can offer them. This reconciliation is evangelical in that it is based in scripture, in our liturgies, and in the sacraments. The scope of the task crosses denominational lines.

The model I offer in this article finds its basis in my own post-combat experiences; it finds its basis in the sacrament of reconciliation. This model has three basic components. First, those who experience war firsthand are affected by their experiences, and they require a holistic approach to dealing with their experiences. The church can *only* offer what it inherently has been given by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit: the gift of reconciliation with God. Second, the call to serve those who have served in war is evangelical *per se*. Soldiers are often depicted in scripture as those who have great faith.² In many cases, faith must be restored. Third, organized faith communities, made up of those who have a strong sense of mission and a strong common faith, possess a quiver full of spiritual tools and gifts that are mediated through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that can help veterans realize that they are still children of God and still an important constituency of the people of God.

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THE LIFE OF A SOLDIER AND MODERN COMBAT

The life of modern soldiers begins to take shape during the earliest stages of their training. One aspect of that training (primarily for the Army, Marines, and Special Forces) is not usually tacitly acknowledged. To be able to render the "enemy" ineffective in combat, one must be able and willing to "dehumanize" the "enemy." From the beginning of the combat training process, this idea is reinforced. Once a soldier is placed in a combat zone, another process takes place that is even more insidious. The "dehumanization" of the enemy is manifested in other ways. A classic example is that soldiers will often demean the opposition forces by assign-

²See Matt 8:5–13; 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 7:1–10; and possibly, John 4:46–54.

ing a generic appellation to the opposition. Often they find a basis related to race or ethnicity. Most of those appellations cannot be printed in a professional journal or used in polite conversation. These appellations are either descriptive or connotative in the most pejorative sense of the word. Rarely in the heat of war is an “enemy” looked upon as an individual or as another part of God’s creation. In some ways, this is a necessary self-preservation and survival tool. War and combat are counterintuitive to human nature.

Very few soldiers, unless they are psychotic, are natural “killers.” Repeated deployments to combat can cause those who are “normal” quickly to become psychotic or perhaps indifferent killers despite their upbringing or natural moral instincts. Years of “upright” living can be tossed to the wayside because of one incident. Repeated tours of combat, or even a single tour, can lead to devastating psychological and spiritual effects. As of today, “slightly more than half of the 2.6 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan struggle with mental and physical health problems.”³ One can imagine that soldiers have, in one degree or another, always suffered from mental and physical health problems related to their service. Often, the mental and physical health problems are accompanied by spiritual problems. Martin Luther seemed to have understood at least part of the soldiers’ plight in life.

LUTHER’S VIEW ON SOLDIERS: A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE FROM A NON-LUTHERAN

In 1526, Luther wrote to an acquaintance in response to an inquiry on the question of the salvation of the souls of soldiers. While the primary purpose of his letter, entitled *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*,⁴ was to respond to this question of salvation, it is largely a polemic against those who would fight against their own (lawfully appointed) rulers; it also addresses other questions regarding the general vocation of the soldier.

Like some people of his own time and many people today, Luther seemed have a very general understanding of the nature of war and the lot of the soldier in combat. From this perspective, Luther offered his view of the nature of the “profession” of being a soldier. He stated, “I am dealing here with such questions as these: whether the Christian faith, by which we are accounted righteous before God, is compatible with being a soldier, going to war, stabbing and killing, robbing and burning, as military law requires us to do to our enemies in wartime.”⁵ The question of the morality of the profession of the soldier and the effect it has on the participants was one that Luther, at least briefly, attempted to answer.

Luther made a rather astute observation regarding the conscience and psy-

³Cited from “Poll Watch,” *The Week*, April 11, 2014, 15. See also Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “A Legacy of Pride and Pain,” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2014, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2014/03/> (accessed July 27, 2014).

⁴Martin Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 87–138. Referred to hereafter as *LW* 46 followed by page number(s).

⁵*LW* 46:95.

chological effects of the profession on those who practiced it, observing that “many soldiers are offended by their occupation itself. Some soldiers have doubts. Others have so completely given themselves up for lost that they no longer even ask questions about God and throw both their souls and consciences to the winds.”⁶ Even five hundred years ago, war caused soldiers to despair and to lose faith and hope in the inherent goodness of humanity and in their God. For soldiers today, those who are brought up in faith and lose it often carry the guilt of their “sin.” However, many young people today are brought up with no strong background in faith in God and these people, at least anecdotally, seem to be the ones who suffer the ill effects of their profession the most. “They have given themselves up for lost” and they resort to alcohol, drugs, and withdrawal from their family and friends in order to deal with their emotions and feelings caused by their experiences and decisions. Luther had other insights to the occupation of the soldier.

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Luther was able to differentiate between the occupation of being a soldier and the person who took up the occupation. Luther seemed to hold the occupation/vocation itself as a morally neutral or even righteous one. He states that the occupation itself “is right and godly” and that those who work in the occupation/vocation should hold those same virtues.⁷ The same holds true today to a certain extent. At least in the United States, we hold the occupation/vocation of “soldier” in high esteem. However, as a society we wash our hands of the duties they are actually called upon to perform: to find, close in on, and to render ineffective or destroy the “enemy.”⁸ Also, we have for the most part sanitized ourselves from exposure to war. As the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan went on and on, the major media outlets rarely chose to report on the progress (or lack thereof). Up until the most recent advances of the ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria or the Russian/insurgent movements in the Ukraine, film footage of combat did not regularly appear on the nightly newscasts like it did in the Vietnam conflict. Casualty lists go largely unreported or are buried in back-page columns in newspapers. Our national silence speaks volumes to those who are on the ground conducting our wars.

⁶LW 46:93.

⁷LW 46:94.

⁸This is the goal of most offensive operations in US Army military tactics. While the words I use here are a bit dated and from my own time in the military, the official description of offensive operations has not changed that much. “An assault is an attack that destroys an enemy force through firepower and the physical occupation and/or destruction of his position. An assault is the basic form of... tactical offensive combat.” See Department of the Army, *Opposing Force Tactics: TC 7-100.2* (December 2011).

Unsurprisingly, “Luther affirms the legitimacy of the military profession.”⁹ For Luther, the soldier serves righteously when he is serving the legitimate government, is fighting in a conflict that involves the self-defense of the state, or when the soldier is fighting against an unjust rebellion against a lawful government.¹⁰ In short, Luther’s understanding of the nature of the profession of the soldier as a God-given vocation was very similar to that of Thomas Aquinas. “The soldier’s duty is to exercise his legitimate and divinely appointed office in the service of God.”¹¹

However, exercise of that vocation in its ultimate manifestation in combat is the antithesis of almost every other vocation or profession, since soldiers conduct war as part of their profession. War, in almost all cases, is a violation of the dictum put forward by Pope Paul VI in 1972 “that the idea of Peace still is, and still must be, dominant in human affairs, and that it becomes all the more urgent whenever and wherever it is contradicted by opposite ideas or deeds.”¹² For many of those who practice the profession, reconciling what they have seen and done in war cannot be reconciled with that which we know is true and right: peace equals life, and war is the handmaid of death. So how can we as church and as Christians help those soldiers who return to “normal” life and who are trying to reconcile what they saw or what they did that they cannot seem to live with?

THERE IS A SOLUTION

I have borrowed the heading for this portion of my article from a chapter in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, better known as the “Big Book.”¹³ There are several avenues of approach for helping returning veterans on their path to spiritual reconciliation and healing. The scriptural basis for the suggestions found in this section can be found primarily in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12 and the Lucan parallels). In the attempt to find veterans who need or want spiritual help and healing in dealing with their experiences, we can borrow from another principle of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, that of attraction rather than promotion. If a member of the local church or congregation approaches us about a friend or loved one, we should reach out to the referred veteran, but do so in a respectful manner. If we are close to a local Veterans Administration facility, we could send a priest, minister, or small group of congregants to lead worship services at those facilities as a type of outreach. Eventually, the Holy Spirit will call veterans and we must be ready to assist them.

When veterans do arrive in our midst, we should make them feel as welcome

⁹LW 46:90.

¹⁰LW 46:91.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “War and Peace,” at www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/war-and-peace/ (accessed July 27, 2014).

¹³*Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered From Alcoholism*, 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001) 17–29.

as we would any other visitor or potential member of our faith community. The *Rule of Benedict* provides an excellent model for the reception of these people to our communities. “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matt 25:35). Proper honor must be shown *to all, especially to those who share our faith* (Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims.”¹⁴ The veterans who are coming to us are truly pilgrims. They have been wanderers and travelers. Often when they return they feel like aliens, foreigners, or strangers in their own land.

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Perhaps each local congregation could designate one or two veterans who are already members of the parish to act as “sponsors.” The recently returning veterans should not be treated as being “different.” Rather, they should be treated as anyone else who is coming to establish or reestablish a relationship with Jesus Christ and the church. The role of the local faith community and the members who make up that community is to effect “the reconciling, community-building work of the triune God.”¹⁵ Soldiers are very adept at working as part of a team and in very structured and “tight” communities in the course of military life. If we can attract them to our congregations, it should not be terribly difficult to incorporate them into our church communities. They understand that “our identity arises within community—within the fellowship of God’s people in the church.”¹⁶ Reconciliation takes place at the individual and local church community levels. As stated earlier, the process of reconciliation is the starting point for bringing the estranged veteran back into the community of faith.

Reconciliation is first of all a ministry of the church that is closely tied to the idea of the economy of salvation. Reconciliation can be broadly summarized as a “coming from” and a “returning to” God. This concept is often applied to the economy of salvation of all humanity. However, it can be applied to individual cases of one coming from God and returning to God via the auspices of the church. This is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Reconciliation is only accomplished through the intercession of Jesus the Christ. However, it is a ministry of the church and of the individuals who make up the church, ordained and lay alike. Often the returning veteran will have contrition for acts or omissions that took place when they were in combat and the church must be ready to assist the individual in the *reditus*, or “returning to” God. Often, the

¹⁴RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1981), 53.1–2 (pp. 255–257). Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 244.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

acts or omissions may be actual or perceived sins. Luther recognized the fact that the soldier often carries guilt for actual or perceived sins. Luther used the term *Billigkeit* (“equity” or “justness”) to describe a norm that is often violated, intentionally or not, in the conduct of war.¹⁷ In order to reconcile these types of situations, the act of an auricular reconciliation (commonly known as “confession”) may be helpful for the individual involved.

Reconciliation for our veterans can begin in our respective congregations in the manner in which we pray. We should also include those whom we deem to be “enemies” in the intercessions.

The act of auricular reconciliation can be done in private, and the minister or priest on behalf of Jesus Christ and the church can offer forgiveness to the penitent. If the veteran asks, the entire congregation can offer forgiveness to the penitent in a formal blessing via the extension of hands. I realize that not all denominations accept the process of auricular reconciliation as biblically valid. However, there is something fulfilling in this act that seems to offer a sense of cleansing and a sense of movement toward changing one’s attitudes to those we may have harmed. If auricular confession is not practiced at your local congregation, reconciliation based on a model similar to the Fifth Step in Alcoholics Anonymous is a good substitution, but it still requires a form of auricular confession.¹⁸ Private auricular reconciliation has fallen out of favor in the contemporary church, but it continues to have spiritual and psychological merits.

Reconciliation for our veterans can begin in our respective congregations in the manner in which we pray. We should also include those whom we deem to be “enemies” in the intercessions (Prayers of the Faithful) during our masses or prayer services.¹⁹ We often pray for our service members at our liturgies, but we rarely pray for reconciliation with those whom we deem “enemies.” Since the returning veteran is often unable to ask forgiveness from the person or persons they may have harmed, they should be encouraged to pray often for those people.

Other models of spiritual healing for returning veterans are beginning to take shape. For example, here in Minneapolis, the Veterans Administration Medical Center is conducting a study to determine the impact of spiritual support groups on healing veterans who are trauma survivors. The groups meet at religious and community centers for eight weeks. The veterans taking part in this study may be assigned to either spiritual or standard support groups. Specially trained clergy lead these groups. While this type of support is commendable, in this particular

¹⁷LW 46:102.

¹⁸The Fifth Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is “Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” See *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 59.

¹⁹In some churches this is formally known as the “Universal Prayer.”

case participants are being paid to take part in it. We in the church cannot offer the suffering veteran remuneration, but we can offer them love, support, and the possibility of becoming whole again in and through the Holy Spirit. We can offer them the promise of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ who, unlike money, will be with them always.

THE LAST TESTAMENT OF A CONTEMPORARY SOLDIER-SAINT

The well-being of the returning veteran is the responsibility of our entire society. The medical, psychological, and social welfare systems all have specific, defined roles in fully reintegrating the returning veteran to “the world.” However, I believe that the most overlooked and important aspect of helping our returning veterans is aiding in healing their spirits and opening the doors of our churches and houses of worship to them. Jesus Christ calls us through the Gospels to minister to and to befriend these men and women. The body and mind of the veteran may receive adequate care. It is our charge as Christians to ensure that if the veteran desires reconciliation with God, we are there to assist in the process. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9 NAB).

A contemporary model of a soldier who had completely submitted his body and soul to reconciliation with those whom he may have harmed was the late Christian de Chergé, a Trappist monk who served as a French officer during the Algerian war of independence from January 1959 to December 1960.²⁰ While Christian did not take part in active combat, he did witness its effects. He was also aware that torture of Algerians by the French was routinely taking place. An Algerian national named Mohammed saved de Chergé from harm by Algerian rebels by vouching for him. Yet the next day, Mohammed was found dead with his throat slashed. From that day forward, Lieutenant de Chergé realized and acknowledged the horrors of war and vowed to serve the Algerians against whom he had waged war. In a sermon de Chergé gave at a retreat about three weeks before the monks of Mt. Atlas were kidnapped and martyred, he stated,

“Thou shalt not kill”: not kill yourself, not kill time (which belongs to God), not kill trust, not kill death itself (by trivializing it), not kill the country, the other person or the Church. There are five pillars of peace: patience, poverty, presence, prayer and pardon.²¹

Pardon may be the most important pillar of peace cited by Dom Christian.

All of us are, or should be, seeking pardon and reconciliation with God and the church for the sins we have committed. War is the antithesis of life itself. Those who wage war on our behalf are good, dedicated people who need the support that only the church can give. We are called to be the conduit for reconciliation and

²⁰John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002) 6–15.

²¹Bernardo Olivera, *How Far to Follow? The Martyrs of Atlas* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1997) 6.

reintegration to the community of faith. The words from the “Testament of Father Christian,” written by Dom de Chergé approximately two years before his murder, sum up the spirit of reconciliation very well: “I want this THANK YOU and this ‘A-DIEU’ to be for you, too, because in God’s face I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both. AMEN! IN H’ALLAH!”²² ⊕

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²²Ibid., 129.