

HOMILY

## Moral Decisions in a Murky and Violent World

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Homily for Thursday of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Week (Year I)

1 Mc. 2:15-29; Ps. 50; Luke 19:41-44

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Not long ago I had lunch with a group of Vietnam Veterans. Three of them are police officers now. One, having had surgery for colon cancer, is currently undergoing chemo-therapy, but that didn't stop him from running a marathon recently for a favorite charity. All together,

they've seen more than their share of horror and trouble in life. Yet what struck me about them was how upbeat, involved, and religious they were, not necessarily in a formal way, but inside.

In the course of our conversation they told me the story of a nineteen year old soldier in Afghanistan on duty guarding the gate of a compound inside of which were several hundred of his fellow soldiers. A truck rapidly approached the gate but failed to stop when ordered to do so. Remember, this is a nineteen year old who had to make a critical decision at this point. What must have been going through his mind? "Did the driver not understand? Is he innocent or a terrorist? If I let the truck go through and the driver is a terrorist, hundreds of lives may be lost. If I fire at the driver, I may be killing an innocent man. If the driver isn't innocent, he may have time to detonate explosives and I will be killed." In the event, the young man did fire; the truck blew up and he was killed, but his fellow soldiers were saved.

We are sheltered from much of life as we sit around discussing moral dilemmas. I'm not sure it's such a good thing that bishops write pastoral letters

on war, poverty, crime and punishment from posh hotels in safe places. It's a dangerous world we live in, a harsh world. It has been since the Fall of Adam and Eve. I suspect it will be until the Second Coming.

The danger and harshness are witnessed to in the First Book of Maccabees. The events described there occurred, oh, maybe 150 years before Christ came into the world. One can't read the Book of Maccabees without being impressed by the courage of people like Eleazar about whom we heard a couple of days ago, or the mother who watched her seven sons tortured and killed for their faith, or Mattathias whom we hear of in today's first reading, who with his sons refused to forsake the faith of his forbears. Neither, though, can one help but recoil from the brutality of the times.

In today's gospel, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, lamenting that in failing to accept him, the Jews missed their chance for peace. Yet those who did accept him found little peace in the Roman Empire of the time, at least not peace as the world measures it. Would it have been otherwise had the Jews recognized Jesus as the Messiah? We'll never know. What we do know is that the world is still a dangerous, harsh, brutal place for many, perhaps most people, and that the peace the saints enjoy is largely interior, enjoyed amidst all "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

So how are we to live in this world? Are we all called to be pacifists? Or is that something like the call to religious life, the call of a few, not the many? A few weeks ago two very fine priests of the Diocese of Rockville Centre wrote letters to the *Long Island Catholic* sharply critical of the paper's doing an article on ROTC. We shouldn't, they argued, be encouraging young men and women to enter a warlike profession. The following week several good Catholic laymen responded, asking if we should discourage men and women from becoming police. They too carry and use guns. Should we disarm them, perhaps?

Unlike the abortion issue, where the principle, *One must never directly take an innocent human life*, is pretty clearly applicable and where the Church's teaching has been unequivocal from the beginning until now, issues of war, capital punishment, even water-boarding, are not so clear, not to me at any rate. If the truth be told, I have more sympathy with the English judges who used to say, "I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead, and may God have mercy on your soul," than I do with those who can't imagine circumstances in which capital punishment might be called for.

If I had a confessed terrorist in my custody, who was bragging about what he had done and told me more was to come shortly, I'd have little trouble whacking him over the head with a telephone book if all else failed to get information out of him that could save others. I mean, we can lock him away for life, perhaps in solitary, but we can't twist his arm? He is not innocent. We do

not treat the guilty the same as the innocent. For justice's sake, for the good of society, we must not.

But how to live this out without risk of becoming as bad as the guilty? Good people will disagree. Not only is the world dangerous, harsh, and brutal. It's pretty murky at times. It's difficult to know what is right. Like that nineteen year old soldier at the gate in Afghanistan, sometimes all I can do is give it my best shot and hope I'm right. After that, may God have mercy on *my* soul.