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THE SWORD AND THE CROSS

“ *All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*”

—*St. Matt. xxvi. 52.*

Being a brief historical exegesis from the Early Fathers to the present time.

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WHEN our Lord came to this earth, three festering sores were draining the vitality of the world. They were : slavery, the degradation of women, and war. The position of women was the first to be altered by the influence of the Christian faith ; slavery as a legal system lingered for some eighteen centuries ; but the problem of war, so far from being solved has become far more difficult and complex with the passing of time. A careful enquiry into our Lord's teaching on the subject is, therefore, of the utmost importance.

It is not possible in this short article to examine all the passages in the Gospels which have a bearing on the subject of war ; but our purpose is to take one apposite statement of Christ, which has always been the debating ground of contending parties, and examine it in the light of the great commentators of the Christian Church.

“ *All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*”

Prima facie it would seem that Christ uncompromisingly condemned the use of the sword ; but the Christian Church has never unanimously accepted that view. The early Christians for the first two centuries were practically of one mind in refusing to make use of weapons of war ; the obvious retort is that they lacked the means to employ them with any chance of success. Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that the testimony of these people as expressed by Tertullian and others has had a lasting influence on Christian thought.

In dealing with our text, Tertullian wrote : “ Jesus cursed the works of the sword forever after.”¹ “ How will the Christian make war without the sword, which the Lord hath taken away.”² “ The Lord afterward in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier. No dress is lawful (i.e. the soldier's uniform) among us if assigned to any unlawful action.” There can be no agreement, he argues, between “ the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil ; between the camp of light and the camp of darkness.” We cannot serve two masters.³ “ Will it be lawful (for the Christian) to occupy himself with the sword, when the Lord declares that he ‘ who takes the sword will perish with

¹ *Writings (De Patientia)*, Ante-Nicene Lib : I. p. 208. *Itaque et gladii opera maledixit in posterum* (Migne Ed : I. 1254).

² *On Idolatry (Military Service)*. I. p. 171.

³ *Ibid.* I. p. 170.

the sword'?'¹ Origen and Cyprian follow Tertullian in condemning war absolutely as inconsistent with Christianity. The former argues that if the Gospel were an invention, why did the disciples follow this text even unto death? Their application of this truth in life was evidence of its having been spoken by our Lord.

"It is a very evident proof to all candid judges that they (the disciples) were fully persuaded of the truth of what they wrote, seeing they submitted to trials so numerous and severe for the sake of Him Whom they believed."² Cyprian links this incident of the sword with that of the Love Feast in the upper room and lays it down that "after celebrating the Eucharist, the hand ought not to be spotted with the use of the sword and with blood."³

Ambrose discusses a legal question concerning two shipwrecked sailors, of whom one is wise and the other foolish. May the wise take away from the foolish, a plank, and so save his own life? He comes to the conclusion (which is accepted by English law) that such conduct amounts to murder. "The verdict is plain in the Gospel"; and then he quotes our text: "All who take the sword, etc." "What robber is more hateful than the persecutor who came to kill Christ?" he continues; "but Christ would not be defended from the wounds of the persecutor, for He willed to heal all by His wounds."⁴ By the fourth century, however, the Christian Church was weakening its faith in the doctrine of non-resistance.

In one of the early letters of Basil, soldiers are classed as "intentional murderers."⁵ But a little later he says that "homicides in war are not reckoned by the Fathers as homicides. This is, I presume, from their wish to make concessions to men fighting on behalf of chastity and true religion. Perhaps, however, it is well to counsel that those whose hands are not clean, only abstain from Communion for three years."⁶ Clerics who have assailed robbers are degraded from their Orders; "for it is said: 'All they that take the sword, etc.'"⁷

St. Jerome uses the text to prove the superiority of the New Testament over the Old. In arguing the claims of monogamy against the polygamy of the old dispensation, he remarks that in the Old Testament, the command was: "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty!" Whereas now it is said to Peter: "Put up thy sword . . . for all they . . ."⁸ How far the Christian Church at this period was really pacifist has been a matter of dispute; but by the end of the fourth century, champions of war were not lacking.

Chrysostom, in his Homilies on this Gospel, dealing with this text says that Christ *comforted* His disciples "by the punishment of them that were plotting against Him; 'for all they,' He said, 'that take the sword . . .'"⁹ Chrysostom dwells not on the rebuke to a militant

¹ *De Corona*. I. p. 347.

² *Contra Celsus*. II. p. 14.

³ *Writings (De Bono Patientiae)*, A.D. 256. II. p. 31.

⁴ *Writings (Duties of the Clergy)*. III. c. 4 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers).

⁵ *Letters of S. Basil*. No. viii.

⁶ *Ibid.* No. xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.* LV.

⁸ *Letters*. cxxiii.

⁹ *Homilies on St. Matt*: xxvi. 52.

disciple but sees comfort for them in the doom of their enemies.

By the time of Augustine, war was receiving ecclesiastical sanction and the theological precepts of Augustine on this subject were later to be incorporated in the official Canon Law. In the hands of this writer, the text is transformed from a general condemnation of war into a general sanction of "war under judicial authority." In writing against the Manichees, a sect which deemed all warfare unlawful, Augustine had to deal with these words of Christ. "To take the sword," he wrote, "is to use weapons against a man's life *without the sanction of the constituted authority*. The Lord indeed had told His disciples to carry a sword ; but He did not tell them to use it."¹ Again ; in a letter to Vicentius, written in the year A.D. 408, he says that it was essential in the New Testament period that the "gentleness of love should be manifested" ; hence St. Matt. xxvi. 52 ; but in the same letter, continuing the same thought he added : "In some cases both he who suffers persecution is in the wrong, and he who inflicts it is in the right. The good persecutes the bad, seeking to do good by the administration of discipline . . . prophets put the wicked to death. What is important to attend to is this : Who were on the side of right ?"² Needless to say, this is a philosophy which both sides to every contest have found sufficient warrant for the most brutal crimes against every law of Christ.

Once again in the hands of Augustine the Old Testament becomes a military text-book. He quotes the wars of Moses as evidence of God's attitude on the subject, and explains away the rebuke to Peter as an example of "adversity for the sake of that felicity."³

There was no doubt about the subject in the Middle Ages. Popes did not hesitate to hold their temporal possessions at the point of the sword ; and the Church often enforced its dogmas on the minds of men by destroying their bodies. One of the greatest thinkers of this period was Thomas Aquinas who definitely approved the capital punishment of heretics. It is not therefore surprising that in his *Catena Aurea*—a Commentary on the Four Gospels, taken from the works of the Fathers—he urges that our text does not condemn war. His quotations are so important as representing the Mediæval mind that they may be given at some length.

After the incident of St. Luke xxii. 36, it continues : "It was natural that there should be swords for the paschal lamb which they had been eating. Hearing then that the pursuers were coming to apprehend Christ, when they went out from supper they took these swords as though to fight in defence of their Master against His enemies. In another Gospel, Peter is represented as having done this, and with his usual hastiness ; and that the servant's name was Malchus, and that the ear was the right ear. In passing we may say that Malchus, i.e. one who should have been king of the Jews, was made the slave of the ungodliness and the greediness of the Priests, and lost his right ear so that he might hear only the worthlessness of the letter in his left.

¹ *Harmony of the Gospels by Augustine.* iv. 299.

² *Letters.* I. 381 ff.

³ *Anti-Manichaean Writings.* IV. p. 302.

For though they seem even now to hear the Law, yet is it only with the left ear that they may hear the shadow of a tradition concerning the Law, and not the truth."

There are many more quotations in exactly the same strain, taken from the works of Jerome, Origen, Rabianus, Hilary and Leo in which Peter is regarded as the instrument of Divine judgment; but there is not a word of condemnation of Peter's act. The section ends with these words:

"The Lord of the zealous Apostle will not suffer *his pious feeling* to proceed further. 'Then said Jesus, put up again thy sword into his place.'" From these words he continues the comments: "It was contrary to the sacrament of our redemption that He Who had come to die for all, should refuse to be apprehended. . . . It behoved also that the Author of grace should teach the faithful patience by His own example, and should rather train them to endure adversity with fortitude than incite them to self-defence. To move the disciples to this He adds a threat, saying: 'all they that take the sword, shall perish by the sword.'" Then follows the quotation from Augustine already stated which interprets these words merely as a prohibition of 'unauthorized' wars. To this he added the opinion of Hilary: "But all who use the sword do not perish with the sword; of those who have used the sword either judiciously or in self-defence against robbers, fever or accident carries off the greater part. Though if according to this every one who uses the sword shall perish by the sword, justly was the sword now drawn against those who were using the same for the promotion of crime. . . . The Lord then bids him return his sword into its sheath, because He would destroy them by no weapon of man, but by the sword of His mouth." The opinion of Chrysostom already quoted, that Christ by these words "soothed His disciples by the declaration of punishment against His enemies," ends the Commentary on the text.¹ It will be noted that the opinions of the pacifist Fathers are not mentioned in this important work.

A few years later (A.D. 1302) Boniface VIII issued the Bull *Unam Sanctam* which asserted that both the Spiritual and the Temporal Swords belong to the Church, and argued that when the disciples said: "Behold, here are two swords," it was obvious that they were both "in the Church"—*in Ecclesia scilicet*; and Christ replied that these two were sufficient. He did not say that less than two would suffice; *uterque ergo in potestate est Ecclesie spiritualis scilicet gladius et materialis*. The former, however, is employed by the Church, whilst the latter is to be used for the Church, by the hand of the Prince in accordance with the order and permission of the Pontiff; but the temporal is under the spiritual.

At the close of the Middle Ages, the greatest scholar in Europe was Erasmus. Although a loyal member of the Catholic Church, he attacked unceasingly the failure of Christians to live up to the ideals of Christ; and the condemnation of war is an ever-present theme in his writings. As a wholehearted pacifist he views war from every angle, and comes to the conclusion that it cannot be harmonized with

¹ *Commentary on the Gospels*. Eng: Ed: 1874. vol. II. pt. 2.

the Christian faith. Christ's command to His disciples to buy a sword, he maintains, must be understood spiritually: "not with the carnal sword, as rogues and highwaymen for murder and bloodshed, but with the sword of the spirit. Did not Christ rebuke Peter for drawing the sword which He had but just before so strictly charged him to buy"¹; and Erasmus pours scorn upon those Commentators who would "furnish out the disciples with halberds, spears and guns for the enterprise of preaching Christ crucified."

Again; in his "Complaint of Peace," which tells the story of peace seeking an abiding place, first in the States and then in the Church, but always without success, he says: "Christ chides Peter, though half a Jew, who drew a sword in His defence, when His life was in immediate danger and orders him to put it up into its scabbard. And yet Christians keep the sword constantly drawn and are ever ready to use it on their brother Christians on the most trifling provocation. Could He wish them or His cause to be defended by a sword, Who with His dying breath pleaded for His murderers? . . . If you say you belong to the Church, what can you have to do with the operations of war? If you say you do not belong to the Church, what have you to do with Christ?"

But Erasmus was only a voice crying in the wilderness; men did not immediately take to heart his message. The Wars of Religion were not far distant.

Let us turn to England of the 16th century, when this country was threatened with invasion from abroad in the name of religion, and Catholics were plotting within the realm. The one thing most needful was a strong central government which would check all sedition and the possibility of civil war; and so in the year 1547 Coverdale published a treatise in English entitled, "The Old Faith, an evident probacion out of the Holy Scripture, that the Christian fayth hath endured sens the beginnyng of the worlde," in which he showed the lawfulness of war and the sinfulness of rebellion. "For thus saith the Lord: 'Whoso taketh *away* the sword shall perish through sword.'²" It will be seen that this exegesis is that of St. Augustine, already mentioned; and is, no doubt, a reasonable interpretation; but what is wholly unwarrantable is the translation of our Lord's words, for neither the Greek text nor the Vulgate will sanction the phrase, "take away." Coverdale himself in his own English translation, some twelve years previously had rendered it into English by our usual translation. Furthermore, this treatise of Coverdale is not original: it is a translation of a work in Latin by Bullinger; but that affords him no justification, for Bullinger wrote: *alioqui enim Christus Petru gladium stringentum ita affatur: converte gladium tuum in vaginam suam siquidem qui gladium sumunt, gladies etiam peritur.*³

The Christian Church having failed to abolish war, philosophers tried to hedge it round with laws and prohibitions. In 1625, Hugo Grotius, who has been called the father of International Law, wrote

¹ *In Praise of Folly*. Ed: 1876. p. 178.

² *Coverdale's Works* (Parker Socy. Pub:). II. p. 52.

³ *Antiq. Fides et Vera Religio*. p. 37. (In Lambeth Palace Library.)

his famous book on *The Law of War and Peace*, in which he said : " I saw prevailing throughout the Christian world, a licence in making war, of which even barbarous nations would have been ashamed."¹ In this treatise he enumerates the sources of International Law as being, *ipsa natura, leges divinae, mores et pacta* ; and under the second heading, our text amongst many others is given consideration. Grotius was in a difficulty ; war was hateful, but he could see no escape. Other methods, however, must be tried first, and so he demands that nations should submit to arbitration : " Especially ought Christian kings and States to adopt this way of avoiding arms." Private warfare was, therefore, condemned as contrary to the teaching of the New Testament ; and our text is cited as proof, and the argument of Augustine is once more pressed into service. Peter was seizing the sword in a *private* warfare ; but Grotius will not allow that these words forbid public wars in self-defence. Peter was rebuked by Christ for three reasons : first, because it was used for revenge. " We may conclude that Peter was transported with eager desire for revenge and not of defence only " ; for in the second place, Christ had no need of defence : " twelve legions of angels " were at his command. And thirdly, it was part of the divine purpose that Christ should suffer. Grotius sums up by saying that St. Matt. xxvi. 52 was " either spoken proverbially to show that blood requires blood," or perhaps rather " as Origen, Theophylact and others interpret, that we should not be too rash in taking the sword of vengeance out of God's hand, Who will certainly in His own time pay blood with blood." . . . " In these words of Christ there seems to be couched a prophecy of those punishments which God would take of the bloodthirsty Jews by the sword of the Romans."²

This legal and theological treatise forms a landmark in the history of warfare ; but the worst horrors of the " Thirty Years War " were yet to come. By the end of that century, a new sect had arisen, " The Society of Friends " or Quakers, which took up an uncompromising attitude and denied the right of Christians to take up the sword for any cause whatever.

In 1678 Robert Barclay wrote *The Apology for the True Christian Divinity, as the same is held forth and preached by the People called in scorn Quakers*, in which he sets out to prove that war is inconsistent with the teaching of Christ, " Who reprov'd Peter for the use of the sword, saying, ' All they who take the sword, etc.' " To this he adds the testimony of Tertullian, already quoted. These opinions spread so rapidly that by 1680, there were said to be 40,000 Quakers in this country ; but by 1697, it is estimated that nearly 17,000 had been imprisoned, 152 transported and that 370 had died in confinement or in consequence of their sufferings.⁴ Nevertheless, their religious faith continued undimmed and unaltered ; and in 1823 Jonathon Dymond made his " Enquiry " into the principles and causes of war in relation to Christianity ; and in quoting our text he remarks : " if ever war

¹ *Prolegomena*.

² *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*. LI, c. 3.

³ *Prop.* xv. Ed. 1886. p. 403.

⁴ Nelson's *Encyclopaedia*. X.

was just, surely it was here, in defence of Himself from the hands of bloody ruffians ; but Christ did not allow the sword to be drawn. What reason then can it be lawful to draw it ? ” Dymond points out that the sword was not condemned merely “ because it would rob Christ of the cross ; but because ‘ whosoever takes the sword, etc.’ ” Neither was the sword forbidden merely because it would have been useless in the circumstances when the disciples were outnumbered, because Christ said that He could command twelve legions of angels. The real reason, he suggests, is found in our Lord’s statement to Pilate : “ My kingdom is not of this world ; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.”¹ The kingdom of Christ has no alliance with the kingdoms of the world ; the sword is inconsistent with the cross of Christ. Such is the teaching of the Society of Friends : a dogma which has never been popular either inside or outside of official Christendom ; and modern commentators agree in rejecting that interpretation.

During the Great War an article appeared in the *Hibbert Journal* from the pen of Professor Bacon of Yale University, which maintained that “ when Peter raised his futile weapon against the servant of the High Priest, it was no time to smite. But the time might come later. Peter was *not disarmed*. His sword was only returned to its sheath to await the predicted day of need.”²

Other writers have questioned the authenticity of the words. Dr. Plummer says : “ The source of verses 52-4 (St. Matt. xxvi.) is unknown ” ; although he points out that part of these words are confirmed by St. John’s Gospel.³ J. Weiss says that the words were spoken at *some other time, if at all*, for they appear to be only a free reproduction of Revelation xiii. 10 : “ He that killeth with the sword, must be killed with the sword ”⁴ ; but adds that “ the early Christian Communities may have often supported themselves under persecution, by this word and example. Would that the lesson had not been so rapidly forgotten ! ”

It has been suggested that our text was merely “ a general legal maxim.” The *Westminster Commentary* says that these words are “ probably an echo of a proverbial saying and recall our Lord’s half satirical rejoinder (St. Luke xxii. 38) to the disciples’ earlier claim to being armed. They serve too as a forcible comment on a war of *wanton aggression* which inevitably brings its own revenge.” The *International Critical Commentary* says that “ Christ did not desire the plans of His enemies to be thwarted,” but it passes over the condemnation of the sword in silence. It has been argued that it was not a military sword which Peter used, but only a small knife used for the Passover Feast. This is true ; but it was the same instrument, with which Judas and his band were armed ; and our Lord’s statement concerning the twelve legions of angels is expressed in “ military language.”

¹ *St. John* xviii. 35.

² *Christus Militans*. July 1918. p. 551.

³ A. Plummer : *St. Matthew*. Ed. 1910. p. 374.

⁴ *Expositor*. I. 317.

It will be seen therefore that commentators have differed widely in their interpretations of these words. Roughly, they may be divided into four groups :

(1) The Pacifist group which has uncompromisingly and consistently urged that these words of Christ forbid Christians to take any part in warfare.

(2) The Nationalist group which finds condemnation only for "unauthorized" wars : that is, civil war and rebellion.

(3) The Legal group which, whilst hating war and all that it entails is unable to accept the Pacifist position. Christ rebuked Peter, they say, because this disciple was too impulsive and was seeking revenge rather than self-defence. War is inevitable, but the teaching of our Lord demands that it shall be minimized and humanized and fenced round with international laws and conventions.

(4) The Critical group which asserts that these words have either no bearing upon war as such, or their authority and interpretation are open to serious criticism.

Of course, these "labels" for parties cannot strictly be accurate or adequate, but they serve our purpose. Which group is right? We cannot escape that question, for on it depends the peace of the world. It cannot be denied that interpretations throughout the history of the Church have been moulded to a very large extent by the circumstances of the time, and to-day we are probably much more anxious to see a condemnation of war in these words than were the Christians of the last century, for we have seen the horrors and the futility of 1914-8. Let us, however, try to examine the text in the light of our Lord's life and general teaching.

It is probably true to say that these words have no more direct bearing upon war than at least a dozen other passages which are not usually regarded as "war" texts in any sense of the word. Our Lord seldom attacked great social evils directly. It was the cumulative effect of His teaching which revealed His condemnation of slavery; and the same thing is true of war. The sheathing of the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane is only one more illustration of the demand : "love your enemies"; "if a man smite you on the right cheek"; "if a man compel you to go a mile"; "seek ye first the kingdom of God"; "My kingdom is not of this world"; "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"; the parables of "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan"; the commands : "resist not evil"; and "take up the cross and follow Me"; "the meek shall inherit the earth." The whole of our Lord's life and teaching was the insistence on the fact that goodness and suffering will remove the causes of evil. The sword and war are the denial of this. It is the expression of faith in violence and bloodshed as a greater power than goodness.

The sword in the Garden was futile; and war has been proved equally useless. Both came under the condemnation of Christ. After the refusal of the sword He went to Calvary; but it was from the Cross and not the sword that the salvation of the world has come; and the Church has been strongest when it was willing to follow in His steps.

Its greatest power was probably revealed in the first two centuries when pacifism was at its height. In the Middle Ages it was St. Francis of Assisi who, condemning the Crusades, was the great energizing power of the Christian Church and not Pope Boniface with his theory of the "Two swords." At the Renaissance we go to Erasmus for light and leading and not to Pope Julius II, the warrior pontiff. In later times no sect has exercised so much influence for good, in comparison with its numbers, as the Society of Friends.

To-day the Christian Church stands in the Garden of Gethsemane ; the world must be saved : it must find a new way of life—the way of Christ. But are its members willing, if needs be, to face the Cross ?

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