

God, Life, and Everything

Veterans Day

Today is Veterans Day. I always approach it with a level of apprehension.

There are several reasons for this.

First, it bothers me when people inevitably talk about those who died in the service of our country.

There is a day on which we honor our war dead: Memorial Day. There's no fear that they will be forgotten any time soon. We lionize the dead who "made the ultimate sacrifice."

Veterans need their own day to be reserved for them. Why? Because too often they return home from war only to be treated like exhausted ink toner cartridges. We don't need them anymore, but we can't just discard them. We have to at least go through the motions of being responsible.

For toner cartridges, that means returning them to the store where you bought them. For Veterans, it means wearing flag lapel pins, going to parades and making speeches. It might also mean making empty promises for job training, medical insurance and psychological care.

This is nothing new, by the way. When out of work World War I vets marched on Washington and set up a "Bonus Army" village to demand early payment on a bonus - a demand supported by military brass, President Hoover called out the active army to drive them out and burn their shelters. During the McCarthy Red Scare, many World War II veterans - especially authors, artists and actors - were blacklisted for "disloyalty," often by colleagues who had avoided the fighting. It is especially complicated for black vets, especially after World War II when they had garnered positions of authority only to have it taken away in the civilian world.

A real tribute to Veterans would be to truly ensure the proper care, training, and support they need to once again thrive as civilians.

The second thing that makes me uneasy about Veterans Day, is more of a national mindset than the day itself. The mindset is that military service is the only way truly serve one's country.

We don't talk about factory workers as serving the country (other than in World War II). If anything, despite the existence of Labor Day (which we just think of as the unofficial end of summer), workers are too often portrayed as adversaries of the country because all they want is higher wages.

We don't talk about teachers as serving their country despite their awesome responsibility for forming future generations and their constant struggle for fiscal sufficiency (teaching has one of the highest dropout rates of all professions). If anything, we condemn them for only working nine months of the year and living a cushy life.

I'm all for honoring the sacrifices of Veterans. They risked life and limb for their country, and it's good and proper to do so with parades AND services. But we should never think that theirs is or was the only service to the country.

The third thing that complicates this holiday is that, while the men and women of the military overwhelmingly enlist out of selfless reasons, it is undeniable that the policies they enforce are often harmful to countless people around the world.

When you join the military, you take an oath to obey. This is, of course, necessary because otherwise discipline would fall apart, and that is simply untenable in a battle. Sure, there are provisions for refusing to obey an overtly illegal or immoral order, but often there's no way to know that what you're being ordered to do is wrong.

There are countless examples throughout our nation's history where soldiers are ordered to do things that may seem right at the time to them, but which their superiors knew was criminal.

I think of the past - massacres of Native American villages or the invasion and takeover of Hawaii. Those happened a long time ago, but I'll bet you can think of more recent examples. Heck, all those protests against the Vietnam War back when I was in elementary school were not so much against the soldiers (though they took the brunt of the abuse). They were more out of the belief that the United States had no legitimate business being there in the first place.

There is one other reservation I have - one that rests uneasily on my soul. I have many friends and relatives who are veterans. I love and respect them and what they've done. But I'm also a priest, and it is the Church's teaching that no act of war is the will of God. Ever. We may not see another way around a situation, but the Gospel always reminds us that to resort to war - especially as the aggressor, the first to shoot, the "preemptive" actor - is to leave behind the command to love neighbor as self.

So by all means, use this day to thank a Vet for their service. But spare a thought to the complexity of the day - or even the need for such a day.