

A famous athlete received a telephone call from a distinguished advertising agency requesting that he pose with a bottle of Gordon's Gin for a billboard campaign. The athlete replied: "Because of my religious beliefs I simply cannot do it."

The executive said "You will receive \$1 million for your efforts."

The athlete paused, then says "Let me think it over."

He goes to his Bishop for some advice. The Bishop says, "It would be a bad example and message for our young people to see. Don't do it."

So the athlete calls the ad executive and says, "I just cannot do the ad."

2 weeks later, the athlete is driving down Hollywood Boulevard and he is shocked when he sees the Bishop on the billboard holding a bottle of Gordon Gin with the words, "It has a divine and heavenly taste." (DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 202, p. 49) I'm going to come back to this joke later. And it makes me thirsty for a Gin & Tonic!

First, some background on Mark's gospel. Does Jesus expect us to cut off body parts that may be used for sinful acts? The simple answer is no, but Mark's readers would not have so easily dismissed this as wild exaggeration as we tend to do. If we all took this literally, we'd all be deaf, dumb, and blind, not to mention missing some unmentionables!

This scathing injunction on how to handle egregiously sinful bodily urges typically is dismissed as hyperbole. Surely Jesus was not encouraging self-mutilation. The Torah prohibits gashing the flesh, tattooing (sorry, just reporting the facts!), even trimming one's beard (GUILTY! But I don't want to look like Santa Claus!) (Lev 19:27-28). The Catechism prohibits 'elective' amputation (par 2297). A metaphorical reading seems the only option. Yet Mark's audience wouldn't have been so sure.

Jesus' contemporaries had ample exposure to persons deprived of eyes or limbs for non-medical reasons. A government slave might have his tongue cut out to prevent him from divulging state secrets. Prisoners of war were mutilated or blinded to prevent revolt. Tortured captives might lose an eye or a limb. Even free persons might be subject to such injuries at the hands of an angry householder, father, or husband.

Nor was voluntary self-mutilation unknown. Military service was mandatory for Roman citizens. Viewed as a civic duty, it was also the entry point for political, social, and economic advancement. With the rise of the Empire, however, patriotic spirit began to wane, and more and more men sought to evade military service. Other than bribery, having a physical disability that would interfere with one's duties as a soldier was the key way to gain an exemption. Some men resorted to elective amputation, for example, cutting off their own – or their son's – thumb, first 2 fingers or right hand so they would be incapable of wielding a sword. Jesus' injunction would have been heard this way: "If even the pagans will go to such lengths to avoid serving their Empire, should not a disciple be willing to sacrifice at least as much to serve God?" Which gives us a whole new understanding. (Sheila McGinn, PH.D., UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD, Oct-Dec 2006)

Second, this kind of understanding could be called 'addition by subtraction.' What would we give up to make our life more fulfilling, more satisfying? I'm talking about something harder to give up than an eye or a hand. Would we give up 4 or 5 hours of our work week to be more present to our family? Would we cancel a

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credit card or 2 and our 'need' for 'retail therapy' in order to support the church? Would we be willing -- and this is hard -- to put aside our fear of someone who is 'different' in some way in order to meet that someone and get to know them? Could we get over our self-righteousness to reach out to someone who has made a mess of their life? Are we willing to risk ridicule and rejection to comfort and support someone in crisis? We can think of it as addition by subtraction, a positive spin on today's gospel passage.

And third and finally, I would like to go back to my opening joke -- the Bishop got the million dollar contract for Gordon's Gin -- but he sold his soul -- and his reputation -- in the process. He gave a terrible example to the young athlete. The rest of my homily focuses on the line that says: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." So I have a story in two parts.

FIRST PART: Many years ago, Al Capone virtually owned Chicago. Capone wasn't famous for anything heroic. He was notorious for enmeshing the windy city in everything from bootlegged booze and prostitution to murder.

Capone had a lawyer nicknamed 'Easy Eddie.' He was his lawyer for a good reason. Eddie was very good! In fact, Eddie's skill at legal maneuvering kept Big Al out of jail for a long time. To show appreciation, Capone paid him very well. Not only was the money big, but also Eddie got special dividends.

For instance, he and his family occupied a fenced-in mansion with live-in help and all of the conveniences of the day. The estate was so large that it filled an entire Chicago city block. Eddie lived the high life of the Chicago mob and gave little consideration to the atrocities that the mob caused.

Eddie did have one soft spot, however. He had a son that he loved dearly. Eddie saw to it that his young son had the best of everything: clothes, cars and a good education. Nothing was withheld. Price was no object. And, despite his involvement with organized crime, Eddie even tried to teach him right from wrong. Eddie wanted his son to be a better man than he was. Yet, with all his wealth and influence, there were 2 things he couldn't give his son: he couldn't pass on a good name or a good example.

One day, Easy Eddie reached a difficult decision. Easy Eddie wanted to rectify wrongs he had done. He decided he would go to the authorities and tell the truth about Al 'Scarface' Capone, clean up his tarnished name and offer his son some semblance of integrity. To do this, he would have to testify against The Mob, and he knew that the cost would be great.

So, he testified. Within the year, Easy Eddie's life ended in a blaze of gunfire on a lonely Chicago street. But in his eyes, he had given his son the greatest gift he had to offer, at the greatest price he would ever pay. Police removed from his pockets a rosary, a crucifix, a religious medal and a poem clipped from a magazine.

The poem read: "The clock of life is wound but once/ And no man has the power,/"

To tell just when the hands will stop/ At late or early hour./ Now is the only time you own./ Live, love, toil with a will./ Place no faith in time. For the clock may soon be still."

STORY NUMBER TWO:

World War II produced many heroes. One such man was Lt. Commander Butch O'Hare. He was a fighter pilot assigned to the aircraft carrier Lexington in the South Pacific. One day his entire squadron was sent on a mission. After he was airborne, he looked at his fuel gauge and realized that someone had forgotten

to top off his fuel tank. He would not have enough fuel to complete his mission and get back to his ship. His flight leader told him to return to the carrier.

Reluctantly, he dropped out of formation and headed back to the fleet. As he was returning to the mother ship he saw something that turned his blood cold. A squadron of Japanese aircraft were speeding their way toward the American fleet.

The American fighters were gone, and the fleet was all but defenseless. He couldn't reach his squadron and bring them back in time to save the fleet. Nor could he warn the fleet of the approaching danger. There was only one thing to do. He must somehow divert them from the fleet.

Laying aside all thoughts of personal safety, he dove into the formation of Japanese planes. Wing-mounted 50 calibers blazed as he charged in, attacking one surprised enemy plane and then another. Butch wove in and out of the now broken formation and fired at as many planes as possible until all his ammunition was finally spent. Undaunted, he continued the assault. He dove at the planes, trying to clip a wing or tail in hopes of damaging as many enemy planes as possible and render them unfit to fly.

Finally, the exasperated Japanese squadron took off in another direction. Deeply relieved, Butch O'Hare and his tattered fighter limped back to the carrier. Upon arrival he reported in and related the events surrounding his return. The film from the gun-camera mounted on his plane told the tale. It showed the extent of Butch's daring attempt to protect the fleet. He had in fact destroyed 5 enemy aircraft.

This took place on February 20, 1942, and for that action Butch became the Navy's first ace of WWII and the first naval aviator to win the Congressional Medal of Honor. A year later Butch was killed in aerial combat at the age of 29. His home town would not allow the memory of this WW II hero to fade, and today, O'Hare International Airport in Chicago is named in tribute to the courage of this great man.

If you ever find yourself at O'Hare International, give some thought to visiting Butch's memorial displaying his statue and his Medal of Honor. It's located between Terminals 1 and 2.

SO WHAT DO THESE 2 STORIES HAVE TO DO WITH EACH OTHER?

Butch O'Hare was Easy Eddie's son. (Source: Yahoo Mail, 21 July 2005)

Albert Schweitzer said "Example is not the main thing in life, it is the only thing." So may it be for you and for me. Amen.