

National day of Thanksgiving, Prayer and repentance

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God may not be on our side . . . (S.N.T.O.)

NATIONAL DAY OF THANKSGIVING, PRAYER AND REPENTANCE

Your next "Swiss Observer" appearing after the National Day of Thanksgiving, Prayer and Repentance on Sunday, September 21st, we are giving it a special thought in this issue already. We have asked the Rev. M. Dietler, of the German-speaking Swiss Church in London, to express his views on this national religious commemoration.

Christmas, Good Friday, the first of August and the National Day of Prayer cannot be compared with one another. The great days of the Church are milestones in God's history of salvation, whereas the first of August is the commemoration-day of a very

small country and nation. Only the day of prayer seems to have a touch of both: God's greatness and our country's smallness. Nevertheless, these very different days of commemoration have one thing in common: their existence causes an uneasy feeling in us and we tend to change their meaning, thus making them into a wet blanket placed over a fire.

Of the many special days of our church and nation, perhaps the National Day of Thanksgiving, Prayer and Repentance is the only one which may still reveal some of its original significance and fire. As for Christmas, if you cannot face its

reality, there is a rich tradition which helps you to escape into a sphere of glamorous lights, family celebrations and "gift business". Similarly at Easter, by shunning the power and glory of the one that lives, we may yet enjoy an excursion into nature, encouraged by the spring and a prolonged holiday weekend. We find on August 1st the same easy way out if we do not feel like being bothered with national problems. The bonfires all over the mountains of Switzerland or the celebration at Wimbledon Town Hall followed by a good dance, some Swiss films and a little bit of yodelling still appeal to our patriotic feelings. It is extraordinary that we should have forgotten to create an adequate tranquilizer for the National Day of Prayer. For this special day in September there exists neither a tradition of giving presents, nor one of travelling or doing anything of that kind. You either commemorate it with dignity or you don't commemorate it at all.

If you compare the two national celebrations with one another, the first of August and the day of prayer, in the latter God appears to be greater and the country smaller than in the former. On the Swiss National Day we tend to glorify our country, and if we bring God into it we almost identify fatherland and creator. The call "for God and country" reminds us of very unholy situations in the past. The Swiss are by no means likely to shed their blood for God and country. Our danger is that, in this combination of God and country, we remain static: having God on our side, we leave things as they are. Contrarily to the first of August, the Day of Prayer carries with it the possibility that God may not be on our side at all and that we may have every reason to repent and to return to God. The divine service is very often opened with the words: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you". (Zech. 2,3) or: "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart". (Jeremiah 29,13). In the prayers God is thanked for his goodness, which we do not deserve. Finally the text for the sermon is often taken from the Old Testament where Israel is rebuked for forsaking God. If the sermon is based on the New Testament, it is usually a text such as the story of the prodigal son which is chosen.

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The danger of worshipping our country is certainly avoided as long as the element of repentance is not forgotten. Another advantage which the day of prayer has, compared with the first of August, lies in the individual challenge. True enough, a good first of August speaker will not dwell upon Morgarten and Sempach in his speech, but if he brings in critical aspects of modern times, he will be disappointed in realizing that he cannot engage his audience, which is apt to pass the baby on to the authorities: "Why doesn't the Government do anything about it? What do we pay taxes and rates for?" On the Day of Prayer the nation is addressed, but as prayer is something to be done by individuals there is the possibility of a deeper engagement. In this individuality and readiness for repentance, the third Sunday in September could become something of high importance in the life of our nation.

If I were asked to sketch a new form for the National Day of Prayer I would stress the following points:

1. There should only be one preacher for the whole country. The activity of local priests and pastors should be restricted to liturgy and to introducing the subject. The preacher should appear on a screen put up in every church. Those at home could watch their own TV.

2. The subject should be a burning and actual problem such as: foreign labour, protection against water pollution of lakes and rivers, migration from the country (into the towns), development help for the nations undergoing rapid social change, supply of arms, etc.

3. The preacher should be a great christian (not necessarily a clergyman) who by his whole thinking and attitude proves to have his responsibility and authority through the word of God.

A man whose life is rooted in Christ's life. Asked what he thought the life of Jesus was, Vitezslav Gardavsky, the Czech marxist philosopher (!) said: "Christ's life is the model of a life which requests from man a responsible decision, where in fierce spiritual struggle he penetrates to the roots of his very existence, but finds a new future in which he is more than what he used to be". Gardavsky concludes: "The world would be poor without the lives of such christians". If, even according to this extraordinary marxist, christians do have a special task which nobody else can fulfil, we needn't put our light under a bushel (Matth. 5,14). As we are the salt of the earth (Matth. 5, 13), we must be mingled with the soup of this world. Perhaps the very seasoning of this salt is that the shock troops grappling with heavy stumbling blocks are people of great faith, perhaps not so much the church as such, but individual christians carrying on a struggle which very often starts as a solitary battle which later on will mould a nation's public opinion. People have a short memory: they tend to forget that so many principles, now publicly approved, have had to be carried-through by christians first.

Today, nobody wishes a total rupture in personal and cultural contacts between East and West. Everyone realizes that last year's liberal development in Czechoslovakia would have been impossible without confrontation with western thinking. Force has been applied to crush the spirit of liberty and humanity but in truth, it has only postponed, and not extinguished, an inexorable development in that country. The majority of people have understood this and want to maintain the links with the Czechs in order to help them. But hardly five, years ago only very few christians pulled their weight in improving East and West contacts, and they were looked upon as having left wing tendencies. Equally, not so long ago, some "funny" christians were criticizing the Americans in Vietnam, whilst nowadays the whole press takes an altogether different attitude.

By now it should have become clear that the voice, competently to be raised on the National Day of Thanksgiving, Prayer and Repentance should be a prophetic voice. Prophets are by no means fortune tellers, though indeed they may have their views and ideas concerning the future. Their task is not so much revealing the future. Prophets could really be defined as God's holy critics. If you read your Bible you know that they never back present conditions and never leave things as they are. There were never many prophets, neither are there many today, but there are always some. It would be a real day of repentance, if on the third Sunday in September, a prophet were asked to challenge the nation.

Marcel Dietler

COMMENT

A DIFFICULT CHOICE

The Federal Council has approved the Military Department's proposal of retaining the "Corsair" and the "Fiat". out of the nine planes under study for the replacement of the airforce's "Venoms". These planes, 216 of them, were definitely ageing. They had already been considered obsolete in Britain's airforce about a decade ago. That the Swiss have kept them for so long is due to the particular terrain they have to defend which calls for a high degree of manoeuvrability. The "Venoms" were satisfactory in this respect. But they are now finally going to be phased out, and ought to have disappeared by 1975. By that date, they will be distinctly older than their pilots, an indication that they really have been used to the maximum!

Our military experts have been making their choice for a new jet since 1966. Out of an initial spread of 22 aircraft, they kept only nine and submitted them to the most rigorous evaluation. The choice of the "Corsair" and the "Fiat" emerged as a result of these studies, which are henceforth going to be concentrated on these sole two planes. The final choice will be made in the first semester of next year. M. Gnaegi, head of the Federal Military Department, has however not completely ruled out the chances of adoption of the Anglo-French "Jaguar" or the French "Milan", the latter plane being a derived version of the "Mirage V", the plane embargoed by the French and claimed by the Israelis for two years.

The "Corsair" is an American-built aircraft. It is subsonic and designed for ground support missions. Over two hundred of them have already been built and used conclusively in Vietnam. They can defend themselves, with air-to-air missiles against faster interceptors. The "Fiat" is a similar type of aircraft, a little less sophisticated but cheaper. It flies slowly, carries a heavy load of bombs and is also intended for ground support.

Choosing the plane on which the country's air defence will rely for the next decade appears to be a complicated job — at any rate, more so than choosing a family car! The weight and cost of such a choice means that it must be, to the highest possible degree of probability, the "right one". This means that, in total unreliance of their feelings, the experts compile the manifold characteristics of an aircraft as well as all the specifications of our airforce, quantify this information, process it, feed it in computers and get the answers printed on rolls of computer paper.

The choice is particularly difficult in the case of the Swiss airforce because there is to date no single plane which