

# The Sword of Peter

There is something awful about Swiss Guards holding cruel instruments of homicidal violence, while standing at the edge of the sanctuary during Papal Ceremonies. Indeed, there is something spiritually grotesque in costumed men with their ancient instruments of human destruction being presented to the world as a permanent part of the symbol system at the most well known Christian church on the planet—St. Peter’s in Rome. Yet, there they are day after day, century after century for 500 years.

It is as if no one with spiritual authority in Rome sees the radical inconsistency between the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels who taught a Way of nonviolent love of friends and enemies and the Swiss Guard’s halberds—instruments created to slice a human being’s head in half or decapitate him century or disembowel him. During Jesus’ passion and death, which the Church says is re-presented at the Eucharist, Jesus orders Peter to put up his sword. He heals the ear of the armed servant of the high priest who had come to take Him to His death. He prays for and offers excuses to God on behalf of those who are killing him. He returns good for evil, love for hate, forgiveness for retaliation, life for death. Yet, when the Successor of Peter celebrates the Eucharist at the Church situated over the very grave of St. Peter, there stand the Swiss Guard with instruments of human slaughter actually and symbolically at the ready.

In original Christianity it is understood that “when Christ disarmed Peter, He disarmed all Christians.” Today the Vicar of Christ and Successor of Peter possesses the oldest continually active military corps in the world—the Papal Swiss Guard. The Swiss Guard with its multicolored, baggy bloomers and battle-axes is of course also a spiritual and moral symbol—a most accurate symbol of the past and present reality of the Church of Rome and practically all other Christian Churches, whether they be Orthodox, Protestant or Evangelical.

However, even today the Papal Swiss Guard, to quote a recent Catholic News Service story, is not just a tourist attraction but is “a lean, mean, fighting machine.” A Papal Swiss Guard must be at least 19 years old, of Swiss citizenship, a Catholic and have completed Swiss Army training, where he becomes expert in the modern technologies and ancient techniques for killing human beings. So, a Swiss Guard is not just an oxymoronic stage prop for tourists’ photo ops. He is a lean, mean, killing machine who takes an oath (something also inconsistent with Jesus’ explicit teachings) to kill other sons and daughters of the Father, indeed other Christians, if ordered to by the Vicar of Christ or his deputies.

How did the Successor of Peter ever get himself and the Church involved in this cacophony of reality and symbol? Ultimately of course it all begins on the night of October 27–28, AD 312, when Constantine, prior to the Battle of Milvian Bridge, orders his men to paint the cross on their swords, shields, armor, etc. This is the first time in history that a Christian symbol is employed to lead a military unit into the mass slaughter of war. However, the more immediate history of the Papal Swiss Guard starts in June 1505, when Julius II, the last Pope to actually lead an army into homicidal combat, requests the services of a group of brutal Swiss mercenaries, the Swiss Guards.

The Swiss Guards were Swiss mercenaries who served as hired killers for various European armies from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The most famous episode in their history was their defense on August 10, 1792, of the Tuileries Palace in Paris during the French revolution. Five hundred of them met their deaths at the hands of an oppressed and enraged populace. France outlawed their presence after the revolution but Napoleon I in 1803 took them on his homicidal excursion into Russia, where most of them perished. Obviously only the economic and political elite of a society possessed the means to hire these kill-for-

pay mercenaries to foster its interests and protect its privilege. The Swiss Constitution abolished most Swiss mercenary activity for foreign powers in 1874 and totally eliminated it in 1927. The one exception allowed by the Constitution was for the Papal Swiss Guard.

In September 1505 Swiss mercenaries, today known as the Papal Swiss Guard, begin to trek across the Alps in response to Pope Julius II's money offer. They arrive in Rome on January 22, 1506. Beginning later this year (AD 2005) and extending into next year, celebrations and ceremonies are planned in Rome to honor the Swiss Guard for its 500 years of willingness to kill and be killed on behalf of the person and policies of the Successor of Peter. One could hope that one of the ceremonies that is planned would be the formal termination of the Swiss Guard as a reality and as a symbol needed by the Vicar of Christ to do his job on earth. That such a hope will probably not be fulfilled is a humanly realistic appraisal of the situation.

Yet, one picture is worth ten thousand words of evangelization. One photograph of a young Catholic in armor, carrying a 30-kilo sword to protect the Vicar of Christ, says more than 100,000 verbal proclamations of the Gospel, in which Jesus tells Peter to put up his sword and where instead of violence He chooses to love even His lethal enemies. Is it even sane to believe that when Jesus told Peter to "Put up your sword," He meant that Peter and the legitimate successors of Peter should hire others to carry the sword for them—that they should employ others to do what they are forbidden to do by Jesus Himself? Can it not be asked, if Christ did not need violence and an army to accomplish all that He had to accomplish on behalf of the Kingdom of God, why does the Vicar of Christ need these things? A wag once said, "If the Swiss Guard were at Golgotha Jesus never would have been crucified!"

Henryk Sienkiewicz, the Nobel Laureate in Literature, wrote what the author James Michener calls a work "for the entire world"—*Quo Vadis*. In the climactic moment of this novel St. Peter is leaving

Rome with his companion, Nazarius, at the height of Nero's persecution of Christians. He meets the risen Jesus on the outskirts of the city. However, Jesus is walking into, not out of, Rome:

*The traveling staff fell out of Peter's hand. His eyes were fixed immovably ahead. His lips were open, and his face reflected unbelievable surprise, immense joy, and rapturous exaltation.*

*Suddenly he threw himself on his knees, his arms lifted upward and stretched to the light, and his lips cried out: "Christ! O Christ!" His head beat against the dust as if he were kissing the feet of someone only he could see.*

*Then there was silence.*

*"Quo vadis, Domine?" his voice asked at last, punctured by his sobbing. "Where are you going, Lord?"*

*Nazarius heard no answer. But a voice of ineffable sweetness and abundant sorrow rang in Peter's ears, "When you abandon my people," he heard, "I must go to Rome to be crucified once more."*

*The apostle lay still and silent with his face pressed into the dust. Nazarius thought he had either died or fainted, but he rose at last, picked up his pilgrim's staff, and turned again toward the seven hills.*

*"Quo vadis, domine?" the boy asked like an echo of the apostle's cry.*

*"To Rome," Peter murmured.*

Would this be spiritually the same story, would it be the Peter of the Gospel if Peter, when asked by his companion, "Quo vadis, domine?" had responded "I am going to hire some Christian mercenaries and then I am going back to Rome to confront Nero and all those others who have it in for us."? Would Peter have been crucified upside-down if he had a military corps at his disposal? Was Peter martyred because he was unable to hire an army to protect himself? "Enough!"

If the Petrine ministry cannot be conducted without mercenaries, or their equivalent, is it because the Petrine ministry as defined by Jesus in the New Testament requires men armed to kill in order for it to function properly, or is it because there is

something(s) presently in the ministry that should not be there?

The fullness of the Office of Peter can indeed be accomplished without accessing a scintilla of violence. May, then, that day be near when the Successor of Peter will “Put up the sword” of violence forever and draw-out instead the nonviolent two-edged sword that is the “living and active” Word of God (HEB 4:12), as made known by the nonviolent Jesus Christ of the Gospels.

Two thousand years ago during a time of hellish violence by the Roman elite and their lackeys, Peter choose to follow his Lord on the road of nonviolent love—choosing to infallibly proclaim the truth of the Gospel with his life and death. Today, the Successor of Peter is being called upon to make the same in-

fallible incarnational proclamation in the face of violence and brutality by political and economic elites—which violence and brutality today dwarfs in the sheer production of misery all the pain brought upon the People of God by Nero’s infernal homicidal proclivities. May the time not be far off when the Successor of the Apostle, who was commanded to “Feed my lambs” (JN 21:15), has the understanding of Jesus and His Way that St. Peter had and the courage to publicly follow it in a world that arms dealers, governments, corporate moguls and media mandarins are turning into a murderous advanced technological global jungle. God and God’s beloved people deserve and acutely need no less from Peter today than they needed from Peter two thousand years ago.

Quo vadis, Peter?

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