

## This Is My Body

IT was D-minus-3 Day aboard the ship going to Northern Africa, or, in the less cryptic language of the layman, it was three days before we were to assault the North African beaches. Like the days immediately preceding, this one was trying, for the men were tense with the expectant and uncertain fate of the coming days. Nerves were frayed. The men knew that their assault was the beginning of a great offensive. They knew that they dared not fail, that if they missed their cue, if they failed to do their job, the folks back home would become discouraged and the bright day of peace would be delayed for years.

They were, of course, excellently trained. Months of back-breaking work both in the United States and in the United Kingdom had toughened their bodies and taught them the complicated ritual of assault. They had practised it often. In all sorts of weather and in differing moods they had climbed down the scrambling nets, hiked through sloppy, muggish roads, and played at being Commandos with all the grim determination of anticipated action. But now it all seemed different. It was grim, sober, real.

Much was still to be done. The technical details of the assault needed to be made as nearly perfect as humanly possible. Gear had to be packed and repacked—the essential stuff placed in the right place for the proper order of debarking. Indeed, all the multitudinous details of the assault had to be cared for with a scholar's exactitude and with an artist's imagination.

But this was not the Chaplain's job. He was concerned with the men's spiritual welfare. He knew that their spirits were depressed by the weight of strange compelling fears. They were tense from their penned-up shipboard life of the past weeks. Their hearts and minds were troubled. Thoughts of death, of sacrifice, of life after death, of God and His mercies arose in their minds. "Chaplain's Troubles" appeared, for the men were bothered—some of them for the first time—by the problems of healthy religion.

Aboard the ship church attendance had been

good. Where a normal garrison Sunday had brought forty or fifty into the chapel—the men being free to come or go as they please—church services now were attracting men by the hundreds. The men showed vital interest in the ministrations of their Chaplain. They came with all sorts of problems—something which even the top sergeants could not ridicule; they came for prayers, for counselling and for help. They asked him to write letters to their wives, mothers, sweethearts and friends “in case . . . . .!” They gave him treasured mementoes: photos, letters, faded flowers in cellophane cases, a piece of ribbon, to be sent home “in case.” One officer requested that all his things be buried with him “in case”! Indeed, the mood of the men was what the theologian might call “eschatological”—expectant of the end of their world and anticipatory of the last times.

The Chaplain was aware of both the psychological and religious implications of their mood. He knew that only eternal verities could satisfy and comfort them. He knew, too, that there could be no substitute for symbolic presentation of the sacrifice of the Cross, so he announced that Holy Communion would be celebrated at four-thirty in the afternoon before the assault was to begin. Only the Communion service could symbolize the mood of the men, for only in this sacrament was there a presentation of suffering and sacrificial love.

At four-thirty on a bleak, grim afternoon, four hundred men gathered in the lounge of a British passenger liner ploughing through a gray Mediterranean. The steward had improvised an altar from a spare table, covering it with white linen, and framed by both the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes. Four officers served as elders; one a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, the great grandson of the most famous British novelist of the 19th Century; the second was the ship's Surgeon, a Scot from Aberdeen; the third was an American Captain from Boston, Yankee and Unitarian; and the fourth was a Pennsylvanian, a graduate of West Point.

The service began with music, softened subdued rendering of “Bread of the World in Mercy Broken.” The Chaplain began the Invitation to confession—“If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the Lord is not with us; but if we confess our sins the Lord is gracious and just to forgive us our sins, and to grant us eternal life.”

In quiet, sincere tones, the men prayed for forgiveness—“We have sinned against Thee in thought and word and deed. We have come short of thy glory . . . in us there is no soundness nor health . . . forgive us, Oh Lord, and grant us thy peace.”

The Chaplain absolved them in the name of Christ . . . “As many of you, therefore, beloved brethren, as truly repent of your sins, and call upon

Jesus Christ to redeem you from all corruption, I announce and declare, by the authority and in the name of Christ, that your sins are forgiven in Heaven, according to his promise in the Gospel to all that repent and believe.”

The Chaplain invited all who repented in sincerity and truth and with full purpose of new obedience to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He invited the sincere but he warned the insincere that by eating and drinking the symbols of the Lord's body and blood they would bring damnation upon themselves. The communicants were invited, and the Chaplain turned to consecrate the elements. And, in the consecration, the Chaplain felt the mystical unity of the assembled group. As he read the words of consecration, a new spirit of devotion spread among the group: “The Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, when he had given thanks, he break it and said: ‘This is my body which is broken for you: This do in remembrance of me,’” and the wine: “After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped saying: ‘This cup is the New Testament of my blood, this do in remembrance of me.’”

World-shaking words: “This is my body which is broken for you” . . . “This do in remembrance of me.”

The service closed—quietly, almost in hushed silence.

The preparations for the assault began. The ship was a busy, crazy mad-house—packing, checking, loading, cleaning, oiling. In the dark of night the ships were anchored. The assault parties boarded the boats and approached the beaches. The battle was engaged.

Next day, after hectic hours, the casualties began to come in. Among those killed in action was the American Captain from Boston, the Yankee and Unitarian. He was buried tenderly in the sandy soil of North Africa. In his pocket, among his effects, was his Testament. At various dates he had underlined passages whose meaning he had discovered by experience. There was a slip of paper lying in at a certain passage, and a date was written on the margin. The date was November 7th, 1942. And the passage read: “This is my body, which is broken for you.”

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