

Verdun: a place of horror, desperation, shame, sorrow, and hope

Sermon by Auxiliary bishop Leo Schwarz, President

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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We have just had an impression of the immense suffering here at the battlefields of Verdun. And, when I look into your faces, I can see that this has left its mark. It is thus fitting that today's reading and Gospel deal with regret and repentance.

When, on 28 June 1914, the shots were fired in Sarajevo, few realised that Europe was about to embark on the bloodiest century of its history. The shots in Sarajevo were followed by political logic, alliance policies, national enthusiasm, delusions of national grandeur and the depths of human desperation. And, what would have been almost impossible to comprehend after the First World War – it was the seed for something far worse that was yet to come. Verdun is a dark milestone on the road that would lead to Auschwitz.

The Battle of Verdun, or rather the carnage of Verdun, is more indicative of the logic of that new age than almost any other event in World War One. The goal was not simply to achieve a military victory, but rather to annihilate the opponent. In describing his goal, General von Falkenhayn, the chief German strategist of the Battle of Verdun, said that he intended to attach a "blood pump" to the heart of the French people and to bleed them dry on the fields of Verdun. He did not succeed, thank God, yet the inhuman strain of these events changed something in the hearts of the people of France, Germany and Europe, in some cases hardening them beyond recognition. This modern barbarism left its mark, with eight and a half million people losing their lives in World War One. How many un-lived lives, how many destroyed hopes, how much unknown suffering, and how much desperation are hidden behind this number?

We believe that each of these lives is in the hands of God. Many of those who went through the hell of Verdun lost this belief. Many of those who returned from the war were full of anger and hate, or were broken in mind and body, and they asked questions, screaming for answers. An existential emptiness opened up in many. The temptation to try and fill this emptiness with the heresy of nationalism or the ideal of a corrupted form of social justice was great. Many – far too many – gave in to this temptation. Fascism and Communism would never have gained such power were it not for the war. Violence beget violence. Verdun affected Europe very deeply. Europe was led astray, into the Babylonian captivity of violence. And, as the captive of the narrow interests of nationalist policies, Europe remained incapable of creating a stable peace after the catastrophe of the First World War.

But where were we? Where was the Church?

It is both good and consoling to know that Pope Benedict XV was unceasing in his efforts to silence the guns and bring peace to Europe. His efforts have long been

underappreciated, yet they should serve as encouragement to us today. The Church has never stopped preaching the Gospel.

Yet we must also remember the fact that, while we celebrated the Eucharist on both sides of the front, we were far too often praying against one another. There were countless lines uttered in the sermons given during the war which even now evoke our deepest shame. The Churches of the time were often susceptible to the false allures of violence and nationalism. The name of our Lord – how often was it uttered in vain? How often was it invoked for murder and other heinous crimes? The belt buckles of the German troops bore the words "God is with us".

There is no question: one could also speak of bravery, sacrifice, altruism and of many occasions where people grew to their true potential. Yet the millions of times where these virtues were abused quickly led to their being used as an excuse, as a means of disguising our failure. Not to admit to this would truly be a sign of despair. For it is our trust in the Lord that enables us to peer into the darkest depths of our history, secure in the belief that He is holding us. Ezekiel tells us how, during the Babylonian captivity, the hand of the Lord came upon him and led him out to a field of bones. The Lord asked: "Son of man, can these bones come to life?" Ezekiel answered cleverly and evasively, saying: "Lord God, you alone know that." It is not the rash answer, the nonchalant reply that "Everything will be all right", that points the way out of captivity. No, it is being patient when confronted with open questions, unfulfilled hope and life that shows us the way.

This is why it is also not right to simply condemn the generations who preceded us, or simply to excuse their deeds. Who would dare presume that it is their place to do so? Yet we are required to take seriously the circumstances and experiences of their lives, for it is this which has formed the ground upon which we stand. And it is only when we understand the structure of this ground that it can become the ground upon which a different, better Europe can be established. Simply getting caught up in talking about the new Europe will not make it come to pass. The shocks which our continent suffered back then have changed its face forever, and even if we have largely left the captivity of violence behind us, we would do well not to forget how far we had to go, and the errors and temptations which we encountered along the way. Here in Verdun we must ask ourselves the question, what opportunities for peace are currently endangered? How can we overcome violence and its consequences? We must offer a good example. We should not fool ourselves; we still have a long way to go. One look at the Balkans and the memories of our internal European turmoil during the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s shows us just how difficult the task is with which we see ourselves confronted. There are also currently many places outside of Europe which should be mentioned here, such as Darfur, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The contemplative remembrance of those who lost their lives or their hope in the blood-drenched fields of Verdun can also help give our efforts the urgency they require. We should not forget those who, at the depths of futility, found the wrong reason to live their lives, but we must also remember those who managed to light beacons to the virtues of righteousness even in this dark time.

This is why it is good that we have gathered here today in order to remember, to pray and to celebrate the Eucharist together. The horizon of history is open. Particularly when we look back at our European experiences, it is incumbent upon us to follow a

new path in order to show our respect for the dead, and to establish a practical basis for our hope. Much has been achieved over these past decades and has even now become part of our tradition. 90 years after the battle of Verdun, Verdun is also a location of German and French reconciliation. Verdun has found itself again, in the degree that we have found one another. Today, Verdun is part of the miracle that is Europe's return to its true nature.

Against the background of this history and for our shared future, it is therefore of great significance that we are truly able to pray together today:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

And I would like to add the words of the tax collector from the Gospels:
"Oh God, be merciful to us sinners!"

It is this spirit which has made it possible for us to gather here today, and I believe that this is a good reason to be thankful. Amen.