

Monte Cassino

To shorten a four-hour flight from Chicago to Oakland some years ago I bought a book titled *The Day of Battle* by Rick Atkinson. It was promoted as the most up to date account of the Allied campaign in Italy from September 1943 to June 1944 – a campaign of attrition as American, British, New Zealand, Canadian, French, North African and Indian units inched their way up the boot of Italy from Salerno to Rome.

The bombing of the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino is dealt with in detail. The monastery was founded in 529 by St. Benedict himself and became the watershed of Judeo-Christian civilization for centuries. Situated as it was on a mountain knob 1600 feet above the Allied forces in the valley below and considering how stiff German resistance had been for weeks, the commander of the New Zealand division, Bernard Freyberg, wanted the building destroyed – assuming as he did that it was occupied by the enemy. “Somehow,” said one soldier, “it was the thing that was holding up all our lives and keeping us away from home.”

Not all agreed with Freyberg's wish. The French General Juin pleaded with the American Fifth Army commander Mark Clark to spare the place. So did the U.S. II Corps commander Geoffrey Keyes, a devout Catholic, who flew over the abbey and saw no signs of enemy presence. Keyes also said bombing the place would only turn it into a real obstacle once the enemy moved into the rubble. Mark Clark himself opposed the bombing, saying, “It would be shameful to destroy the abbey and its treasure” – not to mention the refugees inside. But his British superior Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander overruled Clark. In a dictated memo Clark condemned Alexander, adding: “It is too bad unnecessarily to destroy one of the art treasures of the world.”

And so on February 15th, 1944 at 9:45 AM 250 bombers began to drop 600 tons of high explosives on the abbey of Monte Cassino. Artillery joined in the barrage. “By 2 PM,” writes Atkinson, “the abbey was a smoking ruin.” No one will ever know how many refugees died. The following day the abbot led 40 monks and refugees down the mountain road preceded by a large wooden crucifix. “Down, down,” writes the author, “the procession wound toward the seething valley, with the abbot and his monks mumbling the rosary in contemplation of God's deepest mysteries: the joyful, the sorrowful, the glorious.”

Why do I dwell on this episode? Maybe because I read a recent report deploring the decline of faith in a Europe gone agnostic at best, doubtful of any transcendent meaning to life. Was the bombing of the monastery of Monte Cassino a forecast of this decline? Bombs can't really destroy a civilization's faith in the Gospel and a sacramental view of life, but media bias and blind materialism can - as well as the scandals that have hit us in recent years. Of course, the abbey of Monte Cassino has since been rebuilt right where it was – as if it had never been blown away. And we trust the same will always be true of our Judeo-Christian heritage. For as a wartime pamphlet distributed to Allied soldiers (designed to encourage them to be sparing of Italy's art treasures) asserted: “Man is distinguished from the beasts by his power to reason and frame abstract hopes and ideas.” And let's never forget to add: to care about the vulnerable in our midst, build churches, paint frescos, write poems, celebrate liturgies, generate processions led by a crucifix amid the haze of godless international combustion.

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