

August 13, 2006

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica knew his history. In fact, his own family made a great deal of the history that he knew. Intermarried with other prominent households, such as the Paullus and Gracchus families, the Scipiones were one of the most important dynasties in Roman history, giving the Republic some of its most illustrious generals and political leaders. For example, Nasica's first cousin, Publius Scipio Africanus, was the conquering hero of the Second Punic War, an extended conflict in which a number of his illustrious relatives had perished. Nasica himself, born in 227, became a consul of the Republic in 191 and figured prominently in Roman history, especially in Spain and Gaul, for the next twenty years.

Rome had defeated Carthage in the First Punic War just fourteen years before Nasica's birth, and during much of his early life those two powers fought the Second Punic War (218 to 201), a long series of campaigns in which the Romans seemed to lose most of the battles and came very close to losing the war. (Fortunately for them, Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, failed to bring siege engines adequate to storm the walls of Rome.)

The ensuing peace was always tenuous, and some years later Rome, looking for another excuse to attack its rival in Africa, started the Third Punic War (149-146). At the end of this conflict the Romans, following the counsel of Marcus Porcius Cato (*Carthago delenda est*), razed Carthage to the ground and forbade anyone to live there. A popular consensus said that three wars with one enemy were quite enough.

According to St. Augustine, however, Scipio Nasica, with his superior knowledge of history, would never have agreed with that decision. Except for the constant impetus provided by its competition with Carthage, Nasica believed, Rome would

never have become so strong, and he feared that Rome would decline if that competition were definitively removed.

Nasica, Augustine explained, "feared security, that enemy of weak minds, and he perceived that a wholesome fear would be a fit guardian for the citizens. Nor was he mistaken; the outcome proved how wisely he had spoken, for when Carthage was destroyed, and the Roman Republic was delivered from its great source of anxiety, many disastrous evils came about from the new conditions of prosperity" (*The City of God* 1.30).

The Bishop of Hippo proceeded to list Rome's ensuing many moral evils, which eventually led to Alaric's sacking of the city in A.D. 410, the disaster that prompted Augustine's own reflections on Roman history.

The Rome that Augustine knew was a self-satisfied, self-indulgent place, in which the citizens felt free to pursue whatever they fancied, secure in the assurance that no one could prohibit them. Had the Romans listened to Nasica, Augustine argued, and preserved Carthage, they would never have had reason to fear Alaric.

Since he was making an argument of social morality, Augustine's point was political, and political leaders of all times—perhaps our own times and our own nation especially—should prudently consider his case. Indeed, Augustine's description of the decline of Rome (2.10, for instance) bears striking resemblance to American life since the downfall of the Iron Curtain. The comparison is sobering, to say no more.

Augustine's argument is applicable in many other respects, however, because the effort born of competition is valuable in a host of endeavors. Nowadays this is not a popular thing to say, because competition invariably involves someone's losing, and there is a current and strong bias against any idea of losing. Life itself, alas, entertains no such bias.

Perhaps Christian asceticism is the area in which Nasica's counsel and Augustine's argument are most readily applicable. "You can't lose" seems almost to be the rallying cry of much popular American religion, which strikes me, on the whole, as enormously lazy and self-satisfied. The plain truth is that we *can* lose. Never here below are we completely beyond the reach of spiritual disaster. At least the Apostle Paul did not think so. Even as he argued that nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God," he also exerted every effort not be "disqualified" (Rom 8:39; 1 Cor 9:27).

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