

Convivium spoken texts - Spring 2011: Armada

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Estote fortes in bello

“Be strong in war, and you shall receive the eternal kingdom.” This promised reward for taking up arms for one’s faith has for centuries sustained the resolve of rulers and the soldiers they command, whatever their confession.

By the late sixteenth century, the earth-bound Spanish Empire was the most powerful in Europe, with a presence on five continents. As the preeminent Catholic state, Spain was the natural bulwark against the fragmentation of Western Christianity by the rise of Protestantism.

Thus Philip II, Spain’s monarch for most of the latter half of the sixteenth century, was both the most powerful secular prince in Europe and Catholicism’s most influential advocate apart from the Bishop of Rome. Were his religious duties as defender of the faith to result in a transfer of further territory to Spanish control, so much the better, as this English Catholic pamphlet from 1588 makes clear:

wk. 1: Logan McCarty; wk. 2: Jeff Kline

Since it is the first part of the Catholic King to defend Catholic faith and religion, that he be certainly persuaded in this confidence, that there will be no impediment that can retard this attempt of his, that is Divino praesidio subnixo. For this reason he shall not only, on most just causes, obtain the possession of the kingdom due to him, but shall gain to himself the immortal glory of his name, above all other kings that ever were: namely, so ancient and famous a kingdom joined to Spain."

As part of Philip’s role as Catholicism’s most powerful defender, the Spanish Duke of Medina Sidonia was charged with commanding the largest fleet of ships ever assembled, some 151 vessels in all. The purpose of this unprecedented gathering of naval forces was to liberate the Kingdom of England from the heretical Protestant rule of Elizabeth Tudor. Elizabeth’s power to reign had already been nullified by a decree from the Pope, and now it was Medina Sidonia’s task to coordinate the Armada’s role in Spain’s holy rescue mission. He wrote to his men:

wk. 1: Christopher Laumer; wk. 2: Michael Dettelbach

The principal reason which has moved his Majesty to undertake this enterprise is his desire to serve God, and to convert to His Church many peoples and souls who are now oppressed by the heretical enemies of our holy Catholic faith, and are subjected to their sects and errors. In order that this aim should be kept constantly before the eyes of all I enjoin you to see that before embarking, all ranks be confessed and absolved, with due contrition for their sins.

Kyrie/Gloria

The Armada's victory would place Philip on the English throne for the second time. Thirty-four years before the ships set sail, the Spanish king had married the Catholic Queen Mary of England, and they ruled England as co-monarchs for four years. Upon Mary's death the English throne passed to the Protestant Elizabeth, eldest surviving child of Henry VIII. Philip, again for political reasons, sought in Elizabeth his second English bride, but his marriage proposal, like that of all Elizabeth's suitors, went unanswered.

As the invasion seemed imminent, Elizabeth joined her troops at Tilbury, near the mouth of the Thames, and delivered what would become her most famous speech:

wk. 1: Elisabeth Winterkorn; wk. 2: Harriet Bridges

My loving people,

We have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. In the mean time, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject; not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

O Lord make thy servant Elizabeth

The primary role of the Spanish Armada in the English Expedition was not to do battle, but rather to provide safe transport for Spanish soldiers, most of whom were to be escorted from Flanders across the Channel. The Spanish military presence in the Low Countries was commanded by Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma. According to the following dispatch, Parma demanded of his soldiers a standard of personal behavior equal to the glorious task before them:

wk 1: Logan McCarty; wk 2.: Jeff Kline

*From the highest to the lowest you are to understand the objective of our expedition, which is to recover countries to the Church now oppressed by the enemies of the true faith. I therefore beseech you to remember your calling, so that God may be with us in what we do. I charge you, one and all, to abstain from profane oaths dishonoring to the names of our Lord, our Lady and the Saints. All personal quarrels are to be suspended while the expedition lasts, and for a month after it is completed. Neglect of this will be held as treason. Each morning at sunrise, the ship boys, according to custom, shall sing "Good Morrow"*** at the foot of the mainmast, and at sunset the Ave Maria. Since bad weather may interrupt the communications, the watchword is laid down for each day of the week: Sunday, Jesus; the days succeeding, the Holy Ghost, the Holy Trinity, Santiago, the Angels, All Saints and Our Lady. At sea, every evening, each ship shall pass with a salute under the lee of a commander-in-chief, and shall follow at night the light which he will carry in his stern.*

Tu es Petrus

O Lux et decus Hispaniae

For many Catholics in Europe, the main goal of the Enterprise was the liberation of England's high population of Catholics. Many who were English Protestants in name no doubt attended Anglican services to avoid the hefty fines for failure to do so. The Spanish, for their part, expected and relied on the support of English Catholics once troops made landfall, as Medina Sidonia wrote in his sailing orders:

wk. 1: Ruthie Miller; wk. 2: Kate Gyllensvard

The saints of heaven will go in company with us, and especially the holy patrons of Spain and, indeed, those of England, who are persecuted by the heretics and cry aloud to God for vengeance, will come out to join and help us, and those who gave their lives to establish the holy faith in that land and washed it with their blood. We shall find waiting for us there the help of the Blessed John Fisher, Cardinal-bishop of Rochester, of Thomas More, John Forrest and innumerable saintly Carthusians, Franciscans and other religious, whose blood was cruelly spilt by King Henry and who call upon God to avenge them in the land in which they died. There shall we be helped by Edmund Campion, Ralph Sherwin, Alexander Briant, Thomas Cotton and many other reverend priests, servants of Our Lord, whom Elizabeth has torn in pieces with ferocious cruelty and nicely calculated tortures. With us will be the blessed and guiltless Mary, Queen of Scotland, who, coming fresh from her sacrifice, displays ample and resounding evidence of the cruelty and impiety of that Elizabeth and utters her complaints against her. There too we are called by the laments of innumerable Catholics in prison, the cries of widows who lost their husbands for the faith, the weeping of virgins who were forced to yield their lives rather than destroy their souls, the tender children suckled on the poison of heresy, who are doomed to perdition unless deliverance reaches them betimes; and finally myriads of workers, citizens, knights, nobles and clergymen, and all ranks of Catholics who are oppressed and downtrodden by the heretics and are looking to us for their liberation.

To be sure, the international politics of sixteenth-century Europe can partly explain Spanish motivation to mount an invasion of England. Yet at its heart this Enterprise was in the tradition of a religious Crusade, a fervent desire to return the One True Faith to Europe's island kingdom.

Credo

Intermission

History offers an incomplete story. We omit, either by ignorance or by choice, and in so doing the story of the past is inevitably only a shadow of actual events. Catholic Spain against Protestant England, epic battles, victory and glory, all make for fine storytelling, but the reality was far more complex and generally less glamorous. Take, for example, our Admiral Medina Sidonia. He seems to have been chosen for the job not out of skill, but through family connections, and moreover had no interest in taking command in the first place.

wk. 1: Peter Nore; wk 2: Chris Christopher Chase

"My health is bad, and from my small experience of the water I know that I am always seasick. I have no money which I can spare. I owe a million ducats, and I have not a real [pronounced re-'al] to spend on my outfit, The expedition is on such a scale and the person at the head of it ought to understand navigation and sea-fighting, and I know nothing of either. I have not one of those essential qualifications. I have no acquaintances among the officers who are to serve under me. Santa Cruz had information about the state of things in England; I have none. Were I competent otherwise, I should have to act in the dark by the opinion of others, and I cannot tell to whom I may trust. The Adelantado of Castile would do better than I. Our Lord would help him, for he is a good Christian and has fought in naval battles. If you send me, depend upon it, I shall have a bad account to render of my trust."

Philip persisted that he must go, and the Duke relented:

wk. 1: Peter Nore; wk. 2: Christopher Chase

"Since your Majesty still desires it, after my confession of incompetence, I will try to deserve your confidence. As I shall be doing God's work, I may hope that he will help me."

Philip replied:

wks. 1 and 2: Erik Bertrand

You are sacrificing yourself for God's service and mine. I am so anxious, that if I was less occupied at home, I would accompany the fleet myself and I should be certain that all would go well. Take heart; you have now an opportunity of showing the extraordinary qualities which God, the author of all good, has been pleased to bestow upon you. Happen what may, I charge myself with the care of your children. If you fail, you fail; but the cause being the cause of God, you will not fail.

Meanwhile Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's principal secretary and trusted advisor, wrote despairingly of England's poor preparations as the Armada sailed out of Lisbon:

wk. 1: Cindy Liu; wk. 2: Sarah Spinella

I am sorry to see so great a danger hanging over this realm, so slightly regarded and so carelessly provided for. I would to god the enemy were no more careful to assail than we are to defend.

**How long shall mine enemies
O God, the proud are risen**

The English were wise to fear the military force that was preparing to bear down on their shores, but conditions on the Spanish ships did not bode well for the cause of the invaders. Medina Sidonia, the reluctant commander, wrote to his king of the many hardships his men were suffering:

wks. 1 and 2: Studie Marcuse

The weather, though in June, is as wild as in December. No one remembers such a season. It is the more strange since we are on the business of the Lord, and some reason there must be for what has befallen us. I told your Majesty that I was unfit for this command when you asked me to undertake it. I obeyed your orders, and now I am here in Corunna with the ships dispersed and the force remaining to me inferior to the enemy. The crews are sick and grow daily worse from bad food and water. Most of our provisions have perished, and we have not enough for more than two months' consumption. Much depends on the safety of this fleet. You have exhausted your resources to collect it, and if it is lost you may lose Portugal and the Indies. The men are out of spirit. The officers do not understand their business. We are no longer strong. Do not deceive yourself into thinking that we are equal to the work before us. You remember how much it cost you to conquer Portugal, a country adjoining Castile, where half the inhabitants were in your favor. We are now going against a powerful kingdom with only the weak force of the Prince of Parma and myself. I speak freely, but I have laid the matter before the Lord; you must decide yourself what is to be done. Recollect only how many there are who envy your greatness and bear you no good-will.

Per signum crucis

The Spanish fleet made its way east in the Channel, and along the way the much smaller English force, commanded by Lord Howard of Effingham and pirate-in-chief Sir Francis Drake, pelted the Armada with long-range cannon fire. Despite the clever battle tactics of the English captains, their ships failed to inflict any real damage on the Spanish fleet.

Lord Howard wrote to Walsingham of the state of affairs in the Channel:

wk. 1: Anne Kazlauskas; wk. 2: Anne Matthews

Sir:— I will not trouble you with any long letter; we are at this present otherwise occupied than with writing. Upon Friday, at Plymouth, I received intelligence that there were a great number of ships descried off of the Lizard; their fleet to consist of 120 sail, whereof there are 4 galleasses and many ships of great burden.

At nine of the clock we gave them fight, which continued until one. In this fight we made some of them to bear room to stop their leaks; notwithstanding we durst not adventure to put in among them, their fleet being so strong. But there shall be nothing either neglected or unhazarded, that may work their overthrow.

Sir, the captains in her Majesty's ships have behaved themselves most bravely and like men hitherto, and I doubt not will continue, to their great commendation. And so, recommending our good success to your godly prayers, I bid you heartily farewell.

*Your very loving friend,
C. HOWARD.*

Though the Armada might have been wise to annihilate the English fleet while it had the opportunity, its orders were to proceed to Flanders and escort Parma's army. But in those days communications were a good deal slower, and Parma's forces had yet to assemble when the fleet arrived. One of the greatest dangers in naval warfare is having nowhere to go, as Medina Sidonia wrote to Parma:

wk. 1: John Nesby; wk. 2: Evan Ingersoll

I am anchored here, two leagues from Calais with the enemy's fleet on my flank. They can cannonade me whenever they like, and I shall be unable to do them much harm in return. if you can send me forty or fifty flyboats of your fleet I can, with their help, defend myself here until you are ready to come out."

Da mihi auxilium

The Battle of Gravelines, off the Flemish coast, was the pivotal engagement of the summer of 1588. The English tactic of sending fire ships in among the Spanish vessels caused far more confusion than damage. But in the end, the Armada was unable to coordinate its planned escort of Parma's troops, and thus the whole Enterprise was abandoned. With the English fleet blocking escape to the west, the Armada was compelled to sail north around Scotland and west to Ireland, where an enemy far more deadly than the English ships awaited them. The account of a certain Spanish Captain Cuellar tells the story of the Armada's fate:

wk 1: Ruthie Miller; wk. 2: Liz Hanna

The galleon San Pedro, in which I sailed, received much injury from many heavy cannon balls, which the enemy lodged in her in various parts; and although they were repaired as well as possible at the time, there were still some hidden shot-holes through which much water entered. After the fierce engagement we had off Calais on the 8th of August, continuing from morning till seven o'clock in the evening—which was the last of all—our Armada being in the act of retiring—oh! I don't know how I can say it—the fleet of our enemy followed behind to drive us from their country

All the Armada scattered in such manner by the storm that some ships went to Germany, others drove on the islands of Holland and Zealand into the enemies' hands, others went to Shetland, others to Scotland, where they were lost and burned. More than twenty were lost in the Kingdom of Ireland, with all the chivalry and flower of the Armada.

On the fifth day there sprang up so great a storm on our beam, with a sea up to the heavens, so that the cables could not hold nor the sails serve us, and we were driven ashore. Such a thing was never seen: for within the space of an hour all three ships were broken in pieces, so that there did not escape three hundred men, and more than one thousand were drowned, among them many persons of importance, captains, gentlemen, and other officials.

Many were drowning within the ships; others, casting themselves into the water, sank to the bottom without returning to the surface; others on rafts and barrels, and gentlemen on pieces of timber, others cried aloud in the ships, calling upon God; captains threw their chains and crown-pieces into the sea; the waves swept others away, washing them out of the ships. When any one of our people reached the beach, two hundred savages and other enemies fell upon him and stripped him of what he had on until he was left in his naked skin.

I went to the Judge Advocate— God pardon him!—he was very sorrowful and depressed, and I said to him that he should make some provision for saving his life before the ship went to pieces, as she could not last for half a quarter of an hour longer; nor did she last it. The Judge Advocate followed me, loaded with crown-pieces, which he carried stitched up in his waistcoat and trousers. In the act of casting-off from the ship, there came a huge wave, breaking over us in such a manner that the Judge Advocate was unable to resist it, and the wave bore him away and drowned him, crying out and calling upon God while drowning. I could not aid him, as the hatchway cover, being without weight at one end, began to turn over with me, and at that moment a piece of timber crushed my legs. With great exertion I righted myself upon my supporting timber; and, here came four waves, and they cast me upon the shore, where I emerged, unable to stand, all covered with blood, and very much injured.

Sanctus/Benedictus
Agnus Dei

The Spanish Armada, thanks more to the whims of Mother Nature than to English guns, suffered huge losses of men and materials before its remnants limped back to friendly ports. The suffering of the English sailors, by contrast, was almost entirely man-made. Rather than being welcomed home as conquering heroes, most English sailors were ordered to stay on board for months following the last engagement with Spanish forces, ostensibly to repel a possible Spanish counteroffensive, but more likely to avoid having to pay those who had risked their lives to defend the Crown. While only about 100 English were killed in action, over 3,000 died of disease and food poisoning while languishing in ships off the coast of their native land. Lord Howard paid his men what he could out of his own pocket, and wrote in vain to the government:

wk. 1: Kate Gyllensvard; wk 2.: Ron Lacro

As I left some of the ships at my coming up, so I do find, by their reports that have looked deeply into it, that the most part of the fleet is grievously infected, and die daily, falling sick in the ships by numbers; and that the ships of themselves be so infectious and so corrupted, as it is thought to be a very plague; and we find that the fresh men that we draw into our ships are infected one day and die the next, so as many of the ships have hardly enough men to weigh their anchors.

Thus the victory over the Armada was far more one for the Kingdom England than for those who did the fighting.

The faithful, both Catholic and Protestant, took comfort and gained strength in the perceived rightness of their respective causes. Clearly life was short and brutish - something the participants in the battles and storms of 1588 could appreciate all too well - and the body is but a fragile vessel, returning to the dust from which it is made. But the soul, all good Christians fervently prayed, would find rest in the eternal kingdom.

Memento homo