Ships, Barracks, Monasteries

By Chaplain Norbert Karava

Admittedly, we would not spontaneously associate a deployed ship of the United States Navy or a typical barracks of sailors with a monastery of cenobites somewhere in an Egyptian or Palestinian desert. Surprisingly though, it seems that members of two such diverse communities can suffer with an affliction known as "acedia."

This word comes from Evagrius of Pontus (345-399AD) from whom we learn much about the spirituality of Egyptian and Palestinian Christian monasticism of the late 4th century. He was ordained a deacon by his spiritual father, the celebrated Gregory of Nazianzus in 379AD and ended his life in the deserts of Egypt, having become a great authority on ascesis and written extensively about the struggles of the spiritual life. He is famous for writing on one of the most insidious temptations that the monk or cenobite faced: Acedia is one of the eight "evil thoughts" that Evagrius warns of in his admonitions. These "evil thoughts" were later presented by Gregory the Great as the "seven deadly sins."

We can make a few adaptations and discover that Evagrius' teaching on acedia, written for 4th century monks and hermits, can shed light on our own contemporary scenarios of commonplace unhappiness and frustration. Symptoms of acedia, beginning with somatic, moving to psychological, and ending with moral-spiritual, include:

• Torpor: A disabling lack of energy, together with an increased appetite for food and especially, drink;

• Listlessness and inertia: Things that once were exciting and appealing cease to be so. Enthusiasm withers. As the disease progresses, enjoyment as active ability ceases. Even though there is no lack of enjoyable things, the ability to enjoy them wanes and even passes altogether. This psychological dimension of acedia is one of the obvious symptoms of depression.

• Restless, multi-dimensional "elsewhereness:" This is one of the most characteristic features of acedia. The acedia sufferer is in constant flight, both mentally, and, if possible, physically from his present place of life and work. Only with the greatest of difficulty will he sit at his desk for more than half an hour, and he will find himself going to the head every 15 minutes, not for the sake of mere physical need. This aversion to his place leads to a hyper-criticality of his present circumstances of life: There is always something wrong with this ship, this command, this monastery, and there always is someplace better to be. Once arrived at that "better" place, it ceases to be better, but he never seems to notice this. For this reason also, people who suffer from acedia find it difficult to commit themselves to given events and persons; they are nagged by the worry that they are "missing out" on a better party to be at or cooler people to hang out with. Thus, even while they are conversing with those present at the party, they are constantly scanning text messages and assessing the constantly changing features of the social landscape. They are always elsewhere: On the one hand, they find it intolerable to be by themselves, and are driven to seek the company of others, and yet on the other, they are quickly bored by the very company they find to keep, again, endlessly glancing at cell phones for further options. In other words, the sufferer of acedia has no place and cannot rest in the present and becomes a wandering tortured soul. This restlessness leads him to:

• An ever-increasing inability to work and focus on the given tasks of life: Closely related to the inability of being in the present is the inability to work. In the shadow of sloth, acedia not only disables our ability to enjoy our work, but brings about an active aversion to work. Acedia sufferers will often have "writer's block" not because they are at a loss for words but because they simply hate what they have to do. They will smoke more than their appetite for nicotine requires, they will run four errands for every one errand actually needed, and find every reason not to be about their appointed tasks. This inevitably leads the victim of acedia to see most of his life, spent at his place and occupation of work, as futile, meaningless, boring and frustrating. Could this be one reason why 90 percent of Americans hate their jobs?

• An exaggerated pursuit of entertainment: In the void of the inability to work, the only thing that affords the victim of acedia some relief from his unending flight from himself will be the pursuit of pleasure; a video game to the wee hours of the morning with a case of Coronas fits the bill nicely. Needless to say acedia sufferers are prime candidates for alcoholism and other forms of addiction.

• Loss of the ability to care: When acedia reaches its terminal stages, the ability to care about anything dies. At its Greek root acedia means "absence of care" and it becomes the supreme manifestation of indifference. The connection with sloth and the inordinate desire for pleasure becomes clear: In pursuit of gratification of desire, having chosen so many times not to care, lazy, gluttonous, intemperate, lustful people eventually lose their ability to care at all. With the loss of the ability to care, personal relationships, which require and thrive on active caring, wither, and the sufferer of acedia finds himself ever more lonely and yet ever more incapable of initiating and maintaining friendships.

• The end: The painful discovery that awaits the selfish pertains to the nature of life itself: The supreme indifference of acedia is incompatible with life. In order to simply preserve one's life, one must care about the things that life requires. With the loss of the ability to care, comes the loss of the ability to live. Terminal acedia brings us to despair and yes, suicide. Acedia, which is primarily a moral-spiritual state of affairs, should figure largely on our suicide-prevention briefs!

As one of the eight "evil thoughts" according to Evagrius, acedia is a particularly privileged expression of selfishness or that "thing" we choose when we turn away from love. And what is the remedy? The common theme pervading the thought of Evagrius, John Cassian, and so many of the Fathers of the Desert is well expressed in the words Abbot Moses of Egypt: "Learn to triumph over it by endurance and conflict." There is no psychological silver bullet, no pill or protocol, no therapy to solve the problems brought about by our turning away from love which causes us to become betraying cowards, other than by choosing to turn back to love – even if that means entering a world of pain.

Vice CNO outlines priorities at senate hearing

By Karen Parrish, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama's choice to be the next Chief of Naval Operations outlined his priorities during a Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing July 28.

Navy Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert will be the 30th officer to serve in the Navy's top uniformed post, succeeding retiring Navy Adm. Gary Roughead, if the Senate confirms his nomination.

"If confirmed, my priorities will be to remain ready to meet the current challenges today, to build a relevant and capable future force, to continue to take care of our sailors, our civilians and their families, and institute a manning strategy that recruits and nurtures a motivated, a relevant and a diverse future force," Greenert said.

Meeting those priorities in the current budget environment will not be easy, he acknowledged.

"We must be clear-eyed in communicating what we will and what we won't be able to provide the nation in the future," he said.

Half of the Navy's ships are underway, and 43 percent are deployed, he said, while 12,000 sailors are on the ground supporting U.S. Central Command and another 10,000 are serving as individual augmentees to current operations.

"Your Navy remains ready. It is agile, and it's global, and it's relentlessly been busy," Greenert said. "Operating tempo has been high, [and] our missions have evolved."

The Navy's key mission, he said, is to "assure the security and freedom of the seas, in all the domains, so that the economies of the world can flourish."

To accomplish that mission, the Navy must be forward deployed, able to influence events, assist allies and provide the United States an offshore option, the admiral added.

Large cuts in the defense budget would create a conundrum that will require a strategic approach to resolve, he said.

"Our options are limited; we can't hollow the force," he said. "If we reduce force structure, that would exacerbate the problem we already have. And if we reduce modernization -- that is, go to the shipbuilding and aircraft accounts -- I'm concerned about the industrial base."

Greenert said that as vice chief of naval operations, he has provided data for the Defense Department strategic review, but is not currently involved in major deliberations.

"We have been told we would be part of any final ... decision process in this comprehensive review," he said.

Committee members asked Greenert for his views on China's expanding naval capabilities, noting that Chinese military officials said in June they are refurbishing a never-completed Soviet-era carrier.

"I believe it's clearly ... a prototype for what they ultimately want to have, which is a better aircraft carrier, indigenously built and tailored to their needs," the admiral said.

An aircraft carrier is typically an offensive capability, made to project power, Greenert noted. "The Chinese say they built it for defensive measures," he said. "It's hard to gauge their intent."

The admiral said China's recent growth in maritime capabilities shows that nation is "interested in expanding its operations to blue water" – open-ocean depths – and thereby expanding its influence.

Pet of the Week

Harley is a three year old Miniature Pinscher who can't wait to find a home where he can be with his people all the time. He is sweet, loves to play and loves to cuddle too. Harley is a good pup looking for a family who will return all the love he has to give. To find out more about Harley, or any animal at Pets Are Worth Saving (P.A.W.S.), contact 243-9996, or email usskittytalk.yokosuka@gmail.com, or visit the P.A.W.S. Web site at www.pawsyokosukajapan.com