

The day we bless the chainsaws: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

I imagine it like this. We put up signs all over the Northeast Kingdom, that region of Vermont in which my neighbors and I continue to enjoy the distinction of being outnumbered by Holstein cows. The signs invite anyone with a chainsaw, and especially those who make a living with one, to come to a Monday sunrise service to have their saws blessed.

In addition to the blessing, all those who come receive a logger's breakfast, an evergreen seedling to plant, and a container of two-cycle engine oil. We lay some sheets of cardboard about the chancel in case some of the saws are leaking fluid. After the closing hymn we process to the steps outside, fire up the saws and make one rip-roaringly joyful noise unto the Lord.

Those who attend our church regularly would see the chainsaw blessing as an extension of our Labor Day service, where for the last two years we've invited members of the parish to bring the tools of their trade for a blessing. We've blessed everything from a screwdriver to a lesson plan book, from a dancer's slippers to a stuffed animal used by an investigator of child abuse.

My sense is, however, that some readers, perhaps even one or two of my parishioners, might object to the chainsaw service. For one thing, loggers are predominantly men—though plenty of women in this area use chainsaws. (I once helped to put up a playground with a registered nurse whose ease with a chainsaw astounded me, not because she was a woman but because she had apparently never bothered to sharpen her saw.)

Of course, the major objection would be based on the fact that loggers cut down trees. How could we bless a tool used to level forests? Well, perhaps in the same way that you can read this magazine, which, if I'm not mistaken, is printed on paper.

Let's go another step. Suppose I were to tell you that after we were done with the chainsaws, we planned to have a service at which we would bless the guns of police officers. Does that give you pause? It does me. But now imagine that you're at a church one Sunday and a man with a sawed-off shotgun has just barricaded himself in the basement with the Sunday school. It would seem that his intentions toward the children are decidedly "not nice." Would you call the police? And, given your caveat about blessing guns, would you make a point of telling the police not to bring theirs into the building?

I may be simple-minded, but it would seem to me that for a Christian with an orthodox understanding of creation there are basically two kinds of objects: those we might bless and those we must renounce. In other words, we ought to be able to bless the guns of law enforcement officers or we ought to be calling for law enforcement officers to disarm.

In that regard, I recall how during the Vietnam war Cardinal Francis Spellman would show up at the airport in New York to bless the bombs and how Dorothy Day would show up to point her finger at him. (I'm told she used to beg the cab fare each time.) You might see Day as "the good guy" in the conflict; I certainly do. But at what was she pointing her finger? Dorothy Day wasn't objecting to the blessing of the bombs so much as she was objecting to the bombs themselves. She was in fact much closer to Spellman than to those who were quite content to have bombs dropped in their name—but who would have been appalled to drop them in God's name.

Other reasons besides moral queasiness might hold our hand from blessing a chainsaw. These have to do with the desire for moral license. It is convenient to reserve significant parts of the world as profane, and even "dirty," in order to preserve our ability to act in them without scruple. If sex is dirty, and money is dirty and politics is dirty, then we need not worry too much about keeping our hands clean in the Monday-through-Friday world. We can worship on Sunday much as we would wash our hands and spray a little deodorizer after using the toilet.

To bless something, on the other hand, is to bring it within the bounds—and the requirements—of a moral universe. It is liberation followed by obligation.

Perhaps this idea is most beautifully put in the work of a pagan Greek named Aeschylus. His three-play masterpiece *The Oresteia* reaches its climax with a confrontation between two divine forces: the Furies, blood-sucking, snake-haired

goddesses who exact vengeance for crimes committed against blood relatives, and Athena, the clever, androgynous and rationally persuasive deity who represents everything most liberal Americans admire. The conflict is resolved when Athena accepts the Furies for what they are and gives them a shrine under the Areopagus. From this moment on, law is to be administered reasonably and impartially, but the elementary sense of retributive justice which the Furies represent cannot be banished entirely from Athens any more than it can be banished entirely from the human heart. The wisdom of Athena consists of knowing this, and of recognizing that what you cannot banish you do well to bless.

It might be that a logger with a sanctified chainsaw (or a cop with a sanctified gun) would come to feel a bit too sanctified for his or our good, much like those Crusaders who were blessed before going off to murder and rape as many Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians as they could get their hands on. It might also happen, though, that being asked to clear-cut a mountainside, and remembering that his chainsaw was now holy—like the mountain, like himself—the logger would need to talk to his boss. And his boss, remembering that most loggers tend to be large, would need to listen.