

Prodding Our Conscience **By Andrew LaFleur**

Saint Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned to death for preaching about the salvation that only comes through Jesus Christ. Saint Joan of Arc (1412-1431) was only nineteen years old when she was burned at the stake for obeying God by helping reclaim the French throne in the name of God. Saint Agatha of Sicily (d. 251) was sent to a house of prostitution, then imprisoned, and finally tortured to death because she refused to surrender her purity.

Saint Paul Miki and his companions (1564-1597), which included three Jesuits, six Franciscans, and 17 laymen, were sentenced to death for their fidelity to the Christian message. Among this group of martyrs were the following young people: Gabriel age nineteen, Thomas age sixteen, Anthony age thirteen, and Louis age ten. In addition to enduring torture they were forced to walk over three hundred miles from Miako to Nagasaki through snow, ice and freezing streams. Along the way they sang songs of praise and joy. They told bystanders that their martyrdom was an occasion for rejoicing, not sadness. When they reached Nagasaki, there were twenty-six crosses awaiting the final act of their death sentence. These heroic Christians, some of them younger than the boys in Kepha, ran to their crosses and embraced them.

Let's fast forward to the 21st century. Where are the martyrs of today? They are in China and North Korea, where a Christian can be imprisoned or murdered merely because he or she is a Christian. It is true that currently in our country Christians are not suffering bloody martyrdoms, but there are martyrs of a bloodless kind. They are all around us. There are the mothers who choose to stay home and home school their children because they want to form their character and spirituality. They are the mothers who are forced to leave their children in order to work and support them. They are the dads who work hard so their wives can stay with the children and support them with loving care. The list is endless.

The reality is that every time we die to self we surrender to a kind of martyrdom. Jesus said, "the person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones" (Lk 16:10). To coin a common saying, you have to crawl before you can walk.

We Catholics are blessed with many advantages. So why is it that when we need to publically stand up for our faith, we fail to do so? Welcome to the human condition. Peter was brave in the comfort of the upper room, but he denied his Lord on the field of combat. In one way or another we are all guilty of betrayal. It's called sin.

I suggest that all sin stems from pride. Like Satan, who cried, "*Non serviam* – I will not serve," we too are vulnerable to the temptation to do things "our way." A servant girl frightened Peter, but we may surrender to the fear of ridicule by avoiding the sign of the cross in public. Physical death is not a danger, but the death to our pride certainly is.

Pride is a struggle even in the confessional, where we have the opportunity to admit our crimes against God. It's difficult to admit the truth, to see the ugliness and take full responsibility for our behavior. We may enter the confessional with a sense of anxiety or embarrassment, but then we hear the reassuring words, "I absolve you of your sins." Once again Jesus has come to heal the sick and raise the dead. The awesome truth is our God is full of gentleness and compassion.

I was asked to give a provocation reflection for this quiet time with the Kephra moms and dads. So why highlight the martyrs as our point of comparison? We are all one Body in Christ. They are like us, and we must become more like them.

We risk the death to self every time we make the sign of the cross in public, attend Mass, pray the Rosary or the Chaplet of Divine Mercy in public, or pray before an abortion mill. True, we are not putting our lives on the line as the martyrs did, but we risk ridicule and criticism. It can hurt to be laughed at and called names like hypocrites, holier than thou, Jesus freaks, or ultra right-wing conservatives by strangers, much more so by family members and friends.

We may be invited to a wedding that offends God's law, but we will become the villains if we don't attend. Pope Pius XII hit the nail on the head when he proclaimed that the sin of the 20th century was the loss of the sense of sin.

Living our faith courageously may not endanger our lives. However, it may cause us to lose friendships. Fidelity to Christ brings us into conflict with the prevailing live-and-let-live philosophy that is rooted in self-centered feelings that ignore truth. The world issues the challenge, "How dare we identify the behavior of others as sinful or evil?"

The world teaches that sex is merely an appetite to be experienced with whomever, whenever and wherever we like. Jesus teaches, however, "everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28).

The world encourages people to grab whatever they can, take care of number one. If you get caught it's only illegal. We are told it's permissible to cheat on our taxes, but be careful. After all, the government gets too much of our money as it is, and they waste it favoring special interest groups. What's wrong with shop-lifting from Wal Mart? They won't even miss it with all their money. Jesus teaches us: "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where our treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Mt 6:19).

When we feel disgruntled, discouraged, depressed or angry about what is happening in our society in general or with the trials and difficulties we experience, we need to remember that God brings peace not anxiety. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that should permeate our daily lives amid our challenges. God gives us the grace for the present moment, not for tomorrow's difficulties.

Our challenge is to stay the course by remaining faithful to Christ. In this way we can avoid the allure that leads to shallow promises, self-centered values, broken marriages, wayward children, and shattered families. Jesus instructed us: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:13-14).

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