

Martyrdom: Heroically Living the Gospel

On October 28, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that all Christians should be ready to give their lives for Christ. The occasion of his midday Angelus remarks was the largest beatification ceremony in the history of the Church as 498 martyrs who were killed in Spain in the 1930s were honored. The heroism of the martyrs has been revered since the deacon Stephen was stoned as he prayed: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

The heroism of those who courageously give up their life is even recognized in secular society as, for example, our nation awards the Medal of Honor, also called the Congressional Medal of Honor. The 7th chapter of 2 Maccabees narrates the remarkable martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons, each of whom was slaughtered before her eyes because of their fidelity to God’s law.

From Stephen to the present day some Christians are afforded the blessing of martyrdom, but they have always been relatively few in number. Pope Benedict XVI also recognized “an unbloody martyrdom” to which every Christian is called. It is the heroic testimony of living the Gospel without compromises while expending themselves generously in the service of others. The Pope made the pointed observation that “this martyrdom of ordinary life is a particularly important witness in the secularized societies of our time.” So what does it mean to heroically live the Gospel?

The answer is found, of course, in Jesus Christ, but here I have grappled with questions. In reading the Gospels it is obvious that death loomed over the whole of Jesus’ life from Bethlehem to Calvary. Yet why was it necessary? Any loving act had infinite merit because of the divine Person performing it. So why endure the torturous anguish that ended as he was nailed to a cross, the death of a slave? Certainly the Father is no sadist who took pleasure in the agonizing tortures that ended the Son’s human life. Nor did Jesus relish suffering as the author of Hebrews eloquently expressed:

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:7-10).

This impressive passage raises its own questions? If Jesus’ prayer was “to save him from death,” in what sense was he “heard”? After all, wasn’t he tortured and crucified? What kind of answer is that?

Today it is commonplace to think of suffering as the greatest of evils, but it is not. Sin is the greatest of evils, and from the death of sin, even the slightest taint of it, Jesus’

prayer was answered. Furthermore, his prayer was answered when he conquered both sin and death in the final act of his resurrection. Finally, the text addresses my questions in the insightful passage: “he learned obedience through what he suffered,” and through that suffering was “made perfect” in his human nature. In the Bible the words “love” and “obedience” are synonymous. Genuine love has two essential elements: self-sacrifice and commitment. Commitment implies fidelity when self-sacrifice is difficult. Perfect love also has two essential elements: total self-sacrifice and absolute commitment. The Father “heard” Jesus’ prayer by sustaining him in his suffering so he could love perfectly in his human nature with the same complete abandon and commitment he loved in his divine nature. Jesus desired to love the Father perfectly as a man in a blaze of self-sacrificing love. This is how he demonstrated his love for the Father and for us. In so doing he exemplified perfect human love and set the example his followers are to embrace.

This understanding illuminates martyrdom, whether of the bloody or the un-bloody kind and brings me back to my starting point. Because Jesus was “made perfect” in his sacrifice of total self-donation he is “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb 5:9). Thus surrendering in Christ to the trials and tribulations of life constitute the refining fire that burns away the dross of selfishness and pride that makes our love impure. Painful to the senses and agonizing to the soul, they are the purifying agents of the Holy Spirit by which we are transformed into Christ.

It is in this context that St. Paul wrote:

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

Selfishness and pride are the great impediments to genuine love. Loving authentically is not difficult. It’s impossible! Only Christ can accomplish in us that which we are incapable of doing. This is the power of his saving grace in the lives of those who daily surrender to it.

In his first letter the Apostle John makes a startling statement:

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20).

There is a tendency, I think, to consider that John missed the point. Isn’t it precisely because we do see our “brother” with all his faults, obnoxious behavior, insufferable ego, and injustices that we feel justified in hating him? It’s easy to evaluate and to treat others by the way they relate to us or based on what they can do for us. It’s difficult to cherish their unrepeatable specialness when it is hidden by qualities or behaviors that repel us. But John who stood at the foot of the cross with Mary and the holy women got it right because he was rooted in Jesus’ command:

“A new commandment I give to you that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34).

I wonder how many of us could be fairly convicted as a Christian if that commandment was the criteria of our judgment?

This brings us full circle to Pope Benedict XVI’s call to live courageously in the martyrdom of everyday life as we die to self inch by inch as we live more in Jesus. Like John the Baptist we must become less and less so he can become more and more in us. Then at the end of our life we can enthusiastically embrace death as our final act of self-surrender.

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