

This past Wednesday the Church celebrated the memorial of St. Frances Cabrini, Frances with an ‘e’ – i.e., a female saint. She was born in Italy in 1850. She entered religious life there but after her order dissolved her local bishop encouraged her to take the sisters that were in her charge and found a new missionary order. In 1889 she arrived in the U.S. and began having schools, orphanages, and hospitals built.

There are a number of U.S. saints, many of whom (like St Frances Cabrini) were missionaries. The word “missionary” is used a lot, what does it mean? Fr John Hardon gives the following definition:

“A person who is sent by Church authority to preach the Gospel, or help strengthen the faith already professed ... Essential to being a missionary, whether at home or abroad, is the *desire* to **extend the Kingdom of Christ** by preaching, teaching, or other means of evangelization and catechesis.”

Their most fundamental purpose, then, is to build up the Kingdom of God and the missionary’s primary role in that mission is: teaching the faith. This mission (or commission) comes from our Lord Himself and He exemplified this in His own “public ministry.” He was fundamentally the Savior (building up the Kingdom of Heaven) and the first step in doing this was: teaching the faith.

This memorial of St Frances Cabrini, a missionary focused on our Lord and the souls He put in her path and gave her all for, gives us an opportunity to think a little about all of our Catholic forefathers in this country. They were, in the most general sense of the word, missionaries. They sacrificed much for the sake of the faith, including right here in South Dakota. They built many beautiful, even magnificent, churches, in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s and I doubt that there were a lot of wealthy parishioners who did it. Many of these great churches, our heritage, are in rural SD. Some of you may have been to or seen Sacred Heart church in Aberdeen; it was built in the 1930’s, during the Great Depression. Catholic schools and hospitals were built across the state and the country. These great efforts often galvanized around saintly figures like St Cabrini, St Katharine Drexel, or St Elizabeth Ann Seton but the Catholics of their day rallied in support of the one raised up by God. The missionaries (builders of the Kingdom of God through teaching the faith) often lived in meager, rough, and sometimes downright miserable conditions, including St Frances Cabrini – but they lived with purpose.

Our Catholic forefathers, however, not only sacrificed materially for the sake of the faith but “interiorly” as well. Historian Charles Rambow wrote an article on the Ku Klux Klan in South Dakota in the early to mid 1900’s. He stated the following:

“the South Dakota KKK hated not only Chinese but African Americans and Jews and especially Catholics...In 1921 a Catholic priest was murdered in Lead, SD. The Klan marched past Catholic schools in the Black Hills, throwing rocks and scaring students. A Catholic teacher’s classroom was broken into and a message written on her chalk board: We do not want Catholics in our community.”

Having thought a little now about the visible example of St Frances Cabrini, what she endured, and the nature of the times she was in, let us turn back a little to her interior life, that which drove and directed the exterior part, the visible part. It is a gross and foolish mistake to look at saints through modern “standards,” those based on appearances, on notoriety, “success,” being a leader, strong-willed, and so on, those based on exterior. God does not see as man sees. God

does not judge by appearances. Somebody else, maybe someone with great material resources, could have perhaps done the many great exterior works that St Cabrini did but yet with no merit in the eyes of God. It is not the exterior works that make a person great, but rather their interior life, the purity of their intention, their single-minded devotion to serving the Lord – in short, their love of the one good God.

St Frances Cabrini was physically small, even diminutive; she was born a very frail, she was not highly educated, wealthy, and her family was in no way prominent. To top it off, her religious order “went caput” – a “failure” and she was left with nowhere to go. She was small in every way and she knew it. She knew her own nothingness. And yet she would cross an ocean and, as one biographer put it, she “was responsible for the establishment of nearly seventy orphanages, schools, and hospitals, scattered over eight countries in Europe, North, South, and Central America. Foolish, worldly people believe that humility weakens and debilitates a person while the falsehood of pride gives strength. What an illusion. The life of every single saint proves that the exact opposite is true. Why be afraid of this empowering virtue with an entire army of saints proving otherwise? Why be so eager to line up and pay homage to pride when there is an even larger army of fools proving its ultimate weakness. Stalin, who considered our Lord’s Church his archenemy, once arrogantly, sneeringly, mockingly said: where are the Pope’s legions? Indeed, where are the Pope’s armies, where are his weapons of war? And yet who remains today – Stalin’s Communist Soviet Union or the Church? The Communist Soviet Union was barely a blip on the radar screen of history.

The power that an embrace of humility brings should not be a hard thing to understand. The wise person knowing their own limitation, opens themselves to the one and only all-powerful “force,” namely their own Father, whom we call God. It is like opening one’s self up to the power of the sun or some sort of super-fuel. Pride closes the door and the person has nothing more than their own very limited selves. Look at the evidence. What God has revealed is laid bare by experience.

Our Catholic forefathers endured much and sacrificed much for the sake of the faith. They were not spoiled, they did not believe they were entitled like the prideful of today do. Their missionary spirit, a spirit exemplified by St Cabrini, is largely gone today. Many of the great edifices they built are now gone. Columbus Hospital for example, which St Frances Cabrini had built in New York City, is now a condominium. Most importantly, though, the great edifice of interior faith has been largely lost or cast aside. Why? One way to sum up the reason(s) is to say: because the missionary purpose, flowing from a love of God, has been lost. Each one of us, especially priests and parents, are called to be missionaries – to build up the Kingdom of God by first teaching the faith. With each generation, each marriage, with the birth of each new child this missionary work starts over anew. It is never finished in this life; it requires work and sacrifice – all good things do. We are coming up on Thanksgiving. It would be a good time to stop and think about all that our Catholic forefathers right here in our own country and our own state sacrificed and endured for the faith and what they built for future generations. We would do well to give thanks for their strong faith, their sacrifices, and what they endured...and be inspired by it. There is no time to lay down with some sort of defeatist mentality. Meditate upon these great saints of our country, upon our Catholic forefathers, and let it inspire that missionary zeal our Lord wants us to have, the zeal of saints like St Frances Cabrini. Take their virtue to heart and set out with absolute determination to do likewise. This gives life, all else brings only death and suffering. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.