

Last week the Church celebrated the Memorial of a martyr every weekday except Thursday. This included: St Justin Martyr, Sts Marcellinus & Peter, St Charles Lwanga and companions, and St Boniface. These memorials give us a little opportunity to talk about martyrdom; but first, a few words about each of these saints.

St Justin Martyr was from the very early Church. He was born around the year 100, roughly the time when St John the Apostle died. Justin, then, was basically a second generation Catholic, having followed shortly after the time of the Apostles. One reason this is important is because of his description of Mass. When Justin was arrested, he was questioned by the Romans as to how ‘you’ (i.e., Catholics) worship. The description given by Justin reflects the same general form of the Mass that we have today. His exact words are too much to include here but in effect he said: we gather on Sunday, there are readings from Scripture, the priest exhorts the people (homily), then prayer together (now we have the Creed), wine & water brought forward (Offertory), the priest offers prayers (consecration of Eucharist), and then distribution to each (Communion). This is striking. The Mass we celebrate now *is* what our Lord created at the Last Supper, offered by the Apostles themselves, and handed on to the next generations. What an honor for us to come to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, this “thing” that traces all the way back to our Lord, that has the same general form now as then.

While Justin’s account of how Catholics worshipped God is perhaps what he is most well-known for, there is one more aspect of St Justin that I will mention, namely how he found the Catholic faith, having been born into a pagan family. In many ways he is like St Augustine in this regard – he had a real and sincere thirst for truth. He sought answers to the big questions of life, he wanted to know and understand reality, he desired wisdom and understanding. Not surprisingly he initially sought this through the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato. One day while he was walking along in a deserted place contemplating these questions, he quite unexpectedly came upon “someone” and they began to talk about these big questions of life. “The man” went on to explain to Justin the insufficiency of Platonic philosophy and the fullness of truth in the Catholic faith, which Justin then pursued with a vigor; as an aside, although “the man” apparently never identified himself to Justin, it seems likely that man was none other than our Lord Himself, just like “the child” who appeared to Augustine on the beach while he was contemplating the Trinity. What can we draw out of this? Begin to wonder. Think a little about the bigger questions of life. Read some good Catholic materials (Scripture, the Catechism, the lives and writings of the saints) that help to prompt such questions. It will lead you closer to the Lord, and He Himself will draw close to your side to lead you into the answers you seek.

I will have to be much briefer with the other martyrs from last week in order to be able to get to the main goal, which is to say a few general words about martyrdom itself.

Saints Marcellinus & Peter were martyrs from the early 300’s, just shortly before Constantine and thus the legalization of Catholicism in the Roman empire. One thing this obviously means is that this St Peter is not “*the*” St Peter (the Apostle and our first pope). Both of these martyrs were priests. After being arrested, they were led out to a forest for a reason initially unknown to them. When they found out that it was for the purpose of being beheaded for the faith, for the sake of our Lord, they happily dug their own graves, as related later by the executioner himself who converted to Catholicism and told this to Pope Damasus.

St Charles Lwanga and his companions were martyrs in the African country of Uganda in the later part of the 1800’s. The king at the time of their execution was a vile man, bent on debauchery with young boys who worked in his court. Those who had become Catholic opposed this openly to the king and did what they could to rescue the boys. This enraged the king, who had them brutally executed; one of those martyred was only 14.

St Boniface, English by birth and who lived mainly in the 700’s (born late 600’s) is called the Apostle to the Germans. Although Catholicism had spread throughout much of Europe by that time, including England, the Germanic area was still largely pagan. St Boniface had an interior prompting to go to Germany to evangelize these people, which he did after receiving a commission from the Pope to do so. Some or most of these people were tree worshippers who believed in a god called Thor. There was an oak tree they considered to be the oak of Thor and thus sacred. So to yank them out of their paganism, St Boniface gathered a bunch of the sacred oak

believers around the tree, bringing with him an axe. After just a couple of swings the tree fell to the ground and split in two. Of course, the pagans expected that “Thor” would immediately strike him down and when that didn’t happen, they began to question his reality. St Boniface was eventually made bishop of the whole Germanic area and while he did bring about many conversions, he also faced many obstacles and much hostility. He was eventually killed by a band of pagans who were also looking to rob him.

What can be drawn out of the lives of the martyrs? We might first ask – well, does martyrdom really have anything to do with me? Although there is much antipathy towards faith in our country, although I might get “canceled” if I say anything, it seems unlikely that we’ll face actual martyrdom in this country in my lifetime. That may be true but the Church also speaks of white martyrdom. White martyrdom means that a person goes through a real death to self, a real sacrifice of self, without actually being killed for the faith. The premier white martyr is, of course, our Holy Mother, which also tells us that white martyrdom is not something secondary. Standing for the Lord and being ‘canceled’ – ostracized, hated, called names, threatened, demonized – this would be an example of white martyrdom. Some white martyrdoms might be less pronounced, but still white martyrdoms nonetheless. All the saints have endured some sort of white martyrdom. Red & white martyrdom are largely the same in many ways and thus we can learn about martyrdom in general from the red martyrs.

One thing to immediately notice about all of the martyrs is that martyrdom is not something they went looking for. The early Christians (those in the first 300 years of the Church), for example, did not go running to the Romans saying please execute me. Neither did any of the martyrs mentioned here. So martyrdom is not something a person goes looking for. To chase after martyrdom could only terminate in pride. No, we seek Christ, strive to know Him, love Him, and live by His commands; that’s the focal point. We seek the Lord. But if you really do that, sooner or later it’s going to involve some choice – a choice that involves either remaining faithful to the Lord or denying Him, and it’s really going to cost me if I remain faithful; it’s going to hurt, it’s a real sacrifice of self. That’s martyrdom. The martyrs, whether red or white, did not seek out martyrdom, they might even avoid it if it’s possible to do so without denying the Lord, but when faced with either martyrdom or denying the Lord, they accepted martyrdom.

Martyrdom, then, is distinct from other ways in which we might sacrifice ourselves. Fasting, prayer, doing something for others especially when I don’t really want to – these, and many more, are all ways that we sacrifice ourselves for what is right and good and true. The difference is that, while they might go against my immediate desires, they are not costing me in the way that martyrdom does. Furthermore, they are things I choose to do, whereas martyrdom is something a person chooses to accept rather than deny Lord.

The red martyrs especially raise the question of: what enabled them to stand firm? Of course the grace of God is primary. The saints would not have, and indeed *could* not have, withstood if God did not give them the grace to do so. But what does this mean? That the Lord gives it to some and not to others? There are many who fold, even on a daily basis, in the face of white martyrdom. Does God hate some people and thus withhold His grace? Of course not, that’s absurd. So there must be something else as well. What is it? Well imagine an older brother who sees his younger brother getting picked on by a whole group of other boys and he barrels in to put an end to it. What compelled him to do it? Probably nothing he’d want to admit (!) but it was actually love for his younger brother. The same is true for martyrdom; the only thing that makes a person immovable in the face of martyrdom – red or white – is love for our Lord. In fact, this is why the Lord permits martyrdom; love has to be mutual in order to bind two people together. Our Lord’s love never fails. But that’s not enough to save us because it’s not enough to bind us to Him – we have to respond with love for Him, thus making it mutual which then binds us to Him. Martyrdom, white or red, is the opportunity to do just that.

Our Lord doesn’t just all of a sudden drop martyrdom onto a person. Bishop Sheen said we should die to ourselves a little bit each day. We will have opportunities for smaller white martyrdoms in everyday life. How do we prepare for greater acts of love? By accepting these smaller white martyrdoms from everyday life. Start to become aware of them. Examine yourself and ask if I denied some chance at a small white martyrdom today. St Peter the Apostle did, he was deeply sorry for it and then didn’t do it again. *God bless you, Fr Kuhn*