

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Nov 22nd 2017

Memorial of Saint Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr

My grandmother's name was Cecelia Ryan Purcell. She was born in Ireland in 1890. When she was a child in Ireland it was common to celebrate one's feast day, and so she always would make things a little special on November 22. I was born in 1949, on November 22, and she naturally conflated the two events and would always make a little fuss in celebrating our common special days. Every seven years we would add a third event – Thanksgiving – and we would have even more to celebrate. I grew up knowing about St. Cecelia and her story.

I read at an early age, and I was always fascinated by the lives of the saints (especially martyrs), and military heroes, and other people, who sacrificed their lives for a noble cause. I would read about their lives and the romanticized telling of their deaths, and felt more than once that I would aspire for nothing more than to be a martyr and die for God or in battle for my comrades.

I was seven years old when I first encountered the finality of death. My next-door neighbor was a girl who was killed in a hit-and-run car accident while crossing a street with her aunt, who was also killed. The driver was going so fast the bodies flew more than a hundred feet, according to the newspaper account. After Barbara Jean died I wasn't so sure about the romantic aspects of this dying thing.

But I still was awed by the nobility, the sacredness of true martyrdom. We think of a martyr as someone willing to accept death rather than recant his or her fundamental beliefs. We think of martyrs who pay the ultimate price instead of settling for a lesser sense of themselves.

When I was older, and read the unsanitized versions of martyrs' deaths, it was a sobering experience. We read of torture today and forget that the ancients were masters of inflicting pain and suffering. There is nothing glamorous about all the devilish ways people brought about the death of their fellow human beings in the act of martyrdom. St. Cecelia was a martyr who took three days to die after the Romans botched her beheading. The seven brothers in Maccabees watched each other die, one by one, in a series of gruesome brutalities, and their mother watched all of them die before she herself succumbed.

Why? Why is the power of faith stronger than the physical pain of torture? How is it some people can withstand the violence done to their bodies without stopping it by simply telling the torturer what they want to hear?

I don't know. I know that faith must be stronger than the reality of pain, because we have the example of the witness (the meaning of the Greek word that is the root of martyr). I know that we can draw strength from the example of the martyr who chose death rather than denying God's call. And knowing that some people have been able to make this sacrifice in the most extreme circumstances can give us strength when we face much less fatal consequences.

Aren't we all called to be martyrs, to accept the death of our old lives of selfishness instead of giving up on the call from God to selflessly love of our sisters and brothers? Are we not faced regularly with

challenges to our faith to live as God calls us to do, and to surrender our lives to the will of God? Isn't it ironic that it is easy for us to celebrate the martyrs who give up their physical lives rather than denounce their faith, but so difficult for us to accept the death of our selfishness that keeps us from fully living as Christ calls us to do?

And so my prayer today is for the grace to strengthen my faith so it can withstand the temptations to hold onto my life of selfishness instead of living the generous life that God calls me to enjoy.

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