

7 AUGUST 2022

This Sunday's Epistle, or Second Reading, is an excerpt from chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews. In this chapter, the Sacred Author illustrates the need for Faith by briefly recounting the stories of the Old Testament Saints. His list of Old Testament Saints goes through almost the entire Old Testament, starting with Abel and ending with the Maccabees. The list shows what God's gift of Faith does for us.

A young man I know is going through a crisis of Faith. Indeed, it seems possible that, at least for a time (and only for a time, God willing!), he has lost his Faith. It seems to him that Faith does not really explain anything. Like many people, he struggles with the age old question - surely going back to Cain killing Abel - of why bad things happen to good people. What is the explanation for this?

I am striving to find the right way to tell him that he is asking the wrong question - and you can never get a good answer from the wrong question. Faith is not about explaining anything. Faith, as illustrated by the catalog of Old Testament Saints in chapter 11 of Hebrews, is not an explanation, but a way of living, thriving, surviving, and overcoming. Faith is not essentially the explanation for the "why" of anything. Faith is the power to live, thrive, survive, and overcome everything life throws at us.

A religion professor at the University of Wyoming offered an "Introduction to World Religions" class to undergraduates. She had the excellent custom of dividing every class session into two parts. In the second part of each class, a representative of a particular religious tradition would speak for a while about the basics of his creed and practices, and then answer questions. I was invited one evening to speak for Catholic Christianity. One young fellow, most likely a sophomore, said "I ask this question of every speaker: how does your tradition explain suffering in the world?" I answered that "Our response to suffering is not so much WHY as HOW. We have been given no more than a hint of an explanation for WHY there is suffering in the world, and I am afraid that I lack the authority to answer that question with the confidence you might be looking for. We have been given, in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ, and in the lives of the Saints of both Testaments, abundant and powerful teaching of HOW to live through, thrive despite, survive, and overcome any and all suffering. We have been given FAITH."

"We have been given Faith! Faith enables us to look ahead to a time when we are still here, but the suffering is gone. Faith enables us to look up and recognize that suffering is not the only, nor even the most important thing going on. Faith enables us to look up and recognize the Lord God of Israel, the Lord God of Jesus Christ; and by His presence we will not be destroyed by suffering. It will come to us, and we will defeat it. Faith enables us to look ahead and see Heaven from a distance. No suffering can keep us from getting there. By Faith, we are no longer in terror of death. By Faith, we are no longer in terror of suffering. We have what is

greater than an explanation; we have courage. We have what is greater than an explanation; we have hope”

It was probably not what he was looking for.

But it was probably better for him than what he was looking for.

The great Tertullian, a Romano-African lawyer converted to Christianity, wrote that “the Blood of Martyrs is the seed of Christians” He was probably an eyewitness to the martyrdom in Carthage of Saints Perpetua and Felicity and their companions. He became a Christian after that martyrdom. His own life was a testimony to his words. The blood of Martyrs is the seed of Christians” Is there an explanation for WHY there is suffering powerful enough to change someone’s life? I doubt it. Are there people whose example of courage and hope are strong enough to change lives? I am certain of it. Faith gives courage and hope. Courage and hope make life worth living. Courage and hope overcome suffering and death. Courage and hope conquer the world.

Courage and hope are natural things that can be found, praise God, wherever human beings are found The Faith spoken of in chapter 11 of Hebrews, however, is a supernatural Faith that produces supernatural courage and hope. Jerusalem may have been destroyed, but God has not abandoned Israel! Israel suffers, but Israel also endures, and ultimately triumphs. Jesus may have died on a Cross, but God did not abandon His Christ. Jesus Christ suffered, but He remained faithful on the Cross, and on the third day triumphed over death itself, trampling that last enemy to be destroyed underfoot. To know that God is Faithful, even in the face of suffering, is what it means to be a religious Jew. Even more, since we have put before us, by Faith and a chain of witnesses, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is what it means to be a true Christian. He rose from death! In him we will overcome all things. We will even overcome death itself.

Suffering is real. It is sometimes terrible. Honestly, it is sometimes incomprehensible. I cannot answer the question why. I will affirm, defiantly, that it passes, while courage does not. Evil passes, while good does not. Darkness passes, but the “the light shines in the darkness”, and the light does not pass. Death itself passes, and yields to life the final word.

Tyrants have their time on earth, and I can no more answer “why” to tyrants than I can answer “why” to traffic accidents. If people drive cars, there will sometimes be accidents. If people have princes, prelates, presidents and potentates (and they must), there will sometimes be tyrants. That is of no comfort to the victims of accidents and of tyrants. What is of comfort, of great and eternal comfort, is the Faith that asserts defiantly that accidents have power neither to touch the Love of God right now, nor the Eternal happiness that lies ahead of us.

As to tyrants . . . well!

Tyrants, like dogs, have their day, and in their day they bark and bite. Many suffer from their bite, and that suffering is real. I have no power to take it away. I do have power to say that

tyrants will fail and come to nothing. Their essential littleness will be exposed, death will take them, and all their plans will come to nothing.

The great Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz thus described the death of the tyrant Nero, at the very end of his fine novel "Quo Vadis" (made into a 1950s movie that was better than mediocre, and has some astonishing overacting by Peter Ustinov, if you're into that sort of thing):

"The next moment death had thrown its shadow over Nero's face. From the great thick neck the blood was spurting in a black torrent over the flowers of the garden. For a moment his heels drummed upon the soil. Then he died . . . On the morrow the faithful Acte covered the remains with precious stuffs, and cremated it on a perfumed brazier . . . Thus passed Nero, as pass storms, fire, and war, and pestilence"

Tyrants, like storms, fire, war, and pestilence, are real, but they pass, while the Lord's Word and People endure forever. I once, in relative youth, spoke at a Holocaust Memorial service. Most speakers dwelt on the horror of the thing, which is entirely understandable and probably inevitable, so I wanted to emphasize something that often gets left out, and shouldn't be. The Nazis failed! They sought to annihilate the Jewish People. Look around, and give yourselves permission to rejoice a little, amidst today's solemnity. The Jewish People are still here. The Nazis are not. They failed, as tyrants always finally do, and failed in ignominy and humiliation. The sufferings they inflicted were all too real, but real also is their failure and disappearance. Real also is the current life and prosperity of the Jewish People. The Nazis passed, as pass storm, fire, war, and pestilence. The Covenant of the Lord and the People of the Lord endure.

Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? How many tyrants sought to annihilate the Church of Jesus Christ? But the Lord's Word and People endure forever. Many are the Catholic martyrs of modern times, from China to Mexico. The French Revolution kidnapped Pope Pius VI, and declared that he would be Pius the last (the cardinals took refuge in Venice, and the man they elected Pope had the happy defiance to take the name Pius VII). The Soviet Union boasted that it would destroy religion. Both Empires of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death", delivering far more of the latter than any of the former three, failed. Along the way, they inflicted much misery and pain, and that misery and pain should never be forgotten. Also never to be forgotten is the Faith and was still there, when the misery and pain were no more. Every time we celebrate the Martyrs in the sacred Liturgy, look around and rejoice. The Catholic People are still here, and the various tyrants are not. They failed, as tyrants always finally do. Napoleon I, the French Revolution's heir, ended his days writing bitter memoirs on a remote South Atlantic Island. Most of the younger people in this congregation don't even know what I'm talking about when I mention the Soviet Union. What on earth was that? Well, son, once upon a time some people thought it was humanity's future. The sufferings inflicted by all the Church's enemies were all too real. Equally real is their failure and disappearance. Equally real is the gathering of the Catholic Church here today. These tyrants pass, as pass storm, fire, war, and pestilence. But the Word of the Lord and the People of the Lord endure forever.

Faith does involve the intellect, and many good reasons can be adduced for Faith (yet not conclusive proof, for that would not be Faith but sight!), but that is not the point of today's homily. The point of today's homily is that Faith, while an act of the intellect, is a unique act of the intellect, a point developed at some length by St. Thomas Aquinas. Unlike opinion, Faith has assurance. Unlike science, Faith is about things unseen. Faith, uniquely, is assurance of the current veiled presence of God, and assurance of the perfect happiness we hope for when we shall, seeing God as He is, become like Him.

Faith is not the explanation for why sufferings happen. Supernatural Faith has power to overcome all sufferings. Supernatural Faith has that power because it puts the believer into relationship with God. Apart from that relationship, even the more moderate sufferings life throws at us would be unbearable. With that relationship, even the worst sufferings become bearable. From this supernatural source arises the heroic holiness of the Saints.

Supernatural Faith gives victory over the world and all its evils, even in the face of death itself. St. Peter, for example, was put to a horribly slow death, crucified upside down; but consider St. Peter's Basilica standing over the Fisherman's grave, and ask whether it was truly Nero or Peter that conquered on the day of Peter's suffering?

"Yet even then none of the soldiers who were digging the hole in which the tree of suffering was to be planted, none of the faithful who were kneeling around the spot, realized that before them there was standing the true ruler of that City - that, though its Emperors and the hosts of the barbarians and the succeeding ages would pass away, the reign of that aged man in Rome would last until the end of time"

Thus Henryk Sienkiewicz describes the death of St. Peter.

God helping, apply that now to your own lives. Faith is the realization that you are among God's children now. Faith is the realization that you will one day become like him. Whatever is happening in your lives, persevere by God's power at work in you now, and keep moving toward that City, whose architect and maker is God.