

“The Grain of Wheat that Falls to the Earth and Dies so that Others May Live”

Homily – Memorial for St. Ignatius of Antioch/Mass for 40 Days for Life

St. Raphael Church, San Rafael

October 17, 2020

Introduction

The story is told of a young woman in the early twentieth century who was very bright and dedicated to the cause of justice for the poor. She had been baptized as a Catholic, but her family fell away from the practice of the faith when she was a girl. Being highly educated, she saw in the American Communist Party an opportunity to correct the injustices being perpetrated on laborers in her time. She began to rise in the party, but the more deeply she became involved with it, the more she saw that it was not about justice, but rather about power and punishing and eliminating anyone who would be a threat to one's power.

She later reconnected with her Catholic faith through vibrant worshipping communities, especially of young people, and received instruction from no less than the great Catholic orator Archbishop Fulton Sheen. She recognized the lies perpetrated about the Church in the Communist Party, and returned to the full practice of her faith. She explains that there, among Catholics, she found not power-mongering and hate, but love, goodness and true care of the poor.

Then, Now and Every Generation

This woman, Bella Dodd, has a life story not that much different from the saint we honor today, even though he lived some 1800 years before she did.

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St. Ignatius of Antioch succeeded St. Peter as the bishop of that city, after St. Peter went to Rome where he was to meet his own martyrdom. He is famous for the seven letters he wrote to Christian communities of his time, revealing the basic elements of Church life that have been preserved to this day. Then, like now, there were many slanderous myths circulating about Christians, including the accusation of cannibalism, since they claimed to eat the flesh and drink the blood of their Lord. Ignatius explains the Church's belief in the Real Presence, and who may be admitted to it, in no uncertain terms. But the main charge, as with all Christian martyrs of his time, was his refusal to pay homage to the false gods of pagan Rome. In other words, the governing authorities were forcing the Christians to violate their religious convictions and accept the government's version of what is acceptable religion.

In a retort to a soldier who was grilling him on this point, St. Ignatius said, "You are mistaken when you call gods those who are no better than devils.... For there is only one God who made heaven and earth and all that is in them: and one Jesus Christ into whose kingdom I earnestly desire to be admitted."¹ And Ignatius was speaking literally when he said he "earnestly" desired to be admitted to Christ's kingdom – so much so that he begged his fellow Christians and supporters not to intervene if he were condemned to death. He accepted death for Christ willingly, even happily.

This explains the appropriateness of the Gospel reading for his feast day, one usually read on the feast day of any martyr: "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Our Lord is speaking here first of all of himself: he fell to the ground in coming down to us from heaven in the mystery of the Incarnation, when he took on a human body in the womb of his Blessed Mother. By extension, though, it also applies to those Christian heroes who

¹ Herbert J. Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater, edd, "Butler's Lives of the Saints," vol. I, Christian Classics, Inc. (1981), Westminster, MD, p. 219.

imitate the pattern of his death by shedding their blood for him, the martyrs of our faith. But he says this principle applies in some way or another to everyone, for this is what follows immediately after in his teaching: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.” “Whoever”: not some, not a select few, not a certain category of persons, but “whoever” – that is, anyone and everyone.

Which is what we are here for today. We can see these patterns repeating themselves all throughout the history of the Church, in every generation. That should not come as a surprise to us, for these are universal truths. Anyone who wishes to serve the Lord must be that grain of wheat that falls to the ground. And we endure the same sorts of attacks today as our forebears of every generation before us. Lies, calumnies and myths of all sorts have been circulating about Catholics and the Catholic Church for decades, even centuries. And now we are even seeing attacks on our houses of worship and sacred symbols. They will stop at nothing, even discrediting the legacy of a great man who served with great sacrifice to defend and educate a poor and vulnerable people. St. Junípero Serra was not a martyr, but he was a grain of wheat that fell to the ground through his renunciation of all worldly pursuits and comforts for the sake of the Gospel and the good of a new people being introduced to Jesus Christ.

Winning Souls for Christ

Perpetrators of such calumny and blasphemy are, as St. Paul puts it in his Letter to the Philippians, “enemies of the Cross of Christ.” That is why they need our prayers and our love. And why the place of their evil act needs to be purified from all demonic presence.

St. Paul speaks in very strong language here: “Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their ‘shame.’ Their minds are occupied with earthly things.” The word “stomach” here is often translated as “belly,” for in this context it is a metaphor for the desire for worldly things. St. Thomas Aquinas sees here a fulfillment of a prophecy from the prophet Hosea: “... it is peculiar to God to be the first principle and the ultimate end; hence those who have something as an end have it as their God. Furthermore, they seek their own glory ... The result will be their shame. ‘I will change their glory into shame’ (Hos 4:7).”²

Yes, there are many people today who glory in what is shameful, and make what is shameful their ultimate end; or, to paraphrase St. Ignatius, they call gods that which is no better than devils. And we are once again seeing the most shameful example played out before our eyes with the current nominee to the Supreme Court. You can be sure that every nomination process of a new justice to the Supreme Court will be, in the end, a battle over abortion. To glory in the destruction of innocent human life, to hold it up as a right and even as a good, something to be celebrated – indeed, an ultimate end, and so practically making a god out of it – all for the sake of indulging in pleasure without responsibility: what can be a more tragic and even diabolical example of what St. Paul is talking about here?

I want, then, to take this opportunity to thank you all for being those grains of wheat that fall to the ground and die. The battle for the culture of life is not only fatiguing, but also opens us up to the lies, calumnies and myths about Christians that have been perpetrated in every generation from the beginning. But let us remember St. Ignatius of Antioch: it is suffering such injustices with serenity and confidence, even willingly, that shows our innocence and the goodness and purity of the Christian faith.

² J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón, edd, “Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon,” F. R. Larcher, O.P., trans., *The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine* (2012), Lander, WY, p. 54.

The great Church father Tertullian is the one who coined the phrase that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.” But listen to what he goes on to say: “Torture us, rack us, condemn us, crush us: your iniquity is the proof of our innocence.... The more exquisite your cruelty, the more does it attract to our sect; we increase in number the oftener you mow us down.”³

They will continue to torture, rack and condemn us – always figuratively, and sometimes also literally – until we capitulate. But capitulation doesn’t work. Compromise with what is inimical to Jesus Christ will not win souls for him – or as we say today, it’s not a winning strategy for evangelization. The evidence is all around us: when the Catholic faith is lived to the full, people see there is something different, a better way, the light of truth: the path to the fullness of life. That is what St. Ignatius discovered and defended; that is what Bella Dodd discovered; that is what countless Christian converts and reverts have discovered, sometimes to their happy surprise. Thank you for being those grains of wheat that fall to the ground and die so that others might discover Jesus Christ and live.

Conclusion

You remind me of the young people Bella Dodd describes. After her reversion to the Catholic faith she began speaking about her experiences on college campuses, where she saw a new kind of student emerging that gave her great hope. This was in the middle of the last century, and obviously much has changed since then, to the point that universities have now become more like indoctrination camps than communities for opening young people’s minds to discover the wonders of the universe. But it speaks to the idealism that is characteristic of all young people.

³ *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide, The Holy Gospel According to Saint John*, Thomas W. Mossman, B.A., trans., Loreto Publications (2009), Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, p. 303.

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At the end of her autobiography Dodd tells the story of what happened after a talk she gave to the Newman Club at the University of Connecticut. Since I cannot find any better words with which to conclude my homily than the words with which she concludes her autobiography, I will quote her here in full:

That evening I had stayed so late in answering questions that Father O'Brien asked three young men to drive me to the train in New London. As we rode through the Connecticut Hills it began to snow.... Then one of the boys said quietly, 'Why don't we say the rosary for peace?' He started the *Credo* and there in the darkness of that country road with the soft snow falling, we said the rosary for peace.

I was aware as I rode home that night that men such as these can change the world for the better, so much were they filled with love, so selfless was their zeal. I know that even if the Communists were sincere in the glittering promises they make, they would be incapable of fulfilling them for they cannot create the kind of men needed for the task. Whatever apparent good the Communists have achieved has come through human beings who despite the harsh materialism taught them still retain a memory of God and who, even without realizing it, drew on the eternal standards of truth and justice. But their store of such men is dwindling, and in spite of their apparent victories men schooled in darkness are doomed to defeat.

New armies of men are rising, and these are sustained not by the Communist creed but by the credo of Christianity. And I am keenly conscious that only a generation of men so devoted to God that they will

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heed his command, ‘Love one another as I have loved you,’ can bring peace and order to our world.⁴

⁴ Bella V. Dodd, “School of Darkness,” P. J. Kenedy & Sons (1954), New York, p. 250.