

Good Friday

April 19, 2019

**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of**

**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at**

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

John 18:1-19:42

Last night I talked about the necessity of following Jesus' example whereby He laid down His life for His friends. Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself in order that we might be delivered from the power of sin and death. Therefore, as followers of Jesus we must be willing to give our lives so that others may live. I pointed to Fr. Jean-Marc Fournier, the French priest who saved the Blessed Sacrament from the burning Notre Dame on Monday, as a possessor of this sacrificial spirit and virtue.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ which we just heard helps us to see in what other ways we can live out this virtue. Specifically, it emphasizes the reality that Jesus had been abandoned by most of the apostles. In His hour of need, even as He poured out His life for us, most of His remaining companions were women—his mother, his aunt, and Mary Magdalene. The one Apostle who came back to Him after fleeing the Garden of Gethsemane was St. John, the youngest of the twelve. What we see here is that as Jesus, the Son of God, is brought low, it is not the strong who are with Him, but those the world considers weak. The only ones willing to lay down their lives are those who seemingly have the least capacity to do so.

What this shows us is that there are different ways by which we give up our lives for others. Our collective imagination tends towards the soldier in combat, the firemen rushing into a burning building, the rescue workers who brave earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods. But the three Mary's in today's Passion account from St. John's gospel were giving themselves in a different, but just as important, way when they decided to stand by the Cross of Jesus.

First, they were giving up their reputations. Crucifixion was a penalty for traitors, people who had committed treason against the Roman state. The criminals hanged alongside Jesus had, we are told, committed murder in an insurrection. That is, they had rebelled against Roman authority and killed someone in the process. Pilate intentionally associated our Lord with such people by placing Him in the middle of the rebels and by writing in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek that Jesus is the King of the Jews. Pilate did not want anyone to miss it, no matter his mother tongue; and he wanted to be clear that this is what Rome does to kings. To voluntarily associate themselves with Jesus even as he hung upon the Cross as a traitor was to invite lifelong suspicion. For the rest of their lives, then, loyalty to the state would be questioned. Jesus was numbered with the transgressors and they had numbered themselves in the same way.

The destruction of their reputations would naturally mean that they, secondly, had given up all chance of social advancement. We all know what it means to be black-listed, to have one's

opportunities inhibited because of guilt by association. That is, do not hire this person, do not do business with this person, do not court or marry this person, if you do not want to be tainted by her crime. To offer Jesus compassion in His hour of need was a social death sentence of sorts. To be a friend to Jesus, the innocent victim, was to sign up for a lifetime of friendlessness.

Jesus, of course, knew this. So he made sure that His friendless Mother would have at least one friend. From the Cross, He assigned St. John and St. Mary to each other, son and mother, mother and son. It was a perfect arrangement, as St. Mary, espoused to the Holy Spirit, could not marry, and St. John, in accompanying Jesus to the Cross, had destroyed all prospects for marriage. In an empire where the law mandated marriage for all men and women, St. John remained a virgin his entire life.

It isn't hard to see the parallels between the women at the foot of the cross and women today who buck the expectation of the world and choose loyal motherhood to the bitter end. To choose full-time motherhood is in the eyes of the world to harm one's reputation. To give oneself in this way is to invite the world's contempt, as if someone does something wrong by bearing children and raising them. I won't give examples, because I don't want to lend them any credence at all, but every mother who has made this choice in America today has experienced this contempt.

What comes later is hard to bear, as well. Having devoted her life to love, having poured herself out for her children despite the world's expectations, she then tries to enter the work force, only to be told she has no experience. For choosing to raise up the next generation, she is told as an older woman that her skills aren't needed, and employers will find someone whose loyalties can't be questioned. We don't need someone who has put her family first her whole adult life. We need someone who will put work first, all the time. A bad reputation as a young woman and social isolation as an older woman.

The Good News is that such fierce loyalty to motherhood, to one's children, is in the end rewarded. Those whose reputations and prospects were destroyed, because they chose to stand at the foot of the cross, are now honored as saints. They didn't save anybody from a burning building, but they just as certainly laid down their lives and, as a result, have helped in the salvation of countless souls. This is the consolation of doing the right thing. Even if the world shows us no respect and refuses the gifts we have to offer, we can still rejoice that we did right by our children. Like St. Mary, we didn't abandon them, and by this love, and God's mercy, their souls are safe.

What changes the equation and makes this sacrifice worthwhile is the same truth that enables the strong to risk their lives for the weak. For a mother does precisely this: she pours herself out and gives everything away in order that her weak child may be consoled. Her sacrifice is in its essence no different than the soldier in combat or the firemen at Notre Dame. She can spend everything because Jesus lives, and after her own crucifixion she will be vindicated by the Lord of Life. The faith is alive in those who sacrifice their reputation and prospects in order that their children may be consoled, confident that He who crowned His loyal Mother as Queen of heaven and earth will never leave desolate those who faithfully follow her example.