

Objection!

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 10, 2019

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We might think that the seven brothers in our First Reading from the *Book of Maccabees* were being a bit extreme. They refused to eat pork because it violated their religious laws. While we might say ‘big deal, just compromise,’ they said, “we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.” As the story goes, they were in fact tortured and killed for their disobedience. By the end, the mother herself was also killed for not talking the final son out of it as the king instructed her to do. All of them, the seven sons and their mother, were uncompromisingly obedient to God’s law.

I think this Old Testament story has value for us in that it lays the seeds for a contemporary issue that we don’t hear much about anymore: conscientious objection. The catechism states that the human person “has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions.” (CCC #1782)

A modern-day example of a conscientious objector was a man named Benjamin Joseph Salmon, a native of Denver, Colorado, who was born in 1888. He objected to the First World War. Bishop John Stowe, President of Pax Christi USA and Bishop of Lexington, has taken a strong interest in the canonization of Ben Salmon. Briefly summarizing Salmon’s life and significance, Bishop Stowe writes:

Salmon was explicit that his Roman Catholic faith and his understanding of the life and example of Jesus made it impossible for him to participate in warfare. He suffered considerably for taking this stance as an outward expression of his faith. He accepted a

sentence of death rather than accept the demand to participate in war. His death sentence was later commuted to a 25 year sentence of hard labor and Salmon was freed even from that sentence in November of 1920. Ben Salmon was a newly married layman, 28 years of age, when he took his courageous stance. Even at a time when the hierarchy in the United States encouraged young Catholic men to enter military service in the war, Ben Salmon bore witness to the non-violence of Jesus. He was ahead of his time in questioning the terminology and concept of a 'just war.' He preferred to take the commandment 'thou shalt not kill' as unconditional and inexorable, as he explained in a 1917 letter to President Woodrow Wilson...Benjamin Salmon...can serve as a role model by his willingness to accept the consequences of his prophetic action in favor of peace.

Conscientious objection is not being difficult just to be difficult. It is about being true to something beyond this world, namely, the resurrection of the life to come. Those who are true to their conscience, whatever the issue, even if that means death, are the children of God who will rise. They will be like the angels of heaven who can no longer die. As the seven sons believed, "the king of the world will raise [them] up to live again forever."

Following our conscience in objection can be a profoundly religious experience that takes courage.

Is there anything I would be willing to die for than violate my conscience?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray for a well-formed conscience. Let us pray for the intercession of Ben Salmon, that we too may have the courage to take stands based on our religious faith. In the words of St. Paul in our second reading to the Thessalonians, "may the Lord direct [our] hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ."