

June 2, 2019 A Noble Death Homily: Not long after my ordination to the priesthood in the Spring of 1984, I spent a good part of one afternoon in the company of my grandmother's youngest brother, a retired surgeon named Dr. Raymond Leddy. A highly respected physician in his day, he served as chief of Surgery at St. Peter's Hospital in Albany over an extended period of time. In the course of our lively conversation on a variety of topics, Dr. Leddy spoke wistfully of his on-going status as a student. "I continue to be a student, and will likely always remain so" he emphatically declared. I assumed he meant the need to be apprised of all the advances in the field of medicine, and told him so. "But you have misunderstood my words... today, my teachers are my patients." "But what can your patients possibly teach you now that you are in your mid-eighties?" "They can teach me how to die a noble death and one worthy of my vocation as a Christian." I was momentarily stunned. I was simply bowled over by his sage remark. As a priest of thirty-five years, I can personally attest to the wisdom of his insight.

Is it truly possible that a noble death can be an inspiration to others? All we need do is to consider two great figures of the early church, Stephen and Saul (later named Paul).

In the Acts of the Apostles the Evangelist St. Luke gives us a brief, though stirring, account of an extremely important event in the life of the nascent Church: the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. (Acts 7:53-60) After making his bold confession of faith before the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews, Stephen follows his Master, Jesus Christ, unto death. He is a victim of what we might call today a lynching. His condemnation was unjust and a travesty of justice.

For St. Luke, Stephen is the perfect model of a disciple. First, he is depicted as praying. He falls to his knees and cries out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them". (Acts 7:60) It is a prayer of forgiveness. The first Christian prayer is an appeal for God's mercy. In addition, he commends his soul to the Lord as he prepares to exit his earthly life. "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit." (Acts 7:59)

And there were witnesses. Among the witnesses of the stoning of Stephen is a young man named Saul. He may well have been the instigator of the plot against him. According to Luke, "the witnesses laid down their cloaks at his feet". (Acts 7:58) He seems to imply that the highly unusual and commendable manner of his death was responsible for Saul being forgiven as one of the early persecutors of the church and his soon to be role as a preacher of the Crucified and Risen Christ. Perhaps that is why Luke mentions Saul immediately after Stephen's prayer. St. Augustine agrees. He writes, "If Stephen had not prayed to God, the Church would not have Paul".

What lessons are to be derived from Stephen's martyrdom?

We will not know how deep or shallow our faith is until we face the ultimate test of staring death in the face. Will we give in to despair, or, like St. Stephen, be steadfast in our determination to exit this life in a manner worthy of our calling? One of the early martyrs of the church, St. Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop, composed a letter for his people as he was on his way to martyrdom in Rome. "Now I begin to be a disciple", he readily admitted.

In the Masses honoring the Christian martyrs of the past and present, the priest recites the memorable words from the Eucharistic preface: "He gave his life for the glory of your name. His death reveals your power shining in our human weakness. You chose the weak and make them strong in bearing witness to you".

In closing, it is worth noting that St. Stephen has a vision of Christ, standing and not seated, at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55). Recall that in the Apostles' Creed, Jesus sits at the right Hand of the Father. Why is Jesus standing? Perhaps Jesus stands to give his faithful disciple a royal welcome after suffering a martyr's death.

Let us hope to follow the example of Stephen. Only then will we receive a royal welcome once our earthly pilgrimage comes to an end.

Amen!