

“I will send to them prophets and Apostles; some of them they will kill and persecute” (Lk 11:49). It is often very difficult and trying to do the work of the Lord. As we faithfully listen to God’s calling, other’s may find fault with our ministry and try to tear us down. Certainly, this fits the difficult ministry of Pope Callistus I who was martyred in the year 222.

Callistus’s early career is a riches to rags story. He was an influential domestic servant who rose in responsibility to the trusted position of serving as chief banker for his master’s business. “When the bank failed, Callistus received the blame, and attempted to flee from his master. Being discovered, he was demoted to serve as a manual laborer in Rome. Thus, under inauspicious circumstances, Callistus came as a slave to the city where he would later serve as Pope.”ⁱ

During the reign of Pope Zephyrinus, Callistus became a deacon. His chief responsibility was to care for a major Roman Christian cemetery. Many martyrs of the church are buried there. In tending to the cemetery, Callistus took great pride in caring for the grounds so it was a warm and inviting place to visit and remember the dead. Today, that place bears his name as “Cemetery of St. Callistus.” A trusted advisor to the pope, Callistus was a natural choice to succeed Zephyrinus upon his death in 218 or 219.

Pope Callistus I had a very vocal opponent who accused him of every wrongdoing under the sun. Callistus took to heart the teaching of Jesus, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt 12:7). He taught that all sins could be forgiven when the sinner was truly contrite.

In the early centuries of the Church adultery, murder, and apostasy were considered the deadliest of sins. Callistus tried to reconcile sinners and offered a path of reconciliation after they had performed public penance.ⁱⁱ “Hippolytus, an erudite Roman theologian, accused Pope Callistus of sympathizing with heretics, and resented the new Pope's clarification that even the most serious sins could be absolved after sincere confession.”ⁱⁱⁱ Tertullian was another critic and misguided Christian of that era who held that serious sins were so bad that they could not be forgiven through confession.

In the political and polemical climate of our own times, many seek to condemn with no chance for mercy or forgiveness. Confronted with vitriolic speech and outright character assassination on many fronts, it is helpful to turn away from the news of the day and return to scripture for more informed guidance. “If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness, that you may be revered. With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption” (Ps 130: 3-4, 7).

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-callistus-i-393

ⁱⁱ catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=31

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, CNA.