

On February 6th, we remember Paul Miki and Companions who became martyrs for the faith in Japan in the year 1597. Jesuit Missionary Frances Xavier brought the Catholic faith to Japan in 1549 and over the decades more than 300,000 embraced the faith in the far east. However, tensions arose in the latter part of the 16th century when fear of Christianity led to a period of persecution.

“Suspicion against Catholic missionaries grew when a Spanish ship was seized off the Japanese coast and found to be carrying artillery. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a powerful imperial minister, responded by sentencing 26 Catholics to death. ... Sentenced to die by crucifixion and lancing, they were first marched 600 miles to the city of Nagasaki.” Of the 26, the best known is Paul Miki who was training for the priesthood. Crowds gathered to mock the prisoners. Paul took the opportunity to evangelize whenever he could do so and even from the cross when he was crucified. “After Christ’s example, I forgive my persecutors. I do not hate them. I ask God to have pity on all, and I hope my blood will fall on my fellow men as a fruitful rain.”ⁱ

As inspiring as the stories of martyrs are, they can be somewhat intimidating. God gave Paul Miki and his companions incredible resolve to resist the torture they faced. God calls everyone to a holy life but not all follow the path of martyrdom.

Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews calls to mind the Little Way of Saint Therese of Lisieux which is much more accessible path to holiness for the average person. Paul wrote: “Brothers and sisters: Through Jesus, let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind” (Heb 13:15-16). Persistence in prayer is a simple way of raising our hearts to God.

Saint Therese also teaches a little way to heaven that is very short and direct. Acknowledging the stairway to heaven can seem very steep, there is a simpler way. We humbly recognize our limitations and ask God for the help necessary. The arms of Jesus can lift us up to heaven like an elevator lifting us straight up. With a childlike trust, we accept our littleness in comparison to God’s greatness and we do what we can through little acts of love. Think of how the smile of an infant can make an adult smile and we see how simple an act of love on our part can be pleasing to God.

A good deed done without love goes for nothing, but if anything is done for love, however small and inconsequential it may seem, every bit is counted. God looks to the intention of our hearts and the humility within ... not to what is actually done.ⁱⁱ

The beauty of the Little Way of Saint Therese is that it helps us little by little to be more loving and in time to be able to offer greater acts of love. Therese herself wanted to be a martyr for the faith. She did not travel beyond the confines of the religious convent she lived in and she did not live in a period of persecution. Nevertheless, she offered all her suffering as martyr would when she contracted tuberculosis. Doctors did not know how to treat the illness effectively and the solutions they tried were often very painful. In its heyday, tuberculosis was more deadly than the pandemic is today.

Amidst the pandemic many doctors, nurses and EMT’s are on the front lines offering heroic service to the sick and the dying. Following the little way of Therese, we can persistently pray for those who are suffering and offer humble and sincere acts of love to please God and to benefit all who are suffering.

“May the God of peace ... furnish you with all that is good, that you may do his will. May he carry out in you what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb 13:20a, 21).

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-paul-miki-and-companions-139

ⁱⁱ Introduction to The Little Way of Saint Therese of Lisieux by John Nelson.