

“LESSONS FROM CARTHAGE” THE NEW MARTYRS OF THE CHURCH

North Africa was the site of a vibrant Catholic community, even though one that had its share of suffering. By the middle of the 1st century A.D., Carthage had become the second largest city (after Rome) in the western half of the empire and the hub of the prosperous Roman province of Africa. The theologian Tertullian called Carthage his home, located in present-day Tunisia. The son of pagan parents (his father was Roman Centurion stationed in North Africa), Tertullian led a sensual life while a youth. But he was greatly moved by the strength of Christians under the turmoil of persecutions and eventually sought baptism as an adult. Tertullian was the Church's first prolific theologian to write in Latin. At the conclusion of his treatise entitled “An Apology for Christians,” (197 A.D.), he dropped a bombshell. It ought to be rated “TV- 14” for mature audiences only. Speaking directly to the persecutors: “Nor does this cruelty of yours, each more exquisite, profit you anything whatsoever; rather it is an allurements to our sect. *We are made more numerous, as often as we are mowed down by you: the blood of the Christians is the seed (of the Church).*” (*Plures efficitur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum*) “As often as we are *mowed down* by you...” Talk about telling it like it is! But this was life in the Roman Empire before Constantine.

Last week, Pope Francis made a visit to a famous church on an island in the middle of the Tiber River, the **Basilica of Saint Bartholomew** on the island. The Church was built in the year 1000 A.D. to house the relics of Saint Bartholomew. There was just one problem—the relics never arrived, as the people of Benevento (near Naples, Italy) never turned them over, preferring to keep them in their own town! This was not at all uncommon as communities vied for some connection to important figures of history and the Church. But Saint Bartholomew's found new life when entrusted to the popular Community of Sant'Egidio, a mostly lay movement that is quite involved in Rome. They also have been entrusted with the ancient **Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere**, and each night host a Liturgy of the Word, with music and reflections that fill the Church to overflowing. These lay movements are really the lifeblood of the Church in Europe and are making their way to the USA.

Since 1999, at the request of St. John Paul II, the church houses a shrine built to the modern martyrs, those of the 20th and 21st centuries. Among its contents is the breviary used by **Father Jacques Hamel**, the 85-year-old French priest whom was murdered by Islamist militants who stormed into the church in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray last year. They forced the elderly priest to his knees and proceeded to slit his throat while they chanted in Arabic. No longer can we fool ourselves into thinking that the ultimate witness is relegated to the annals of history or Butler's Lives of the Saints! Since St. Stephen was stoned to death in 36 A.D., Christians have faced persecution in diverse corners of the world and the Basilica is filled with relics and artifacts from the past 100 years that tell diverse stories of faith in the midst of trial. There is a stone that was thrown by the German SS against the residence of Bishop Joannes Baptista Sproll of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, who was exiled for opposing the Nazi euthanasia program. One can see a small cross, the kind secretly distributed after the Albanian government officially proclaimed its atheism in 1967, forbidding any and all public manifestations of religion.

As a seminarian, though fascinated by the stories of the ancient martyrs, I was ignorant as to the reality of modern martyrdom. But that changed in 1982, while a college seminary sophomore. Pope John Paul II canonized St. Maximilian Kolbe (d. 1941), the Polish Capuchin priest who volunteered to stand in a married man's place whom the Nazi's had picked out of a crowd to undergo punishment. You likely know the story, but his heroic witness while dying of starvation in a pit, moved me tremendously as a 19 year-old. I wondered if I would have volunteered to take another's place. I surmised that I would have remained silent, preserving my own life. I did not then, nor do I now desire to be a martyr. The suffering of the early martyrs in fact led to the rapid growth of the Church, and that was known by the second century. When the Church was attacked, in many cases, the attacks backfired.

On April 20, Pope Francis announced the impending canonization of three adolescent proto-martyrs from the 16th century in Mexico. Cristóbal, Antonio and Juan had long been venerated as the first fruits of martyrdom of the evangelization of Mexico. Aged between 10 and 14 at the time of their deaths (Cristóbal, in 1527, followed by Antonio and Juan together in 1529), they were killed in what is now the Diocese of Tlaxcala. The

Holy Father formalized what the faithful had believed for centuries regarding the tremendous courage of these young children. Two days after Easter this year, fundamentalist Hindus set fire to the rectory garage and the door of the **Catholic Cathedral in Kathmandu, Nepal**. Thankfully, no one was hurt, unlike in 2009 when the same church endured significant bomb damage and three worshippers were killed, including a teenager. The ultimate witness of Christians is not relegated to the pages of musty books in the stacks of a library, but is part of our present-day experience of suffering for the sake of the Body of Christ. Against this backdrop, we are challenged to live our own faith more authentically, never taking it for granted.

- The Latin language still exists, and even thrives! The **Pontifical Academy of Latin** is offering a prize for research in the area of medieval to modern Latin, the final winner being chosen by Pope Francis himself! The 20,000 Euro prize (more than \$21,400) will be awarded to young scholars between the age of 25 and 40. Too bad they do not offer awards for geeks in their mid-50's who still like to dabble from time to time. C'mon, perhaps even a gift card for a nice meal at Cossetta's?
- We are heavy into Confirmation season, soon to be followed by graduation season! But on several occasions priests have remarked to me– “Did you do something to the interior?” Or, “When did the Cathedral suddenly get so bright?” I love these off-the-cuff remarks because they remind me that the work we have done is being noticed. Yes, the floors also get honorable mention.
- The **100th anniversary of Fatima** (Saturday May 13) is a significant event in the life of the Church. The apparition enjoys the full endorsement of the Church. We will display our refurbished statue of Our Lady of Fatima in the sanctuary. It will also mark the first anniversary of Archbishop Hebda's installation.
- Next weekend, **Bishop Chad Zielinski** from the **Diocese of Fairbanks**, AK will speak at our Masses. I am so pleased we were invited to support his missionary diocese for this year's appeal and I encourage your generous support. After all, he oversees the **largest diocese** (by area) in the United States, comprising about 11,000 Catholics spread out over almost 410,000 square miles.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector