

One of the things that can be so easy to take for granted is our freedom to speak our mind, to worship together, but also it can be easy to forget just how hostile the world can be to what we believe as Christians. For our faith is under fire throughout the world. And martyrs are not just the stuff of history books; new martyrs happen daily in the world, and that is because so many refuse to be silent about their faith, but live it out through word and action, no matter what the cost. Take for instance the following stories:

Samuel Masih was a simple street cleaner. One day, while cleaning a garden in Lahore, the twenty-seven-year-old Pakistani Catholic was accused of deliberately piling garbage against the wall of a mosque. He was arrested and thrown in jail, where he was repeatedly tortured for his faith. While being treated for tuberculosis, which he contracted in prison, a police constable decided to earn a place in Janna' (Paradise) by killing him with a brick-cutting hammer.

Thousands of miles away, on a beautiful mid-August day, thirty-two-year-old Fr. Jesus Adrian Sanchez was giving religious instruction at a school in the rural area of Chaparral (Tolima), Colombia. An armed man burst into the classroom, ordered him outside, and shot him dead.

Deep in the Brazilian rainforest, a seventy-three-year-old Sister of Notre Dame, Dorothy Stang, was used to living among people who wanted her dead. She had long been trying to protect peasant laborers from exploitation by logging firms and ranchers. One day, while walking to a meeting of poor farmers near the town of Anapu in the western Brazilian state of Pará, two armed men intercepted her on the path. She knew what they were there to do. Taking out her Bible, she began reading to them and, for a precious few minutes, they listened before opening fire. Sr. Stang was shot six times in the head, throat, and body.

These are only three of the more than 100 Catholics who bear the unique distinction of being the first martyrs of the twenty-first century.

According to the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the official martyrology contains the names of 132 Catholics who have died for the faith since 2001. But this is not a complete list. Its 2005 report acknowledges that there are "many more possible 'unknown soldiers of the faith' in remote corners of the planet whose deaths may never be reported."

Dying for Christ seems almost surreal to most Westerners. We live in a part of the world where Christianity rarely makes the news unless it is to be mocked or defamed. Otherwise, the media is strangely silent about modern Christian martyrdom. Denver's Archbishop Charles Chaput said it bet: "Three things distinguish anti-Christian persecution and discrimination around the world. First, it's ugly. Second, it's growing. And third, the mass media generally ignore or downplay its gravity."

The secular West has been looking the other way for a very long time. Even the average church-going Christian is not likely to know that 45.5 million of the estimated 70 million Christians who have died for Christ did so in the last century. Many of these names are familiar: St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Edith Stein, and Dietrich Boenhoffer, all of whom won the martyr's crown in Nazi concentration camps; Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who was assassinated while celebrating Mass in 1980; and Bl. Miguel Pro, a Jesuit priest who was executed by the Mexican government in 1927.

Thousands of others are less well-known. Among them is Bl. Peter To Rot, a thirty-three-year-old catechist and native of Papua New Guinea, who was

murdered by the Japanese occupation force in 1945 for refusing to embrace the practice of polygamy. Referred to as a "martyr for marriage," he was declared blessed in 1995 by John Paul II. And just last week, Pope Francis beatified 7 Greek Catholic bishops who clung to the faith under the Communist regime, dying under the Romanian Communist regime.

Millions of Christians in the last century were lost to Communism. In China, estimates run as high as 50 million total lives lost, while the Soviet Union claimed another 25 million. As the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky so aptly put it, Communism typically killed as many people in a day as the Inquisition killed in all the centuries of its existence.

While Christians in the secular West languish in spiritual mediocrity, Christianity remains a deadly serious matter almost everywhere else on the planet. And this is what costs lives.

The world's 2.1 billion Christians are a religious minority in eighty-seven countries. The Geneva Report of 2002 estimates that up to 200 million Christians are being denied their full human rights, as defined by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, simply because they are Christians.

Since 2000, there have been forty countries where at least one verifiable death attributable to anti-Christian violence has occurred.

In Iran, a report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom finds that Christians are increasingly subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment. In Iraq, an Assyrian-Chaldean Christian organization has reported eighty-eight Christian victims of violence since 2003. In Saudi Arabia, it is considered a religious obligation for Muslims to hate Christians and Jews. Apostasy from Islam warrants a death sentence. The Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks for elementary and secondary school children demonize Christians, Jews, and non-Wahhabi Muslims.

In Turkey, Christians are denied access to civil and military jobs, and it is almost impossible to build churches. Since Islamic Law was proclaimed in twelve northern states in Nigeria in 2004, clashes between Christians and Muslims have claimed 12,000 lives from both groups.

The Chinese government continues to detain and repress thousands of Christians and other religious minorities. Anyone caught worshiping outside

state-controlled churches is subject to arrest. Since late 1999, the Chinese government has destroyed 1,200 churches in one eastern province alone. A Holy Mass, a prayer service, and even praying over dying Roman Catholics are all considered illegal and subversive activities by the Chinese government.

Christians, especially Catholics and Evangelical Protestants in the world face atrocities such as torture, enslavement, rape, imprisonment, killings, and even crucifixion. Some of the reasons: resurgent communism, religiously intolerant forms of Islam, and re-emerging nationalism. A fourth reason cited by many members of international watchdog groups is the continued ignorance or indifference of Christians in the developed West.

Brother Andrew, founder of Open Doors, an international organization supporting persecuted Christians, wrote in "The Calling": "We in the Western Church don't come close to matching the level of commitment, determination, and strength of many Muslim groups. Until we do, Islam will continue to be the world's fastest growing religion not because of its strength but because of our weakness. We can and should do much more to support persecuted Christians in the developing world. Financial and

prayerful support for the missions is essential, but so is developing an increased awareness of and involvement in the fight for human rights."

From the earliest days of the Church, it was the courageous witness of Christians willing to die for their faith that converted so many Romans. It can do the same today, but the story must be told.

The best way to honor those who have died for the faith is to embrace it and proclaim it. But the problem, a Brother Andrew said, is there can be such a lack of commitment to our faith. So many get sidetracked; they put other things ahead of the faith; they take it for granted; or they become ignorant about the faith and buy into what culture or the media tells them and use that for their formation rather than the Church. This great feast we celebrate today though reminds us that faith formation is life long, and the Church is there to help us in it, but we who make up the Church are called to continually evangelize the world.

The Holy Spirit can sometimes be misunderstood, as we have one major feast celebrating the Spirit each year. What's important to remember though is we do not just celebrate a historical event where the Spirit came

at one moment in time. Rather the Holy Spirit continues to guide our Church and us. But we must open ourselves up to the gifts of the spirit, and remember that the Holy Spirit first and foremost reminds us that our God is a relational God. The Spirit gives us gifts to help learn and defend the faith.

Among them include wisdom, knowledge and understanding. God is relational with us. You can't have a relationship with a historical figure or major figure in the world; you can admire a person, but they won't be your friend most likely who will be with you every day. God though is with us. God is relational. This is why we pray; why we come to Mass. We experience God in a special way in the sacraments especially Communion. God listens to us through our highs and lows. But God also continually forms us and guides the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember we are not fundamentalists. The Bible wasn't written in English and we are continually open to the power of the Spirit to guide our Church, which is why the Church speaks out on faith and morals and teaches us. So as a first step, we have to ask ourselves do we know the faith? Can we articulate the faith? Or did faith formation stop when we were 15? It's so important we are open to that continual formation which happens by learning about the faith throughout our lives. So dust off a catechism; watch

some good Catholic media or read a good book by folks like Bishop Robert Barron or Matthew Kelly. Our faith has so much good stuff, we just need to learn it because it all centers around the Church wanting to help us on the road to salvation.

There is also the gift of counsel, which is telling right from wrong. This is why we pray and use what the Church teaches us to form our conscience. It's how we live out the faith and say yes to some things and no to others. With this gift, it's so important to remember our decisions impact who we are and change us. Skip Mass one week because it's nice, start justifying doing things you shouldn't be doing like a little lie here, a little look at a bad picture on a computer there, and it's a slippery slope. The gift of counsel helps us to run the race of life well to it's completion, and to not become a mediocre Christian.

With that though we defend and spread the faith. Gifts of the spirit also include fortitude, strength and courage. As I said, we have to be aware of how much the faith is under attack, but this happens right here in our own country. For instance just last week, the Bishop of Providence, Rhode Island, was trending on Twitter. Bishop Thomas Tobin tweeted that

Catholics shouldn't be going to Pride festivals and events, and that they can be harmful for children. Twitter tends to not be the best place for an argument, as you often find a more in depth and coherent argument at a second grade lunch table. And this was no exception. Interestingly there was little media coverage of recent attacks and executions of people in same sex relationships in the Middle East, but the bishop drew plenty of scorn from media as well. Many of the comments on Twitter were profane, others simply saying he's one of those guys who protects pedophiles, but no one wanting to engage in a conversation. Here was his point. The Catholic Church loves and tolerates all people. Discrimination and bigotry are evil. But at the same time, we do not define the person based on orientation. And in some events, a pride festival may not be about diversity and tolerance, but about expressing publicly that marriage is not just between a man and a woman. And as some of the events can have sensual things with them such as people lightly clad in dress, such events might not be the best environment for an 8 year old to be at. I get his point. Earlier in the 20th century, Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter of St. Louis issued an order in 1947 to end segregation in Catholic schools within the diocese, seven years prior to the Supreme Court's decision to end segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. As you can imagine there

was backlash. But this gutsy bishop wrote a letter against those trying to fight him civilly citing canon law and threatening them with excommunication; his letter was read in all churches. Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel of New Orleans called for the integration of churches within the parish in 1953 and would call for the integration of Catholic schools three years later, though this latter act would not be achieved until 1962. In addition to these moves, numerous clergy would take part in civil rights demonstrations mostly notably the Selma-to-Montgomery March in Alabama in 1965, that also saw lay Catholics taking part in the protest. Leaders also took part in the March on Washington (where O'Boyle gave the invocation prior to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech), as well as taking part in a religious leaders summit that sought to encourage Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Though the names of those in the Church may never reach the level of recognition as that of King, Rosa Parks, or Medger Evers, those involved did make lasting contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, particularly within the Catholic Church.

And most recently, just last week, Addison Woosley, 13 year old testified in North Carolina that her city should be a sanctuary city for unborn children,

she said “I strongly believe that abortion is murder. I also believe murder is wrong. So I’m here to ask you to make abortion illegal in Raleigh.” She spoke of the humanity of the unborn and asked why it is illegal to kill children only after they exit the womb. Some in the audience began to laugh as she said a baby isn’t an it or a fetus but a human. Comparing abortion to slavery one woman shouted out “Inappropriate!” And another “you don’t speak for all people!” The mayor tried to bring order but one person was forcibly removed. Yet the brave girl spoke on, undeterred. And the bishop did not retract his tweet. This is what we are up against in the world. And on top of this, not only do we need to speak up for our faith, but there are those situations that crop up in daily life too - telling someone they shouldn’t drive because they’ve had too much to drink; our conscience telling us a person is crossing the line in words and actions towards a child or a spouse; a workplace or school bully. There is tolerance, and then there is cowardice, the vice against fortitude. People may hate us for speaking up and acting, but this is what we are called to do as Christians.

I’m pretty sure most everyone here at Mass tonight would respond in the affirmative to the question “are you a Christian.” And if I asked you do you love God, and does God love you, I’d hope that would elicit an affirmative

response as well. But love requires a response. The apostles do not stay in the room, they go out, and for going out, for preaching and acting, many are killed. We must not be blind to how our faith is under attack, both from governments in the world and from people who are hostile to the faith. But if you get past a person's initial anger or hostility, and actually engage with them, be patient with them, and talk with them, they just might realize that we are not out to tell them what to do, to judge them, or to shame them. They might realize we are giving them an invitation - to come to know this God who is love. This God who is alive and with us always.

And so as we prepare now to receive Holy Communion and be reminded once again that God is with us each and every step, may we also remember that the Holy Spirit strengthens us too, but gives us a challenge. To go out into the world, and to proclaim the truth. To set an example by our conduct. To not be afraid to be mocked or ridiculed, because our mission is the salvation of souls. Learning how to respond to God's love and invitation to "come follow me" is a lifetime of work - so let the Spirit guide you, and use the power of the Spirit go help others to not just say "I believe in God" but to help them know what that belief really means.