

In the film “A Man for All Seasons,” which tells the story of Sir Thomas More the English chancellor who was murdered by Henry VIII, when we first meet him, he is a successful man within the English government, in the good graces of the king, and surrounded by people who admire him. As the film goes on though, so many people, fearful of the reaction of going against the monarchy as Henry murders his wives and of course splits with the Catholic Church, remain silent. Some look for ways to gain the king’s graces. Among them is a protégé of Sir More named Richard Rich. Eventually he sells out Sir More, and lies on the witness stand at More’s trial. When More asks the judge if he may ask the witness a question, he approaches and asks what he is wearing, as Rich has a chain with a red dragon. The judge says that Rich has become attorney general of Wales. At this More has the famous line, that it profits a man nothing to gain the world at the cost of his soul, but for Wales? Rich is left silent. More obviously has defended himself well, but with it being a kangaroo court his conviction is a foregone conclusion. He dies at the scaffold; Rich would end up having More’s old job as chancellor and live out his life dying in bed. But which one of these men do we know today as the one of honor? Which one left a lasting imprint on the world for the better? In London today, you’ll find statues of More. I only learned about Rich as I listened to Bishop Robert Barron’s homily this week, as he referred to the film as one of his favorites.

History is full of great men like More. Of people who could have made other choices for their career, or backed down in the face of opposition, but made a different choice. To take up their crosses; to suffer; to speak out against injustice; to act. Consider for instance the following people who faced seemingly hopeless situations:

On September 11, 1973, Augusto Pinochet overthrew Chile’s democratically elected president. Torture and murder followed, as death squads stalked the capital, targeting dissidents. Faced with certain death if they stayed, most of the regime’s opponents fled the country. Not Cardinal Archbishop Raul Silva Henriquez.

Despite moderate Catholics being one of Pinochet’s targets, Cardinal Silva not only stayed in Chile—he set up a group to help people survive the persecution. The Committee for Cooperation for Peace offered financial assistance, legal aid, and sanctuary for those targeted by the regime. When it couldn’t protect dissenters, the Cardinal personally hid them under his own bed. The group excelled at defying authority. When Pinochet ordered it closed down in 1976, Cardinal Silva simply renamed it and changed its location to the Santiago cathedral—where a loophole in Chilean law meant the dictator had no jurisdiction.

The Cardinal helped tens of thousands escape persecution. Without his heroism, modern Chile would be a much emptier place.

During the Cold War, Eastern Europe was a very unpleasant place to be.

Czechoslovakia had been grabbed by the Soviets fist, and the Stasi had East Germany. But not everyone was easily cowed. For Rainer Schubert, the Berlin Wall offered a chance to stick it to communism—97 separate times.

As one of East Germany's best people smugglers, Schubert was adept at helping citizens escape the party's clutches. During one memorable cross-border escapade, he whisked two people out of Prague by hiding them underneath a live tiger. The tiger in Prague, and under the tiger in the cage was a hidden space for two people. The guards didn't want to mess with the tiger cage checking it so they crossed; the tiger went to a zoo in West Germany. The youngest was four months old with his parents the oldest was 75. Despite living at a time when making even one illicit trip to the West meant braving imprisonment, torture, and death, Schubert kept his operation up for three whole years. In that time he saved nearly 100 people from a life of crushing misery.

In 1975, the Stasi caught up with Schubert and sentenced him to nine years in one of the country's most notorious prisons. Despite being told he would die there, Schubert survived, showing up the Stasi one last time.

In 1938, British stockbroker Nicholas Winton was preparing for a winter skiing holiday, when a friend asked him to come to Prague; he said I have a most interesting assignment and need your help. Abandoning his plans, Winton instead spent a not-very-merry Christmas traipsing around Jewish children's camps in the city. Realizing the full horror of what awaited these kids, Winton vowed to get them to safety in England.

He set up his own rescue operation. At first, Winton's office was a dining room table at his hotel in Wenceslas Square in Prague. Anxious parents, who gradually came to understand the danger they and their children were in, came to Winton and placed the future of their children into his hands. Winton contacted the governments of nations he thought could take in the children. Only Sweden and his own government said yes. Great Britain promised to accept children under the age of 18 as long as he found homes and guarantors who could deposit £50 for each child to pay for their return home.

Because he wanted to save the lives of as many of the endangered children as possible, Winton returned to London and planned the transport of children to Great Britain. He worked at his regular job on the Stock Exchange by day, and then devoted late afternoons and evenings to his rescue efforts, often working far into the night. He made up an organization, calling it "The British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Children's Section." The committee consisted of himself, his mother, his secretary and a few volunteers.

Winton had to find funds to use for repatriation costs, and a foster home for each child. He also had to raise money to pay for the transports when the children's parents could not cover the costs. He advertised in British newspapers, and in churches and synagogues. He printed groups of children's photographs all over Britain. He felt certain that seeing the children's photos would convince potential sponsors and foster families to offer assistance. Finding sponsors was only one of the endless problems in obtaining the necessary documents from German and British authorities.

On March 14, 1939, Winton had his first success: the first transport of children left Prague for Britain by airplane. Winton managed to organize seven more transports that departed from Prague's Wilson Railway Station. The groups then crossed the English Channel by boat and finally ended their journey at London's Liverpool Street station. At the station, British foster parents waited to collect their charges. Winton, who organized their rescue, was set on matching the right child to the right foster parents.

The last trainload of children left on August 2, 1939, bringing the total of rescued children to 669. The significance of Winton's mission is verified by the fate of that last trainload of children. Moreover, most of the parents and siblings of the children Winton saved perished in the Holocaust.

After the war, Nicholas Winton didn't tell anyone, not even his wife Grete about his wartime rescue efforts. In 1988, a half century later, Grete found a scrapbook from 1939 in their attic, with all the children's photos, a complete list of names, a few letters from parents of the children to Winton and other documents. She finally learned the whole story. Today the scrapbooks and other papers are held at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, in Israel.

The rescued children, many now grandparents, still refer to themselves as "Winton's children." Until his last days on earth, Nicholas Winton wore a ring given to him by some of the children he saved. It is inscribed with a line from the Talmud, the book of Jewish law. It reads: Save one life, save the world.

When a British TV show invited him on in 1988, the host asked people in the audience to stand if they owed Winton their lives. To his tearful surprise, nearly everyone stood.

A common theme throughout our readings today is that of sacrifice. Jeremiah, who expresses frustration over the hardships of being a prophet where he's imprisoned, mocked, exiled, and put in stocks vents a bit saying he was duped but ultimately he knows he did the right thing, reflecting that not doing what God called him to do isn't an option, "I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it." Paul to the Romans says we are not to conform ourselves to this age, but rather we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. And Jesus in the Gospel calls Peter out when Peter does not want to hear of this suffering business Jesus speaks of that He must endure, saying that the follower of Christ must take up his cross, and follow Him, and that the one who loses his life for the sake of Jesus will ultimately find it, then saying the famous line quoted by Sir More, that there is no good to gain it all if you lose your soul.

From More, to Cardinal Silva, to Schubert and Winton and so many others, they got this truth figured out. Any one of them could have lived for themselves. They could have taken the easy way out. But they saw something greater, that in loving God and others, and taking a stand, they might suffer, but it was worth it for the greater good. And for that, people came to know the meaning of hope and love.

The meaning of love is to will the good of the other. We see this when we come to Mass and hear “this is my body, given up for you” and gaze upon the crucifix; Jesus loves us, and does this for us. But we are called to follow Him as His disciples. The way that happens is by having a relationship with God, and carrying out His call for us.

Our soul is what puts us in contact with God; it embraces our entire life. In his homily, Bishop Barron also brought up a painting in Paris he saw that was a favorite of his, called “Romans During the Decadence.” It shows a partying group of people, and took Thomas Couture, the artist, three years to paint. Everyone is exhausted from the revelry, but Bishop Barron was struck by the forlorn looking woman in the center who seems jaded and sad. And he took it to be that she represents someone as having it all, but ultimately being empty because they realize too late that having it all isn’t what it seems. When you look at the painting, it’s hard not to notice her because she is all of us when we get caught up in a sin or focus on the things of the world. It seemed like it would bring us joy and everything we wanted, but ultimately it leaves us empty inside and not fulfilled. So the starting point is to ask ourselves, how is our soul doing? Do we focus on God, making Him our highest priority and being in heaven. Are we focused on listening to God, so we can, like Jeremiah, come to know His will? Do we turn to God when our souls are divided and we face the temptations or demons of sins of habit knowing He is there to help us? Do we know that He will bring us the joy we seek if only we take the steps to reach out and follow Him?

With the soul being connected to God, it then leads to words and actions, which is what can be so costly. With respect to words, so much of what we believe as Catholics is counter-cultural up and down through the ages. Jeremiah spoke out against the Israelite king and leaders who had fallen away from their faith, and the response was his persecution. The stakes for us are high too. But remember, our faith has to inform what we say even if it’s not popular. This includes challenging those who are going down the wrong path, but also not fearing being someone who is politically active. Our faith informs how we vote, but our stance on moral issues, and if heaven forbid people are offended by what we say, well that’s not a bad thing. It hopefully gets them to think once they get past emotion. But we also have to remember we can’t just pray for an end to abortion, to racism, to poverty, and for the police and front line workers without backing this up with being active in engaging others on these issues and helping them to think more deeply when we leave church. It’s why we say “go announce the Gospel of the Lord.”

And lastly, the actions. Are we willing to suffer for the Gospel? Are we willing to take up our crosses and sacrifice? Why does a teacher work so hard to prepare for their students even at home? Why does an officer facing scorn from many put on a badge? Why does a parent after working all day spend an hour at practice and then make dinner and then another hour or two helping with homework? Why do people go help strangers clean up after natural disasters or help out at a homeless shelter? It’s not because we seek out suffering. But it’s because a person realizes there are greater things than the pleasures of earthly life and focusing on those, namely making this world and other people better, something each one of us as the power to do. To again quote

from the Talmud, save one life and save the world. That's done with actions, not just talk; with intending the good of the other and helping others not ourselves, and doing it with no strings attached. An individual action can seem so small, but it can make such a profound difference.

The contrast to the woman in the painting of the Roman party is another painting, that of Mother Teresa's smiling face in the midst of poverty, because she is focused on God and bringing Him into the slums and the darkness. So who do we want to be? Who do we live for? Inside all of us is the power to do such good, for Jesus has shown us the way. It's not easy. It will be costly. But when we lose our lives for His sake, and take up our cross, what great things ultimately happen. It might not get us a mansion on earth, but it will get us and many others something so much greater, namely true happiness and to a place one day that eye has not seen and ear has not heard.