

In recent years like many of us, I've come to rely on my GPS on my iPhone to get me to where I need to go. For the most part, it does just fine, and I tend to put a lot of trust in where the voice with the English accent takes me (I changed it to British because the accent is so cool and I figure I'm more apt to listen to it).

But of course in life, while God gives us a GPS of sorts with our conscience, sometimes due to original sin's impacts, and our environment, it can be very easy to lose our way. We can become short sighted; we can think something leads us to where we want to go, but in reality we may be going down a wrong path that will lead us further away from happiness, and God. But, when we turn our lives over to God, and have Him front and center, ultimately we will be lead safely home to the Kingdom of Heaven. However, doing this requires a focus on Him knowing He will lead us where we need to go; knowing that sometimes though it may be painful we have to look at the parts of our lives we try to cover up or ignore, and help others to do the same in their own lives. In so doing you and I as Christians can be beacons of hope to help lead others on the right path in a world that so often gets turned upside down, with so many people losing sight of where to go.

We all know of World War II and of Nazi Germany. Sometimes people will look back and ask ourselves “how could this happen?” Well again, original sin’s impacts causes people to lose their way. It’s nothing new; just Friday we had the feast of Saint Josaphat, an Eastern-rite Catholic bishop killed by fellow Christians when an Orthodox mob murdered him and threw him in a river thinking they were doing the will of God. Tragically, Nazi Germany had many enablers for Hitler and the Nazis to seize and keep power. Some thought his vision would create a better world; others thought he would restore German pride; others were just angry over World War I and latched onto him with hope. Of course, we all know what happened.

When Germany surrendered to Allied Forces May 7, 1945, not only was Germany shattered, but so too had the Catholic Church suffered. But during the dark times, when so many were caught up in the euphoria of the Nazis, and others were caught up in the fear and terror, there were a number of brave souls who were rays of light and hope.

Adolf Hitler’s destructive reign had turned many Germans into brutes or victims of the Nazis ’crazed megalomania. The Catholic Church suffered

tremendously. Millions of Catholics died on the battlefield, on execution blocks, in forced labor or in concentration camps. Some have since been beatified, a step on the path to sainthood.

One of the first was Erich Klausener, a 49-year-old civil servant who, on June 24, 1934, delivered a scathing anti-Nazi speech at a Catholic conference. Six days later, he was shot dead in his office by SS agents, the elite guard of the Nazi Party, during the “Night of the Long Knives,” when Nazis massacred political opponents. The Nazis claimed Klausener had died by suicide.

Two other prominent Catholics were murdered a few days after Klausener: Adalbert Probst, who headed a Catholic sports association, and Catholic newspaper editor Fritz Gerlich, who was murdered in the Dachau concentration camp.

Priests were persecuted too, though initially not subject to murder as easily as laypeople. Among traps set to intimidate and silence priests was to call a priest to perform the last rites in an apartment. When the priest arrived, a

prostitute would throw herself at him while a Gestapo agent took “incriminating” photographs.

Father Bernhard Lichtenberg of Berlin, a persistent critic of the regime, was arrested in 1941 for drafting a sermon in which he was going to tell the faithful to reject anti-Semitic propaganda. After spending two years in jail, he died on his way to Dachau.

These murders and persecutions galvanized leaders like Bishop Clemens von Galen to speak out more forthrightly. His sermons influenced the White Rose resistance movement of students in Munich and, in the city of Lubeck, inspired Blesseds Johannes Prassek, Eduard Muller and Hermann Lange. The priests with their Lutheran counterpart, Rev. Karl Friedrich Stellbrink, were beheaded in 1943 after a show trial in a Nazi court.

Blessed Richard Henkes attracted the attention of the Gestapo for declaring the incompatibility between Christianity and Nazism. Imprisoned in Dachau, Henkes became well known in the camp for his selfless acts of mercy. In the end, typhoid killed him before the Nazis could, on Feb. 22, 1945.

Another “Angel of Dachau” was Blessed Engelmar Unzeitig, a priest who died a week after Henkes, also of typhoid. Like him, Unzeitig cared tenderly for prisoners with typhoid.

There was Blessed Gerhard Hirschfelder, who joined the Schonstatt movement in the camp; the movement, meaning “Beautiful Place” in German, dated back to 1914 as a movement for spiritual renewal in Germany. He had long spoken out against the Nazis, but what got him to Dachau was an objection to the destruction of Christian images. He died of starvation and pneumonia.

More than 1,000 priests from different countries died at Dachau, from disease or exhaustion or murder.

When Blessed Alois Andritzki asked for Communion, the guards mocked him. They killed him by lethal injection Feb. 3, 1943.

Blessed Otto Neururer was an Austrian whose crime was to counsel a young parishioner not to marry a man of dubious morals. It turned out that

the man was a friend of the local Nazi chief, and the priest was transported to Dachau and then to Buchenwald.

There he was frequently tortured. After he baptized a fellow inmate, the camp commander hanged him upside down. Neururer died May 30, 1940, after 34 hours.

Blessed Maria Restituta Kafka, a Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity, was the only woman religious to be formally sentenced to death by the Nazis.

An Austrian nurse in Vienna, she defied the Nazis by refusing to remove the crucifixes from hospital rooms and was also said to have dictated a poem mocking Hitler. She was beheaded at the age of 48 in 1943.

After serving as a chaplain in World War I, Father Max Josef Metzger, an ecumenist, became a peace activist. When World War II came, he was arrested several times by the Gestapo. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1944 after his memorandum to a Swedish bishop outlining how a defeated Germany could become part of a peace plan was intercepted.

Blessed Nikolaus Gross, trade unionist and journalist, was also a peace campaigner. When his Catholic workers' newspaper was banned by the regime in 1938, he continued publishing it underground. He was arrested during the roundup following the failed assassination attempt on Hitler in 1944. Executed in January 1945, he left behind seven children.

One man who was killed for actually plotting to assassinate Hitler was Claus von Stauffenberg, an aristocratic army officer who had once been a keen Nazi. But the evils of Nazism offended Stauffenberg's Catholic ethics, and he became a member of the resistance group called the Kreisau Circle. Stauffenberg was executed by firing squad.

The Kreisau Circle's spiritual leader was Jesuit Father Alfred Delp, whose role was to explain Catholic social teaching to the group and establish contacts with Catholic leaders. As a parish priest in Munich, he helped to smuggle Jews to Switzerland. He was falsely accused of being party to the plot to kill Hitler. In jail, the Gestapo offered him freedom if he left the Jesuits. Delp refused. He was sentenced to death and executed at the age of 36.

Some Catholics died because they refused to join the armed forces.

Austrian Father Franz Reinisch said at his trial: “I am a Catholic priest with only the weapons of the Holy Spirit and the faith; but I know what I am fighting for.” He was beheaded.

These are just some of the German and Austrian Catholic martyrs to Nazism. Many more such martyrs came from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy and other places. Their stories came out after the war, but while the Nazis took their lives, they of course could not touch their souls. So what is it that caused these heroes to do what they did, along with so many others up and down history? The answer is they knew where they were going. So how about you and me?

As the liturgical year winds down and we enter mid-November, through the first days of Advent, much of our readings will focus on the end of the world. It's a subject that fascinates us as humans, which is why there are so many films and books and shows on the subject.

Jesus in our Gospel this week takes the apostles to the Temple, the center of Jewish identity and something that meant everything to the ancient Jewish person, and shockingly He says the days are coming when every stone in that Temple will be thrown down. He speaks of the darkening of the sun and moon and the stars falling down too. So what does this talk mean?

Well we do know that the world will end one day. But we should not get caught up in picking a specific date and time, or think that it is imminent, or focus on these readings as meaning the earth coming to an end. For if we take all of this language literally, Jesus says “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Well, that generation did pass away and lo and behold we’re still here. Rather, a better way to think of this as an unveiling; a revealing if you will; like the last book of the Bible’s title “revelation,” it is a removing of the veil or unveiling. So what is being unveiled? The truth.

The GPS to an ancient person was the sun and stars and moon; they got you places. So a good translation of this Gospel could be to think of it as with the sun and moon being darkened and stars falling as “the days are

coming when you will lose your sense of direction.” And indeed that has happened for us because often as we know humans lose their way.

But in Jesus, there is an answer. Jesus also speaks of the powers in heaven being shaken. Behind the reality of our world is spiritual power, the power of heaven, greater than any earthly power. Those who hate God try to deny this. It's why the Nazis, the Communists, the Romans and every tyrannical political power you can think of use fear to try to control people. Death is final; so why would you stand in the way if it meant loss of life? Jesus though upends this. The Sanhedrin and Roman officials kill Him; he surely knew what was to come and we know the forces of evil gather. But He never backs down. And when He appears to have been defeated, there is the resurrection. The unveiling if you will of the truth - that God is far more powerful than death and those that use fear of death to control. It's what the many martyrs of World War II understood and what led them to join our Lord in unveiling the truth.

So what does this mean for us? Two things.

The first, is where is our spiritual GPS pointed? What or who is governing our lives and how are we guided? Sometimes we focus on the wrong things in life and think this or that will make me happy. Other times we are influenced by the wrong people who cause us to make poor choices. Just like clouds cover the stars, so too can things cover up God in our lives. So it's important to do an inventory and to remember that we all face judgment. It should not fill us with fear and terror, but the truth of who we are will one day be unveiled when we stand before God. We want to use our time to prepare for that by becoming a better person. By making time for God in our lives. By listening to Him and being guided about how to live and what choices to make. For when we do these things, everything else falls into place. We know how to use power properly. We know how to be humble and prudent and merciful and forgiving. We stop living for ourselves and keep ambition in check. We learn how to cope with the storms of life and the battles of sin. But this can only happen when we keep our eyes fixed on our final destination.

And second, how we are going to unveil the truth in this world? We might not live in Nazi Germany, but this world is full of evil. People young and old are manipulated by culture, by lies about the dignity of the human person,

by lies about what true freedom is. Tragically so many follow the wrong path because no one is there in their life to help them follow the right path. Others let the voices of evil prevail because they are too afraid to speak up lest they be “canceled” or shouted down. In a world that can be full of so many lies, from relativism to racism to hatred based on politics or religion to the abuse of the human body, whatever it may be, you and I have to do something about it. We take a page from those heroes of World War II who were seemingly powerless to testify to the truth. While we may not be martyred like them, we may be hated by many, but in the end, we might just one day be standing in heaven and meet people we helped get there because we were not afraid to help them find the way there.

Of the day or hour when our world will end, or when we will die, we do not know. Some focus on trying to know that moment; others focus on escaping from the reality of mortality and evil. Perhaps a better way is to look to our Lord who changes the meaning of death, for as I say every Ash Wednesday, ashes do not end the story, the empty tomb does. We too will arise with our Lord, but to follow Him to heaven we need to take our commission to be His disciples seriously. To stay focused on Him, and to remember we are sent into the world not to condemn it, but to help one

another see the deeper truth - that in the midst of it all is a God who loves us, and wants us to come to know Him. May we give our lives over to Him and let Jesus guide us, trusting that even if what is unveiled in our souls are things we don't like, His mercy can transform us, and we can use that love we are given to in turn transform this world.