

A little over 6 years ago, while he was celebrating Mass, Fr. Jacques Hamel lost his life when two Muslim men, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, burst into his church in Normandy, France.

Pope Francis, preaching on him a few years later, said of Fr. Hamel, "He gave his life for us, he gave his life so as not to deny Jesus. He gave his life in the same sacrifice of Jesus on the altar, and from there he accused the author of persecution: "Be gone, Satan!"

His whole life was one of loving service to God and others; he retired in 2005 but continued to serve and help others.

Before his death, Father Hamel, who usually slept like a baby, was beginning to have recurring nightmares. He would leave the little church that he served in St.-Étienne-du-Rouvray and make his way through the town toward his house. The streets were deserted. Suddenly, a group of strangers would ambush him and begin to beat him. He would look around for help, but there was no one there.

The 85-year-old Father Hamel confided this nightmare to his sister months before his murder. Roselyn, who did not attach much importance to it at the time, told her brother Jacques: "I'm the one who has the nightmares. You've stolen them from me!

Father Hamel often told his sister of his admiration for the Rev. Charles de Foucauld, the great martyr in the desert at Tamanrasset, Algeria. Father de Foucauld lived among the Tuareg people and was also known for his charity, gentleness and spirituality. Father Hamel, who rarely went to see movies, attended a screening of the film "Of Gods and Men," a story about the monks at Tibhirine, also in Algeria, who suffered a similar fate at the hands of Islamist fanatics in 1996.

"How is it," he asked his sister, "that these men could act with such vicious violence against these men who had lived in their community doing nothing but serving the poor, feeding the hungry and caring for the sick? Is it because the devil had entered into their hearts and minds, and they became numb to all charity and compassion?"

Jacques Hamel was born on Nov. 30, 1930, in the town of Darnétal in Normandy in the northern region of France. His parents divorced when he was still a child, and he and his siblings grew up with their mother in great poverty. He exhibited extraordinary piety at a young age. He would assist at funerals at his local parish whenever possible. He was a member of the choir early on and loved chant. His mother found him once in a shed out in their garden pretending to celebrate Mass using makeshift altar.

The young Hamel felt drawn to be a missionary with the Missionaries of Africa, known as the White Fathers because of their robes. But he was told that, due to his poor health, that was not a possibility. He instead became a parish priest in the Archdiocese of Rouen and served his congregations faithfully for several decades.

Father Hamel was known for his good memory, his discretion and his compassion for others. When troubled souls would approach him, he would seek to heal their wounds without being judgmental. He helped people in the local community, and he also sought to help those on the margins. His sister said that, since the age of 7, she never heard him complain about anything. He enjoyed a deep interior peace in which others found refuge.

The morning of the martyrdom was like any other. Father Hamel woke at 7 a.m., as was his custom, recited the prayer invoking the protection of St. Michael the Archangel, read from his breviary and went to the bakery to buy bread for his breakfast. He left the rectory around 8:30 a.m. and walked about a quarter of a mile to the church where he was due to celebrate the 9 o'clock Mass.

When Father Hamel arrived, there was a small but committed congregation—three Vincentian sisters, a married couple of 64 years and another layperson. It was during the Prayers of Petition that two Islamic State-inspired perpetrators barged in, knocked Father Hamel down and slit his throat.

As Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean lunged at him with a knife, Father Hamel exclaimed, “Va t'en Satan!” (“Get away, Satan!”). The priest saw in this heinous attack not the work of merely confused youth or fanatic religious ideology but that of the Father of Lies. Indeed, what else could instill the hearts and minds of young men with such hatred as to murder a priest, unknown to them, in cold blood, while he was celebrating Mass?

After forcing Guy Coponet to hold a video camera and record the assassination of his priest, one of the attackers calmed down and asked one of the religious sisters present, Sister Hélène Decaux, “Are you afraid to die?” She said no. Surprised by her answer, he asked why. “Because I believe in God, and I know I will be happy,” she said. He then murmured, “I believe in God, too, and I am not afraid to die.” Then he exclaimed, “Jesus is a man, not God!” Sister Decaux found the theological discourse surreal. The authorities were summoned and when the two young attackers attempted to leave the church, they were shot dead.

Currently Fr. Hammel's cause for canonization is opened, but he is one of a number of martyrs of recent times who have confronted evil without fear. Others include Shahbaz Bhatti, who was given the title Servant of God; he is a Catholic politician from Pakistan, who was killed 10 years ago by an Islamic Terrorist Group. He was the only Christian in Pakistan's federal cabinet, and worked for religious freedom striving to protect Christians and other religious minorities. Then there is Fr. Ragheed Ganni, born in 1972 in Iraq, he studied in Rome, and requested to be sent back home to serve as a priest. One night after celebrating Mass where his 3 cousins were deacons, a man approached the group and told him to close the Church, to which he responded “How can I close the House of God?” All men were told to convert to Islam or die and they refused. They were shot, and their bodies were placed in a car full of explosive so if anyone attempted to remove the bodies they would be destroyed. The bomb squad removed the bombs

and they were buried properly; the Official Vatican statement concerning his death said “Ragheed’s sacrifice will inspire in the hearts of all men and women of good will a renewed resolve to reject the ways of hatred and violence, to conquer evil with good and cooperate in hastening the dawn of reconciliation, justice and peace in Iraq.”

Sadly, we will never have a time when there is not evil in the world. But the answer to this is seen in people like Fr. Hammel and Fr. Ragheed and Shahbaz and so many others who show us, with their lives, that there is an answer to evil: namely that of good, because they realize there is much more to things than just the world that is before us.

In our first reading this week, we hear of a mother and her 7 sons. They are captured by the occupying Hellenists, the invaders from Greece who want to spread their culture everywhere, and so want them to eat pork, which to this day Jews do not do. Trying to get the occupied to assimilate, thinking if they give in others will, they find they refuse to give in to the demands. We hear their determination; one holds out his hands saying “it was from Heaven that I received these; for the sake of his laws I disdain them; from him I hope to receive them again” and another says we live for God; “the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever. It is for His laws that we re dying” and another says “It is my choice to die at the hands of men, with the hope God gives of being raised up by Him.”

In the Gospel, Jesus encounters Saducees, a former sect in Judaism who saw no resurrection and this world as all there is; it wasn’t an uncommon belief at the time, but Jesus of course believes in and knows that life is eternal, so confounds them when they pose to him the bizarre case of who’s wife a bride will be of 7 brothers who have each died. Marriage is beautiful, but he points out something even greater awaits in heaven, where there is perfect love between people.

What these readings remind us are of the eternal nature of life; they fill us with hope; and they challenge us to bring that hope into the world through the way we live our lives.

First, with respect to life being eternal, sometimes we can fall into the trap of believing all that is before us is what we see. There is no getting around the reality of death and it’s pain; and while understandably we might not want to think about it, it does come for us all. In November the Church gives us a time to think about it with All Saints and All Soul’s Day, and readings speaking often of the end times, set amidst a time of year of increasing cold weather and darkness. But in this, there is the hope and promise of everlasting life. We are reminded Jesus dies too and is risen. And we think of what lies ahead. For some, as the brother says there is no resurrection - this is what we refer to as hell; the place of absence of God, for those who entirely reject God and have their will be done. For others, we believe in a final preparation for that eternal life; called “purgatory,” which is so often misunderstood. As I shared on All Soul’s Day, citing then-Cardinal Ratzinger whom we studied in a class called “Eschatology,” a fancy word meaning the study of the last things, purgatory is where we are in God’s love and have such hope. When we die we are outside of time; and it is not some type of concentration

camp. Rather the only pain is that of letting go; for sin is often pleasurable, and it can be hard to kick something completely. In this, which again is not a matter of weeks or years, there is this encounter with our Lord who says let me show you how to love completely and help you as His love burns away the muck that accumulates on our souls. Lastly when we love completely, there is this heaven, which eye has not seen and ear has not heard; what is beyond our wildest imagination. Even greater than the love of marriage is on display there. Pure love with God and one another that will be incredible.

When we have that desire to want to get to heaven, we are like those martyrs; meaning we do not seek out death, nor do we seek an escape from this world, but rather we become people of hope who want to bring that love and hope into the world as they did.

For one, we do it through actions. How many good deeds of love did those people do over the course of their lives? I think of the funeral Masses I celebrate, when I meet with the families of the faithful departed and they share with me all that their loved ones did for them; the acts of love and kindness that accumulate over a lifetime. We must never forget the meals we make, the homework we help with, the places we volunteer, the time we give to those in need, all of these matter so much to bring light into people's lives. The Christian is not trying to escape the world but rather is engaged in it, armed with the hope of heaven, they bring pieces of it into this world through love and mercy.

But with that, we also move forward not being afraid. Courage, as I shared last week, is an important virtue. All three of those men like virtually all martyrs, could have saved themselves by denying their faith, or keeping quiet about it. But they did not. Now, while we do not likely face martyrdom, living our faith is tough. It takes courage to testify to the faith; to say to someone "this is not right" out of love; to speak to what we believe, especially as we do as elections approach when we have those difficult political conversations where our faith and political life intersect. It's far easier to keep quiet when someone says there is no life in the womb; when someone has a problem they aren't addressing in their lives; or when others invite us to make poor moral choices and go along with the crowd. We too will be vilified, gossiped about, trashed on social media, or told to keep our faith out of politics. Just a couple of days ago a major UK newspaper ran a story about a priest for preaching, from his pulpit, a pro-life message and against transgenderism; he was simply preaching what the Church teaches. But thankfully he was undeterred. Remember, we do not condemn people but we love them; we preach mercy. We also use prudence, not proselytizing or subjecting the faith to ridicule or shaming people, but rather gradually trying to bring them to see the truth through love, prayer, patience, tolerance, and journeying with them. But at the same time we will their good, and want people to find true happiness, not the fake happiness the world offers. Doing this means being often counter-cultural in a world that says do what you want when you want. We as Christians, rather say do this and do not do that to get to heaven. Would we rather have someone hate us and end up in heaven, or like us because we are silent and end up in hell because fear took over us?

When you look to the great leaders of our faith, both the martyrs and those who were not martyred but lived saintly lives, what you see is the same thing in each of them: a love of this world, but a focus on the next, and the living of a life of detachment, of fearlessness to testify to the faith through word and action; and of living lives that make this world a better place than it was when they came into it. May we follow their example, and not keep the faith hidden or secret, but live it as a way of life knowing we are passing through this world on our way to something greater, but until that day comes we have a job to do - to make this world a better place, which we can do when we live out our faith. Hopefully we know where we are eventually going and do all we can to help people get there through our actions, our conversations, our prayers, knowing what a difference we can make in bringing souls into the heavenly kingdom.