

Most all of us would say that we believe in God which is why we are here at Mass. And for the most part, even though many do not believe in God in our country and world, one saying they believe in God would not seem to be much of a threat.

But look just a little deeper, and what we would find is all is not as smooth as it seems, for those words “I believe” are ones that have consequences. In many parts of the world, people continue to be persecuted for their faith in Christ. And, even in our own country, because so much of what we believe as Catholics can be counter-cultural - certainly not something unique to 2023 - Catholics can face intense pressure to remain silent about their faith. But that can't be an option for a Catholic, for it is our job to go and evangelize, and often this will result in hatred from the world.

Hitler was known for his hatred of the Jews; but for the most part, Catholics were not overtly persecuted. However, if one spoke out, they most definitely were.

The Holocaust took the lives of millions of innocents. Amazingly, throughout all of those horrors there were always those who stood tall and

spoke out against the existing tyranny. Their courage, staring into the face of death, is awe inspiring. One of them was Bernhard Lichtenberg, a priest who was beatified. A victim of the Holocaust, his courage is an example to us all.

Bernhard was said to have been, understandably, afraid of what was going on in Germany. Fear is a normal emotion. But he felt his fear. It attacked him from head to toe. It did not matter. He knew in his heart he must do the "right thing". If he had lived in America he would have been safe, he would not have felt fear. But he lived in Nazi Germany. If you were a Catholic priest and spoke out publicly against Nazi tyranny, your chances at longevity were immediately reduced.

Bernhard Lichtenberg was born in 1875 in Lower Silesia, located in Prussia. There were five siblings in the family and he was the second oldest. His father was a merchant and earned a modest living. The family had all that they needed to have a good life.

Bernhard received his Abiturium (basically a high-school diploma qualifying the recipient for university studies) somewhere around 1889. He had been feeling the call to the priesthood and answered that call beginning

theological studies shortly thereafter. Bernard, an excellent student and a young man filled with an exploding faith, was ordained a priest in 1899.

Father Lichtenberg began his ministry in Berlin in 1900. He became a pastor of Sacred Heart parish in Charlottenberg (in western Germany) and then served as a military chaplain during World War I. The years passed by and the Nazis were slowly but surely obtaining power. Then came 1931 and Father Bernhard Lichtenberg was about to get noticed by these Nazis.

The famed movie, All Quiet on the Western Front, had been released. Father Lichtenberg began encouraging his parishioners at St. Hedwig's Church to go see the film. None other than Josef Goebbels' paper, Der Agriff, attacked Father with a vengeance for doing so. Father Lichtenberg, active in the Centre Party since 1920, had moved on to also become a member of the Peace Association of German Catholics.

Father Lichtenberg continued to speak out against growing Nazi injustice and on March 31, 1933, only two months after Hitler seized power, Father arranged for a Jewish banker to meet with the Archbishop of Breslau, Cardinal Bertram, trying to get him to intervene to stop the anti-

semitic boycott of Jewish businesses. The Cardinal decided that this was not the business of the Catholic Church.

The Nazis, however, did take notice of Lichtenburg's incessant meddling and he was placed much higher up on their watch-list. When Father Lichtenburg went directly to Hermann Goering to protest the cruelties he was hearing about at the concentration camps, Goering was furious. He denied everything and ordered Father Lichtenberg taken into "protective custody" for spreading lies about the German state.

Father was released from jail after a short stay and immediately went back to protesting Nazi cruelty. In 1937 he began to distribute Pope Pius XI's condemnation of the Nazis titles. From the pulpit Father Lichtenberg told his congregation, in referring to Kristallnacht and the burning of synagogues, "we know what happened yesterday. We do not know what tomorrow holds. However, we have experienced what happened today. Outside, the synagogue burns. That is also a house of God."

From this point on Father Bernhard was a marked man. He had become an outspoken critic of the Nazis and then attacked their murdering of the

mentally disabled organizing a public protest in 1941. In October of that year he was arrested.

When the Nazis searched his home they found pamphlets that Father intended to distribute the following Sunday denouncing Josef Goebbels. While being interrogated he was adamant that he opposed the Nazi treatment of the Jews because it violated Christian charity. He told his captors that Nazism was completely incompatible with the teachings and commands of the Catholic Church. Talk about guts---Father Lichtenburg had plenty.

Father was held for two years and then shipped off to Dachau, known as the Clergy barracks because it housed over 2500 Catholic priests.

However, Father Lichtenburg never made it to Dachau. He died in a cattle car before the journey was over. Incredibly, over 4000 people had the courage to appear at his funeral in Berlin. An onlooker observed, "I wonder if they know they are burying a saint?"

At Father Bernhard's beatification ceremony in 1996, Pope St. John Paul II said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

Blessed Bernhard Lichtenburg did just that. He spit into the face of fear, stared into the eyes of evil and allowed his courage to win the day. He is an example for us all.

In more recent times, we see persecution all around us. In Hong Kong, Cardinal Zen, and Jimmy Lai a millionaire media man who could have easily fled to the UK, were both convicted for standing up for religious liberty. In the UK, several people have been arrested for thought crimes - in all seriousness - for praying silently outside of abortion clinics. And even in our own country, people face intense pressure all the time to not speak out for what is right lest one ruffle feathers.

Here's the thing though. As Fr. Bernhard came to realize, while fear can be powerful, the Christian is put here on earth for a reason, and it's not to stay silent. Rather it's to live out our mission.

This week's readings hit this point home.

Jeremiah, the prophet from our first reading, reflects on the hardships of mission. He says “you duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped,” reflecting on how as a young man he was called by the Lord to give a message like Fr. Bernhard’s that would be hated by the powers that be. In his case, namely we have sinned, and there will be consequences for those sins; so repent, and accept what is coming. No one wants to hear that. Just as no one in power wanted to hear what Fr. Bernhard was saying against the actions of the state. Jeremiah reflects on how he will be mocked and hated. But he also knows something, the same thing Fr. Bernhard knew: “I must cry out” he tells us. He says he may think of not speaking, but then it becomes like a fire burning in his heart. Jesus, following Jeremiah, will also speak out and it will have consequences, namely His martyrdom too. Peter isn’t a fan of this, but Jesus says that this is a must if one wants to think as God does. There is no detour around Good Friday.

And so for us this week, the question is how do we listen and discern the message, and how do we carry it out?

The first part, the listening. What is God calling us to do? Whatever that may be, it will entail difficulty. You take up your cross when you are called

to a vocation. You take up your cross when you are called to evangelize. You take up your cross when you are called to volunteer and make a difference in this world. Nothing is easy, and it can be tempting to give up when the going gets tough. But imagine if a parent did that when they had their first argument with a fussy child, or look at some of the things you have accomplished in life because you were willing to listen to what God called you to do. Making time to hear God's voice will often entail Him telling us to go on a difficult mission, be it to help our family, to confront evil, to be a voice crying out in the desert - but with God, we can make a difference.

Second, the perseverance. It is easy to give up at times when the going gets tough. Jeremiah did not live to see his people liberated; in fact he may have been killed by them after being thrown in the cistern. Fr. Bernhard did not live to see the fall of Nazi Germany. Persecuted Christians in places like Hong Kong, China, and Pakistan still see forces that try to silence them. But what you do see time and again is people who do not give up which is why the faith continues. How frustrating it can be when we see the world going crazy, and wonder how can people think like this or do this to one another; how can someone not see the evil of an action or how so



many things are an affront to human dignity. Original sin's effects are always blinding us. But this is where when the chips are down, we can't give up. We have to remember that deep down, man has this capacity for good as well. And so many eyes over time have been opened to the truth. But it takes a never ending commitment; a willingness to be hated by not giving up on the world but engaging it when we speak of faith and morals, of the respect of human life from womb to tomb and the dignity of all people regardless of age, race, creed, or orientation. The question is will we be willing to be hated by those who want to silence us and let fear take over, or will we like Jesus take up our cross and go into the lion's den?

And lastly, are we willing to go "all in" on our faith is a question too we need to ask regularly. How tempting it can be at times to say yes Lord I'll follow you for a little bit. No one is going to arrest us for being here at Mass. But how about when we find there's conflict when we talk about the faith to a growing child or another family member who may be luke-warm or have left the faith? When politics and faith cross, and the Church has clear moral teachings that are also political issues of the day? When we see an unjust situation at school or work? Or even in living out our faith, when we are called not to just be at Mass on the weekend, but help someone in need, or

get more involved in social justice issues through volunteering? Or even in looking at ourselves, where we recognize that some things need to change if we want to become a saint, but doing so is hard? The faith is never easy, but God is knocking at the door of our hearts, and He wants us to reach our potential but also has a mission for us, one that won't be easy, but one that can change the world if we so chose to go with him.

As I've shared many times, I love getting away from it all, going out and taking some photos and being in nature. But my job as a Christian isn't to escape. I need those times away, but my job as a Christian is to be a person of hope who changes this world for the better. Something I can do if I chose to not fear testifying to the faith I believe. This is the job we all share in too - so on this Labor Day weekend, lets not be afraid to answer the call. Like Jeremiah, may the call of God and His word become a fire that burns within us, and like him and Blessed Fr. Bernhard, may we set the world on fire by truly being not afraid.