One of the things we have seen over and over again in history has been how the Church and Christians have been persecuted. Wether from a government or from individuals pressuring others, the tactics are the same: using a message that there is no hope, that your faith will never grow, so give up, for you are no match for evil.

You take for instance Japan. It was just two years ago that 50 Christians lost their lives in Edo - the city later renamed Tokyo. It was part of a persecution that began some 70 years after Saint Francis Xavier, a prolific missionary and contemporary of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, arrived in Japan. Initially the faith flourished; there were tens of thousands of converts, and Jesuit, Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian missionaries followed. By 1614, there were 150 clergy and 650,000 Catholics in Japan. But a ban took place starting in the later 16th century, which led to a period from the 16th to the 19th centuries of Christians living in secret, suffering violence and humiliation.

But today, the Catholic Church, while still small there, is thriving and doing well, with Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis both visiting the country. Today there isn't persecution there but still the work of evangelization continues, and it's due largely in part to those who refused to abandon the faith - they believed, even when so many others felt giving up was the better option.

Blessed Peter Kasui Kibi, one of the martyrs of Japan, has been called the most determined man on the face of the planet.

Born of Japanese Christian parents in 1587, Blessed Peter was raised in a country that was already hostile to the faith. Even his family's status as being noble or samurai didn't protect him. Despite persecutions, Peter entered a Jesuit minor seminary with hopes of one day being ordained a priest. After graduating, he asked to enter the Society of Jesus but he was denied; the superior was concerned that he wasn't determined enough to persevere in his vocation.

Rather than accept this response, Kibe made a private vow that he would continue to pursue a Jesuit vocation. He spent 8 years working alongside the Jesuit missionaries. When all foreign missionaries were exiled by the anti-Christian government in 1614, Kibe went with them to Portuguese Macao (China) where he was refused ordination because authorities claimed the time wasn't right for native Japanese priests.

Undaunted, Kibe looked elsewhere. He sailed to Goa in India, to a seminary founded by Saint Francis Xavier for the purpose of forming native clergy. When he found the doors closed there as well - this time not just to the Japanese but to all non-Europeans - Kibe might have turned his back on the Church seeing it as racist. Instead, he set off for Rome. On foot. He walked all the way from India to the Holy Land along the Silk Road, spending time in Baghdad and occasionally traveling with caravans through the desert.

In all, he walked about 3,700 miles.
Kibe became the first Japanese person ever to visit Jerusalem. He then made his way to Rome, convinced the ecclesial authorities of his qualifications, and was ordained a

priest 6 months after arriving. Asked to make a two-year novitiate with the Jesuits before returning to Japan, Fr. Kibe managed to convinced his superior that there was no time to waste, and that the Japanese people needed him immediately.

This being the 17th century though nothing was ever immediate. I took him 14 months just to get to India. When he finally made it to Macao, he was told that the government would allow no Christians to sail on their ships to Japan. Fr. Kibe journeyed to Siam (Thailand) where he found the same difficulty. For 2 years he tried to sail from Siam, and then he headed to Manila. Still unable to find a ship that would take him to Japan, he built one.

Termites attacked the boat. Fr. Kibe plugged the holes and set off. Eight years after leaving Europe, he finally had Japan in his sights - and was overcome by a typhoon that smashed his boat to bits.

When the victims of the shipwreck pulled themselves together, the found they were in Kagoshima, the same spot from which Saint Francis Xavier had launched his mission to Japan some 80 years earlier. With the zeal of Fr. Xavier (whose canonization he had attended in Rome), Fr. Kibe arrived at last in Japan. He had spent 24 years trying to become a priest in Japan before he finally returned there as a priest of Jesus Christ, all the time knowing that he was headed for torture and certain death.

Fr. Kibe managed to minister for 9 years under constant threat of death. He was betrayed by one of his flock, and he was brought before Fr. Cristovao Ferreira, the Portugese provincial superior of the Jesuit mission. As for why he was brought before another priest, Fr. Ferreria sadly became an apostate - he's played by Liam Neeson in the Martin Scorsese film "Silence," and even worse he worked to lead others astray too. He urged Fr. Kibe to apostatize, but Fr. Kibe implored Fr. Ferreria to return to the faith. "Let us go to die together," he begged an astonished Fr. Ferreira.

Ferreira refused, and a torturer was sent in his place. Fr. Kibe though wouldn't budge. His iron will was unbent by Ferreira's arguments, and he suffered greatly, being hung upside down in a bit. But he encouraged those suffering with him until he was removed for too strong a will; they felt he would give too much hope to those suffering with him. The most famous torturer in Japan, Inoue, called him "the man who would not say I give in." He ultimately took his life, along with two other Christians, on July 4, 1639.

In our second reading this week, the author says "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen." It's a beautiful statement that speaks to the nature of faith where look ahead to not just heaven and God, but also to the great things that our faith can do when we put it into action as people of hope, growing in it and spreading it.

Faith can sometimes be misunderstood. Some might think of it as some leap into the dark. But that is not faith at all.

With faith, it's important to remember that faith is something that is very deep. In all of us is that Saint Thomas who wants to touch the hands and side; even I must admit it might be nice to get more proof of God on some days. But God is not just going to appear physically; He did not come down from the cross to reveal Himself to everyone. But that does not mean that faith is some type of leap in the dark. When you look at the great Christians over the ages, people Blessed Fr. Peter Kibe or others like Augustine, Aquinas, John Paul II, these were very smart people. And they grew in their understanding of faith. But the challenge for us first is to think outside of the box with respect to God; God is not like a formula in math you can prove, because God is other. He can't be put under a microscope. This is not to say we can not see evidence of God in the world; Aquinas wrote about signs or proofs of God's existence such as the order of the universe, or God as the first mover if all objects are in motion - but at the same time God is hidden.

Yet if all this were make believe as an atheist might suggest, would all these smart people put so much into learning the faith? Would so many people have suffered martyrdom when they could have walked away from the faith, or let it die out after Jesus was no longer here? No, something drove them on. Why didn't Fr. Kibe just give up or be a Christian in secret? What was it? I'd argue that it was trust - trust that something from above was reaching down, just as we were reaching out. And the challenge for us is to open our eyes, and to reach out, and to grow in the faith in our heads and in our hearts.

I think there are 3 key elements of faith that Fr. Kibe had, and that all the saints and great figures of our faith had; namely 1) trust; 2) learning; and 3) not giving up on the faith in the world by spreading it.

That first part is trust. Look again at the story of Abraham referred to in our second reading. Here is is an elderly man along with his wife; and God promising him that he will have descendants as countless as the stars? Really? Or Moses, being called to from the burning bush. The prophet Amos, who takes care of trees for a living. Or Peter, having a life as a fisherman that is safe and secure and profitable. All of these people didn't know what was going to happen, but they share that bond of trust. When we can get let down so often in life, it's important to have that trust that God has a plan. He is there for us. We may not see Him with our eyes, but He was here; He created us; He died for us; He said He was with us always to the end of the ages. That wasn't a lie. The problem is I think sometimes not only do we get burned by people or life, but because we can't see God, it's this out of sight, out of mind kind of thing. The most important thing can become money; the test scores to get into the best school; the sports; the friends; the social life. But as we heard last week, "vanity of vanities, all things are vanity" (better translated "vapor" or "bubbles") all around us is passing away. We are only here for a little while, and God will get us home. But for that to happen, we have to have trust in Him, like Leah did, and realize it's not just about us or figuring out every rule or law on our own, but realizing we need help, and that we are loved.

Part of that is learning the faith - having that faith in God that isn't just a statement "I believe" but a lifetime of learning what those words mean, which we do through our prayer life, through learning the faith, through growing in a relationship with God every day so that we can speak of God who is relational with us. This is not some God who is distant and far away; this is the God who met Abraham in the Old Testament; the God who became flesh in Jesus; the God who came among us in the descent of the Holy Spirit on that Pentecost Sunday.

And lastly, we remember that we need to see as God sees. Returning to Blessed Fr. Peter, he could have easily said look this whole thing isn't going to work; the Jesuits said no, the government said no, the journey is too much. But he believed in himself, and he knew God was with him, but he also saw the bigger picture. He envisioned a Japan where the faith was not persecuted. He envisioned a future Kingdom of Heaven where all were welcome, which is why he never stopped preaching the faith. Sometimes in life, there can be the temptation to give up. We can get down on ourselves and think this is too hard, what's the point. Well if you are giving up on a hobby that might be okay to sell the golf clubs - but we can't give up on ourselves when we are pursuing our vocations and dreams. God put us here, and once like Fr. Peter did, realizing what he was called to do, we need to keep at it so that we can then do what God has called us to do, especially with respect to the faith. Maybe you battle the same sin over and over; don't give up, trust in God's mercy, and take the steps to improve. Maybe you've let people down in your life. Don't look at yesterday, look at today and look ahead with God knowing you can better yourself. Or maybe you're struggling in your marriage or family life or parenting or career, whatever it may be. Believe in yourself, because God does. You may fall over and over again like Fr. Peter - but when you are doing what God called you to, you will find happiness.

But here's the thing: no matter what we are called to do, the big thing is to spread the faith. And this is where we have to be people of hope. How easy it can be to just say "what's the point" and give up when we see the state of affairs in the world, or know people who seemingly will never come back to Mass or get serious about their faith, or are battling something. But the saints and so many great people who have come before us, they thought big. Think of the Founding Fathers on July 4, 1776, knowing they were marked men by singing that Document, but because of them we are here today freely worshipping. Or the martyrs of Japan all those years ago. Or the Apostles in the Upper Room fearful to leave. They all did the same thing: they left the comfort of "playing it safe" and changed the world. This is you and me when we evangelize, when we testify to the faith, when we don't give up on one another or the world.

One of my favorite hymns and readings is from 1 Corinthians 2:9; eye has not seen and ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love Him. Life can be scary. And I know sometimes I cling to the familiar; I love nostalgia, looking back, and think back to the carefree days of being an 80s kid, running around the neighborhood all day in summer or spending the day at the park, playing some Atari video games in the basement, and doing it all again the next day. We all want to relive those moments for a time. But we are not meant to stay there; we are meant to be like Fr. Peter; or like Frodo

Baggins from “Lord of the Rings,” we are meant to go on a journey with God towards what eye has not seen and ear has not heard. The journey can at times be difficult, and sometimes it can be so hard to see what is out there. Fr. Thomas Merton, the monk known for his spiritual writings, perhaps said it best:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

We do indeed walk by faith and not by sight, but that doesn’t mean we can’t see God, and it certainly doesn’t mean that He can’t see us. Indeed, He is ever with us - so let’s strive to know Him more deeply every day, and help one another to do the same, knowing that when we walk with God, we can change the world. People of faith don’t stay in the basement or at home - people of faith go on that adventure and change the world, for that is hope. May we do this by bringing that hope and light into the world going on that adventure of life that is our faith journey with the Lord.