

Homily for November 18, 2007
Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Peter Nguyen, S.J.

From this Gospel narrative we learn basic things about Jesus and Christian discipleship. First, Jesus is completely honest.¹ I can imagine him saying to his friends and followers, “This struggle is what you must expect if you choose to follow me.” It consoles to me to think that Jesus believed in humanity enough to offer us, not an easy way, but a way to be heroes.²

Second, to live a heroic Christian life demands that we have perseverance. According to one of the Jesuit scripture scholars, ‘perseverance’ is not a virtue in a society that desires instant gratification—fast food, fast computers, sound-bite political debates.³ Perseverance requires waiting, but it does not imply apathy.⁴ There is an active resistance to evil or the status quo.

Let me tell you of a human being—Beth Buttita whose spirit resisted against evil, who refused to let her disease determined how she lived her life. I had the privilege of teaching Beth philosophy/theology five years ago at St. Ignatius College Prep in Chicago. It was my first year teaching as a Jesuit. Beth did not begin the school year with this class. She missed the first 2 months of school because she was recovering from her first bout with cancer. When she returned to school, she asked me if she can do make up work. I gave her the option to skip much of the material. She refused. If she was going to catch up with her class it was going to be the honest way. No short cuts, for Beth. We’d meet several times afterschool and I’d see her walk with her

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1975), 259.

² Ibid.

³ Dan Harrington, SJ “Perseverance and Holiness,” *America* (Nov 12, 1990), 39.

⁴ Ibid.

limp up the stairs and down the stairs. Sometimes she'd take the elevator, when she was tired. And so an entire semester she would do both the current class work and the remedial work. Beth did not want to be given special privileges.

In the summer between my 1st and 2nd year of teaching, we discovered that Beth's cancer had returned furiously and was killing her. She was scheduled to go on a service trip to help build affordable housing late that summer. Because she was dying, her parents tried to talk her out of going. She stubbornly refused and told her mom, "Take me Home Depot, so I can get my hammer and nail belt." The week after she came back from the trip, she became bedridden. A few days before she died, I went to her house with one of my colleagues. Her parents led us to her bedroom where she lay dying. She held both our hands and led us in praying the Lord's Prayer. Her last actions taught me that history does not erase us, because in the moments of being loved and loving (of humbly receiving and giving), we found ourselves as part of an 'inexhaustible' mystery.⁵

Thus, Jesus promised his friends and followers that they would never meet their tribulations alone.⁶ It is the sheer evidence of history that great Christians have written over and over again, when they encounter great trials, tribulations, and death⁷ of being consoled by Christ.

I want to direct you one of the earliest letters of Christian martyrdom—the Martyrs of Lyon letter. This letter told the Romans and Christians that the name 'Christian' carries much weight. If one called oneself a Christian, then one confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and is the source of one's faith. For example, St. Blandina was a woman and a slave who was tortured and

⁵ From Karl Rahner

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1975), 259.

⁷ Ibid.

put to death. Her commitment to her identity as a Christian and as a Christ's disciple never faltered.

“Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from the dawn to the dusk were weary and exhausted. The guards admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, and they were surprised that she was still breathing, for her entire body was broken. This blessed woman like a noble athlete got renewed strength with her confession of faith: her admission, ‘I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of’, brought her refreshment, rest, and insensibility to her present pain.”⁸

Blandina's well-conditioned faith allowed her to maintain her dignity and to continue her confession of Christ while she was being crucified. The faith of this slave and woman, also, gave nourishment to fellow Christians who were facing similar punishment.

“Blandina was hung on a post. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister Him who was crucified for them, that He might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal life in the living God.”⁹

The man or in this case the woman who walks with Christ, especially during times of tribulation, may lose her life, but she can never lose her dignity and can be a eucharist for her neighbor.

In the past few days we celebrated the martyrdom of the Jesuits and laywomen of the University of Central America in El Salvador. These were Christians who lived their lives for the sake of God's people. In a violent world they believe in standing for truth and the dignity of all God's children, especially the most vulnerable and the poor.¹⁰ In their deaths they witness to the world that the Body of Christ—the Church will not abandon Her people during tribulations and will give Herself away for their salvation.

⁸ ----. “Martyrs of Lyon,” in *Acts of Christian Martyrs*, ed. Hebert Musurillo, SJ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 67.

⁹ Ibid. 75.

¹⁰ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, (New York: Crossroads, 1998), 500.

The gospels disclose how far Jesus freely responds to the Father and gives his body to be broken and given away for the world's salvation. For Christ's entire life is Eucharistic. And for us, to truly receive Eucharist, is to enter all aspects of Christ's life including his self-sacrificial/giving death. In the reception of Eucharist, the Church offers us to be included in Christ's obedient sacrifice. We are divinized (as the Eastern Rite Christians would say) and taken into the mission of Christ and we mediate the Trinitarian love. We give to the world not just the gift of ourselves but also the gift of divine life.¹¹ Like Blandina and the martyrs of El Salvador were for Christians, we can be food for our neighbor in our time.¹² This includes the poor, the hungry, the marginalized, the sinner. This Eucharistic gift extends to the furthest and deepest reaches of humanity. There is no created or historical reality — no place on earth that we, as the Body of Christ, do not enter.¹³ We must go to the one who think that have been rejected by the world — the very last forsaken one. Because Christ was blessed, broken, and given away for our salvation, let Him bless us, break us, and give us away for the salvation of others.

¹¹ From Hans Urs von Balthasar

¹² From Origen

¹³ From Nicholas Healy