

GOOD FRIDAY (Years A, B, C)

“A Freely Given Sacrifice”

The French Revolution broke out in 1789—the same year in which George Washington became America’s first president. The American Revolution made the world a better place, but that certainly wasn’t true of the French Revolution. Even though the revolutionaries claimed to stand for liberty, equality, and fraternity, they ruthlessly attacked anyone perceived as a threat, and eventually the revolution reached a point where violence seemed to become an end in itself, with thousands of victims from among the clergy, aristocracy, and even the common people. France became a form of hell on earth. Early in 1793 King Louis XVI—a weak leader, but a good man—was executed at the guillotine, and his wife Queen Marie Antoinette suffered the same fate later in the year. Because the Church had been closely identified with the old order, many revolutionaries were violently anti-Catholic, and a number of repressive laws and decrees were implemented. Church property was confiscated, and priests were forced to take an oath transferring their loyalty from Rome and the Holy Father to the new regime; those who refused had to flee for their lives, though many stayed behind to minister to their parishioners in secret— all the while risking death. A law was also passed dissolving all religious orders, and many nuns were forced out of their convents and forbidden to wear their religious habits in public. During the Revolution, many devout Catholics were martyred for their faith—including laypersons, bishops, priests, deacons, religious brothers, and religious sisters.

In the city of Compiègne, fifty miles northeast of Paris, there was a community of twenty-one Carmelite sisters, ranging in age from 29 to 78. At first they weren’t affected by the revolution, but in 1792 they were forced to leave their convent and move into apartments, where they tried to maintain their community life as best they could. About 100 years earlier a member of the Carmelite Order, while living at the convent in Compiègne, had a mystical dream in which she saw nuns from her convent receiving great glory in heaven; in her dream, she saw a Lamb—symbolizing Jesus—look at the nuns with great love, and they willingly followed the Lamb. When the Mother Superior at the time of the revolution found this message in the convent’s archives, she was convinced it was a prophetic vision applying to her and her sisters; Jesus was the King of Martyrs, and so to follow the Lamb meant to experience martyrdom themselves. Mother Superior began preparing her community for this possibility; she introduced a prayer called “An Act of Holocaust” for them to pray together each day, in which they offered their lives “to restore peace and free captives from going to the guillotine.” The two oldest sisters in the community were at first shocked and horrified by the idea of offering themselves as victims, but later they repented and from then on made this daily consecration with the others.

In June 1794, two years after being evicted from their convent, the Carmelite sisters of Compiègne were arrested as “enemies of the people”—exactly 100 years after the earlier Carmelite had her mystic dream about them. The revolution, now under the leadership of a ruthless lawyer-turned-dictator named Maximilien Robespierre, was in its bloodiest stage; so many people were being accused, arrested, and executed on the slightest grounds that the period of June and July of 1794 was known as the Reign of Terror. Of the original 21 sisters, 2 had died of old age and 3 were elsewhere when the authorities came—so 16 Carmelites were arrested. They were temporarily imprisoned in a former monastery now being used as a detention center, where a group

of Benedictine nuns from England had already been incarcerated for two years. The two groups of religious sisters became friends, and the Benedictines were very impressed with the Carmelites' daily act of consecration and self-sacrifice. Eventually the Benedictines were allowed to return to their homeland of England, and from that time on, they believed their lives were spared because their Carmelite friends had offered themselves as victims.

Normally the Carmelites were not allowed to wear their religious habits, but three weeks after their arrest, they were given permission to do so only for as long as it took to wash the second-hand civilian clothes they were usually forced to wear. It happened that the authorities coming to take them to their trial down in Paris arrived that very day, and didn't want to delay the journey until the nuns' clothes had dried—and so for their last few days on earth, the sisters were able to continue wearing the habits they had worn for most of their lives. They were taken to Paris, and in a farcical trial on July 17, were accused of many things, such as hiding weapons in their convent; to this charge, the Mother Superior pulled out her crucifix and said, "The only weapon we have ever had in our convent is this." At the end of the trial, Mother Superior tried to take responsibility for their supposed crimes and offered to die in place of the others, but the tribunal rejected her offer and condemned all of them to death.

The sisters were loaded into carts called tumbrels, along with the other condemned victims, and slowly transported two miles to the site of the guillotine, surrounded by large crowds of people walking alongside them. Normally the crowds were loud and hostile, mocking the condemned prisoners and pelting them with rotten fruit; that day, however, they were completely silent, and the only sounds to be heard were the sisters singing *Salve Regina* and other hymns. When the Carmelites arrived at the guillotine site, Mother Superior asked that she be executed last of all, as this would allow her to encourage each of the sisters. This request was granted, and as each sister's turn came, beginning with the youngest, she knelt before Mother Superior and said, "Permission to die, Mother?" The response was, "Go, my daughter!," and Mother Superior held out a small statue of Mary and the Child Jesus for her to kiss. All throughout, the sisters kept singing hymns, and every few minutes there was one less voice in this choir of innocent victims willing to follow the Lamb. Finally it was Mother Superior's turn, and after slipping the statue to a sympathetic woman in the crowd for safekeeping, she mounted the platform and, like the other sisters before her, freely accepted martyrdom. Over 100 years later, in 1906, all sixteen Carmelites were beatified, or given the title "Blessed," by Pope St. Pius X.

These Carmelite sisters had died willingly, freely offering their lives for an end to the Reign of Terror—and Heaven accepted their offer, for ten days after their martyrdom, the revolutionary leader Robespierre himself was unexpectedly removed from power, arrested, and sent to the guillotine. With his death, the Reign of Terror was over. Sixteen brave religious sisters sacrificed their lives for the sake of many innocent victims of the revolution; their blood helped quench the fires of violence and death (Mark Regis, "The Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne," *Garabandal Journal*, Jan. - Feb. 2005). In this act, they followed the example of the Lamb—for Jesus shed His blood on the cross to save all humanity from the fires of hell. Because of our sins, we were the ones who deserved to die—but Our Lord took our place, even though He was completely innocent, and this amazing and freely-given sacrifice requires our heartfelt response.

The 1st Reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah foretells in a wonderfully accurate and profound way what Jesus was to suffer on Good Friday. Speaking of the suffering servant of God, the passage says, "Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a

lamb led to the slaughter . . . he was silent and opened not his mouth. . . . When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sins of his people, a grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers, though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood. . . . Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; through his suffering, My servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.” Thus, we’re told that Jesus, though completely innocent, willingly took upon Himself the guilt of all humanity and suffered condemnation and death in our place, so that the long and terrible reign of sin and death might be ended. The 2nd Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that this incredible sacrifice was successful in achieving its purpose; Jesus is now our great high priest Who has passed from death to life, thereby becoming “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.” Our Lord is the paschal Lamb, the sacrificial Victim, and the King of martyrs; His blood washes away the sins of those who hope in Him and serve Him as Lord.

This is something wonderful and amazing—but it’s also hard to comprehend, and even hard to remember and appreciate when we get caught up in all the concerns and events and activities of daily life. We human beings are easily distracted, and it’s usually hard for us to visualize spiritual things and to stay focused on the deepest and most important realities. That’s why the Church commemorates Our Lord’s sacrifice at this time every year; the more we remember the events of Holy Week, the greater an effect they’ll have in our lives. That’s also why the Church uses artistic renderings and images such as the Stations of the Cross on the side walls of church and the crucifix mounted here in the sanctuary; these visual reminders make it easier for us to relate to and imagine all that happened in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. The importance of having a personal link to the past is also why the Church preserves and venerates relics, which are sacred items handed down from the life of Jesus or one of the saints.

Relics and other holy items are physical reminders of God’s love, and should be treated with great respect and gratitude. This was the case with the English Benedictine sisters whose lives were spared during the French Revolution. When they were sent back to England, they were not allowed to wear their habits, and had to find other clothing instead. Nothing was available—except for the civilian clothes the Carmelite nuns had been washing, and had to leave behind, when they were taken to Paris for execution. The Benedictine sisters used these clothes on their way to freedom—and when they later heard what had happened to the Carmelites, they cherished these clothes as relics. The woman in the crowd to whom Mother Superior handed the statue of Our Lady and the Child Jesus before mounting the scaffold to her death realized that this statue was something precious; she treated it with great respect, and carefully hid it until after the Revolution ended—and it has been preserved to this day. Over the centuries the Church has acquired, preserved, and venerated many thousands of relics—including items which belonged to one of the saints, snippets of a saint’s hair or clothing, articles involved in documented miracles, and even tiny slivers of wood from the True Cross of Christ. Holy things which speak to us of a great sacrifice of love should call forth from us a grateful, humble, and loving response—and since Jesus died for each of us, every single person we encounter should be a living reminder to us of God’s love for the world.

Under normal circumstances, to call a person a relic might be considered an insult; it’s a way of suggesting someone is very old, irrelevant, or behind the times. However, there’s also a spiritual way of looking at it, a way in which being a relic is a good thing—for we need and want to be associated with someone great and holy, someone Whose sacrifice made a lasting difference in the

world. Because Jesus died for you and for me and for everyone else in the world, that means that each one of us has infinite value in God's eyes; it means that we have a personal connection to the events of Good Friday, and it means that each one of us is supposed to be a living reminder of all that Christ did and suffered on our behalf.

Do we truly appreciate everything Jesus did for us? If so, the best way of showing it is by our treatment of others and by our willingness to take up our own cross each day. Being friendly and polite to others, being helpful to persons in need, being understanding and sympathetic when someone is having a rough day, being respectful of people who are different from us, being appreciative of anyone who does something for us, being kind to someone we dislike, and being loving toward someone we normally take for granted, are all ways of cherishing other human beings for whom Jesus willingly died. Every person we meet is, in a spiritual sense, a relic, or living reminder of Christ's sacrifice. We too are supposed to be relics, or living reminders, of this sort—and this has implications for our behavior. Obeying God's commandments and the teachings of the Church, giving a good example to others, asking ourselves "What would Jesus do?" as we make our moral decisions, forgiving other people in Christ's Name, using God's grace to overcome our faults and grow in virtue, spending time in prayer each day, and placing God's will ahead of our own, are all important ways of living a holy life, of preparing ourselves for eternity, and of witnessing to the truth that the events of Good Friday still have an immeasurable value and relevance in today's world.

Sin entered the world when the first man and woman rebelled and disobeyed God. As a result of this revolution, humanity was alienated from God, banished from paradise, and condemned to harsh lives of misery and toil, followed by death and a loss of eternal happiness and peace. Jesus freely offered His own life to end this "reign of terror," and the blood He shed by dying on the Cross shattered the power of sin and death and brought about our salvation. The Carmelite sisters of Compiègne are just a few of the millions of Christians who've imitated their Master by giving their lives out of love for God. We may not be called to martyrdom like them, but we are called to be living signs of Christ's victory over death—for if we truly comprehend what Good Friday means, nothing will ever again be the same.