

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
October 22, 2006

“Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492.” The one year that we were always able to get right on our history quizzes, because of a simple little rhyme. We were taught about Christopher Columbus, and the stories encapsulated a spirit of adventure; and we learned about the pilgrims, whose story was one of determination; and if our teachers didn’t spend too much time on Columbus and on the pilgrims, we maybe even learned about some of our own ancestors, wayfarers most of them who embodied a craving for a better life. Until air travel became the norm, traveling that ocean blue was no pleasure cruise for those who sailed to foreign lands: their trips were lengthy, and they were difficult; many died on their way to their destination. But they came because they were motivated, albeit motivated by different things. Some came hoping to discover great wealth: who knew what gold, silver and other treasures might be waiting on the other side of those great seas, waiting to be claimed by the first ones strong enough to reach them. Some came looking for freedom: oppressed by the rulers where they lived, they simply wanted to find a place where they could live out their days without being controlled by the powers that be. Many were not in search of riches or even freedom necessarily, but simply a better life; many immigrants simply did not have the opportunities where they were to find work, or to have land to farm. No one makes a sacrifice such as all of these did, unless there is something that they love, something that means more to them than comfort, something that means more to them than security. You do not sacrifice a greater thing for a lesser thing, and many of us are here right now because our ancestors considered freedom, and a better life, to be the better thing.

This weekend the Church is observing World Mission Sunday. The Church’s missionaries are those who *also* gave up much in the way of comfort, familiar surroundings, the closeness of family and friends, gave it up to take the Gospel to those lands inhabited by others who had no or only limited opportunity to learn about their Savior. And missionaries, like all travelers, are motivated by love of something. But theirs is not a love of potential wealth, for they did not come to mine for gold; they came to mine for souls. It was not a love of freedom, for indeed, they were dedicated anyway to lives of total obedience to the Gospel. And it was not love of a better life, for all of them gave up the comforts of home for the inhospitable terrains and harsh climates and substandard living arrangements of the lands they would visit. What they did have, was a love for Jesus, a love so burning that they would endure all sorts of hardships to make him known to more men; and they had a love for souls, a love for people whom they had not yet met and who had not yet been saved; brothers and sisters in the family of man whom they hoped would become brothers and sisters in Christ. The measure of their love can be found in their stories: Damian of Molokai, the North American Martyrs, Peter Claver, and all those who are now honored as missionaries: they left their homes and all that they were familiar with, but in leaving home, they

found their calling, and they found the people whom God wanted them to touch with their compassion, and with their instruction as well.

Just this past week, the Church celebrated the feast of the North American Martyrs: John de Breeuf, Isaac Jogues, and several other companions. They were French Jesuits who traveled to Canada and North America in the 1500's, and their mission extended from Nova Scotia to Maryland. They preached the Gospel to the natives whom they found in the area; captured, and tortured, Isaac Jogues still wanted to return, saying to his superior: "These tortures are very great, but God is still greater." In today's Gospel, we heard John and James, the sons of Zebedee, say that they could drink the cup that Jesus would drink, and be baptized with the baptism with which he would be baptized. Jesus was speaking of the cup of suffering, and the baptism into eternal life through death. Suffering and hardships—be it the tortures endured by the North American Martyrs, or the sufferings which come from being separated from loved ones and the comforts of home—is part of the vocation for missionaries. And as we pray for the missions this week, we should consider our willingness to suffer and endure hardships, or even what we consider to be hardships, for our beliefs. It's funny, that we live in a culture in which we can easily proclaim a willingness to be martyred, knowing pretty well that martyrdom is not likely to be part of our future; yet at the same time, how many will not suffer what they consider to be boredom at times; can't tell you how many people have told me over the years that they stopped coming to Mass because they just didn't get anything out of it, as if the purpose of worship is to entertain *us*, rather than to honor God. How many decline to suffer any sort of deprivation? I know some families who do without cable TV and ipods and newspapers even so that they can afford to send their children to Catholic schools; yet there are many who cannot imagine foregoing the newest of new gadgets so as to be able to support the Church and help those in need. How many decline to suffer any sort of unpopularity? How many won't take an unpopular stand in the public realm for fear of turning off certain of their peers? This is the cup which is being presented to us today; accepting it is part of how we are able to do our part in sowing the seeds of faith.

Damian of Molokai is another great missionary in our Church: sent to the Hawaiian island which had been reserved for lepers, he took the risk of exposing himself to the (at that time) debilitating and then fatal disease, and received little praise and honor for doing so in his day. Jesus said to the sons of Zebedee, "to sit at my right or my left is not mine to give." To have a true missionary spirit is to *do* without receiving credit; few missionaries probably feel loved in their work, as they are met with as much resistance as they are acceptance. But that doesn't matter, because they're not motivated by a love for wealth or power or acceptance; but their motivation should impel us to consider, what is our great motivation in the faith. Certainly as Christians we desire heaven; all of us should, and that's a good thing. But to avoid sin solely out of a fear of damnation is what the Church calls imperfect contrition; it will suffice for confession, but is not the loftiest of motivations. To desire holiness, with no apparent earthly reward, is a better reason to serve, but

still not perfect. The best reason to serve God, and to bring others to him, is our love for God just because of who he is. Missionaries such as Damian of Molokai received little in return for their labors, but accomplished much, because they made God known, and loved God enough to sacrifice all that they had in order to do so.

Saint Peter Claver did not die a martyr's death, nor did he face the loneliness of a de facto exile on a remote island. But he did demonstrate a terrific love for the African people being brought over on slave ships: he tended to their needs, their illnesses, gave up his own comfort so that he could minister to these, the most taken-advantage of people he could find to serve. He served as servant to those who had been kidnapped to serve others, living his life according to the words of Jesus, that whoever wishes to be first among you will be the servant of all. Service: doing that which we don't particularly feel like doing, or doing something we like but at a time or in a place or in circumstances that suit others, not us. We can cultivate a missionary spirit, by doing this—looking for ways to serve, inconvenient ways, challenging ways.

The Church has always valued her missionaries, the difficult life and lonely trips which are part and parcel of their vocation. *We* ought to show that we value them as well, by valuing the principles which motivate and inspire and impel them. Whether or not we ever set foot on another continent to proclaim the Gospel message, we join in the missionary spirit of the Church through our prayers, through our financial assistance, and most of all by being the Gospel for others to see: may God deliver us from us from fear, deliver us apathy, deliver us from an inordinant love of comfort and popularity; may God give us a true spirit to do mission work, perhaps far away, but definitely here, where we are today.

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