

The Martyrdom of Obedience

“Everyone who comes to me and listens to my words and acts on them—I will show you what he is like” (Lk 6:47)

In the year 257 AD, St Cyprian, bishop of the Church of North Africa, had been captured and led into the quarters of the governor in that area. His friend Pope St. Cornelius had already been beheaded for not denying the faith, and so St. Cyprian was fully aware of the sentence that awaited him. After the governor of North Africa had commanded St. Cyprian to recant his faith and worship the Roman gods, St. Cyprian replied with complete boldness: “I am a Christian and a bishop. I know no other gods besides the one true God, who made heaven and earth. This God we Christians serve.” And with that response the governor sent him into exile and eventually had him beheaded a year later.

Today we honor the memory of St. Cyprian and St. Cornelius who were faithful to Christ unto death, and we pray that we may have the same obedience to Christ through his Church. ***We pray that we “may be found worthy of either the pure white crown of a holy life or the royal red crown of martyrdom”-St Cyprian (x2)***

St. Cyprian and St. Cornelius were able to withstand the temptation to deny our Lord because their faithful witness to the Lord came from a faithful heart just as good fruit comes from good trees. Their faithfulness was built upon a daily fidelity to Christ and his words out of love. Jesus clearly taught “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home in him” (Jn 14:23). The witness of St. Cyprian and Cornelius was a resounding testimony to their love for Christ, yet it was not fueled by their efforts alone lest we think that we can be faithful without God. Their wills were fortified with the grace of the Trinity dwelling within them and enabling them to love until the very last breath.

In some ways, these men were martyrs before they were even martyred because they endured a daily death of their wayward wills through obedience. St. Jose Maria Escriva would counsel that “to obey always is to be a martyr without dying” (x2). Obedience is like martyrdom because in obedience our selfish self dies and we slowly learn to put God’s will above our own wills, we learn like St. Paul to “count all things as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Phil 3:8). If we develop this daily obedience to Christ in love day by day, we would rather die than deny Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yet we must maintain our obedience to Jesus through the Church he established. In the Catholic Church we have a sure guide to understanding who Jesus truly is because he has entrusted the revelation of his very self to the Church as a bridegroom entrusts his whole being to his bride. In Luke 10:16, the Church understands her role as the one who transmits the words of Christ since Jesus says: “He who hears you hears me, and he who

rejects you rejects me.” Similarly, St. Cyprian would also teach, “We cannot have God as our Father, if we do not have the Church as our Mother”.

Therefore, we must dig deep through the shifting sands of our secular age, dig deep through the values of relativism, radical individualism, and materialism our culture upholds and lay our foundation on the rock of the Church which represents St. Peter and his successors. Jesus proclaimed that “You are Peter and on this **rock** I will build my Church”. That is how we can have assurance today of what Jesus desires for his people through the Pope and the bishops of the Church, also known as the Magisterium and their official teachings. By being faithful to Jesus through the Church, we become true obedient servants of the Lord and the Church, faithful to the Divine bridegroom and his bride.

Obedience to the Church’s teaching is a real pressing issue today for Catholics. A recent pew report study in 2015 showed that 66% of Catholics in America believe that contraception is not a sin even though the Church has explicitly taught that it is “intrinsicly wrong” in *Humanae Vitae* (para 14). And I would venture to guess that the numbers are very similar for Canada. Although I cannot go into a detailed expose of the Church’s teaching on contraception you can listen to Jason Evert’s talk called “Green Sex” on Formed or Youtube or Catholic Lighthouse Media. But I want to raise the question not just for this issue but many others we may disagree with: do we trust in the Church’s teachings which are a faithful handing on of Christ’s plan for love and sexuality? Do we trust that Jesus came ‘to give life and to give to the full’ and that he possesses ‘the words of eternal life’? We must continually refocus our vision of God as the Father who loves his children and desires that they experience ultimate happiness and fulfillment, and the Church as a mother presents his laws which are given to us as a gift to guide us to that blessed goal.

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my words...”, yet we all acknowledge that we fall short of this obedience to the Church, this response to Christ’s love, in some way or another and we come to seek his forgiveness: Christ Jesus came to save sinners. We should all recognize the poverty of our humanity which is unable to be faithful to God on our own and we stand in need the riches of his grace. And so we approach the fountain of grace today in the Eucharist and we pray that he will give us a new heart and a new spirit to follow his statues and ordinances so that we, as St. Cyprian teaches, may be found worthy of either the pure white crown of a holy life or the royal red crown of martyrdom.

God desires that there is a true unity and harmony between what we say and what we do. In Isaiah 29:13, God says

*These people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me*

Jesus has some even harsher words in Mt 7:22-23

On that day, many of you will say to me 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers.'

Notice how these two passages point how externally someone could be doing all the right Church things, but internally their heart is actually far from God. In fact, Jesus says that despite the fact that we may do mighty deeds in his name, **he never knew us** because we may have been doing these works or ministries for our own benefit or pride. Our knowledge of God must go beyond the mere worship of our lips and external activities but completely transform our hearts. Jesus desires a 'heart knowledge' which is a communion between our hearts with his Sacred Heart.

This is not meant to discourage us from doing any work in the Church, but the Church is challenging us today to renew our hearts so that our worship may correspond with our works, our hands with our hearts.