

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 15:9-17

Earlier this week, in the Vatican gardens, Pope Francis quoted the Gospel that we just heard. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The context was the swearing-in ceremony for the newest members of the Pontifical Swiss Guard, the world’s oldest standing army and the soldiers tasked with protecting the Pope, which in their oath they promise to do even with their lives.

The ceremony at which Pope Francis preached and which he oversaw takes place every year on May 6th, the anniversary of the Sack of Rome in 1527. On that day Protestant German mercenaries of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V attacked the Vatican. With Spanish officers who also participated in the attack, they killed 147 of the Swiss Guard while attempting to get the Pope, Clement VII. The action of the Swiss Guard, though heavily outnumbered, gave the Pope enough time to escape with the forty survivors of the battle, who escorted Pope Clement to safety in the Castel St. Angelo. This is the only time the Swiss Guard has as a unit seen combat, and they suffered a casualty rate of 78%. Holding the ceremony on May 6th is a reminder that today’s soldiers may be called some day to do the same thing.

Those 147 men who died are not martyrs because they did not die for their profession of the Faith, but in the performance of their duties. This is true for any Catholic who lays down his life for his friends when his responsibilities require it, from the more than three hundred Catholic firemen who died on 9/11 to the thousands of Catholics down through the years who have died serving in the United States military. They are living out Jesus’ call to every one of His followers, the command to “love one another,” and the greatest love, as Jesus makes clear, is to die for one’s friends.

Such a death is, quite obviously, to mimic the death Jesus died for our salvation. Just as Jesus went to Calvary assured that He would be raised from the dead, so the Catholic whose duties require that he confront death knows that we, too, shall be raised. However, his death in the line of duty does not assure the Catholic of salvation. Like everyone else, he must die in a state of grace, without mortal sin on his soul. He must be prepared for death more immediately, for it is more likely that it may come unexpectedly than is so for us.

Therefore, in his preaching to the new Swiss Guard recruits, Pope Francis emphasized two things. For one, he noted how he and his soldiers live in such close proximity to each other, so the annual swearing-in ceremony for the guards and their families was an occasion to nurture the friendship between them. Recall that long before each guard promises to lay down his life for the Pope, the Pope has already promised to die for the Faith, when he receives the red biretta of the College of Cardinals. He does not ask his soldiers to do what he has not promised to do himself.

Pope Francis said that great courage is necessary to undertake such work, so his counsel to the new recruits was to frequent the Sacraments. He told them, “A soldier of Christ participates in the life of his Lord.” That is, they have all promised to protect Pope Francis, but the King they are following is

Jesus. To that end, the Holy Father told the guards that they should keep a book of the Gospels handy, as well as the Rosary, so that in quiet moments they may enter into prayer and contemplation of the sacred mysteries, to enter more deeply into relationship with the Shepherd they are following.

What applies to the Swiss Guard applies to us as well. Therefore, our Gospel today should prompt us to consider two questions at least: Who are my friends for whom I may lay down my life, and how do I nurture my relationship with them, so that I have the courage to do as Jesus has done should I be called?

With regard to that first question, “Who are my friends?”, we must consider whether the beneficiary of our sacrifice is worthy of the life we have to offer. Our death in such circumstances must be a participation in the redemption of the world, so a willingness to die for a mob boss so the he may continue his criminal enterprises, for example, doesn’t cut the muster. We might sacrifice ourselves for the conversion of the mob boss, but we should never throw our lives away furthering his nefarious purposes.

This is an extreme example, but I mean to cause everyone here to think about the sacrifices on a daily basis you are being asked to make. Are they for God? To what end do they point? Are the beneficiaries of your sacrifices your friends, and would they lay down their lives for you? If you were to die performing your duties, would Holy Mother Church laud you as a hero and recognize your sacrifice with a ceremony every year, or would your death go unremarked because it was pointless or, worse, advancing evil? So first, who are your friends?

If your answer to the first question means that you can in good conscience continue to work as you have and make sacrifices in the same context, then you must move on to the second: How do I nurture this friendship?

The answer to this question is actually much easier, as it is the same for everyone and I’ve already told you what Pope Francis said. If our service is good, then we are serving Christ, so to nurture our relationship with our earthly friends we must go deeper into relationship with our heavenly Advocate. To the degree that we are friends with Jesus, we will be able to be friendly with those the Lord has placed in our lives. It is precisely through participation in the Sacraments, through prayer and study, that we receive the strength we need to be the friend we must. Remember that the Apostles had to grow in the Faith before they could be the friend to Jesus that He had been to them. In their immaturity they failed. But in the strength of God’s grace they all did indeed lay down their lives.

Pope Clement VII was not the greatest of pontiffs. His poor statesmanship and vacillation were what made the Sack of Rome possible in the first place. Though he was a Catholic priest, he had at least one child, and he had benefitted handsomely from nepotism. However, the Protestant revolution was less than ten years old the first time Protestants tried to kill the Pope. What might they have said and believed had they been successful? How demoralized would the Church have been had the Swiss Guard not saved Clement's life? We can’t know that, but it would not have been good.

What this means is that the people we serve, even the people we serve by the gift of our very lives, don’t have to be perfect. They just have to be the people we know we’re supposed to be serving. If we don’t know that in dying we would be laying down our lives for Jesus, then we won’t take the bullet. Indeed, we shouldn’t. Better to figure out now who our friends are, so we can see in their faces the face of Christ.

