

Eighth Sunday after Trinity
August 10, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 14:22-33

Pope Francis this past week made a plaintive appeal to the international community to protect our Christian brothers and sisters in northern Iraq. The Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Cardinal Sako said the situation has gone from bad to worse, with 100,000 Christians fleeing their homes on the Nineveh plain, trying to make it north to the areas controlled by the Kurdish military forces. Cardinal Sako said that what is needed is a formidable army, that speeches, pronouncements, and protest marches are not enough. He said what we are witnessing is ethnic cleansing of one of the most ancient Christian communities in the world, and this humanitarian catastrophe may soon become genocide if those who have the power to do so fail to act.

I have not seen persecution of the Church like this in my lifetime. Certainly the Church has undergone horrific trials in the past, and even today Christians suffer various levels of persecution around the globe. But the scale of this suffering is something I have not witnessed in my forty-three years. They are not only taking everything the Christians own, there are mass killings; and the latest reports indicate the Christian and Yazidi women of Iraq are being sold into slavery. The children present here at Mass and simple propriety prevent me from saying explicitly what is happening to these women, but you know what slavery to a Muslim army will entail for these our sisters in Christ.

Despite the terrible tribulation the Church now suffers, Cardinal Sako has repeated the words of Jesus that we heard in today's Gospel: "It is I; have no fear." On the one hand Cardinal Sako has promised that he will stay with his people to the bitter end. Like Jesus, he will not abandon the disciples, but will walk the entire way of the cross. You may know that St. John Fisher, who shares a feast day with our patron, St. Thomas More, became a cardinal shortly before his martyrdom in 1535. He is still the only cardinal in the history of the Catholic Church to be martyred for the faith. Cardinal Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholics, may well become the second by virtue of his insistence that he stay in Iraq with the suffering Christians there.

So Cardinal Sako and his people are looking death in the face and still he says, he repeats, the words of Jesus, "Have no fear." How, we ask, can they have no fear as they walk with only the clothes on their back in the searing heat? They are a gaggle of people in pajamas, since they were forced from their homes at 11:00 at night, given no warning and an order by the Islamic State terrorists simply to abandon their homes and flee. How can such people have no fear? It seems it would be easier to walk on water.

But Cardinal Sako does not simply say, "Have no fear." He places those words within the context of our great and holy faith. He goes on to say that their suffering is for the redemption of their people. In uniting their suffering to the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Chaldean Catholics of Iraq are participating in the salvation of souls. Cardinal Sako goes on to say that he believes Tertullian is right: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the faith." So the martyrdom they are now experiencing will draw more people to Jesus, just as Jesus promised: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself." The events we are now witnessing from afar will one day be observed as a Feast Day in the Church, just as we now venerate the Spanish and Mexican martyrs of the twentieth century.

Why does this assurance that they can unite their suffering to Christ's own cast out fear? Why does the prospect of martyrdom make one less afraid? Remember that the Muslims that are the architects of this persecution are giving the Christians of Iraq a choice. They are telling our brothers and sisters to convert to Islam or die. Those who choose to convert imperil their souls, but those who remain steadfast are necessarily looking forward to the resurrection. The only way we can lay down our lives for Jesus is if we believe with all our hearts that He is indeed alive and waits to welcome us on the other side of this valley of tears. Reports thus far are that 95% of the people confronted with this threat of death are refusing to become Muslims. Ninety-five percent of our brothers and sisters in Iraq would sooner die than deny their faith in Christ. Thus, they are able to live without fear because they know that these Muslim maniacs can take their bodies, but they cannot take their souls. It is worth pondering if faced with the same threats whether we here in America would be as faithful as the Chaldean Catholic Church.

A responsible reading of this situation, however, cannot end with our admiration for those willing to die rather than deny Jesus. We must remember that Cardinal Sako did indeed appeal for our prayers, but he also asked for a formidable army to stop the architects of the persecution. Therefore, we can take a little bit of comfort that the United States Navy has begun to defend areas under Kurdish control with airstrikes on military targets. But I say a little comfort because Cardinal Sako asked not for the Navy but for an army, men on the ground who will literally stand between the vulnerable and the terrorists of the Islamic State.

The appetite of the wicked for death is insatiable. If we choose not to stop this massacre, those fanatics are not going to stop on their own. Wars do not end because President Obama says they have ended. We might not have soldiers there, but the war in Iraq is ongoing, and the innocent are still being slaughtered. The only way this war will end is if the enemies of all that is good, holy, right, and true are defeated. Such lawless killers are an existential threat to the survival of the human race. And victory in this war may take a very long time. If we don't want our people to live perpetually in fear, the civilized world will need to take the fight to the barbarians.

I'm not saying I know how this will be done. That is for those in lawful authority. But the Pope has said, "Defend these people," so it is our obligation to lobby for that defense. How long has it been since the Pope last asked for military action? But it is also our obligation to prepare for the future. We must raise our boys to know what one day will likely confront them, what sacrifices they will be called upon to make to defend the innocent. Nor can we neglect to educate our girls about what life under Islam would look like for them, so they will support our men in the sacrifices they must make to protect women and children.

Cardinal Sako represents a beautiful Christian tradition, the willingness to offer his life for the faith even as he appeals to the strong to defend the faithful with their lives. He is making his appeal to us, but it is one that has been made by Christians living in Muslim lands many times before. And if we are to take this appeal seriously, we must recognize that it has no expiration date, until the day that Jesus returns to instill fear and visit justice upon those who crucify Him even now.