

18th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Matthew 14:13-21

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote: “Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked” (8:35).

In A.D. 1823 the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome was burned to the ground. A workman, repairing the wooden beams of the roof, knocked over his oil lamp and accidentally set fire to the huge beams. The flames jumped from beam to beam along the length of the church and created such heat that the marble pillars supporting the roof cracked and fell. Within hours the great monument to God and to St. Paul the Apostle was lying in ruins. It had survived earthquakes, barbarian invasions, and floods for over a thousand years but now it lay destroyed. Except for one single part of the church. The ciborium or great triumphal arch built high over the altar remained standing and on that arch was the image of Christ enthroned in Heaven and surrounded by the Angels and the Saints. Standing alone but tall and proud amidst the destruction and devastation stood the great monument to the sacrifice of Christ and to Christ Himself. It became a symbol that the sufferings of this world will always give way to the glory that lies in God alone.

There are two things for which we should pray and seek the grace of God so that we, too, can bear with suffering. The first is to persevere in patience by making small sacrifices every day and uniting them with the great sacrifice of Christ. This might mean bearing with the insults of others rather than retaliating, or walking away from gossip, or spending half-an-hour in prayer rather than watching half-an-hour of television. The second is to persevere in charity by seeking out those who are in pain such as those who are old or sick, those who have difficult marriages or families, those who have trouble at work or at

school, and giving them attention so that they do not feel so alone.

Christian joy is different from earthly joy. Joy is a feeling of delight and satisfaction that happens when we come across something good. But in our fallen world, good things wear out and what satisfied us today will no longer satisfy us tomorrow. This is why earthly joy, even when noble and deep, is a feeling that comes and goes. But Christian joy is more than a feeling, it is a virtue. It is joy born of the belief that there is nothing that can separate us from Our Lord's love. He will never be unfaithful, and he will never die. It is why the Saints were able to rejoice even in the midst of life's most terrible sufferings. It is why the faces of the martyrs, even as they step forward to be executed, glow with joy. For they know that Our Lord's love is stronger than every evil and longer-lasting than every pain.

Following the French Revolution there came the Reign of Terror in which the Church was persecuted and, for all intents and purposes, outlawed. Priests were forced to denounce their priesthood or be imprisoned, churches were closed, and religious brothers and sisters, monks and nuns, forced to leave monasteries and convents. Some of these were sixteen Carmelite nuns of Compi gne who were ordered to leave the convent and take on so-called normal work. However, these women refused and so they were forcibly removed from the convent. They were forbidden to live as a community or to wear the habit. So they dressed in ordinary clothes and lived separately but they still found ways to meet regularly to pray and to offer their sufferings as a sacrifice to Almighty God. Since they refused to abandon the faith and their way of life and to adopt a totally secular life in the "New France" they were arrested and condemned to death. They were loaded onto a cart and driven to the guillotine. Each one of these nuns moved to the executioner and placed her head on the chopping block, without any soldier having to force them. As they lay their heads down each one sang the *Salve Regina*, a hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Instead of the usual frenzy of the crowds crying for blood and

jeering at the prisoners there was silence and all that was heard was the sound of the hymn.

The next day the terror was ended and the Church was restored.

These sixteen women made a choice between earthly joy and Christian joy; succumbing to this world and so living or standing firm in Christ and so dying. For them there was no place for compromise.

I began by quoting St. Paul and saying, "Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked" (8:35). That quote finishes with these words: "These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of Him who loved us" (8:37).