

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
November 13, 2016

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There are no doubt some people who think Holy Mother Church provided today's Mass gospel for all those unhappy with Election Day results! But enough of that. Any major city with sightseeing attractions is constantly full of tour buses and tourists, some foreign visitors, some from rural parts of our own country, and all with cameras visiting the big city. You and I see that in Boston. The tour guides, speaking many languages and sometimes all at once, explain the significance of what is being seen. The tourists sometimes get in our way, but they are having a good time, and their visit supports the local economy. The Holy City Jerusalem had its share of tourists long before Boston was founded. Picture with me a time in what we now call 31A.D. when a small group from the north country, with their tour guide, was duly impressed with the whole scene in the Jerusalem Temple precincts: the throngs of people, the magnificence of the architecture, and the opulence of the appointments. And then they were getting ready to leave.

Minus the tour buses and cameras, that was the scene for the men we eventually came to call the Twelve Apostles. But the happy mood was dramatically changed by their tour guide, who just happened to be Almighty God. He suddenly declared the Temple, and all its trappings, would one day be thrown down! That is what we call a show stopper! Of course you and I know that the destruction of the Temple *did* take place, in 70 A.D, and the residents of the city were scattered. We also know that as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and the persecution of the Church, Christianity was forced out of the Holy City and became the worldwide religion it has been ever since. And looking back down the centuries of Church history we recognize this pattern: great persecution and great spread of the gospel occur simultaneously.

Time and again the persecutions put Christian witnesses in front of audiences who otherwise would not have paid any attention to religion. And many who witnessed the persecutions were emboldened to support and embrace the Christian faith. When the apostles suffered, a dynamic was released enabling others to speak out loudly in public. Today, sadly, the *opposite* is often true. When Catholic leaders waffle and prevaricate in public, the faith of church people is confused, sapped, and debilitated.

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Catholic history is quite clear on the matter. When martyrs died, Christianity spread. When governments lashed out against God's people there is great opportunity for witness and example. Scripture tells us when St Paul's congregations learned of his suffering for Christ they were strengthened and encouraged in their own hope and witness.

Some things have not changed since St Paul's time. We now know that more Christians died for the faith in the 20th Century than in all previous eras of Church history combined, and not only in Europe under brutal Nazi and Bolshevik regimes. At the end of the century we could add Northern Nigeria, the Sudan, Pakistan, the Holy Land, China, Indonesia, Egypt, Iraq and Syria, where Christians are suffering at the hands of hostile local and national governments and religious madmen. That list is not exhaustive. And you do not need me to tell you the 21st Century has begun with its own list of horrors: a priest having his throat slit while celebrating Mass in France. The city of Mosul, where fighting and terrific suffering is ongoing, has no Christian population for the first time in twenty centuries. Why are the leaders of the so called "free world" not talking about a Christian genocide?

Our Lord Jesus predicted all this, and He told us, in effect: "Do not spend much time in advance worrying about what you will say." He then promised to put the right words in our mouths when the time comes.

Many years ago an English bishop friend of mine came to visit. And I took him to see the local Cathedral. He surveyed the chapter room, which contained the portraits of the dignified clerics who had been bishop of that diocese. After a moment he then pointed to a bare spot on the wall and said "*There!* When that bishop is a martyr for the faith the gospel will come alive in the people of this place." It was a chilling thought. But it also seems to work that way.

Of course there is not only the blood-red martyrdom of faith. There is also a *white* martyrdom of faithful witness. The white martyrdom comes through Christian constraint: lifelong cultivation of virtue and banishing of vice through God's grace, acts of penance, and a resolute conforming of our wills to the Divine will. I cannot tell you people's confessions. I can tell you the obstacles put in the way of souls

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are often daunting, and require great sacrifice and acts of courage. Hearing confessions is invariably humbling for the confessor. However our lives work out, in a red or white way, in the end nothing will prevail but God and His glory.

Along the way of life we learn that *both* the red and white martyrdom are part of the gospel good news, given to us by Our Lord Jesus Who *is* the gospel good news. It is not only through our worldly successes that we can learn to give God the glory. It is perhaps even more in the shadow lands of our disappointments and sufferings that we have the splendid opportunity to place all our hope in the One Who delays judgment because His desire is that all may be saved. *And to be saved is our goal.*