

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Stations & Benediction
March 9, 2018
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In a wonderful way Almighty God uses even our wrong choices to accomplish His will. The story of the Passion is a catalogue of wrong choices. The chief priests had to choose between their stagnant formalities and the life of God. Judas had to choose between His Lord and thirty pieces of silver. The other disciples had to choose between loyalty and desertion. Peter had to choose between confessing Christ and blaspheming Him. The mob had to choose between Christ and Barabbas. Pilate had to choose between justice and injustice. Every one of them chose evil rather than good. And it all led to a day we call Good Friday.

If exceptions prove the rule, the Passion story provides us with a few souls who made good choices. For 2000 years one man has been praised for his choice. Except that he didn't make the choice! It was made for him. You know the story. As Our Lord's strength failed along the *via Dolorosa*, we are told "they compel one Simon, a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His Cross."

This Simon is called a Cyrenian to make clear he is someone else than St Peter, who is also called Simon. There is also Simeon at Candlemas. Simon is a common name in the gospel story, as is John and James and Mary. If you were making up a religion you would conveniently arrange for every prominent personage to have a different name! Truth can be less convenient. And Cyrene? It is the region in modern Libya near which a great battle was fought at Benghazi in 1942. And it is where an American ambassador and a foreign service officer were killed in 2012. Simon of Cyrene is praised because he was chosen to bear the Cross. However unwilling he may have been at the time, Simon is the one man who ministered to Our Lord on the *via Dolorosa*. And as long as the Bible is read and the Stations of the Cross are prayed, Simon's name will be remembered.

These Stations are little time engines. Catholic Christians recognize these incidents as revelatory events. Their meaning to us is not easy or immediate but has to be waited for. Our repeated rehearsal of these Stations yields their message in the character of a permanent presence allied to our own experience of life. We do not first find this contact with our own lives as a reason for our participation. Rather, we look to the devotional life of the Catholic Church, where our souls may be

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opened to grace as God in His mercy is pleased to allow. And we come to realize that *there are no accidents* in the Passion story.

Simon of Cyrene thinks he is a most unlucky man. He was simply about his own business on the day before Passover, when by chance his way into the city was blocked by a tragic procession of the condemned. You know how busy you can be just before a great holiday! That was Simon. But before he knew it he was pressed into service, to help carry the load of a man he supposed to be a criminal on his way to the execution he deserved.

Was it just bad luck for Simon? Not so. Almighty God had planned this very thing from all eternity. The way of Christ's love means no one is meant to suffer alone. God in the flesh lives the life of all ordinary men and women. It was not even that He chose this reluctant help from a stranger. That decision belonged to the soldiers of the execution squad. Christ did not get to choose because we do not always get to choose. With life closing in on Him, Our Lord Jesus was not able to choose even the help to be given by someone who showed little interest. That situation plays out daily in sick rooms at home, in hospitals, and nursing homes, where the patient may be cared for by an annoyed relative waiting impatiently for an inheritance, or a care-giver only looking for a paycheck. And where, when loving care *is* given, its motivation goes back in some way to the conviction we are here on earth to help carry the Cross of Christ.

We are to help Christ *blindly*. Why? Because we know Him by faith, not by vision. Not that vision helped Simon of Cyrene! He only saw three criminals on the way to a death they deserved. Jesus did not seem worth helping. And Simon was probably annoyed at being delayed about his own business and ashamed to be pressed into this sordid and degrading work.

This means we must help Christ, not only in those who seem Christ-like, but in those in whom Christ is very much hidden. Our Blessed Lord hid His beauty under the ugliness of sin so that we might be given the chance to help those whom the world condemns. And the Lord turned to sinners as much as to saints for help.

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There were few saints present on the Way of the Cross. And Simon of Cyrene was not one of them. We too must not wait to be saints or even to be good by any worldly standard before we help Christ carry His Cross. Our gentle Saviour accepts what assistance anyone would give Him: a woman named Veronica, the repentant thief on the cross, the soldier with the sponge and hyssop. They also made good choices. Even in death the Lord accepted the ministrations of those two reluctant Jewish officials, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

It is not for the good alone to help Christ. It is most of all for sinners, for the weak, the hesitant, the selfish, to take up the Cross. Long ago Moses prayed, “O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance.” (Ex 34:9) We see the answer to Moses’ prayer once again on the *via Dolorosa* in this little incident with Simon of Cyrene. For Simon could not know, or even in his wildest imagination ever guess, that when he had taken up that stranger’s Cross, he was carrying the instrument that would accomplish his own salvation.