

Fourth Sunday of Easter: Alone in a crowd, alone for others.

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We are surrounded by people. We are continually waiting in line-- the grocery store, the bank, the DMV. There are so many people at work. So many people in school. We are part of the crowd; we are the traffic; and yet we are alone. Our family is relatively big; three, four children along with Mom and Dad. Somebody is always talking. Somebody is always crying. There's a lot of noise and most of it is happy noise, but Mom feels very much alone, so does Dad. And they have each other. The little children feel so alone that they need to crawl into Mom and Dad's bed every now and then. The adolescents and older Teens are convinced that no one understands them. They are probably right. But God understands them. God understand each of us. He sees the unique reflections of His Image and Likeness He created each of us to be. He knows our spiritual potential. And He offers us the ability to live in His Presence.

And He knows that we are not alone. He loves each of us too much to let us be alone.

Still, the feeling of loneliness needs to be confronted by each of us. There were times that Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, the pagans, felt alone. He would first preach to the Jewish people. Time and again, the people wanted to embrace the Gospel, but then their leaders would oppose him. They would turn the people against him. That's what we heard in today's first reading. when Paul and Barnabas preached first to the Jewish people. Then they preached to the pagans, the gentiles. To the shock of the Jews, many of the Gentiles listened and turned to follow the Gospel the apostles were preaching. The reading says, "all who were destined for eternal life came to believe." This does not mean that they had no choice. This does not refer to a Calvinistic concept of pre-destination. It means that they accepted the Gospel and were on the road to eternal life. Do not misunderstand. It was not just because they were part of a group that they were saved. The community gave them support, true, but each person had to make up his or her mind to follow the Gospel. Each person was alone in the crowd of believers. Each person had to work out their salvation with the Lord.

I recently saw a wonderful opera entitled *Dialogues des Carmelites*, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. This was about the 16 Carmelite nuns who were guillotined on July 17, 1794, during the Reign of Terror into which the French Revolution degraded. All the Carmelites did was live a cloistered life of prayer and work. But they did not dissolve their monastery when ordered to do so. They remained praying, remained loyal to the Church, and for that they were executed. They went to the guillotine singing the *Salve Regina*, and kept singing as each was murdered from the oldest to the youngest--their voices fading into the last saint's solo. The point of the opera is that each had to make that choice, and it was a difficult choice. The main role was Sr. Blanche of Jesus in the Agony in the Garden, a woman full of fear but who was

determined not to allow her fear to hold her back. Picture these women, with the crowds screaming, the sixteen together, yet each very much alone.

All of the martyrs presented in the second reading, those who have washed their baptismal robes in the Blood of the Lamb, all of the martyrs had to work out their salvation with the Lord. My favorites, Agnes, Perpetua, Felicity, Thomas More, all of them had to confront their fear, and work out their salvation with the Lord. Agnes was a little girl, twelve years old, facing the might of Rome because she refused to give up Christ and embrace the pagan lifestyle. Perpetua and Felicity were two new mothers who had to make the decision for Christ even if this meant losing their babies first, and then their lives. They knew that God was calling them to Christianity. This would result in their making a terrible choice, and each of them struggled with it. But they held firm, and became part of the inner circle of heaven, those holding palm branches and eternally ecstatic. Thomas More, the former chancellor of the exchequer for Henry VIII, had all his political friends tell him that he was being foolish in not supporting the King as the head of the church. Even the bishops opposed him. He was alone in his cell in the Tower. But he was convinced that his own salvation was at stake. Alone in a country where the nobles and the leaders of the Church turned their backs on Rome, Thomas knew that he was being called to give witness, to be a martyr for the Truth.

The martyrs had to work out their salvation, and so do we. We may not be called to sacrifice our lives, but we are called to live in such a way that we give witness to the reality of Christ's Kingdom. We know what the Lord wants of each of us. How? We can listen, listen to His Voice. In the Gospel Jesus says that He knows His sheep and His sheep recognize his voice. We are His sheep. When we look deep within ourselves, we can hear the Lord's voice. He is calling each of us to be that unique person He created each of us to be. He is calling us to listen to our consciences. He is calling us to look for companions who will support us, not lead us into lives of dissipation. "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future," most parents tell their children. That is because negative influences can destroy our desire to listen to our conscience. Positive influences can support our desire to be the best person we can be. This is not just an instruction for Teens though. All of us need a Christian, Catholic support group.

But with all this said, you and I are alone. Alone, alone in a crowd. Yes, sort of. Well not really. We are never really alone when we are determined to serve our God. He always walks with us.

And like the martyrs, we need to realize that we are alone for others. We embrace giving witness to Jesus Christ. That is what being a martyr means after all. We have a responsibility to others to choose Christ and live this choice. Just as we have been strengthened by the martyrs choice, we need to strengthen others by our determination to stand firm for the Lord no matter what the personal cost might be. If we feel alone in living our Christianity, we need to remember that we are alone for others.

We pray today for the grace to continue to work out our response to God's grace, our salvation, for ourselves and for all who need the witness of our determination to follow Christ.