

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In this Sunday's Second Reading, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, we are told "May the God of Endurance and Encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of Our Lord, Jesus Christ"

Endurance. Some things in life are equally important, but in every aspect in life, including life's moral and spiritual aspects, nothing is more important than Endurance. Today's Epistle reading immediately follows a reference to the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, not just the physical suffering of His Passion, but also vehement disagreement, blame, and rejection. "The reproaches of those who reproached You, fell on Me" Whatever anger people felt at life, the world, and the World's Creator, they took out on Jesus Christ. To handle the reproaches of His People required, among other things, Endurance.

Endurance. It is something that I have valued since high school days, even though I didn't have supreme physical endurance. My best friend of those days did. He could be confident of being fresher than almost any opposing wrestler by the time the third period rolled around. If he survived the first two periods, and wasn't too far behind, his freshness in the third would win the match for him. Many activities in life, perhaps all, when you think about it, are like that. To do well, you need to be able to go for a long time, and under pressure. You need Endurance. This is certainly true of moral and spiritual life.

Endurance is a mark of all the Saints. Endurance quite obviously marked the Martyrs, the first Christians to be honored as "Saints" by the Christian community. The Christians carefully preserved the bodies of the Martyrs, built altars over their burial places, and celebrated the Holy Eucharist on those Altars (from whence comes the custom of having relics of a saint embedded in every Altar). In many cases, they carefully preserved eyewitness accounts of the Martyrs' Deaths. For Cyprian, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Perpetua and Felicity, and many others, we have eyewitness accounts, and the Church gives these accounts a degree of respect next only to the Sacred Scriptures, for they are "archives of Faith, written in letters of blood", in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In other cases, we have lives of the Martyrs written down not long after their deaths - rather, their "Natalia", their birthday into Heaven. These are read from at every feast or commemoration of a Martyr. In other cases, unfortunately, no one wrote anything soon after the Martyr's Natalia. In the absence of written accounts, people would tell stories about these Martyrs, and these stories often developed into legends, which cannot be taken altogether seriously. This happened in the case of St. Barbara.

St. Barbara's feast day in the old Roman Calendar was December 4. She is not found in the current Roman Calendar, for the simple reason that we don't really know anything about her, except that she is a Martyr. Her Natalia was in the third Century A.D., but nothing was written about her until the 7th Century. During those four hundred years, imagination had run wild. It is a good story, with a beautiful maiden, a paranoid father, a high tower, a daring escape, visions,

villains, torture, and even fire from heaven as divine vengeance on her horrible father. It is a fun story, but only a legend, and I don't like to deal in legends from the pulpit.

So, what can we take from St. Barbara?

For one thing, we can take a lesson about God's mysterious ways. We say all that time that His ways are mysterious, but we don't realize how completely mysterious they are. We look at the figure of the crucified Lord, and that should make clear how mysterious are the ways of God. He chose that sinful humanity should be saved not by a decree from Eternity, but by the Eternal Word becoming Flesh and living among us, dying among us as a willing atonement for all the sins of humanity, and rising for us, to be the First Fruits of a redeemed, resurrected, and renewed human race. God's ways are mysterious in regard to His Christ. They are also mysterious in regard to Christ's Saints. We know hardly a thing about St. Barbara, but in the later Middle Ages so many miracles were worked by the Lord through her intercession that she was called one of the "Fourteen Holy Helpers". After all, the effects of any Saint's intercession do not depend on our knowledge about the Saint, nor upon the Saint's merits, but only upon God's will to honor one of His holy ones with a miracle through that Saint's intercession. God chose to honor St. Barbara, a saint about whom we know next to nothing, with many miracles. Without really knowing about her life on earth, we know that she is in Heaven, seeing God as He truly is and enjoying Eternal Life with Him, and, according to His will doing good for His people on earth; and what more do we really need to know?

A second thing we can take from St. Barbara is that nothing is too little for God's attention. I remember a friend scoffing at another friend praying before a Basketball game. "Do you really think God cares about Basketball?", he asked scornfully. On behalf of the second friend, I answered "Well, we know He cared about a wedding feast in Cana. How dare we declare what God does and does not care about? He willed that His Son's earthly ministry should begin with rescuing a particular Wedding Feast, by providing it with an abundance of good wine. How do you know if someone might be dragged away from thoughts of suicide tonight by what happens in this Basketball game? I don't know either. But He does. For all you and I know, in the final reckoning this Basketball game might be more important than the annoying presidential election (those things have annoyed me for decades). He sees how all things fit together. We are just supposed to do our best with everything, including Basketball games, and pray about everything, including Basketball games"

My friends didn't expect a sermon, but it wasn't a bad one, as I recall, and I stick to those words. That is why the idea of patron saints makes sense to me. We say that God only cares about the important things. But only He knows what those really are! It is best for us to regard everything we do as important enough to do well, and important enough to invoke the Lord's help through His Saints. Because of some things in her legend, St. Barbara is considered Patron Saint against Lightning and Fire, and the Patron Saint of Architects, Construction Engineers, Military Engineers, Builders, and Masons. She is also the Patron Saint of those in danger of dying without the Sacraments. I hate to use this phrase from bad t.v. advertisements, but, seriously, if you or a loved one are involved in Architecture, Construction Engineering, Military Engineering,

Building, or Masonry, pray to the Lord through the intercession of St. Barbara. If you or a loved one are in any danger from fire or lightning, or in danger of dying without the Sacraments, pray to the Lord through the intercession of St. Barbara.

(Parenthetically, St. Barbara was also regarded as the Patron Saint of Artillery. That had to do with one of the odder episodes in her legend. I have a better suggestion, however, for a Patron Saint for Artillery. This suggestion goes back to an eyewitness. The Duke of Alencon, one of the young French officers who responded enthusiastically to St. Joan of Arc's leadership, testified years later that she had an excellent eye for where to put artillery. So, if, as the saying goes, you or a loved one are involved in artillery, pray to the Lord through the intercession of St. Joan of Arc)

I get at the final thing to take from St. Barbara somewhat indirectly. Her legend was included in a collection of stories of saints called "The Golden Legend", and printed in English at the very end of the Middle Ages by the early printer Thomas Caxton of London. Caxton also printed the authoritative version of the Legends of King Arthur and His Knights, "Le Morte d'Arthur". Reading that as a kid got me permanently interested in knighthood and chivalry. Going out on a limb, I will say that if you were to read only one serious book on knighthood and chivalry, read Maruice Keen's book CHIVALRY. One of his theses, well argued, is that Chivalry was a definitely Christian, but distinctly lay, idea. That is, it was not a pagan survival, but a truly Christian concept. It was not, however, developed by the clergy, but by the knights themselves. The ideal of Chivalry was, among other things, an assertion that one didn't have to be a monk, nun, or cleric to get to Heaven, nor even imitate monks, nuns and clerics as best one could. A Christian could get to Heaven simply by being a good and faithful knight. Knights did not exist only to do what clerics told them to do. The Clergy were appointed by God to be ministers of the Holy Sacraments, and to be teachers in those things that pertain to Salvation. The Clergy were to be teachers of moral truths, but not dictators of how those moral truths were to be lived out daily at court and at war. Chivalry's own code, Christian but lay, could do that. Chivalry was an authentic vocation within Christianity.

Apply that to yourselves. Certainly marriage and parenthood are vocations, but your career can be a vocation too, a way to Heaven as blessed as mine. You, as Christians, can get to Heaven simply by doing your jobs faithfully and well. You do not exist only to do only what clergy tell you to do. We Clergy do have a high dignity, by God's gift. We are appointed by God to be ministers of the Holy Sacraments, and to be teachers in those things that pertain to Salvation. As such, we are indeed teachers of moral truths, and you are wise to listen to the Church's teaching. We are not, however, to be dictators of how those moral truths are to be lived out in the marketplace and in the workplace, in the courthouse and in the streets. Going down just a short part of my list of lay friends, I say that lay Christians are to let Christianity soak into them thoroughly enough for them to develop their own "Code of Chivalry", their own code of how to be a Christian administrator, a Christian teacher, a Christian intelligence officer, a Christian singer, a Christian advertiser, a Christian psychologist, a Christian police officer, a Christian secretary, a Christian accountant, a Christian farmer, a Christian construction worker, a Christian farmer, a Christian realtor, A Christian rancher, a Christian engineer, a Christian soldier, a

Christian janitor, a Christian lawyer, a Christian landfill operator . . . etc. etc. etc. Soak in Christianity enough for you to make your own profession an authentic vocation within Christianity.

Whatever your profession is, ask the Lord for Endurance, in it and, above all, in your Christianity. Feeling that your vocation is a Christian vocation will keep you from “burning out”. Most importantly, keep your eyes fixed, in good times and bad, on Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has promised you Eternal Glory. God will give you the Grace to persevere in this hope until the end of this earthly life, if you ask for it. Ask for this Grace every day, as part of the petition “Give us this day our Daily Bread”. Ask for this, and you will receive it. You will obtain God’s eternal reward for the good work you have done in, with, and by the Grace of Jesus Christ.