

ASH WEDNESDAY

In just a few minutes, and for some of us for the fortieth, fiftieth, sixtieth, or seventieth time, we will have ashes placed on our foreheads in the form of a cross. As this is done, the Missal gives the celebrant a choice of which words to say: either “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” or “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” My guess is that the first is by far the most frequently chosen, and perhaps this year it would be especially appropriate inasmuch as 2015, like every third year before it, has on most Sundays readings from the Gospel of Mark, in whose gospel the very first words of Jesus are these: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Yes, “repent.” The entire season of Lent is preeminently a time for repentance, for a change of heart and mind that is meant to help us better prepare for the great feast of Easter six and a half weeks from now.

This morning, however, I have chosen the second set of words, themselves appropriate every Lent because it is only through dying that we can come to the goal of every Christian life—resurrection through the power of the risen Christ to the joy of an eternal Easter. This is surely among the reasons why St. Benedict, as one of the tools of good works in the fourth chapter of his Rule, says that we should keep death daily before our eyes, even as he ends his prologue with similar words, saying that if we observe God’s teaching “in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.” Those of us who have lived at St. Anselm’s for some decades know from experience the value of such words, for some of our brothers have been taken away in death without any clear expectation that it was so near. When Fr. Thomas Fahy got out of bed on the morning of October 6, 2008, he certainly didn’t foresee the automobile accident that would take his life before nightfall that very day, and when Fr. Patrick Granfield arose on Easter Monday last year, he surely did not suspect that that would be his last full day on earth. We trust that these brothers

of ours were nevertheless ready when their hour came, for such readiness has always been a hallmark of a genuine Christian.

When one considers the almost oppressive fear of death that afflicts some people, it is all the more impressive to note how radically different was the attitude of someone like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. She often said that there is no need to fear death, since, in her words, “death is something beautiful: it means going home,” going home to God. She likewise loved to recount the wonderful contentment of the thousands of persons whose earthly lives ended in her Homes for the Dying. One such man told her: “I have lived like an animal in the street but I am going to die like an angel—loved and cared for.”¹

Others who care for the sick have noted how the conviction that one is destined for a heavenly homeland has enabled even young children to make definite and appropriate decisions about their medical care. Sr. Margaret Sheffield, while working among terminally ill children at a hospital in Alaska, tells of a twelve-year-old girl, Karen, who was dying of leukemia and who one day unexpectedly announced to the doctor who had just given her an injection:

That’s the very last time you are going to prick me. From now on I will not let you put another needle in me. I’m so tired of all this. It won’t ever do a bit of good. All I want now is to go to heaven. I’m just waiting. Why does God make me wait so long? I’m all ready to go.²

Sheffield reports that the girl then entered into the most peaceful period of her three-year struggle with the disease. All aggressive treatment was terminated and replaced with the simple administration of pain medication. Karen was alert and comfortable for the following three days,

said all her “good byes” and, surrounded by her family, slipped into a coma and shortly thereafter expired. Without necessarily being well-versed in all the scriptural terminology of heavenly dwelling places, she had firmly grasped the reality of Christian faith and in so doing was enabled to die a grace-filled death.

This morning we cannot help but think of others who just last Sunday met death in a terribly violent but simultaneously exemplary, faith-filled way. I refer to the twenty-one Coptic Christians who were so brutally murdered—beheaded—on a beach in Libya by fanatic Islamic extremists. They died with words on their lips that we trust will be precursors of ours at the time of our deaths, words such as “Jesus, help me” or “my Lord, Jesus.” Sadly, they are only relatively few of the thousands and thousands of Christians who have been suffering exile, torture, or death at the hands of such brutal men in that part of the world in recent times. For us, they may seem far removed, persons with names that we may not even know how properly to pronounce—Abanub Ayad Atiya, Maged Solaimain Shehata, Yusuf Shukry Yunan—but each of them and the other eighteen were beloved sons, husbands, fathers of persons left behind in their Egyptian village, men who are tearfully mourned even though they may rightly be seen as martyrs, more to be prayed to than prayed for.

We ourselves may not be able to give immediate help to their grieving families, but at the very least we can commit ourselves to living this Lent in a way that will make us better prepared than ever for the death that inevitably awaits each one of us. The ashes that will soon be placed on our foreheads will be washed away by evening, but may the mark of the cross remain in our minds and in our hearts throughout these forty days, witnessing not only to our faith in our saving God and to our hope one day to be united with God in heavenly bliss but also to the love that Christ says is to be extended even to our enemies. As we pray *to* these Coptic martyrs, may

we also pray *for* their killers and, as Ayatollah Ahmad Iravani reminded us in his fine talk here last Thursday night, pray as well for all those in the Muslim world who are giving interpretations of the Qur'an far different from the hateful, twisted message of ISIS and similar groups. Jesus, help us. Jesus, help them.

1 Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *My Life for the Poor*, ed José Luis González-Balado and Janet N. Playfoot (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 89-90.

2 Margaret Sheffield, "Conversations with Dying Children," *Spiritual Life* 33 (1987):33.