

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – November 10, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 650 words

The Sadducees did not believe in life after death; thus in the gospel, they tried, in their great pride, to trap Jesus, believing what he had preached to be erroneous. They hoped that by confounding him with their clever question he might demonstrate that they were really right. But he instead confounded them. The Sadducees, in fact, claimed to accept the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus thus cited the Torah – “even Moses” spoke of the resurrection, he told them, showing that their interpretation of scripture was selective and therefore false. He turned the ruse back on them.

But even if the Sadducees did not accept the rest of the Old Testament, and thus would not have recognized as legitimate the second book of Maccabees (our first reading), yet a reflection on the history of their people could have helped them appreciate better the hope of eternal life. That the seven brothers had given their lives for fidelity to the law of the Torah – and did so hoping in the resurrection, in the afterlife – was an historic fact. That so many others, down through the centuries, hoped in the afterlife was also an historic fact. They chose to ignore not only scripture but their own history.

The Sadducees are one example of many through the centuries that illustrate why we need a higher authority than ourselves, to be able to believe rightly. They relied on their own interpretations and were blinded by their prejudices. This is the same mistake that most other sects and separatist groups commit. But how do we know if we have not done the same? Because we have the Church – instituted by Christ, invested with his authority – to authentically interpret the Word of God for us. The Church first tells us what the Word of God is: scripture and tradition; then she gives us its true sense.

The challenge for us as members of Christ’s Church is not that of needing to seek out the true teachings – the correct sense of his Word – and hoping that we get it right. No, the challenge, rather, is that of assimilating that true teaching into our lives and living it out coherently. Many non-Catholics, in fact, are scandalized by the ways we do not always live out our faith. Many use it as an excuse for not joining our ranks. Maybe some of you who are converts came up against that very concern in your own journey. Thus Jesus warns us, “from those to whom much is given, much is expected”.¹

We see how heroically the seven brothers in the first reading had assimilated their beliefs. It would have been so easy for them to compromise on the Mosaic dietary laws to save their necks. Perhaps they were tempted with presumption, also: “make that compromise, then ask God to forgive you”. But they held fast; they lived what they professed. The stories of the martyrs in every age are always an inspiration. Theirs is the supreme contradiction: though they lose everything in this life, they gain everything in the next – and their example bears witness to us and gives us strength and courage also.

It is by now cliché to speak of how the word “martyr” means “witness”; I’m sure you’ve all heard homilies along those lines. But we do need to hear it again. Whether we give witness by dying for our faith or simply by giving good and consistent example to others in our daily living, we are called to be martyrs – credible witnesses – all the same. Thankfully, we do not have to make things up; in fact, we would likely err if we did. No, we must follow faithfully what Christ has revealed, the true sense of which his Church teaches. Our faithful perseverance in the truth is what will not only save us but lead others to God besides.

¹ Luke 12:48.