**February 5: St Agatha**

**SAVE YOUR LIFE**

St Agatha is one of the most highly venerated virgin martyrs of Christian antiquity. She was put to death in Catania, Sicily, for her steadfast profession of faith. Her martyrdom probably occurred during the persecution of Decius (250-253 AD). Historic certitude attaches merely to the fact of her martyrdom and the public veneration paid her in the Church since primitive times. The rest that we hear of St Agatha is legend, which means that we should read it for our edification.

In Luke’s gospel (Lk 9:23-26), Jesus has just predicted his passion and has scolded Peter who wanted to dissuade him from it.

Jesus states the conditions for anyone who wants to follow him as a disciple. These conditions find their context in the first prophecy of the passion that immediately precedes them: “The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death, and to be raised up on the third day” (Lk 9:22).

Now Jesus speaks of the conditions for following him.

The verbs used, “renounce”, “take up his cross”, “follow”, “lose his life”, are shades of the same reality: whoever wants to follow Christ must decisively give up everything that obstructs him in order to share with Jesus his destiny that culminates on the cross. However, the mention of the glorious Son of Man (Mt 16:27) shows that the last word must be reserved for the resurrection.

Jesus is not a boss who orders us around. He is our brother who clears a way for us. Before preaching self-denial, he practises it. Before offering us the cross, he carries it. In this way he teaches us to *save* our life. He risked his earthly life and held nothing back in order to do God’s will.

Luke shows us Jesus who, at the beginning of his last journey, took the road to Jerusalem on purpose. The Christian’s “way” is to “follow” Christ. We give out that we have chosen Christ decisively. But we cannot be Christians, that is, disciples of Christ, if we are not disposed every day to carry our cross after him, and even to lose our life for him if we are called upon to do so.

We Christians need to renew our baptismal choice for Christ, but not only at the beginning of Lent and during the Easter Vigil. It is a risky choice. By choosing Christ, we can expose ourselves to opposition and persecution. Often it will be necessary to renounce some of our affections, much of our self-indulgence and all of our selfishness. We can’t expect an easy, comfortable life, but we don’t have to make it miserable for ourselves either.

At times it may seem that being a Christian means losing too much. For some graced people, it goes so far as to give up living altogether. But we must not presume that this is required of us until God’s will is clear.

Jesus is unequivocal. Only by denying our selfishness, and even giving up our life if necessary, will we be able to find the true life, to be saved. Not only did he say this, ever so clearly. He did it himself, first. St Agatha and the martyrs did it after him.

The true Christian must be ready for any sacrifice if he is to live like Jesus Christ and find true life in him. To accept Jesus, the “Suffering Servant”, means to follow him and to behave as he did, in the concrete situations of every day. The prospect can appear “narrow”, but it is “the hard road that leads to life” (Mt 7:14).

Jesus does not deceive those who want to become his disciples. He promises sacrifice, not easy triumphs. However, he does not disappoint them because their sacrifice will result in “the glory of the Father”, which everyone will participate in “according to his present actions”.

This gospel is often read in the commemoration of martyrs because these were the convictions that motivated Christian martyrs of all ages and that still motivate them today. Their deaths demonstrate that the imitation and following of Christ is along the way of the cross.

As St Paul tells the Philippians, the way to life is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death”, hoping to take our place “in the resurrection of the dead” (Phil 3:10-11).

Let us pray for those many Christians in Syria and generally in the Middle East who have been killed or who are suffering persecution and the threat of death, that the Lord will strengthen and console them.