

COLUMNISTS

Today's martyr lives a virtuous life

The terrible events of September 11 have served to highlight the link that has existed for centuries between martyrdom and religious faith. The 19 hijackers who crashed three commercial jets into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (a fourth went down in an open field in western Pennsylvania after a struggle involving passengers) viewed their own deaths as acts of martyrdom, whose reward would be immediate entrance into paradise.

Some have noted a similarity between the Muslim terrorists' concept of martyrdom and that of the early Christians, who also believed no human experience was more glorious than martyrdom.

The church's first saints were the martyrs, who died refusing to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. At the time there was one official religion in the Roman Empire. To profess or practice another was tantamount to treason.

St. Ignatius of Antioch begged fellow Christians in Rome not to intervene with Roman authorities in order to prevent his own impending martyrdom. Describing himself as "the wheat of God [to] be ground by the teeth of wild beasts to become pure bread," he made it clear that he welcomed martyrdom because it would allow him to imitate the sufferings



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

of Christ himself.

There are numerous accounts in the lives of so many saints of this period that tell the same story of men and women, old and young, who gladly embraced violent death for the love of Christ.

From the beginning the church taught that those who willingly gave their lives for Christ were admitted immediately to heavenly glory.

There are, however, major differences between the Christian concept of martyrdom and that of the Muslim hijackers and thousands of their coreligionists. The Christian martyrs lost their lives at the hands of others. The Muslim "martyrs" lost theirs in the act of killing thousands of innocent people of all ages, races, religions and ethnic backgrounds. The Christian martyrs believed that

God absolutely prohibited them from doing violence to anyone, even in defense of their own lives. The Muslim "martyrs," on the other hand, believed that Allah had commanded them to kill others and would rejoice in their success.

Many Christians have, in fact, died for their faith over the course of the past 20 centuries, but the ratio of martyrs to non-martyrs has changed drastically since the days of the Roman Empire. Martyrs now constitute only the tiniest fraction of 1 percent of the total Christian population.

Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II seems to uphold martyrdom as if it were the ultimate norm of sanctity and the highest form of Christian discipleship.

During his 23-year-long pontificate, he has canonized 451 saints, more than 75 percent of whom were martyrs. And yet the history of the church discloses a rich diversity of truly great and memorable saints, most of whom did not die for the faith: the Blessed Mother, Francis of Assisi, Mary Magdalene, Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, Vincent de Paul, Catherine of Siena, and the list goes on and on.

While martyrdom at the hands of the church's most virulent enemies is still an eminently courageous expression of faith, it cannot be a realistic model for more

than 99 percent of Christians who will never be required to die for their faith.

Therefore, it diminishes the reality of Christian faith when one even implies that martyrdom is a live option for many members of the church and, indeed, that we should look upon martyrdom as the greatest and noblest form of Christian witness, thereby relegating those who do not suffer martyrdom to a kind of second-class spiritual status.

For the overwhelming majority of Christians, martyrdom is a matter of literally "witnessing" to one's faith, not by violent death at the hands of others, but by living a virtuous life (heroically virtuous, if possible) as the mother or father of a family, with a regular job, and with all the normal ups and downs that are part and parcel of an ordinary human existence. Such a life will inevitably provide many opportunities for self-sacrifice, generosity, forgiveness, mercy, and courage in the face of injustice done to others.

Is Christian faith a faith to die for? For a minuscule few, yes. For the remaining 99.9+ percent, it is a faith to live for.

Indeed, it is a faith that should inspire us to live for others.

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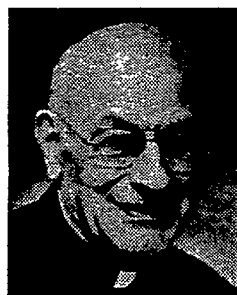
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Saintly lives are lives of perseverance

32nd Sunday of the Year (November 11) (R3) Luke 20:27-38; (R1) 2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14; (R2) 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5.

One day some Sadducees came forward to pose a problem to Jesus. The Sadducees were members of the priestly, aristocratic party who were very conservative in their theology. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Their scriptures consisted only of the first five books of the Old Testament — books attributed to Moses — which do not mention the resurrection of the dead. They concluded there was so such thing, believing that when the body died so did the soul. Furthermore, they were not the least bit open to the teachings of Jesus. In fact, the Sunday Gospel shows them coming to Jesus for the sole purpose of trying to trap him, to discredit him and, expose him as a fraud.

To do this, they brought him a complex riddle. If a man married and died before he had any children, it was the custom then for the next oldest brother to marry the widow. In their riddle the Sadducees spoke of a woman whose husband had died. The husband's next oldest brother then married her. He too



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

died before begetting a child. She married seven brothers and each died without begetting a child. The riddle was, "At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" The fact that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection shows that their question was asked simply to trap Jesus.

Jesus saw the trap as an opportunity to set the record straight about the resurrection. In heaven, he explained there is no need for marriage, for in heaven the good become like angels and are no longer liable to death — no need, therefore, to propagate. Then Jesus closed the argument with a remarkable passage: "God is not the God of the dead but of the living. All are alive for him."

God is the God of the living. He does not want us to give up. Saints are not peo-

ple who have things made easy for them. Saints are generally people who simply will not give up regardless of what they may face. Like holy Job they say, "The Lord gave and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." There is a saying that "the constancy of the dropping water wears a hole in the rock." Perseverance crowns the work.

God not only does not want us to give up. He wants us to be fighters. I bet one of the most repulsive sounds in God's ears is the pathetic whine of someone who moans in time of adversity, "Well, this is God's will. I'll just have to accept it." Of course there are events in life we can't do anything about; for instance, the death of a loved one or a terrible disease. But we can do something about our response to those events. We can become fighters. We can respond with aggressive determination. God's will is for us to fight on. We are not meant to be quitters. We can heal even a divorce. We can heal business or school failures. We can heal a family crisis.

God wants us to go on and fight, for the Gospel is a gospel of hope. God is with us. And if he is with us, who can be against us and conquer us?

Never give up no matter how difficult

the problem or heavy the burden. God is for us and he wants us to fight the good fight. No matter the outcome, God is with us. And to those who love him and trust him, all things will work together unto good.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, November 12
Wisdom 1:1-7; Psalms 139:1-10; Luke 17:1-6

Tuesday, November 13
Wisdom 2:23-3:9; Psalms 34:2-3, 16-19; Luke 17:7-10

Wednesday, November 14
Wisdom 6:1-11; Psalms 82:3-4, 6-7; Luke 17:11-19

Thursday, November 15
Wisdom 7:22-8:1; Psalms 119:89-91, 130, 135, 175; Luke 17:20-25

Friday, November 16
Wisdom 13:1-9; Psalms 19:2-5; Luke 17:26-37

Saturday, November 17
Wisdom 18:14-16, 19:6-9; Psalms 105:2-3, 36-37, 42-43; Luke 18:1-8

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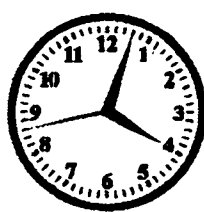
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