

Dean's Vespers – Sept. 28, 2006 – Memorial of St. Wenceslaus

I should like to begin by acknowledging and thanking Dr. Leo Nestor, Mr. Kevin O'Brien and the students from the Rome School of Music for their offering of sung prayer and praise this evening and for leading us in song this afternoon.

I also note that some of them were on the trip of the Music School last summer and participated in the Wenceslaus tour of parts of the Czech Republic. We commemorate St. Wenceslaus at Vespers tonight, a tenth century martyr who at the age of 28 was betrayed by his brother and murdered. (With that kind of biography who needs to watch daytime TV from 12:30 to 4? The same scenarios on "daytime TV" are writ large, unfortunately, in the history of the church!).

We also commemorate St. Lawrence Ruiz and his companions who were martyred in seventeenth century Japan. Like Wenceslaus, Lawrence Ruiz was a layman, and was also a husband and father. Along with his companions he witnessed to the faith unto physical death in martyrdom.

Sometimes we confine (what we often call) "the age of the martyrs" to the church's life before Constantine. The example of Wenceslaus and Lawrence reminds us that martyrdom was never confined to the church's early life. In fact it characterizes the church's life in every age.

One of the lesser known parts of my personal biography is that just before coming to CUA I spent two and a half years in the Benedictine Abbey of St. Anselm in Manchester, New Hampshire. For some years after receiving my doctorate at the Benedictine Ateneo of Sant'Anselmo in Rome I was frequently drawn to pondering whether the monastic vocation was my true vocation. Finally on Epiphany 1983 I went to New Hampshire to teach at their college and as a diocesan priest to live their life and after six months to enter into monastic formation. I learned a lot and never regretted the time I spent there. Obviously I discerned that the monastic life was not my vocation. On the feast of the Assumption 1985 I came to Washington.

At the monastery I went through the typical rigors of monastic formation, made the more difficult, I suspect, by (what I regarded then as) my advanced age of 37! Another contributing factor was that in his *Rule for Monks* Benedict insists that the already ordained should not gain an easy entrance to the monastery, nor should they experience any preferential treatment because of their ordination. Believe me, my superiors took those chapters (specifically 60 and 62) of the *Rule* very seriously.

Among the life lessons I learned from our novice master was that in addition to physical, bloody martyrdom there was what he called the unbloody martyrdom reflected in all of the church's history and which is required of every Christian. It is one thing to give your life in death for the faith. It is another to put to death a number of things in your life for the sake of the faith. An example in our own day (and among some of our students) is the persecution of the church in China. Another is those imprisoned for their stance against apartheid.

Of course for the novice master one chief example of unbloody martyrdom for young monks was the lesson that to live with other monks can itself be a martyrdom!

But I suggest today that there is an unbloody martyrdom that each of us needs to face into when we engage in the academic life.

There is an unbloody martyrdom in the asceticism for all of us professors and students when we sacrifice ourselves at the altar of our desks in rigorous study. The asceticism of academic rigor is the price we willingly pay for excellence in teaching, researching, learning and writing. No one of us is immune to it. No one of us should be immune to it.

There is an unbloody martyrdom for all of us when our research and study challenge us to go against one or another of the present canons of contemporary scholarship and offer an alternative view of things, sometimes to the point of rejection by others in the theological academy.

There is an unbloody martyrdom for all of us when our faith convictions challenge us to take countercultural positions on any number of positions that run counter to American culture today and to do that with both courage and humility.

There is an unbloody martyrdom in sacrificing ourselves for the common good, for a common project, for a communal enterprise when the prevailing winds today more often than not billow sails that promote oneself. That is part of the Catholic ethos. It is a hallmark of this university.

There is an unbloody martyrdom in moving from self absorption, self promotion, or even just the self to what I regard as one of the goals of the spiritual life within Catholicism, namely communal self transcendence.

There is an unbloody martyrdom required of all of us who hear the words of the book of Ecclesiastes as the first reading at Mass today about “vanity of vanities” and naming what is vain and ephemeral in our lives which ought then to be placed on the pyre that might be called the “bonfire of [our] vanities.”

There is an unbloody martyrdom when professors mentor students and do just that, mentor, but do not control them or make them after our image and likeness in thought, word or deed. In my estimation one of the saddest phrases in contemporary literature is from Muriel Spark’s novel and play *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The terminally needy secondary school teacher Jane Brodie collects cliques of selected students each year and then says to them and about them “give me a girl at an impressionable age and she’s a Brodie girl for life.” Students are with us for a time, not for life. There can be an unbloody martyrdom is knowing how and when to “let go.”

None of us seeks martyrdom. But all of us are called to it and live it in ways that are very real or really very subtle and the more subtle the more challenging. Most don't get the martyrdom thing right, at last natively or initially. There are just too many temptations to remain as we are, not to rock the boat or to avoid humbling ourselves in appropriate ways.

That is why we need to be reminded of martyrs who have gone before us and are for us examples of what it means to sacrifice the self for the sake of God and others.

That is why we need this evening Vesper prayer, to join the martyrs who have gone before us and to support each other as unbloody martyrs in the cause of proclaiming and living what is right and just.

Time was I was surprised that the hymn "Good King Wenceslaus" was a favorite Christmas carol and hymn, simply because its lyrics say nothing about the birth of Christ. It was only later in life – in graduate school to be precise – that I learned that in the church's wisdom we celebrate the feast of St. Stephen the first martyr on the day after Christmas, which is a favorite day to sing about Wenceslaus. If in fact the birth of Jesus can be called "the beginning of our redemption" because it led to his death and resurrection we can do nothing better than follow Christmas with the feast of a martyr because martyrdom is part of what the Christian life is all about. For some it is the total self sacrifice in giving one's life. For the rest of us it is the no less real, daily challenge of engaging in appropriate acts of unbloody martyrdom for the sake of our redemption.

May Stephen the first martyr (and the name of our former Dean Stephen Happel), Wenceslaus, Lawrence Ruiz and their companions challenge and exemplify for us what it means to be a martyr for the only cause that is worth it, ever deepening conversion and communal self transcendence in this community of scholars at this, the Catholic University of America.