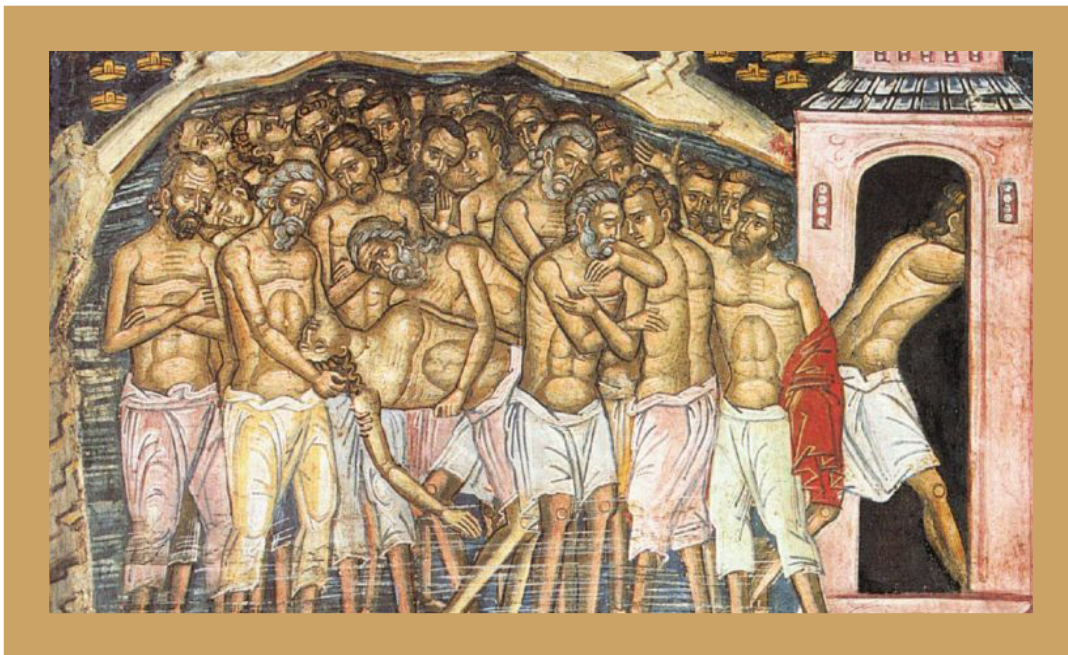


Martyrdom



Icon of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

THE MONTH OF MARCH is an excellent time to consider the subject of martyrdom for at least three reasons. One is that during Lent we should be thinking more deeply about the last things and our ultimate goal, which is eternal joy with and in God Himself.

Another reason is that our world is in flux. We live in troubled and revolutionary times, but sometimes don't notice it because we often take for granted the world we live in as "normal." Yet Catholics, and other Christians worldwide, are suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ as perhaps never before in history. Witness the persecutions in the Middle East and China. Witness also incidents within our own country where to be a devout Catholic or Christian is to be a potential target of unending legal harassment, as, for example, when a Christian baker declines to bake a same-sex "marriage" wedding cake.

A third reason is that March is the month when we

commemorate the feast of the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste, a feast providentially falling within Lent. Providentially, because the number forty is symbolic—it is both the number of the martyrs we celebrate on March 9th, and the number of the days of our Lenten observance.

The number 40 is frequently found in the Bible. Because it appears so often in contexts dealing with judgment and testing, many scholars consider it as symbolizing "probation" or "trial." It appears that God chose this number to help emphasize times of distress and suffering. Most fitting for the 40 Martyrs.

The word "martyr" comes from the Greek word *martyros*, meaning a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. Christians first applied the word to the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of the life, passion, death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Then, within her first few centuries, the Church began to use the word to describe those who witnessed to Christ by shedding their blood.

In his Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope St. John Paul II describes Martyrdom as “...an outstanding sign of the holiness of God’s Law, the holiness of the Church, and as a splendid witness to the sacredness of the personal dignity of man, created in God’s image and likeness. ... [T]he martyrs ... light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law (cf. Wis 2:12), and they make the words of the Prophet echo ever afresh: ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!’” (Is 5:20).

He continues: “Although martyrdom represents the high point of the witness to moral truth, and one to which relatively few people are called, there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice. Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic-commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude, whereby — as Gregory the Great teaches — one can actually ‘love the difficulties of this

world for the sake of eternal rewards”.

According to St. Basil, the forty soldiers of Sebaste, in ancient Armenia, had openly confessed themselves Christians and were condemned by the governor to be exposed naked upon a frozen pond near the town on a bitterly cold night—that they might freeze to death. Among the confessors, one yielded and, leaving his companions, sought the warm baths near the lake which had been prepared for any who might prove inconstant. One of the guards set to keep watch

over the martyrs beheld a supernatural brilliancy overshadowing them and at once proclaimed himself a Christian, threw off his garments, and placed himself beside the thirty-nine soldiers of Christ. Thus,

the number of forty remained complete. At daybreak, the stiffened bodies of the confessors, which still showed signs of life, were burned and the charred bones were cast into a river so that Christians would not gather them up.

Three days later the martyrs appeared in a dream to St. Peter, Bishop of Sebaste, and commanded him to bury their remains. The bishop, together with several clergy, gathered up the relics of the glorious martyrs by night and buried them with honor.

Relics were distributed throughout many cities; in this way, the veneration paid to the 40 Martyrs became widespread, and numerous churches were built in their honor. St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nyssa praised and preached about them, and St. Ephrem the Syrian, eulogized them.

The story of the 40 Martyrs is strikingly reminiscent of another and very recent martyrdom.

In February 2015, Islamic State terrorists kidnapped 21 foreigners working in Libya. ISIS released a video of their murder. It shows each of the men dressed in an orange jumpsuit, kneeling on a beach, with their black-clothed executioners eagerly standing behind them. They were beheaded. The video shows many of the men

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ISIS prisoners awaiting execution.

encouraging each other to stay faithful and praying “Lord Jesus Christ” in their final moments. Of the 21, 20 of the men were Egyptian Coptic Christians.

One, however, was not a Christian. He was originally from Chad in Central Africa. On camera, one of the terrorists asked him, “Do you reject Christ?” “Their God is my God,” he responded, and he became the 21st man laying down his life for his faith in Christ.

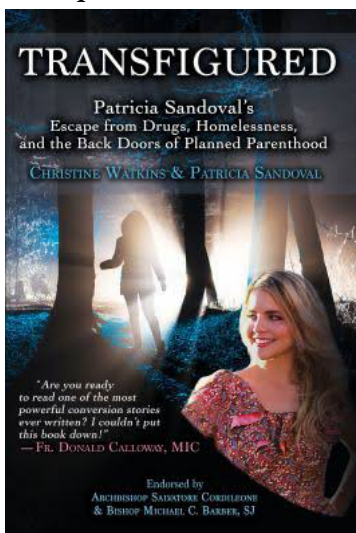
He had, at that moment, converted to Christianity “because of the faith” he witnessed in the Coptic prisoners, said Fr. Rafic Grieche, spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt. He added, “he found his faith when he saw the face of the other Egyptian Christians, he didn’t want to leave. He wanted to be a martyr like them.”

Today the world is in a state of great ferment. We do not know what the future holds for us, for our country, or our Church. But, come what may, the witness of the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste, and of the 21 Martyrs of Libya, are magnificent examples that will help inspire us in managing any of the troubles, sufferings and even martyrdom that may result from our faithfulness to Our Lord Jesus Christ. May these martyrs intercede for us—that we always with great hope recall Our Lord’s glorious promise: *Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven...* (Lk 6:22-23).



Book Review: *Transfigured*

In the book *Transfigured*, Patricia Sandoval gives a powerful personal testimony which exposes the lies of the modern world, the darkness of a life of sin but then also, and most importantly, shows us the light and power of God’s merciful love. In a way, this book



is not only the story of Patricia Sandoval, it is also the story of God and how He patiently works with a soul to communicate to it the blessings of Christ’s redemption. The work is engaging and well written. Patricia is brutally honest about what she experienced during the dark years of her addiction, her life of

immorality, her abortions and her time with Planned Parenthood....and then how the light began to shine in the darkness and how she was then later given the courage to bear witness to the power of God’s mercy before a world that stands in such desperate need. It is also a work that can impel us to dedicate ourselves more wholeheartedly and with greater conviction to the pro-life cause in all its aspects. Patricia’s courage and forthrightness also challenges us in our own walk of faith. As one reviewer wrote of this work: “Few are the books that after turning the last page, the reader senses that he or she has grown in faith, hope and love. This is one of those books”.

Transfigured: Patricia Sandoval’s Escape from Drugs, Homelessness, and the Back Doors of Planned Parenthood by Christine Watkins and Patricia Sandoval, Queen of Peace Media, 2017.