

Meditations: Friday of the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer during the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time.

- John the Baptist is a martyr for the truth
- A clean heart to love God
- Seek God's glory and not our own

NO SOONER have the apostles returned from their first experience

of preaching the Gospel, than the New Testament relates the death of John the Baptist. This seems to suggest two things: that the apostolic mission consumes our whole life and that martyrdom is the supreme way of following Christ.^[1] We are given some details about John's death, beheaded in one of Herod's palaces during the king's birthday celebrations. Because of his courageous and forthright preaching and despite the fact that Herod held him in high esteem, the king had had John imprisoned. *It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife*" (Mk 6:18), the Baptist had said. The instigator of his death was Herodias, the woman who lived with the king and who hated John.

To commit oneself to the search for truth is certainly demanding and affects the deepest core of our being. "Truth involves our whole life. In the Bible, it carries with it the sense of

support, solidity, and trust, as implied by the root 'aman,' the source of our liturgical expression Amen. Truth is something you can lean on, so as not to fall. In this relational sense, the only truly reliable and trustworthy One—the One on whom we can count—is the living God.”^[2] —

We will find the complete truth only in Jesus Christ, who said *I am ...the truth* (Jn 14:6). The complete truth is this meeting, which satisfies without satiating. When we try to live a life that is holy and filled with God's mercy, the truth will grow in us. Herod sacrificed the truth in order to avoid complications, just as Pilate did during the Passion. Although he admired John and liked to listen to him, Herod allowed himself to be swept away by events. It is he, more than John, who is really imprisoned: he does not know the love that

moves freedom towards the good and the true.

THE MARTYRDOM of John the Baptist took place in an environment of frivolity and revenge: a banquet and a dance led to an imprudent oath; the hatred and anger of Herodias; the brutality of a beheading. In the face of John's fidelity a tide of superficiality arises that culminates in the murder of an innocent man.

Herod could no longer hear the words and counsels of John. He missed another opportunity two years later, when he met Jesus on the morning of Good Friday. Despite the fact that "when Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad...because he had heard about him" (*Lk 23:8*), he did not recognize the Savior. He gazed upon him with curiosity but with a heart

that was not open. He sought only to be entertained, to be awed by a miracle. Jesus, who could have a conversation with anyone, “but to the fickle-minded and impure Herod, not a word.”^[3]

He beheaded John. He treated Jesus *with contempt and mocked him; then arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate* (Lk 23:11).

Herod lived behind a mask of laughter that disguised his emptiness, his lack of self-control, and his inability to respond to the supernatural. We, by contrast, wish to look at Jesus with clean eyes, with a heart that is sensitive and open to the supernatural life. “This heart of ours was born to love. But when it is not given something pure, clean and noble to love, it takes revenge and fills itself with squalor.”^[4]

HE MUST increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3:30), John had said to his disciples when they heard news of Jesus' preaching. His mission was accomplished: he had seen and proclaimed the Lamb of God. Now he could give way to the Messiah, standing aside so that Christ could grow, be heard and be followed. With this same disposition of soul, with realism and humility, he confronted his martyrdom. “Given that he shed his blood for the truth, it is certain that he shed it for Christ.”^[5] With the testimony of his death, he anticipates the death of our Lord.

The Baptist “with a prophet’s freedom, rebuked Herod. Imprisoned for his audacity, he did not fear death nor a dubious trial but rather, from his chains, his thoughts were directed to Christ whom he had proclaimed.”^[6] St Josemaría saw in John a model for his own life: “My way is to hide and disappear, so that

Jesus can be seen.”^[7] John’s discretion, his sincere search for the glory of Jesus rather than his own, are what enabled him to give the supreme witness of martyrdom.

“The Truth is Truth; there are no compromises. Christian life demands, so to speak, the ‘martyrdom’ of daily fidelity to the Gospel, the courage, that is, to let Christ grow within us and let him be the One who guides our thought and our actions.”^[8] Mary, Queen of Martyrs, will present to our Father, God, our desire to search for the truth and, when we meet it, to share it with courage.

^[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2473. “Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the

faith: it means bearing witness even unto death.”

^[2] Pope Francis, Message for the 52nd World Day of Communications, 2018.

^[3] St Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, First Station, Points for Meditation, 3.

^[4] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 183.

^[5] St. Bede, Homily 23, Book 2.

^[6] Origin, Homily 27, on St Luke 2-4.

^[7] St Josemaría. Letter, 28 January 28 1975.

^[8] Benedict XVI, Audience, 29 August 2012.

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