

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we heard Jesus say, *“everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”* This saying of Jesus is used in our confirmation rite, and no doubt we are serious when we make our promises, yet few of us will really be tested in this promise, for we live in a land protected by a Bill of Rights, the rights of free people acknowledged by our government and codified in the first 10 amendments to our constitution.

You know that the first of these amendments is the one that acknowledges our right to worship and act, not according to some governmental dictates, but according to our own conscience. It’s often characterized as establishing the “separation of church and state,” and, to be sure, the amendment does prohibit the State from entangling itself in religious matters — *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”* — but the protections are not just for the church; they protect the individual.

This is a radical idea. It certainly wasn’t so in Germany in the 16th century as Luther began to question the teachings and practice of the Roman Catholic church. Then the Roman church and the Holy Roman Empire were tightly yoked. Thus it was to a Diet at Worms in 1521 that Luther was called — that is, to a gathering of the princes including Emperor Charles — and it was in front of *“governors and kings for [the] sake [of Jesus]”* (Matt. 10:18) that Luther had to stand up and defend himself, *“to bear witness before them”* and say to them, *“I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”* Certainly Luther acknowledged Jesus before men at great peril.

Later, in the Diet at Speyer in 1526, a bit of a reprieve was granted by the Emperor. There he allowed the ruler in the region to determine the official religion in that region. So the Lutheran princes promoted the Lutheran confession in their regions. This was in no way religious freedom as we know it; it was still an entangling of the government with religion. And indeed, three years later, at a second Diet at Speyer in 1529, Emperor Charles rescinded that rule and returned to enforcing a strict religious discipline according to the Roman church. It was at this Diet that the term “protestant” was coined for here the Lutheran princes objected and protested this abridging of their freedom to follow the Word of God purely. These laymen, too, confessed Jesus before powerful men at great peril.

Only a year later, another Diet was convened, this time in Augsburg. At this Diet a Lutheran confession would be presented — the Augsburg Confession,

which presentation we remember today, for it was read on this day, June 25th, 487 years ago. Although it was written by Lutheran theologians — Philip Melanchthon principally — this was a confession of the Lutheran princes, signed by them. And again, boldly, did these Lutheran laymen confess the true faith: that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus. They confessed Jesus before men, holding onto the promise that He would confess them before the Father in heaven. We give thanks to God today for their confession for we are their spiritual descendants and heirs of the pure Gospel confessed in it

But will we confess it so boldly? Protected by the First Amendment, we have had things relatively easy in the U.S. Until recently, we have had little occasion to have to defend our faith publicly before the powerful. We have been pretty much free to worship and pray and act according to Christ’s teaching in the Scriptures. But in more recent times, there have been encroachments by the State into religion. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, passed in 1993, sought to redress some of those trespasses, but that has not stopped the State from further attempts to trespass on religious freedom: trying to force religious people to pay for life-killing drugs, to use their artistic talents in homosexual wedding ceremonies, to open their sex-specific bathrooms to be used by persons of the opposite sex.

Will we confess as our forbearers did? It is not so easy. It can be frightening. The State has power. The State can fine you. The State can bankrupt you. The State can take away your livelihood. The State can imprison you, and even kill you if you do not comply, if you do not “step on this image of Jesus” or “spit on this crucifix.” The State can try to force you to apostatize, deny Jesus, deny the faith, deny the truth.

A 1966 historical novel by Shusaku Endo, called “Silence,” was made into a movie by Martin Scorsese in 2016. It explores this very theme. What do you do when the State’s powers are arrayed against you? In the movie, two Jesuit priests from Portugal go to 17th century feudal Japan in search of their mentor. Now Japan was a brutal place, and the governor of Nagasaki tortured and killed anyone who confessed the name of Jesus and would not deny Him. It was said that their mentor priest had, in fact, apostatized; he had denied the faith.

The two younger priests were sneaked into the country and began to serve the underground Christian church there. The book and movie follow especially one priest, Rodrigues, who was discovered, imprisoned, and tortured.

Under severe duress, Rodrigues finally did apostatize; he denied Christ. He was forbidden anything Christian, and he worked the rest of his life searching out any Christian symbol that might be smuggled into Japan. He lived as a Buddhist, with a

Buddhist wife, and was watched carefully, so that he neither prayed nor expressed any devotion to Christ until he died — so it was thought.

Yet, at one scene toward the end, Rodrigues prayed silently: “Lord, I fought against your silence.” And Christ answered: “I suffered beside you. I was never silent.” Rodrigues replied aloud: “I know.” And he continued: “But even if God had been silent my whole life, to this very day, everything I do, everything I’ve done, speaks of Him. It was in the silence that I heard Your voice.”

Was he, as the two had said about Ferreira, “damned,” or as the Narrator in the movie said, “lost to God”? Or was it as the Narrator intimated: “But as to that, indeed, only God can answer”? Earlier Ferreira, the older priest had told him: “Only our Lord can judge your heart.” And in hearing this truth, Rodrigues recognized that Ferreira had also said “our Lord.” Could he have retained the faith amidst this physical and spiritual torture?

The movie concludes with Rodrigues’ death. He is buried as a Buddhist, too, and is cremated. But before the fires were lit, his wife placed a token in the coffin, something to “ward off evil spirits.” But she also placed something in her husband’s hand. As the fires engulf the coffin, the camera moves in to see what she had placed in his hand: it was a crucifix.

What are we to think about this? It is true that Jesus does say, “*do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*” But He had also told the disciples earlier that, as they faced persecution, “*be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*” But then He says, “*So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*”

Rodrigues quoted this verse to a cowardly Japanese Christian named Kichijiro, but later affirmed, “Kichijiro was right in saying that all men are not saints and heroes. How many of our Christians, if only they had been born in another age from this persecution, would never have been confronted with the problem of apostasy or martyrdom, but would have lived blessed lives of faith until the very hour of death?” And I think he’s right when he said, “No matter how strong one’s faith, physical fear can overwhelm one completely.” So, it behooves us, who have never experienced this kind of persecution, not to be too quick to condemn those who hid themselves rather than acknowledge Christ before men, or who in weakness denied Christ before men. We are still saved by grace through faith in Christ. St. Paul does say: “*When I am weak, then I am strong,*” after Jesus had reminded him, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Indeed, the church has often had to go underground like these Christians did in Japan. Not always does the truth have strong defenders as was the case with Luther in the 16th century, with his prince, Fredrick the Wise protecting him. Sometimes, unrelenting persecutors seek the church out to destroy her. She has had to pray in the catacombs in Rome, meet for clandestine services in the South, endure concentration camps and even death in Nazi Germany, survive attempts to wipe her out in communist Soviet Union and China, and now live in the midst of those who bomb churches and behead the faithful. But these attempts to destroy the church did not succeed and will not. The church remains and will abide forever — Christ promises. Moreover, Christ, made like us in every respect, knows our every weakness, and He died for them, too. He is ever there with His grace and forgiveness for our weaknesses in the face of persecution.

For, we will be hated; we may be put to death. But let us remember, as Jeremiah says, and as was echoed by the old priest, it is the *“LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind.”* The Lord delivers *“the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.”*

Therefore, we pray: Lord, keep us in the true faith, and in that faith steel us for difficult times that may be ahead of us. Let us *“sing to the LORD”* and *“praise the LORD,”* and let us pray as we just sang: *“Lord, be our light when worldly darkness veils us; Lord, be our shield when earthly armor fails us; And in the day when hell itself assails us, Grant us Your peace, Lord.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.