

I Lay Down My Life for My Sheep

Acts 4: 7-12; Ps. 118; 1 Jn. 3: 1-2; Jn. 10: 11-18

In the holocaust memorial at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, there is a tiny cell with a candle burning in it. The candle commemorates St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest. In July 1941, in reprisal for the escape of one prisoner, ten men were chosen to be executed. St. Maximilian offered himself to take the place of one of the condemned men because the man was a young husband and father. St. Maximilian was the last of the ten men to die having suffered two weeks of starvation, thirst, and neglect.

St. Maximilian put into action the teaching of Jesus in a radical way. For Jesus said: *'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.'* (Jn. 15: 13)

In the Gospel for this Sunday, Jesus speaks no less than five times about laying down His life for His sheep. We are still in the Easter Season so we continue to reflect on the unfathomable sacrifice that Jesus made on the Cross for each of us.

Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who is willing to lay down His life for His sheep. Jesus points out that the Good Shepherd is not a hired man. When danger threatens the sheep, the hired man will run away because he does not really care for the sheep. He is simply doing a job and the pay that he will receive does not adequately compensate him for risking his life to protect the sheep.

But Jesus indicates that the Good Shepherd is not motivated by personal gain or glory but rather by love. He does not do a cost-benefit analysis before acting. Love outweighs all sacrifices and all dangers. Jesus gave us the perfect example of sacrificial love by dying on the Cross for our salvation. Jesus laid down His life so that the gates of heaven would be opened for everyone who believes in Him. And St. Maximilian Kolbe acted as an icon of Christ.

It is more than likely that the young husband and father that St. Maximilian replaced was Jewish and not a Christian. Just as Jesus' act of love on the Cross made a believer out of the Roman centurion, is it possible that the action of St. Maximilian may have converted some Jewish souls? Jesus said: *'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'* Jesus indicated that He was sent to save everyone who listens to His voice and believes in Him. Did St. Maximilian, as an icon of Christ, bring other sheep into Jesus' fold?

Jesus said: *'I know my own and my own know me.'* How well do we know Jesus? To know Jesus is to love Him, and to love Him is to follow Him; to follow His commandment to love. This should be the essence of our relationship with Jesus.

St. Gregory the Great, a Pope in the sixth century, put it this way: *'Ask yourselves whether you belong to His flock, whether you know Him, whether the light of His truth shines in your minds. It is not by faith that you will come to know Him, but by love; not by mere conviction, but by action.'*

We need to ask ourselves: What can I do to be an icon of Christ? What can I do to be the voice of Christ and bring others into His fold? And then we need to act.