

Homily of Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, 2023

Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69:10-17, 33-35; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

Jeremiah was one of the prophets God sent to prophesy to the people of Israel to turn from their sinful ways or they would face divine judgment. Jeremiah prophesied that since the people had failed to repent of their evil ways, a foreign power was going to conquer them, take them captives, and destroy the temple and Jerusalem. For such prophecy, Jeremiah was persecuted and was nearly killed. The first reading is a prayer of Jeremiah while he was being persecuted. Jeremiah teaches us to commit our persecutors into God's hand. He prayed:

“But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not prevail. In their failure they will be put to utter shame, to lasting, unforgettable confusion. ... Let me see the vengeance you take on them, for to you I have entrusted my cause. Sing to the Lord, ... For he has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the evildoers! (Jeremiah 20:11-13).

Jeremiah represents messengers of truth everywhere who are persecuted, silenced, or eliminated: in our families, neighborhoods, groups, workplaces, institutions, organizations, churches, countries, and so on.

The Gospel is Jesus' encouragement to his apostles to be fearless in proclaiming the Good News. He reminded them that, later on, their witnessing the Good News would attract persecution. He encouraged them not to be discouraged because their sustenance would come from God.

Violent persecution of Christians is going on in several parts of the world. In those places, Christians are killed, church buildings are burned, church properties are destroyed, Christians' rights and privileges are denied them, or taken away from them. We pray for the Christians in such places.

Another type of persecution is anti-Christian policies by some governments, some media outlets, and some institutions and organizations. Some countries' leadership no longer recognize the fact that their countries' foundations were built on Christian principles. Christian principles, values, symbols, education, and identifications are condemned as offensive and removed. The adverse effect of the anti-Christian actions on the society is obvious. It is clearly seen in the rise of all kinds of crimes and crises. Someone says, “Life without Christ is Crises.”

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel not to be afraid or discouraged. Jesus says, “... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father...” By this statement, Jesus promises rewards to those who remain witnesses during persecution.

St. Paul speaks to the leadership of the Church and indeed to all of us, “I charge you ... proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine; but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Jesus encourages us, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. ... You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. ...” (Matthew 5:11-14). Jesus is urging us that no matter the persecutions and the mockeries, we must not lose our taste or allow our light go out. Jesus reminds us in John 15:20, “If they persecute me, they will also persecute you...”

Jesus’ teaching does not dismiss the fact that it is the responsibility of governments to protect the citizens from abuses, destruction, and mindless killings by persecutors. It is heartbreaking to see governments persecuting their own citizens, and governments being collaborators and accomplices with persecutors’ heinous activities as it is the case in Nigeria. According to a news report, in 2022, over 40 priests and religious were abducted for ransom. At least 39 priests were murdered in cold blood. These figures do not include leaders of other Christian denominations who suffered the same fate. Countless number of churches and church properties were burned down or destroyed.

However, it is easy for me to see persecution out there but fail to recognize how I, myself, persecute others by my actions of maltreating, bullying, torturing, silencing, or eliminating them. Do I, purposely, set out to frustrate, irritate, annoy, hurt, disturb anyone? Do I deny anyone what is due to him or her? Do I take retaliatory action against people who disagree with me? Do I click or gang up against anyone or any group?

Jesus promises us in today’s gospel reading that all the hairs of our heads are counted and that we are not to be afraid. We earnestly pray for God’s divine intervention in the places where persecutions are taking place and in the lives of the persecuted.

Prayer of Protection by St. Patrick:

*I arise today, through God's strength to pilot me, God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me, God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me, God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me, God's host to secure me, Against the snares of devils,
Against temptation of vices, Against inclinations of nature, Against everyone who shall wish me
ill, Afar and near, alone and in a crowd. Amen.*

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