

MARTYRDOM

We have read about them. In preparation for the priesthood, we studied them. As Christians, we are called to follow their example. I am referring to those individuals who refused to deny their acceptance of Christ, even to save their lives. We call them martyrs or witnesses. They are very authentic witnesses due to the fact that an individual will rarely (if ever) give up his or her life for a lie.

The Church produced a multitude of martyrs during the early years of her existence. Rome's ancient history is filled with assaults on Christians by its emperors, who saw Christianity as a threat to the state. Those first Christians refused to reject their relationship with the Lord, even if it meant that they would be tortured and put to death. Their names are recorded, both in this world and in the next.

There have been martyrs in more modern times, as well. Usually, these have been groups of individuals, whose names we do not know so well. However, now, in our day, we have the name of an individual who, as of this writing, may be put to death because he embraces Christ.

He is 42-year-old Abdul Rahman. Abdul is an Afghan who converted to Christianity in Germany some years ago. Now, he faces execution in Afghanistan if he does not reject his faith in Christ and become a Muslim again. You have read about him and you have seen him on your television set. He carries a book of Sacred Scripture in Arabic and proclaims his belief in the Holy Spirit. Muslim clerics demand his death under the Afghan legal system.

As a result of the outcry for Abdul's release, the latest news coming out of Afghanistan regarding him is that he may be declared mentally ill. That was a ploy used by the communists when they wanted to put someone away. The person was never heard from again.

How has all this made you feel? Is it just another news story to you? It ought to strike to the very core of our Christian hearts. That should not, however, happen in the way that we Americans usually react, but as the early Christians reacted. They did not go demonstrating, issuing threats, or even demanding justice. What they did was stand with the person in support of his or her resolve to remain faithful in witness to Christ. Moreover, in addition, they were ready to follow in like manner.

This, in itself, is a worthy Lenten reflection. How would you and I measure up in a similar situation? The answer, can, most likely, be found in the many lesser decisions that we make in the course of our daily life. What excuses do we use for not participating at Mass on a weekend or gathering with the parish for devotions? What takes precedence over our extending a helping hand to those in need or being involved in the life of our faith community? What are our priorities for the use of the resources that the Lord has given us as stewards to manage? We could go on with a whole list of similar questions.

Those who would score well on such a test are today's living martyrs. They are willing to give of themselves in witness to the Faith. It is likely that they could be the Abduls of today.