

Good Friday
April 15, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
John 18:1-19:42

St. John obviously appreciates irony, most famously in the recollection in today's Passion narrative that Caiaphas had counseled the Jews "*that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.*" Caiaphas meant that Jesus' death would save the Jews from Roman depredations, but St. John relishes the reality that it was indeed expedient for Jesus to die for the people, for it saves everyone from sin and its consequence, death.

But today I want to focus on another of St. John's ironies because it brings into focus the advocacy of Our Blessed Mother. It begins however, with St. Peter.

The context is Jesus' interrogation by the high priest, Caiaphas, the man who had already determined that Jesus' death would be expedient. Outside stands St. Peter, warming himself by a charcoal fire that had been lit by the servants and officers of the high priest. St. John, the witness to these events, reports that one of the officers struck Jesus, beginning the abuse of our Lord, because he objected to how Jesus had answered Caiaphas during the interrogation. And immediately St. John reminds us that St. Peter continues to stand by, warming himself.

St. John's point, of course, is to magnify the gravity of St. Peter's denial. Not only is the Prince of the Apostles unwilling to suffer death with Jesus, as evidenced by his threefold insistence that he is not one of Jesus' disciples. If this were not bad enough, St. John wants us to see that St. Peter comforted himself even as he watched Jesus get beaten. His failure is not only unwillingness to suffer; his failure is that he wants to be comfortable even as he watches our Lord suffer. It is more than a mere fear of death, more than a desire for self-protection, to which we could all relate. St. John here convicts St. Peter, his fellow apostle, of desiring consolation in the face of our Lord's desolation.

So the denial was not only verbal. The corporeal manifestation of St. Peter's spiritual weakness was his need to be warm even as he denied our Lord. And this is a temptation to which we here in America can easily fall prey. From the comfort of our homes, and the warmth of our living rooms, even as we dine before a pantry full of food, we watch on our many screens the sufferings of Jesus today in Ukraine. Yesterday we watched Him suffer in Syria and Iraq. When I was in high school and college, we watched him suffer in South Africa; in middle school, Ethiopia. And when I was a little boy, I can remember watching Him suffer in Vietnam.

It's often the case that we keep such suffering at an arm's length, not just refusing to enter into it, but becoming disturbed when our comfort is threatened by things like the cold or more expensive gasoline, even as next door we can see Jesus getting punched in the face.

In contrast to this insensitivity and selfishness, we see at the end of our Lord's Passion Our Lady and St. John. At the foot of the Cross they stand with Jesus, entering into His suffering, exposing themselves to the danger St. Peter strenuously avoided. They stand in close proximity to the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the tree, unsheltered from the elements to which St. Peter did not want to be exposed. Herein Jesus assigns to St. Mary the universal motherhood to all the faithful, represented by St. John, who stands in for all the imperfect who respond perfectly to the sufferings of our Lord.

We should understand these words, "*Behold your mother!*" as an affirmation of St. Mary's intercessory power, first exemplified in Jesus' first miracle at Cana in Galilee. Not only do we have an example, the perfect woman, who stands by her divine Son while sin wreaks its destruction; but we also have a mother who loves us and prays for us, bringing to Jesus our concerns large and small, counseling those who've run out of wine at their wedding reception, and comforting grown men crushed because they've just witnessed their best friend get tortured to death. St. Mary is not just the counterpoint to the cowardice of St. Peter. She is also the friend of those who, like St. John, are willing to suffer as Jesus suffers, even if at first they did run away. St. John came back, and he was rewarded with the embrace of a loving Mother as he endured his great sorrow.

A good number of you have indicated to me that you know today is the first anniversary of the death of my son, Damian Alfonso. Please know how grateful my family and I have been for the consolations you offered to us during and after our trial. You were nothing like St. Peter, who watched from afar—and in comfort—the sufferings of our Lord. Instead, like Our Lady and St. John, you entered into our agony, even as you pled on a daily basis for St. Mary's intercession on our behalf. The prayers of Our Lady of Providence issued in all we needed: the food, the funeral expenses, and indeed the loving embrace of Our Lord, whose willingness to endure pain lessened ours and continues to strengthen us one year later. We thank you for your loving witness. When later today we visit the cemetery to adorn Damian's grave, we will remember in our prayers you and all those you love.