

“Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” These are the challenging words we just heard in the second reading in which the Lord speaks to us directly through the First Letter of St. Peter.

If you want more evidence that the Catholic faith is *not* the product of “self-deluded wishful thinking,” there it is. I mean, “rejoice in the fact that you may share in the sufferings of Christ?!” and “blessed are you if you’re insulted for Christ?!” Rejoicing in the midst of suffering? Considering yourself “blessed” if you’re insulted? These powerful words from our second reading are most certainly counter-cultural, especially for anyone living in 2017, at a time when our world is obsessed with going to extreme lengths to avoid any and all suffering.

Many scholars maintain that this First Letter of St. Peter was written in the context of a widespread persecution of the Church at the time, probably at the hands of the Roman Empire sometime during the latter half of the first century AD. The persecution of Christ’s Church is

consistent with what our Lord Jesus foretold in terms of His Church's existence within this fallen world and Her future.

During His public ministry, Christ repeatedly told His Apostles and disciples that they would experience persecution, suffering, and death if they were to faithfully follow Him in the midst of this fallen world. This is one of the reasons why Christ explicitly prays for us, His Church, in today's Gospel from John. In this prayer during the Last Supper, Christ prayed for the preservation and the unity of His disciples, especially in the midst of suffering and persecution. The Son of God knew that His Church would follow in *His* footsteps and therefore experience great persecution and suffering in the midst of this world.

In fact, a recent study conducted by an Italian-based research center has definitively concluded that in 2016 Christians remained the most persecuted group in the world. The findings of this particular study have been corroborated by multiple reports and studies as well from those who monitor the persecution of Christians around the globe. What's so disturbing is that according to this Italian study, in 2016 *alone*, approximately *90,000 Christians* around the world were killed

for their faith, and one third were killed at the hands of Islamic extremists like ISIS.

*Just this past week*, in addition to the heinous and barbaric terrorist attack in Manchester in the UK which targeted young women and girls, terrorists from the Islamic State or ISIS carried out a horrific attack against Coptic Christians in Egypt who were on pilgrimage to an ancient monastery. Attacking a bus carrying the pilgrims, the terrorists brutally gunned down 29 Christians, including children, and wounded another 24. Also this past week, in the Philippines, in the southern city of Marawi, ISIS-linked terrorists stormed the Catholic Cathedral in the city, taking the priest and 13 church-goers hostage. The Church and the Filipino government are currently working to secure their release.

Brothers and sisters, in light of today's second reading and the ongoing persecution of Christians around the globe, especially the ongoing genocide of Christians being perpetrated by the Islamic State in the Middle East, we have to examine the fundamental disposition of our heart when it comes to following Christ and living our Catholic faith in our daily lives. If our Catholic faith is defined as enjoying an intimate,

personal relationship with Christ *in and through* His Church, then we have to ask ourselves a series of reflective questions. Our Lord Jesus undoubtedly loves each and every one of us with a perfect and infinite love—how much do we honestly and sincerely love Christ?

When we truly love someone, we want to get to know them more. So do we love Christ enough to go deeper into our Catholic faith so that we can better understand and defend the teachings of His Church? How much are we *willing* to actually *suffer* for Christ? Are we even *willing* to suffer *with* Jesus? Are we *willing* to be insulted and mocked for the sake of Christ and His Catholic Church?

Are we *more concerned* about “offending” others with our Catholic faith than about offending God with our own sinfulness? Are we *more concerned* about our personal image and popularity than about our fidelity to Christ and His Church which is supposed to be rooted in love? Are we *willing* to speak up to lovingly defend Christ and His Church when they come under hateful attack by others or do we cower in fearful silence not wanting to “start anything” but rather remain “nice”? When we’re at work or out with friends and family in a social

setting, are we embarrassed or ashamed of Christ and His Catholic Church? Are we *more concerned* about what others think of us than about what Christ our Savior thinks of us?

Brothers and sisters, as disciples of Jesus, we're not called to be "popular," we're called to be faithful to Christ and His Church and to love always, especially in the midst of suffering and persecution. We're called to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us! We're called to courageously fight evil in this world by speaking out against injustice and false and destructive ideas. We're called to fight evil in this world by striving for holiness with the help of God's grace and by actually *living* our Catholic faith with every fiber of our being, in our words *and* our actions, in both our private *and* public lives!

Brothers and sisters, Christ our Savior is *always* faithful to us in perfect love. Let's strive, with the help of His grace, to *always remain faithful to Him*, especially in the midst of suffering and persecution.

Lord Jesus, as we prepare to worship and receive you in the Most Holy Eucharist, give us the grace to love you with every fiber of our being and to be faithful to you and to your Church every day of our lives. Amen.