

Homily for the Dedication Mass of the Columban Martyrs' Memorial Garden

May 26, 2016

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Behind me here on the wall are the names of the twenty-four Columban missionaries who sacrificed their lives out of fidelity to the Gospel in various countries around the world. On the pathways leading into the Garden are bricks with many of your names, the names of other Columban friends and supporters, as well as the names of coworkers and family members of Columbans. It seems right that not only the Columban martyrs, but also so many other people, many of whom are living but some of whom are deceased, should be commemorated together here in this one place. Why? Because it was the faith of their families and relatives that nurtured and strengthened the vocation of these martyrs. Because it was the kindness of friends and companions that sustained these missionaries throughout their journeys. Because it was the sacrifices of Columban supporters and coworkers that enabled these priests and this Sister to dedicate their lives to the Gospel and sacrifice everything for it. That is why it so meaningful to commemorate hundreds of family members, friends and supporters side by side with these twenty-four Columban martyrs. Together, all of us are collaborators with God in making known his love across the globe.

The love of God for all people has been made known to us in Jesus. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to sharing the Father's love with the poor, the sick, the outcast and sinners. Despite opposition, he persisted with his message. Despite persecution, he persevered in his vocation. Despite rejection, he remained faithful to his mission. He never wavered in his commitment to the Father's love, even as he faced death on a cross. The cross that stands here in this Memorial Garden is a reminder that the Columban missionaries whose memory we honor also faced many trials

and tribulations along the road of life. And, like Jesus, they too endured opposition, persecution and a violent death. Though in the sight of some they were punished, their hearts were filled with the hope of immortality. They believed that God would raise them up like Jesus and that they would live with him in love forever. The circular wall around this Garden expresses life without end, their sharing in the life of the eternal God. You will notice that the wall is not the same height all around. This is not due to poor construction or a recent earthquake! If you look closely, you will see that, rather than being a simple circle, this wall is, in fact, the first strand of a spiral pathway that ascends toward the sky.

This spiral pathway that is directed toward the heavens connects the two pathways that lead into the Garden – this one that I'm standing on that is straight and leads directly to the center, and the other that approaches from the side, has a curve, and is in the shape of a question mark. These two pathways present us with two different approaches to those whose lives and deaths we honor here. Entering on this straight path, we can immediately view the names of the martyrs, the far-off countries where they ministered, and dates on which they died. Everything seems obvious and straightforward. However, entering on the other path shaped as a question mark provokes us to ponder profound questions: Did fidelity to their vocation come easy to these missionaries, or was it a hard fought battle? What enabled them to lay down their lives for their people? Why did surrender to God's will require such a great sacrifice? And what did their sacrifice achieve? Our answers to these questions will lead us to ponder other profound questions about ourselves and our own faith commitment: How willing are we to sacrifice ourselves for others? How deep is our surrender to God's will? How generous are we in responding to the mystery of God that surrounds us?

We can sense the mystery of God that surrounds us here in this bigger garden that surrounds the Memorial Garden. We can sense his mystery in the variety of trees and plants, grasses and flowers, birds and insects,

rodents and animals. As Jesus points out in the gospel story, the world of nature helps us to understand something of the mystery of the reign of God. The branches of the trees provide shelter for the birds, while the birds help scatter the seeds of the trees far and wide. The blossoms provide the bees with nectar for honey, while the bees pollinate the blossoms so that the trees bear fruit. Trees and insects, plants and animals depend on one another. This large garden that surrounds the Memorial Garden reminds us that the world of nature is one large web of relationships.

This web of relationships that we see in nature reminds us that we too depend on one another, that we too blossom insofar as we live in right relationship with God, with others and with the world around us. As Christians who believe that God is the creator of all, we value the web of relationships that connects all things and all peoples. The twenty-four Columban missionaries whose memory we honor here dedicated their lives to building relationships between peoples of different countries, devoted their energies to building friendships between peoples of different faith traditions, and sacrificed their lives to building a bridge between earth and heaven. As missionaries who crossed boundaries of language and culture, they were like birds that feel at home in this garden as well as in the neighboring garden, they were like butterflies that see the world as one large garden, God's great garden.

The Martyrs' Memorial Garden is not only surrounded by a bigger garden, but is also one with it – it opens on to the bigger garden. Here too inside this Memorial Garden are trees and plants, flowers and insects ...and at a later hour, deer and raccoons! Here, the world of nature joins with the martyrs in praising the Creator, in glorifying God. Here, creation joins with the martyrs, with Christians throughout the world, and with all of us in proclaiming that darkness gives way to light, winter gives way to spring, and death gives way to eternal life.