

On Suffering

By Deacon Jerry Brennan

The deacon is often described as an icon of Christ the Servant. The lives of some of the historical deacons give us insight as to what it means to live as a visible sign of Christ the Suffering Servant.

On January 22 we celebrate the Feast of St. Vincent the Deacon. Vincent, both in life and death, united his life with Christ and the Gospel message. Vincent is sometimes known as Vincent of Saragossa or Vincent the Martyr. Like his cousin and fellow deacon, St. Lawrence, Vincent suffered a particularly gruesome martyr's death. In part Lawrence's torture was attributed to his bold exhibit of the riches of the Church; the poor and suffering. Similarly Vincent was subjected to increasingly painful levels of torture because of his bold witness.

Vincent was appointed as a preacher by Bishop Valerius of Saragossa at least in part because the bishop had a speech impediment. Bishop and deacon were imprisoned during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian around the year 304. Vincent succeeded in converting his jailor. This so infuriated the governor Dacian that the governor planned a particularly painful death for Vincent. Throughout various tortures Vincent remained faithful and his verbal responses to his torturers led to the conversion of some of the soldiers who were torturing him.

The story of Vincent brings to mind the scene in the movie *The Passion of The Christ*, in which Jesus is depicted as stepping into the scourging. He is not a victim. He is in charge.

In the Office of Readings for St. Vincent's Feast, St. Augustine reflects on this ability to accept suffering. Augustine reminds us that "For whenever we speak prudently as we should, our wisdom come from him, and whenever we endure evils courageously, our long-suffering comes from him." In other words we do not bear suffering well because we are strong but because we surrender to God's will. We do not speak well because we have a silver tongue but because God gives us the words to say. Augustine goes on to say that with Vincent it is as if there were two different persons; one whose body was being tortured and one who was speaking out. Augustine says that in the case of Vincent there were two separate persons. Vincent was given strength from God to endure the torture and the words he spoke were the Holy Spirit speaking.

This month's Magnificat has a wonderful article about Vincent and a reflection on a painting of Vincent's body by Augustine Théodule Ribot.

https://www.magnificat.net/english/flip_com_oeuvre/index.asp

For more on the modern diaconate please see either of the two links below:

<http://www.dioceseoflansing.org/deacons>

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/diaconate/>