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Weighing Conscience, Perceptions of Divine Truth

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Weighing Conscience, Perceptions of Divine Truth

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

Sunday Readings for May 16, 2010 for Cycle C:

Acts 7:55-60, Ps 97, Rv 22:12-20, Jn 17:20-26

WEIGHING CONSCIENCE, PERCEPTIONS OF DIVINE TRUTH

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The martyrdom of St. Stephen, recounted by St. Luke (Acts 7:54-8:3) followed a religious debate in which the holy deacon expressed faith in Jesus along with a sharp criticism of those who exercised religious authority in Jerusalem. Were they merely trying to preserve their own positions or did they hold Israel's best interests at heart? At the Last Supper St. John recorded that Jesus had warned his disciples that some who opposed them might be in good conscience. "Not only will they expel you from synagogues; a time will come when anyone who puts you to death will claim to be serving God!" (16:2; see 1 Tim 2:12-14). As we know from events in the Middle East and elsewhere in the recent years, tempers flare quickly in the Mediterranean area and tragedies engulf families and larger communities before reason can prevail. The witness of Stephen ("the Crowned One") is described beautifully; he prayed to Jesus as Lord and imitated his Master by interceding for those stoning him. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them: (Acts 7:60; see Luke 23:34). By noting the presence and approval of the young Saul of Tarsus, Luke subtly points to the efficacy of such prayer. From a merely human viewpoint defeat deprives a person's existence of meaning, yet in faith even (or perhaps especially) the undeserved death caused by persecutors may have a powerful impact.

The story of Stephen has inspired Christians throughout the centuries. We should reflect that even this week some are bearing witness to their faith in circumstances that threaten death. Do we give them the basis of assurance that our prayers support them? Do we use our freedom to bear witness to the Gospel's challenge in the various situations of our personal lives? We cannot afford to allow mediocrity to govern our choices because one never knows what test may loom on the horizon.

Trying to identify with Christ and the saints in persecution is a salutary exercise, but we must also examine our use of authority and power. Virtually every ancient religion or political system has had leaders who sought to control others by force or threat of death. While Catholics have often been among persecuted minorities, some of our predecessors, clerical and lay, have attacked those whose conscience led them in a way that differed from our perception of divine truth. "Error has no rights" was the argument. But rights adhere to the human person, so are not to be considered merely in the abstract. Each one also has the concomitant responsibility "to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and his Church, and to embrace it and hold on to it as they come to know it" (Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty* #1).

The Second Vatican Council clarified the seeming tension between the rights and needs of society and those of the individual. It is understood that no one should act contrary to truth and the common good. Societies must legislate to protect the rights of all and, because of the propensity to impose conformity upon minorities, governments should guard their religious and other rights carefully.

Would that such a concern permeate all areas where atheistic oppression of religion has been replaced by other rulers!

A misplaced zeal was a factor in the 1492 decree of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella expelling all Jews from Spain unless they converted. To rescind the decree five hundred years later, as King Carlos did in March 1992, cannot repair the past but it does lay the foundation for the future.

The great commission to preach the gospel to all creatures (see Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15) should be completed by a reading of the gospel chosen for the seventh Sunday of Easter. Presenting the gospel and arguing for the truth of Jesus' message and work will be effective to the extent that the new commandment (Jn 13:34-35) is lived within the Christian community. The mutual love among the disciples of Jesus should reflect on earth the very mystery of the blessed Trinity. So Jesus prayed "that all may be one as you, Father, in me and I in you...That the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).