

Is 41:13-20
Ps 145:1,9,10-11,12-13ab
Mt 11:11-15

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Crosses We Carry

We all have crosses that we carry – like the death of a loved one, a debilitating illness, difficulties in religious life, a ministry that makes us unhappy, and so forth.

Last October 2nd, the Feast of the Guardian Angels, 10 Amish girls (ages 7 to 13) of the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Bart Township, Lancaster, Pennsylvania were fatally shot by Charles “Carl” Roberts IV. Five girls died and the other five were seriously injured. The whole Amish community was devastated and they suffered severely. But they carried their faith and carried this huge, heavy cross; they survived this tragedy and continued to live. The Amish community not only buried their five dead girls and continued to care for the five surviving girls in the hospitals in Philadelphia, but they even mourned for and attended the funeral of their assailant, Carl Roberts. Imagine that. What an ocean of mercy and forgiveness do the Amish have! Katie Weaver, an Amish woman from Michigan, was interviewed by the Associated Press and I quote her, “But you see, at a very young age our parents teach us to forgive like Christ did, not man-made forgiveness. Jesus still takes care of us, even if bad things happen. These children are in Heaven. We still weep and cry just like everyone else, but then we go to Christ.”

In our first reading from the prophet Isaiah, God says, “*For I am the Lord your God. Fear not, I will help you; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.*” God will give us Jesus, whom we are waiting for this Advent season, and whom St. Matthew refers to in his Gospel, as “*the least in the kingdom of heaven*” but who is greater than his cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, is our help; he carries our crosses all the way and through his death and resurrection, we are saved; we are redeemed.

The saint we remember today, John of the Cross, is a saint because his life was a heroic effort to live up to his name: “of the Cross.” The Paschal Mystery – through death to life – marks John as a reformer, mystic-poet, priest-theologian and now a doctor of the Church. Ordained a Carmelite priest in Spain at the age of 25 in 1567, John worked with Teresa of Avila to reform the Carmelite Order, eventually establishing the Order of Discalced Carmelites. But his work and reform came at a price. He experienced increasing opposition, misunderstanding, persecution and imprisonment – all from his Order. He came to know the cross acutely – to experience the dying of Jesus – as he sat month after month in his dark, damp, narrow cell with only his God!

Yet what a paradox! In this dying of imprisonment, John came to life, uttering poetry. In the darkness of the dungeon, John’s spirit came into the Light. There are many mystics, many poets; John is unique as a mystic-poet, expressing in his prison-cross the ecstasy of mystical union with God in the *Spiritual Canticle*.

His prose masterpiece is the *Ascent to Mt. Carmel*, which was for him a purifying climb to the top. As a spiritual director, he sensed this purifying ascent in others; as a psychologist and theologian, he described and analyzed it in his writings. John wrote strongly about the gospel paradox: the cross leads to resurrection, agony to ecstasy,

darkness to light, abandonment to possession, self-denial to union with God. If you want to save your life, you must lose it.

John in his life and writings has a crucial word for us today. We tend to be rich, soft, and comfortable. We shrink even from words like *self-denial*, *mortification*, *purification*, *asceticism* and *discipline*. We run from the cross. John's message, like the gospel, is loud and clear: *Don't*. Don't run from the cross, but instead we must carry it – if we really want to live.

From his poems, John wrote:

“Never was fount so clear,
undimmed and bright;
From it alone, I know proceeds all light,
although 'tis night.”