

January 22, 2006

The Feast of the Apostle Timothy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Church received from late Old Testament literature two accounts of the sufferings and death of Eleazar, an old man of great integrity, who suffered martyrdom during the persecution of the Jews in the early second century before Christ (2 Maccabees 6:18-31; 4 Maccabees 5-7).

During that awful period (167-164 B.C.) the oppressive Seleucid government at Antioch, abetted by an apostate priesthood in Jerusalem itself, tried to impose a radical cultural reformation on the Jews, attempting to turn them into Hellenistic pagans. The persecuting king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163), began by sacking the city, killing thousands and selling thousands more into slavery. He then provoked the people with the pollution of their holy sites and religious institutions, even erecting an altar to Zeus in the Holy of Holies (1 Maccabees 1:54; Daniel 11:31). When the people, thus provoked, reacted with shock and indignation, Antiochus retaliated most cruelly.

His persecution was violent and remorseless. The Jews were compelled, under penalty of death, to partake of pagan sacrifices and to violate the kosher laws that identified them as Jews (2 Maccabees 6:5-9). Women were executed for circumcising their infant sons (6:10), and those who refused to violate the Sabbath were murdered (1 Maccabees 2:29-41). "Others," we are informed, "were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment" (Hebrews 11:35-36).

During this terrible time some devout Jews, in order to survive in their fidelity to God, went out to the wilderness, wandering "about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented-of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth" (11:37-38).

One of those who did not flee was Eleazar, "one of the chief of the scribes, a man advanced in years" (2 Maccabees 6:18). To humiliate this man his tormentors forced pork into his mouth, knowing this food to be forbidden to the Jews. When he spat it out, he was led away for execution.

Then the old man's own captors, taking pity on his venerable years, pleaded with Eleazar to eat some other food and only pretend to be eating pork, thereby sparing his life. He refused.

It is worth reviewing the reason for Eleazar's refusal. This old man knew the importance not only of *being* good but also of *appearing* to be good. He realized that the appearance of wrongdoing can be every bit as morally destructive as wrongdoing itself.

It is obvious that scandal can result from a misunderstanding as much as from a fact. Occasionally there is nothing we can do about this, of course, because misunderstandings are sometimes beyond our control. But when we deliberately *cause* a misunderstanding, then we are responsible for whatever evils come from that misunderstanding.

Long before John Donne pronounced on the fact, Eleazar knew that no man is an island. No man is an isolated moral being. Man's moral responsibility is co-extensive with his social nature.

It is insufficient, therefore, for a man to keep his conscience pure before God. Because of the social responsibilities that are part of his own being, it is imperative that a man's conscience should consider also and always the moral advantage of other human beings. None of us goes either to heaven or hell by himself. No man in this world--not even a hermit--is responsible solely for himself. This essential aspect of the human conscience is what Henri Bergson called *le moi social*.

Man's social nature, however, is exercised through his body, including his senses. In their relationships with one another, human beings depend on phenomena--how things seem--as much as with facts--how things are. Man's moral responsibility, therefore, includes also a certain stewardship of appearances. He cannot escape this social responsibility. It pertains to his moral being.

Venerable Eleazar appreciated this truth. He knew that before the judgment seat of the Almighty he was responsible, not only for his own integrity, but also for his appearance of integrity. He thought of the spiritual and moral welfare of those who knew him, and he strove to sustain their own consciences in a very difficult hour, even at the cost of his life.

In this measure, therefore, Eleazar's martyrdom expressed his fidelity, not only to God's Law, but also to the social conscience that God placed in his soul when He created him a human being.

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