

Testing our Faith Today, October 8, 2016

CPI: St. James at Sag Bridge

The CPI asked me to give a small meditation this evening to precede Dr. Fortini's talk on "The Hope of the Mustard Seed". So I suppose Lisa is going to speak about when Jesus spoke about this in the Gospel of St. Matthew 17, when, just after his disciples had unsuccessfully tried to cast out a demon from someone, the Gospel says: *Then the disciples approached Jesus in private and said, "Why could we not drive it out?"²⁰ He said to them, "Because of your little faith. Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

Today, it seems, almost everything is becoming impossible for Christians: impossible to influence our politicians and our laws (that continue to drift away at an ever increasing speed from Christian morals), impossible to practice our own faith because of the increasing busyness of our life-styles (how many people don't go to Sunday mass anymore because they were too busy), impossible to keep our children or at least most of the young generation in the Church (the statistics are roughly 70% of Catholic Youth leave the Church, depending on how you count it...). If nothing is impossible for Catholics with a tiny faith, what must be our faith today if almost everything is impossible?

I have been thinking about this especially because just a few days ago we celebrated the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. As you might know, this is a feast day that commemorates a historical event, the Battle of Lepanto, and the crucial Christian victory over a Turkish fleet. It was a supreme example of faith "moving mountains", of overcoming incredible odds. So let me just talk about that for a moment, as a comparison of a catholic culture where there is faith with ours today.

The history, in brief, goes like this: for over a century the Turkish fleet had been winning battles against the divided fleets of the Christian nations: they regularly pillaged the Christian Mediterranean coasts, and

had taken some important Christian Islands at Rhodes and Cyprus. They had also attempted to take Malta, but had failed, thanks to the incredible courage of the Hospitaller Knights, who were outnumbered 8 to 1. (All of this is recounted in a very good book, *Empires of the Sea*, by Roger Crowley). But the final battle was to happen on October 7, 1571. The Pope at the time, Pius V, also against all odds, was able to convoke Christian Fleet from the Holy League of Catholic Nations. The two fleets met near Lepanto, (near the coast of Greece), and though outnumbered in vessels and men, the Christians won, again with incredible bravery, and inflicted an overwhelming defeat against the Turkish fleet that they were never really to recover from. As one commentator put it: *Had the Christian fleets sunk off western Greece on October 7 in 1571, we would not be here now, these words would not be written in English, and there would be no universities, human rights, holy matrimony, advanced science, enfranchised women, fair justice, and morality as it was carved on the tablets of Moses and taught by Christ.* Pius V, who had asked all Christians and especially the soldiers to pray the rosary for their victory, attributed the victory to Our Lady and this prayer, and instituted the feast we are celebrating today(it is said that every soldier had a rosary in his hand or pocket).

So what are we to make of this feast-day, which is one of the most politically incorrect holidays in all the Catholic Calendar? These men, though most of them were hardly what we would call “saints” today, were willing to offer their lives for their faith and the faith of their families and nations. Though other aspects of their lives were perhaps weak, their faith was like a rock. And I think it must be true that their faith is radically different from the faith of most Catholics today, at least American Catholics. They really did believe; faith and its implications were the most important things for them, at least when it came to the big decisions.

Today I wonder if our faith is so strong. In the document of VC II *Lumen Gentium* 42, we read this: *From the earliest times some Christians have been called upon—and some will always be called upon—to give the*

supreme testimony (giving our lives) of this love to all men, but especially to persecutors. The Church, then, considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love. Though few are presented such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross.

We can concentrate on these words: “all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, even in the midst of persecutions”. Is this not what we face today and often fail to do, even on an everyday, banal level, when we are afraid to pray in a restaurant, or say what we believe at a dinner party, or say we are voting according to our Catholic principles? The Church says that being prepared for martyrdom is the duty of all Christians, so how can it be that we are so habitually afraid of someone making a little fun of me?

In Matthew 10, Jesus says: *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;³⁸ and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

This last sentence is the decisive moment or test of the size of our faith. Jesus says that our faith must be the most important thing in our lives, more important even than our family loyalties, even more important than our own lives. For the men at Lepanto and Malta and Rhodes, they really were willing to stake their lives and lose them for Christ, in order to find them again. One of my favorite theology books is a small book written by Hans Urs Von Balthasar back in the turbulent 60's. Its title in English is *“The Moment of Christian Witness”*. It was written when the movement in many parts of the Church was to stop being so militant, so different from the world, and to know how to accommodate ourselves to the world and its ways. But Von Balthasar knew this was wrong. He claims, rightly I think, that if we want to test to see if we have faith “to move mountains”, we can really only do it in one

way: the decisive test: martyrdom. In other words, take to heart what Jesus just said above. Prefer Him to everything.

I am quite sure that one of the reasons that our faith is ailing today is that we prefer so many things to Jesus. We like Him, we want to stay in the Church, but so many things in practice are more important. Perhaps the example of these men, and the celebration of the day of Our Lady of the Rosary, could help us to reflect on our own actions, and ask ourselves if we too are prepared to confess Christ before men in our politically correct and secularized culture. †

The Hope of the Mustard Seed: The Faith That Can Move Mountains

Lisa Fortini-Campbell
October 8, 2016

I'd like to begin this evening's reflection, not just yet with the mustard seed that features in my title, but with a story about a little spider – one who has recently made her home in our backyard. My husband first noticed her one day when he was about to dump our accumulated vegetable peelings and coffee grounds into the compost bin. But, as he began to lift the lid, he saw that a spider had stretched her brand new web between the lid of the bin and a tree a few feet away. There was no way to lift the lid without tearing the web.

So there poor Alan was on the horns of a dilemma--our commitment to ecological responsibility in direct conflict with a spider's need to catch her food! There was no easy way to accomplish one objective without undermining the other, so, with a sad and rueful look at the spider sitting quietly in the center of her beautiful creation, Alan lifted the lid, emptied the compost and left her web dangling in the breeze.

Two days later, though, with another canister of compost in hand, Alan saw she'd rebuilt her web, attaching it once again to exactly the same place. Again, he lifted the lid, and again, tore the web, but again, two days later, there it was, rebuilt in exactly the same place, good as new.

The perseverance and tenacity of the insect world is striking, isn't it, and that little spider made me think of the many ant hills I've seen actively under construction oblivious to the danger around them. Thousands of ants go to work for hours and hours, piling up sand in a crack in the sidewalk, only to have a five-year old on her tricycle plow right through it. But when she does, destroying all their hard work, not to mention countless little ant lives, the remaining ants seem neither shocked, confused, grieved, angry, nor discouraged. Like my little spider, they just go back to re-building what was lost.

Our own late Cardinal George believed in the virtues of tenacity and perseverance, too, although many people have come to believe he was quite pessimistic about the future of American society. At a gathering of the priests of the Archdiocese back in 2010 he famously said, "I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square." But, most everyone who quotes him leaves off what he said next. "And his successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history."

Tonight, I'd like to encourage us to take a cue from the spider and the ants and our own good Cardinal George and let go of whatever confusion, anger, grief, or discouragement we may be feeling these days as so much of our culture crumbles around us--our family structures, our religious traditions, our medical ethics, our legislative and judicial integrity, and even our civil society--in ways we are powerless to stop and only

intermittently successful at slowing down. We rightly fear for our freedom to live in faith in the coming years, but despite it all, we must remember that Christ's call to us is clear now as it has been for 2000 years, "Follow me!" "In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world." (Jn 16:33).

We leave the conquering to him and focus ourselves on a different job. The prophet Micah put it in a way I like best, "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

So, trusting in Our Lord, we walk humbly on. But our footsteps do more than move us through time and space; our acts of kindness, justice and love leave a mark behind, like breadcrumbs in the forest, that makes it easier for others who follow us to see and follow the Way, too. Bishop Fulton Sheen used a different metaphor and called this work "laying stones in the Highway of the King." We must be conscious of our role as highway builders and do it as well as we can because it is by walking on these stones that Christ will re-build the world.

Highway construction is no easy job, however, especially when our fellow travelers keep tearing up the stones as soon as we've laid them down. It would be understandable, and easy, frankly, in the face of all this resistance to get angry--and, to be sure, we see plenty of angry Christians these days. But, it's far more common in my experience for Christians to get disheartened and discouraged and to lose so much hope in the possibilities of the future that they want nothing more than to take a nostalgic leap back into the golden past where when things were not so hard, to that time when we imagine all families were intact, morals were strictly observed, everybody went to church, and no one was afraid to wish one another a "Merry Christmas."

Sometimes I think we're like the Israelites, also making their great journey forward, their exodus out of slavery in Egypt, and across the uncharted desert to the promised land. But remember that as soon as the going got tough, how discouraged they were and how urgently they wanted to go back where they came from? Not yet two months into their journey, they started complaining--about the...food. "If only we had died at the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!" (Exodus 16:3). Faced with hunger, they would rather have gone back to slavery. But God had them in hand and wasn't about to let them turn around. That night while they slept, manna rained down from heaven. The next morning, they ate and forged on.

The same is true for us. The world of our past is gone and we can't go back. The only way is forward, come what may, blazing a new path, building a new highway, re-building the world. And like the Israelites, we don't have to worry about strength for the journey. The Bread of Life is still here to keep us going.

Be that as it may, I think it helps to have some human encouragement, too, at least it does for me and human encouragement is why we're here tonight. So to help me find it, I've been looking into the past--not in nostalgic longing, but trying to find whispers of guidance and glimmers of inspiration, from those who walked ahead of me. I want my ordinary human ancestors to encourage me, and tell me what to do, right now, in this discouraging time and place.

To make sure I was gathering really good and useful advice, though, I decided to look to people who lived through the toughest of tough times--through war, genocide, imprisonment, oppression and suppression--because I want to know how they kept going, even if only for another step, when the matter was literally one of life and death.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, which many scholars call The Book of Encouragement, labels these people our great 'cloud of witnesses.' "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith." (Heb 12:1)

So what does this great "cloud of witnesses" have to share with us? What kept them going, putting one foot in front of the other, one day at a time, hard at work on the Highway of the King, even through the worst of times? And how do we apply the fruits of their experience to our difficulties today?

So far I've learned four things from their example that we can easily do and I'd like to share them with you tonight, beginning with the most important one first. It's an exhortation that echoes over and over again, in every generation and in every place. It's simple advice, although it takes some energy to sustain and you've heard it many times before: lift up your heart! The practice of religion may be outlawed, people may be imprisoned or even killed for proclaiming their faith, Christianity may be forcibly suppressed in an entire country for decades, but the longing for God will not die because God is not dead and never will be. He is eternal, the gates of hell will never prevail.

One of my heroes, 14 year old Anne Frank, wrote these words in May, 1944, just a few months before she and her family were captured that never fail to help lift up my heart.

"It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

As we know, Anne Frank didn't survive the concentration camps, but Viktor Frankl did and in 1959 wrote a book that, I think, has had more influence on me than any other single book, except perhaps the Bible. It's called, "Man's Search for Meaning" and is the story of his experiences in Auschwitz and Dachau and the insights about the meaning of life that he discovered there. Among his many observations, his most durable insight, and the one most helpful to us tonight, was that while forces beyond our control can take away everything we possess, they cannot take away our freedom to choose how to react to those forces. While we cannot choose what happens to us and in the world around us, we can always control how we think about what is going on and what we do in the face of it. Keeping our hearts lifted, by the grace of God, and full of confidence in his ultimate victory is one such choice.

The last sentence of his book makes that point more strongly than any other. He writes, "Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips."

Like Viktor Frankl, Elie Weisel was another who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald to write one of the first first-person accounts of the Holocaust. In his book, "Night," he remarked how astonished he was that in the midst of all the brutality around him and the endless suffering, many of the Jews in his company continued to pray and to celebrate the holidays, as best as they could.

Fr. Walter Cisek, a Jesuit priest imprisoned in Stalin's labor camps for 23 years, witnessed the same phenomenon. In the early days of his solitary confinement in the infamous Lubyanka prison, he could hear other prisoners praying Psalm 91 (1-4, 7-8a) through the walls.

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shade of the Almighty,
Say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress,
my God in whom I trust."
He will rescue you from the fowler's snare,
from the destroying plague,
He will shelter you with his pinions,
and under his wings you may take refuge;
his faithfulness is a protecting shield.
Though a thousand fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
near you it shall not come.

When he was ultimately transferred to Siberia, rumors spread that he was a priest. And so in spite of the threat of punishment and even execution, people began to come to him surreptitiously for prayers, for blessings, for confession, for advice, and eventually for Mass because faithful people living outside the camps found ways to smuggle in

bits of altar bread wrapped in pages of the Missal and also vials of sacramental wine, at the risk of their own lives.

Fr. Cisek was released and came home to the US in 1963 and three years later the April, 1966, the cover of Time Magazine was emblazoned with the question, "Is God dead?" They were quoting the famous phrase of Frederick Nietzsche, the 19th century nihilist German philosopher who was certain the answer was, "yes."

But the answer is "no," because in that same year, on the other side of the world a Jesuit Father serving in Vietnam as an Army chaplain was celebrating the Mass in the jungle for his American soldiers. As he did, he was aware that North Vietnamese soldiers had also crept in close by, hiding themselves in the dense foliage so that they could hear the Mass, too. It makes sense: before the war, 1.2 million Roman Catholics lived in North Vietnam. 600,000 of them fled when the Communist regime took over, but the remainder stayed, many of them, no doubt, drafted in the army. Like the prisoners in Siberia, they could have been killed for any practice of their faith, but full of faith with hearts lifted up, they were drawn to the Mass, even one celebrated by an 'enemy' priest. The story makes me wonder if any of those young soldiers ever became priests after the war. It's not beyond imagining. Today the Catholic faith is alive in well in Vietnam, counting 6 million faithful, nearly 7% of the population, and they are served by more than 2500 priests.

So with this cloud of witnesses as our guide, let us lift up our hearts and fill our lungs with good air. God is not dead. He will never die. He will never let his church die, either. No matter how bad it gets, he will always ignite the gift of faith in his children on earth.

"For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands," writes St. Paul to Timothy, "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord...but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." (2 Tim 1:6-8). So we need to keep our hearts lifted as we are hard at work on that Highway of the King!

All well and good. But what do we do when others destroy overnight what we have spent years building? St. Mother Theresa said, "Build it anyway."

Her famous "Anyway" poem ends with these lines,

"The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway."

At another time, she put it this way, 'God does not require that we be successful only that we be faithful.' So that is our second lesson from the cloud of witnesses: just get to work on His Highway: put one foot in front of the other as surely as you can, lay in one stone after another as carefully as you can, do it one day at a time as faithfully as you can, and leave the rest to God.

One foot in front of another, one stone after another, one day at a time could have been the motto of St. John Vianney, the Patron Saint of parish priests. Because he is so famous, perhaps you already know something of his story, but the part I'd like to tell you starts in 1818 when 32 year old Fr. John Vianney arrived in a place called Ars to serve as the parish priest for its 230 inhabitants. Like people in so many French villages at that time, the men and women of Ars had lost the practice of worship and even the habit of moral behavior during the Reign of Terror which violently suppressed Catholicism after the French Revolution. Despite the risks, John Vianney's family kept their faith alive during that frightening time, and when Napoleon finally allowed the practice of religion once again, John Vianney became a priest and was sent to Ars.

He had no grand vision for his vocation. He simply went about the business of doing the work God had put right on his doorstep, hour after hour, day after day. He took place his in the pulpit and in the confessional and waited. A few came. Gradually, word about his preaching and spiritual advice got around and more came. What started as a slow trickle of penitents became a stream, the stream becoming a river and finally, the river becoming a torrent. By doing nothing more than laying one stone at a time, by 1858, forty years after he arrived, 20,000 people a year made their way to Ars, and to him. In the last ten years of his life, Fr. Vianney spent 16 to 18 hours a day in the confessional, just making his humble walk with God and leaving success in his hands. Can we do the same?

In 1925, the same year Fr. John Vianney was canonized, Francis Ford, a Maryknoll Father went to China as a missionary. While missionaries had been working there for centuries, the Christian faith never seemed to fully take root. Father Ford thought it was because the Chinese saw Christianity as an imported religion, not a truly native one, so he reasoned that for it to become native, its seeds had to be deeply planted in the hearts of the Chinese people by other Chinese people. And so he set about cultivating a little nursery of native plants by allowing the seed of longing for God, which he knew lay dormant in every Chinese heart, to be germinated by the witness of faithful Christians living with them in their villages.

With the help of the Maryknoll Sisters, Father Ford, now Bishop Ford, formed a small group of Chinese women, calling them Sister Catechists of Our Lady, and sent them into villages, two by two, like the early apostles, to simply make friends with the other women who lived there. He told them, "Go where there is no path and leave a trail," because he was certain that people would be drawn to the example of these good Christian women, become curious about it, and eventually aspire to follow it. St. Francis of Assisi has the same idea: "Preach the Gospel. Use words only if necessary."

Anne Frank wrote the same idea in the early spring of 1944. "We all know that a good example is more effective than advice. People will always follow a good example; so be the one to set a good example, then it won't be long before the others follow. How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to begin to change the world!"

Bishop Ford's episcopal motto was 'condolere,' to be compassionate--to be with and to suffer with others. It could also have been the motto of the woman who most inspires me, Edith Stein, Sr. Theresa Benedicta, the German Jew, professor of philosophy, Catholic convert and Carmelite nun who died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

In her last days before dying in one of the most horrible places ever to have scarred the face of the earth, Edith Stein still moved along on her humble walk which was now progressing minute by minute, rather than day by day. And her highway building continued, now by laying just tiny pebbles, rather than full-size stones. Surviving witnesses said that they watched her in those days moving about the camp, utterly at peace, doing the tiniest of things to bring comfort to the other prisoners--arranging a child's hair, letting a woman cry on her shoulder, making a little girl laugh.

There is so much work we can do, right on our doorstep, to live the Gospel. Can we afford to waste any time on anger, discouragement or fear? I certainly don't want to.

Christ says, "Be brave," and certainly Edith Stein, Bishop Ford and John Vianney were, but what bolstered their courage? What does the cloud of witnesses have say about that?

It turns out that they have a lot to say about it and they tell us to draw our courage by focusing on the good that is always present in the world, no matter how overwhelming the evil. That's the third lesson, just look, they say, good is always there the way the blue sky is there, no matter how dark the storm.

Anne Frank literally found her hope in the sky. In the late winter of 1944, after nearly two years in hiding, and seeing the outside world only through a small crack in the window shutters, she wrote,

"The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles."

Joyce Pilgrim gave five year old Phyllis the same advice when she, Phyllis, and her brother were captured and held in a prisoner of war camp in Java for almost four years by the Japanese during the Second World War. In her book called "The Hidden

Passport," Phyllis tells how her family was captured at gunpoint after the Japanese invaded Java in March of 1942. She, her mother and three year old brother were separated from their father, who was as a chemical engineer working for the Shell Oil company, and imprisoned in a camp for women and children. Her father was taken to a camp for men and no one knew if they would ever see each other again. (Happily, the whole family survived and was reunited after the war).

Not knowing what the next day would bring and despite the fear and brutality that were with them every day, Joyce worked to keep Phyllis and her three-year-old little brother hopeful. She told them to do something very simple and something even a little child could do, "See something beautiful, hear something beautiful and do something beautiful for someone else--every day." No matter the hunger and the heat, the disease and the cruelty, it was always possible to do something good for someone else--invent a game for them to play, tell a joke, or say a simple kind word.

And, there was always something beautiful to see, a sunset, a flower, the stars. And something beautiful to hear: a bird, the rain on the palm trees, her mother singing a song. We can do this, too. Look on the good!

See something beautiful. Hear something beautiful. Do something beautiful each and every day. That's what the little Pilgrim family did day after day for four straight year to keep their courage.

Writing a good-by letter from his prison cell, St. Paul told the Philippians to do the same thing...

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Ph 4:8) If they did that, he told them, then "The God of peace will be with you." (Ph 4:9) A heart fully at peace, even in the midst of terrible suffering. To me this is an excellent definition of the kind of courage Christ wants for us.

This is simple and straightforward advice and there is no reason we can't practice it, too. And it's so obvious that I wonder why I don't do it more often myself. I think the reason is that it's so easy to be drawn to the ugly, the obnoxious, the mean and the miserable because it is broadcast at us every day.

My husband, Alan, says that when he becomes King of the World, his first act will be to see that TVs come with off switches. He's being funny because we can already re-direct our attention by turning off the news feeds, TVs, radios, and by changing the subject in a conversation that drives off a cliff into despair. But it's hard. As the old truism says, it's easier to be wrong in a crowd than to be right alone. So, the cloud of witnesses tells us, don't let yourself be alone!

"Encourage each other daily while it is still today," says the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 3:1), and this is the fourth lesson.

St. Paul told the Philippians the same, "Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel, not intimidated in any way by your opponents," St. Paul exhorts the Philippians (Phil 1:27-28)

Stay together! Encourage each other! Studying my cloud of witnesses, I find that this advice becomes the most urgent as a person knows he has very little time to make sure others hear his advice.

Among our earliest Church Fathers was St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, captured by Roman soldiers under the Emperor Trajan in the year 107 when he was 70 years old. He walked in chains from Antioch to the Coliseum in Rome where he was killed by the jaws of a lion. But, on his way to Rome, he wrote seven letters to the people he was leaving behind which earned him the title, "Doctor of Unity" because something in each letter urged his Christian readers to stay together and in union with the bishop who is in union with Christ himself. He understood that vulnerable Christians in a pagan society had a stronger chance of surviving by staying together than they would ever have alone.

Just a few weeks ago on September 20, we celebrated the feast day of Fr. Andrew Kim Taegon and his lay companions who were martyred in Korea in 1867. In his final letter from prison, he too, urges the same message, "Hold fast, then to the will of God and with all your heart fight the good fight under the leadership of Jesus; conquer again the diabolical power of this world that Christ has already vanquished. I beg you not to fail in your love for one another, but to support one another and to stand fast until the Lord mercifully delivers us from our trials."

Fr. Taegon's letter concentrates the four themes of encouragement from the cloud of witnesses in to just a few perfectly distilled sentences.

1. Don't forget: Christ has already conquered sin and death, so lift up your heart!
2. Keep going. Fight the good fight, do the work right in front of you, keep going.
3. Hold fast and have courage.
4. And, last, but not least, Stay together, love one another and encourage one another.

How to translate this advice into our daily lives is a task for each of us and something I hope we can take the time to discuss with each other in just a few minutes. It is important that we do this work because when we do, as Fr. Taegon says, The Lord will bring something good out of it all.

So, this brings me back at last to the title of this reflection, because knowing the Lord will bring good out of it all is the hope of the mustard seed.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches," (Matt. 13:31; see also Mark 4:30; Luke 13:19). And, "Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matt 17:20)

No matter the destruction, God is always bringing good out of his little mustard seeds to re-build and renew the face of the earth and we must look to see the giant mustard trees thriving on the earth.

Can you imagine how overjoyed martyred Fr. Taegon would be to see the fast-growing Christian church in Korea and to know that 30% them are Christian and that 70% of Korean Americans are Christian? Can you imagine how thankful the tortured and martyred Bishop Ford would be to know that today Christianity is a native Chinese religion and that on March 27 of this very year, 100 million people celebrated the Resurrection of Our Lord on Easter Sunday?

And can you imagine how proud Fr. Cisek would be know that while Vladimir Putin has just approved legislation that makes it illegal for Russians to share faith outside a church building, not even at home with their children, not even with their friends by email, the 50% of Russians who call themselves Christian have vowed to find a way?

Out of the mustard seeds of all of their ministries, God has moved mountains and given rise to very great trees. Isn't it exciting to wonder what he will bring out of us, too?

My good friend, Fr. Joseph Henchey, told me that when he was a seminarian in Rome back in the early 1950s, every professor began his lecture, each and every day, by kissing the lectern then reciting the verse from Psalm 104, "Emitte Spiritum tuum, et renovabis faciem terrae. Send forth your spirit, Lord and renew the face of the earth." They did it because they hoped that God would use their lecture would do on that day, in that place, for those young men listening to bring about good things, a renewal of the world. I hope that we, too, can dedicate our days in exactly the same way. I think there's no better way to express the hope of the mustard seed.

I'd like to conclude tonight with one more story about one more survivor--this time about a man named Yisrael Kristal who, at the age of 113, also has the distinction of being the world's oldest man.

He made the news a couple of weeks ago, not because of his age, but because he was about to celebrate his bar-mitzvah, 100 years late. It seems that in 1916 when he was 13 years old, his mother had already died and his father was away fighting in Russia, so there was no one to preside over the ceremony. When the war ended and Yisrael grew up, he took his place in the family's candy business in Poland, but the Second World War swept Yisrael and his family into the camp at Auschwitz. His wife and children died there, but in 1945 he was liberated by the Allies, weighing just 80 pounds.

Yisrael picked up the pieces of his life and moved to Israel, restarting his family's candy business. He married again, fathered children again and now at 113, surrounded by scores of family and friends, he would finally celebrate his long-postponed bar-mitzvah.

The occasion brought journalists from all over the world and they all wanted him to tell them the secret to his long life. But he said, "I don't know the secret for long life. I believe that everything is determined from above and we shall never know the reasons why. There have been smarter, stronger and better looking men than me who are no longer alive. All that is left for us to do is to keep on working as hard as we can and rebuild what is lost."