

Reflections

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The Holy Innocents

I believe that for a Christian of the 21st century, this is one of the cruelest and most difficult pages of the Gospel. The life of Christ begins with a trickle of blood, of innocent blood.

Tradition has surrounded with jokes and pranks this 28th of December in which these innocents are commemorated. Could it be that we surround with grins that which terrorizes us? Because before the scene of the flight of Christ and the deaths of the small Bethlehemites, a Christian can feel nothing more than horror and fright.

The flight. We can imagine how frightened Joseph remained after the announcement from the Angel. What the Angel told him about Herod was unfortunately most probable and Joseph knew that the king's soldiers would soon travel the 8 kilometers which separated the capital and the village. He awakened Mary, although half-asleep they dressed quickly, gathered what was indispensable and started on their way.

Thus they fled, without stopping to think, without studying the road they had to follow and without knowing where they could take refuge. They only knew they had to flee the city, they had to put distance between their Son and Herod, and they had to do it without leaving a trace, without saying farewell to anyone.

To flee was to sleep during the day and walk all night. It meant turning around when hearing whatever step along the way and to see in each shadow Herod's soldiers. It must not have been easy for them to walk at night through those lonely areas, without knowing the way, and they had to cross the desert with its dangers in the sand; thirst and the sun. And thus they left, without suspecting the great tragedy left behind.

The tyrant. When Herod saw that the Magi had deceived him, his rage exploded. He could not accept that someone had fooled him. What concerned the king was not so much the child, but a possible Messianic movement against him which could produce an insurrection. He then decided to take the easier road and ordered the assassination of all those recently born in Bethlehem and its environs.

To understand this decision, one must know the inhumane character of the king. The historian, Josefo, says that Herod "was a very cruel man toward others" and he relates several of his crimes; so horrible and repugnant that the killing of a few Jewish children seems like nothing and Josefo doesn't even mention it.

What he does mention is that in his last days, he ordered the killing of three of his own children. And before his death, he decreed to eliminate the main nobles of his kingdom which did not take place because the tyrant died before. Only a man so cruel and violent as Herod could have ordered the barbarous killing of innocents.

The meaning. How many were killed? The legend has multiplied the numbers: it speaks of hundreds; of thousands.

Bethlehem was, at that time, a small village and with its environs it could not have had more than 20 or 30 boys under the age of 2.

But it is not the number which horrifies us, it is the act. Why did these children die? The man of today cannot digest the deaths of the innocents – in spite of the fact that so many innocent children have never died in our time. It is enough to think about organized abortions.

The Church, lovingly venerating these small ones, has tried to understand the mystery of their deaths: they still could not speak and already they confessed Christ. They were a testimony to Him; not with their words, but with their blood. Without knowing it, they were the first martyrs. Even moreso, they were the saviors of the Savior because not only did they die for Christ, but they also died in His place.

They were the first Christians, the first saints of the Church. Therefore they have secured, for many centuries, their privileged place on the calendar of the Saints.

Dear brothers and sisters, may these Holy Innocent Saints help us to bravely give witness to Christ before men, not only with our words but with our lives.

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