

# “UNDER THE HOLY CROSS”

## HOLY CROSS PARISH RETREAT DAY (Part 1)

I don't know about you, but I am not a huge fan of suffering. This will be of no surprise to anyone who has had to work with me for any length of time. To be honest, I find suffering rather annoying, it gets in my way and just puts me in a really bad mood—or more so than usual. And if any of you aren't really sure what suffering is, you will know after having to sit here and listen to me for the next twenty minutes or so.

The thing is, I have always wanted a quiet, simple life. It was one of the reasons I thought of priesthood. I wanted to spend my days in the peace of Christ which I found in the quietness of a church. I know what most of you would be thinking, that looking at me when I was young—I mean younger—that by day it would have been all extreme sports and by night raving and clubbing. But, surprisingly, that wasn't the case. I wanted then, as I do now, peace and quiet, stability and order. But suffering gets in the way and, as I said, I am no fan of suffering.

I don't mean the idea of suffering. As any of you who have downed a can of Red Bull just to make keep awake through any of my homilies would know, I talk about suffering regularly. And that is because I honestly believe that suffering is redemptive. That suffering produces a crisis which, in spite of how it sounds, is a morally good thing. You see the word “crisis” comes from the Greek verb κρινω which means “to choose”. Because that is actually what a crisis is—a moment to choose. And that is what suffering can do; it causes us to choose, to make a decision. I believe wholeheartedly, as I have said before, that the way of the Catholic is the way of the Cross because it is the way of Christ. And that if God incarnate cannot escape suffering, then neither can we.

The world abhors suffering. It despises it and does everything it can to rid itself of it. On one hand, I think we can all understand this and it is appealing. On the other hand, it is nothing more than nihilism—the complete and utter destruction of our humanity. The world says that a person should not have to bear the consequences of his or her own bad choices. If I get pregnant, and I don't want to be pregnant, then I have every right to get rid of it, because why should I have to suffer the consequences of my actions? If I was born a man but decide I want to be a woman then why shouldn't I just say that I'm a woman? If I claim to be a Catholic but don't bother with all that weekly Mass nonsense but only bother with the Church when I need it for a baptism or a wedding or whatever it may be, then how dare you tell me I am in mortal sin! How dare you tell me I am on the road to hell! If God loves me, then why would He send me to Hell. I mean—I don't have any real love for God and I'm not really interested in what He has to say—but that's not the point! Why should I have to suffer the consequences of my choices?

In this first talk, I will talk about the crisis facing the faithful today and the persecution of the Church at the hands of the world. In the second talk, I will talk about how this crisis finds its resolution because the persecution we face is will find its defeat in the place evil was defeated long ago—in the Holy Cross of Our Lord.

Our world has torn down the religion of God and replaced it with the religion of myself. It no longer cares that God became Man. It is more interested in man becoming god. The stupidity of this is that if the world actually ever bothered to understand the reality of the Catholic faith then it would understand, as the Priest prays at every Mass when he pours the water into the wine and says, "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity", that God has already made possible for us the fullness of who we are. But the world clings with, ironically religious zealotry, to its religion of the self. Science

has replaced the Sacraments in a desperate attempt to rid the world of death. As French Catholic author, Madeleine Delbr  l , wrote: “[the problem is] they still believe they kill death... they kill ways of dying: rabies, smallpox, [but] death is doing just fine”.

Part of this new religion of man over God is that there is no such thing anymore as truth. Instead, I have my truth and you have your truth. But again, the stupidity of this is that you can have your truth as long as you don’t hurt my feelings, because if you do, then you are an extremist. It is the same with the modern idea of tolerance. We are told tolerance is a virtue. But by definition, a virtue must be a virtue all the time. For example, it is always right to be courageous, it is always right to be prudent, it is always right to be charitable; there is never a time when it is wrong to be these things. But you can’t say that, and not even the world says that, about tolerance. We are told we should be tolerant of different lifestyles, but we are told that there is zero tolerance for this or that behaviour. Well how can tolerance be a virtue if sometimes it is good to be tolerant and sometimes it is bad? This is the problem that pervades a world that has violently rejected the Catholic faith. There is no longer any foundation for intellectual thought, there is no longer any guide to what is good and what is bad, there is no longer any certainty on what is right and what is wrong. Instead, these things are determined by whoever shouts the loudest, whatever the popular media decides, and whatever is easiest at the moment.

Anti-Christian bigotry is nothing new, it has existed for centuries in one way or another. In previous times, philosophers like the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche who raged against Christianity, still considered the faith something serious enough with which to argue. Today, however, people yawn at the question of God because the world has moved on from that nonsense and anyone who still clings to those old-fashioned ideas is, at best, quaint, and at worse an extremist that needs to be put down.

The world still does harp on about “spirituality” but that is because it sees spirituality as safe because it is a personal matter that has no place in modern society—apart from the boutique shops down in Newtown that sell essential oils, books on better living through yoga, and whatever is the latest disgusting green liquid that passes as a tonic for mindfulness (a few years ago it was wheatgrass and we got to go up the counter and have our wheatgrass cut in front of us—kind of like mowing a lawn—and have it blended into a sickening green frothy concoction and have the privilege of paying \$10 for it). Far from the genuine Christian spiritualities of Saints like St. Ignatius of Loyola or St. Therese of Avila or St. John of the Cross, spirituality is now simply a passing reference to God, a higher being or the universe that seeks to anaesthetise and soothe our troubled egos, assuring us that whatever we choose for us is right because it feels right.

So why, then, if the faith of our Fathers is no longer relevant is the world so deathly afraid of the Church? It is because the Church—the true Church—believes that the destiny of man is transcendent not transitioning, that my body is not separate from my soul but that my actions inform who I am as a moral person, that there are boundaries and limits to humanity that can only be traversed by a belief in the fullness of life that was won for us by the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Holy Cross.

The world looks on the Church as nothing more than anti-everything: anti-choice, anti-freedom, anti-fun. They want us to laugh with sinners and laugh at the Saints. “We are history’s wet blanket and are a perpetual buzzkill to life’s simple material pleasures”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chap, Larry, “I Blossom on the Grave of the God Who Died for Me: Evangelisation in an Age of Unbelief”, [gaudiumetspes22.com](http://gaudiumetspes22.com)

The Church is all that really remains against the tidal wave of totalitarianism that seeks to destroy all remnant of God from the world. And this is the work of Satan. It mocks man and seeks to ape the Church. It is why modern western society can promote the ideals of abortion under the tattered banner of “my body, my choice”, and within the same breath tell us that we have no right to choose whether our body is vaccinated or not. It is why a woman dressed as the Blessed Virgin Mary can simulate an abortion on an altar in a church and be supported by the law as her right to freedom of speech, but a woman praying silently across the road from an abortion clinic will be arrested and handcuffed and sentenced to prison because it is a denial of the rights of others. It is why the Devil possesses human beings, because he seeks to make a mockery of God becoming Man.

Last year in Finland a member of Parliament and a doctor were placed on trial to face “hate crime” charges for having quoted the Bible in defence of Scripture’s teaching on homosexuality. In her opening statement, the Finnish prosecutor said, “The point isn’t whether it is true or not, but that this is insulting.” Think about that: the point is not whether these words are true or not, but that someone’s feelings were hurt by them. If convicted, the law permits them to be sent to prison.

This is not an isolated case. In Scotland, proposed reforms to the government’s Hate Crime Bill could mean that simply owning a Bible or a Catechism could be a crime. That is because the new laws would make illegal anything that is considered “inflammatory” or “stirs up hatred”, and so the moral precepts against adultery and homosexuality given in the Bible would be considered “hate speech”. And if you doubt this, the leader of a prominent Scottish atheist organisation, Atheist Scotland, has already said: “We fully intend to monitor all Holy Books, sermons in places of worship and the social media accounts of the various religions and report any hatred to Police Scotland for criminal investigation.”

In France, a proposed law will make it a crime of publishing or even speaking against abortion, and that includes even one relative speaking to another who wants to abort her baby.

A recent report from the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDAC Europe) found that social pressure and censorship targeting Christians is intensifying and taking on new ways. In 2021, there were 519 anti-Christian hate crimes in nineteen European countries, but which are probably significantly underestimated because of the limited number of Christians who report the attacks against them. But this figure alone suggests that every single day, there are at least two hate crimes committed against Christians. How many of these do you hear reported on the news? Watch the news tonight and see if you can find even one story on this.

The fact is, and you will not hear the popular media ever report on this, and sadly, you will be hard pressed to even hear this from some in the Church, but Christians are the most persecuted people in the world. The fact is that in at least three out of four acts of religiously-motivated violence and oppression, it is Christians who are the victims. In their annual report, Aid to the Church in Need found that in 75% of the countries surveyed, Christian persecution was on the rise. [In November 2020 in Eritrea, an attack on a church left almost a thousand people dead. On Pentecost Sunday last year in Nigeria, a massacre killed forty people attending Mass. In the past three months in India, over 603 churches have been destroyed and 150 people have been killed. In all of these, the police refused to intervene. In China, more than 2,000 churches and Crosses were demolished within one year. In Egypt, it is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity. In Eritrea, within one month in 2017, 122 Christians were arrested during a government crackdown and 33 women were jailed in a prison notorious for torture. In Iran, saying Mass in Farsi, the main language of Christians, is not allowed. Priests are required to ask a Muslim attending to leave or else the Priest will be arrested for alleged proselytism, that is, making

converts. In Iraq's Nineveh Plains, almost 13,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in Christian majority towns and villages during a 2½-year occupation by Daesh (ISIS) and 120,000 people were made refugees. In a northern Nigerian diocese, Islamist Boko Haram mass killings and violence caused 1.8 million people to be forced from their homes and the killings left 5,000 widows and 15,000 orphans. In North Korea, there are reports of public executions of Christians, and the faithful meet in secret in groups of two or three and silently mouth prayers. In Saudi Arabia, there are no churches as they are forbidden, public Christian worship is banned, as is the import of Bibles, and converting to Christianity is punishable by death. In Sudan, in February 2017, the government gave notice of its intent to destroy at least 25 churches. In Syria, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Aphrem II pleaded for help for Christians exiting en masse, admitting to fears that one of the oldest Christian communities was "on the way out". In Turkey, over the past five years at least 100 church properties have been seized.<sup>1</sup>

Last year, it is estimated that 5,600 people were killed because they were Christians; that's an average of fifteen people every single day. When BBC News ran a report on the numbers of Christians killed, it called the figures "nonsense" and tried to argue them down.<sup>2</sup> This is how popular media treats the persecution of Christians. Yet there are laws proposed around the world that will make it a hate crime if I so-call "misgender" someone, and the popular media are fully in support of this. So, it seems, you can hunt down and kill a woman in the street because she is Christian, but you better not call a woman "miss" if she has decided that she is now a man.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Ruth. "Are there really 100,000 new Christian martyrs every year?," BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24864587>).

It is ironic that as Catholics we honour the true victim, Christ Himself, whilst the world ridicules Our Lord and makes themselves out to be the victims. We live in a society which now celebrates the idea of victimhood. In an episode of the television series “Will and Grace”, there is an argument over who to vote for in an upcoming local election. In the scene with the characters of both Will and Grace, there is an argument between them: “So, listen, I need a check.—What for?—Judy Green. She’s running for city council, and I think we should support her.—But we’re backing Ted Bowers.—Well, I found out a few things about him that makes me think I should support the other candidate.—Like what?—Like he’s running against a woman.—So? Who is she? What do we know about her?—She’s a woman. And she’s Jewish.—And?—And she’s a woman... [and] what makes you think that you have the better candidate?—[H]e’s gay.—Well, mine’s a woman and Jewish. That makes two victims to your one.”

We have lost sense of what a victim is. A victim isn’t someone who has their feelings hurt because they don’t like what another person says. A victim isn’t someone who is a victim because they are part of a minority. Catholics are a minority, but that doesn’t mean we should label ourselves victims. We define a victim as something or someone offered in sacrifice to the glory of almighty God. The sacrifice implies that the victim is given up as an act of adoration or of restitution. This means that a victim is someone who offers themselves to God for the love of God or to make amends for wrongdoing. This is the true understanding of a victim and this is why we honour Our Lord as the true victim.

What all of this does, all this pretending that Christian persecution doesn’t really exist, all these laws to make the teachings of the faith “hate speech”, all these trials to convict someone for a belief which does not conform to the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the age, is to lead to the abolition of humanity.



You may say that I am exaggerating, but think of what Hannah Arendt, a Jewish historian, wrote as World War II had drawn to a close and the glow from the ovens at Auschwitz had only just faded. She wrote: "In this sense, it must be possible to face and understand the outrageous fact that so small (and, in world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and antisemitism could become the catalytic agent for first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of death factories." No one really cared when, first of all there was just a one-day boycott of all Jewish businesses in Germany—I mean, it was just for one day. And no one really took much notice when Jews and political opponents were banned from the civil service—I mean, we can't allow extremists to infiltrate the government. And no one was too concerned when Germans who consulted Jewish doctors would no longer have their medical bills paid—I mean, those people should be cancelled. No one really cared much about any of this until suddenly the world was at war because of this.

The world has always been subject to revolution, to social and political ideologies, to extremism from the left to the right and back to the left again. And throughout it all, there has always been a desperate need for a scapegoat, to find some group to blame for all the troubles we are facing. In ancient Greece it was Pandora who was given a box by the Greek god Zeus but was told never to open it. She did, and unleashed all the troubles on the world. In Russia and then later in Germany, it was the Jews who were to blame. Today, it is Christians. But the ultimate scapegoat was Our Lord Himself.

You see, the term scapegoat has its origins in the ancient Middle East. In the Bible, a scapegoat is one of a pair of goats that is released into the wilderness, taking with it all sins and impurities, while the other is sacrificed. You can read this in the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament where a goat is chosen to be cast into the desert to carry away the sins of the community.

It says: "Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness... The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region" (16:21-22). It is why St. John the Baptist would say when "he saw Jesus coming toward him... 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (*Jn.* 1:29), and why in the book of the Apocalypse St. John would write: "Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:6), and why in the Mass, as the Priest holds up the Host above the chalice, he says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

It is why the only thing that the Church truly possesses as her own is the crucified and risen Lord and the witness of martyrdom of those who believe in the Lamb that was slain (*cf. Apoc.* 5:6). And it is this belief in and this witness to the crucified and risen Lord which has inspired the greatest artistic and intellectual achievements of the past 2,000 years, and the greatest acts of heroism that the world has ever seen. It is why the only real revolution that the world has ever known, is the revolution of Christianity. It is the only revolution that has been able to find the reconciliation of death and life. And that is because Our Lord, Jesus Christ, God made Man, placed Himself on a wooden cross and brought forth from that instrument of death the way to eternal and unending and everlasting life.

The answer to all of this does not lie in programmes or strategies or in committees and policies, nor does it lie in councils or sessions, because it does not lie in re-arranging the structures of the Church to make them more corporate or more parliamentary or more democratic. We are facing what the great German theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, called our "ernstfall". That is, I started this talk, our crisis and the moment of choice that we must make. I think people are not asking how I can be a part of the Church, but why should I

bother with the Church at all. People are begging to be challenged and given a faith of deep substance that demands something of them—that demands sacrifice.

In a radio address back in 1969, a young German theologian named Joseph Ratzinger, the future great Pope Benedict XVI, saw hard times ahead for the Catholic Church. He predicted, it will “become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning,” and the process will be painful. But though smaller, the Church in time will be shaped again by saints, and she will be a light for people seeking answers to questions of meaning when the secularism of our world will have no reply.<sup>3</sup> Because the only reply left to give will be to point to the Holy Cross.

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<sup>3</sup> Shaw, Russell, “The Future of the Catholic Church,” *First Things* (firstthings.com).