

**Homily for the Novena of the Immaculate Conception - Title: Queen of Martyrs
December 4, 2022**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As we continue our Novena in preparation for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception this Thursday, we honor Our Blessed Mother this evening under her title, Queen of Martyrs.

When I meet with the *confirmandi* prior to administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, I explain many of the symbols we use in the Church, such as the vestments and sacred oils. Then we have a question-and-answer session, as we ask each other questions. One of the questions that frequently comes up is: what is a martyr? The usual answer is: someone who died for the faith. That answer is correct, but it is only partially correct, since there is more to martyrdom than dying for the faith and one can be a martyr without physically dying. What do I mean by that?

The word martyr comes from a Greek word, *martyros*, which means, “witness.” According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “The

term was originally used of the Apostles as witnesses of Christ's life and resurrection (e.g., *Acts* 1:8, 1:22), but with the spread of persecution it was reserved to those who had undergone hardships for the faith, and finally it was restricted to those who had suffered death."¹ Since last night's theme for the novena focused on Our Lady's title as Queen of Apostles, it is fitting that this evening we reflect on her title, Queen of Martyrs, since the Apostles, except for Saint John, were martyrs in both senses of the word, that is, as witnesses of Christ's life and resurrection, as well as dying for the faith.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* gives primary attention to the sense of a martyr as a witness, defining a martyr as a "person who has given or exposed his life in testimony to the truth or relevance of the Christian faith."² St. Augustine described the theological concept in these words: "It is not the suffering that constitutes the martyrdom, but the reason [for the suffering that makes one a martyr]."³ In other words, it is in giving witness to the faith that is most important, even if that results in suffering and death.

We usually think of a witness as someone who gives testimony concerning a controversial fact. Such testimony may be that of an eyewitness who saw something happen, but testimony can also be of knowledge or information, such as an expert witness. Yet there is still more: "A witness is

a person who calls attention to something other than himself, one who is called upon to give—or to be—evidence of something. He gives—or is—witness. All true religious witness ... transmits truth to others in a living way. A witness is a person totally *given* to God and his fellow men. There are three elements to this Christian witness: message, signs to convince, [and] divine helps to awaken and draw others to God.”⁴

Yesterday, Father Dominic Rankin and I were in Memphis, Tennessee, to run the marathon and half-marathon in support of St. Jude Research Hospital for Children. We ran as members of the LIFE Runners group, a pro-life organization that promotes respect for human life from conception to natural death. When we arrived in Memphis on Friday afternoon, we picked up our race packets and then spent some time at the LIFE Runners booth at the marathon expo. While we were at the LIFE Runners booth, a woman saw our sign that proclaims, REMEMBER THE UNBORN. She expressed interest in our cause and asked what becoming a member would entail. I replied that LIFE Runners are expected basically to be witnesses in the sense of proclaiming the pro-life cause, which we do primarily by wearing our t-shirts, hats, and jackets with the message, REMEMBER THE UNBORN.

In that sense, we are martyrs, acting as witnesses to the truth that human life beings at conception. But there is also the sense of martyrdom in suffering for the truth, even if it does not result in physical death. This is known as “white martyrdom,” in contrast to the red martyrdom of shedding one’s blood for the faith. We have sometimes experienced this type of white martyrdom when people shout obscenities at us and at our pro-life message. Others have experienced white martyrdom in our contemporary “cancel culture” when they are shunned or lose their jobs because they stand up for the truth.

Earlier this week, a lawyer by the name of Robin Keller wrote in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL how the law firm where she worked, Hogan Lovells, organized an online conference call for female employees and invited her to participate in what was billed as a ‘safe space’ for women at the firm to discuss the Supreme Court’s recent decision in the *Dobbs* case overturning the Court’s 1973 abortion decision in *Roe v. Wade*. She described what happened this way:

Everyone else who spoke on the call was unanimous in her anger and outrage about *Dobbs*. I spoke up to offer a different view. I noted that many jurists and commentators believed *Roe* had been

wrongly decided. I said that the court was right to remand the issue to the states. ... I referred to numerous reports of disproportionately high rates of abortion in the black community, which some have called a form of genocide. I said I thought this was tragic. The outrage was immediate. The next speaker called me a racist and demanded that I leave the meeting. Other participants said they “lost their ability to breathe” on hearing my comments. After more of the same, I hung up. Someone made a formal complaint to the firm. Later that day, Hogan Lovells suspended my contracts, cut off my contact with clients, removed me from email and document systems, and emailed all U.S. personnel saying that a forum participant had made “anti-Black comments” and was suspended pending an investigation. ... I filed my own complaint with the firm’s general counsel’s office ... My complaint was dismissed, my contracts with the firm were terminated, and other firms, wary of the publicity, blackballed me – all after an unblemished 44-year career. The response of the rabidly anti-*Dobbs* participants on the call wasn’t surprising. What was shocking, at least to me, was how eagerly Hogan Lovells kowtowed to a woke faction inside its workforce.⁵

Tomorrow the United States Supreme Court will take up the case of

303 *Creative v. Elenis*, which involves a woman who designs websites and

offers custom wedding websites, saying upfront that she will decline to work on same-sex weddings, because doing so “would compromise [her] Christian witness.” The lower courts have ruled against her, based on Colorado’s so-called antidiscrimination law, so she is hoping that the Supreme Court will uphold her First Amendment rights to freedom of religion and freedom of speech.⁶

This is the type “white martyrdom” that many people of faith are facing today right here in our own country.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose martyrdom in the lions’ den in 116 A.D. is depicted in our second stained glass window on the north wall of our Cathedral, preferred to use the words *imitator* and *disciple* rather than *martyr*, “for according to his thinking the martyr was one who perfectly imitated Christ in His suffering and death.”⁷

The Second Vatican Council taught that “Martyrdom makes the disciple like the master. ... Therefore, the Church considers it the highest gift and supreme test of love.”⁸

Therefore, we turn to Mary, Queen of Martyrs. St. Alphonsus Liguori said that “Mary is Queen of Martyrs, for her Martyrdom was longer and greater than that of all the Martyrs.”⁹ While the word “queen” can be used

to refer to a monarch who rules in her own right, a queen can also be understood as the wife or the mother of a king. Thus, as we heard in this evening's Gospel passage, Jesus said to the disciple and hence to all of us in reference to His Mother at the foot of the cross, "Behold, your mother" (John 19:26). We turn, then, to Mary our Mother, the Queen of Martyrs, praying for her intercession for us to be strong witnesses of our Catholic faith in our belief that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), s.v. “martyr.”

² *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967), s.v. “martyr.”

³ “*Martyrem non facit poena, sed causa.*” Quoted in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “martyr.”

⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “witness.”

⁵ Robin Keller, “No Dissent on Abortion Allowed at Hogan Lovells,” *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, November 29, 2022; accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/articles/no-dissent-allowed-at-hogan-lovells-abortion-dobbs-roe-v-wade-meeting-safe-space-forum-genocide-lawyers-outrage-11669753147?st=yskehfhflrgkqthg&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

⁶ Nicholas Tomaino, “Can Colorado Tell Lorie Smith and 303 Creative What to Say?,” *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, December 1, 2022; accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/articles/can-colorado-tell-lorie-smith-what-to-say-obergefell-303-creative-v-elenis-kennedy-marriage-speech-11669925027?st=pynl10c4who7wzw&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink. See also “A Christian Artist and a Gay Wedding at the Supreme Court,” *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, December 2, 2022; accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-christian-artist-and-a-gay-wedding-at-the-supreme-court-11670025799?st=ini47i2b6agugip&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

⁷ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “martyr.”

⁸ *Lumen gentium* 42.

⁹ St. Alphonsus Liguori, “The Dolours of Mary,” taken from *The Victories of the Martyrs*, Discourse 1: Mary Queen of Martyrs, Part 1; accessed online at <http://www.catholictradition.org/Passion/queen-martyrs2.htm>.