**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

10TH OF FEBRUARY SCHOLASTICA

Effectively we all have the week off: good prep for Lent!

SCHOLASTICA [d 547] was the devout sister of Benedict of Nursia, who set up a women’s foundation at Piombariola, about five miles away from Benedict’s monastery at Monte Casino. She is the patron saint of Benedictine nuns, but, apart from her name, we have no evidence of any learning she may have acquired.

The rest is found in the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, who wrote up the life of Benedict. According to him she was very attached to her brother; the nunnery was administered under the direction of Benedict, and they met up annually, for prayer and review, Scholastica travelling to a house away from the monastery which, as a woman, she was not allowed to enter.

The story goes that three days before she died Scholastica had met with her brother and wanted him to stay the night, but Benedict quoted his rule and prepared to leave. There arose a huge thunderstorm which Benedict accused his sister of causing, and she replied that as he had refused to stay on, she had asked God, who had provided the answer to her prayer.

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A hagiography like this and others supposedly describing the life and work of saints are to be read as exemplars, rather than actual biographies, and it is for this reason that we need not only to have a quantity of salt at hand – a mere pinch will not always do – but must keep in mind the question as to what purpose these exemplars were originally supposed to serve, and the extent to which that purpose may still be relevant to modern liberal spirituality: the rest is for you to work out your answers prayerfully, and apply them as best you can to your thinking and to your life.

In the weeks to come there are some well-documented accounts of recent martyrdoms; Archbishop Luwum of Uganda and Oscar Romero, and it is people like these and their stories that should help us discern the difference between a hagiographic martyrdom and one the circumstances and causes of which we should take seriously, including getting a ‘take’ on their back story and the factors of institutional sin that brought them about: think, for example, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a relatively easy case to take on.

When the word ‘martyr’ comes up in the news nowadays it often refers to Islamic extremists – ‘Radicalism’ is absolutely the wrong use of the word in this context. The Koran insists that believers should not put themselves in harm’s way needlessly, unless it becomes a matter of defending the faith. This, of course, begs the question of whether God needs our martyrdom for this purpose, and the answer to that particular question for those who sacrificed their lives in the apostolic era would be a resounding ‘yes,’ as far as we can understand it. Later in the history of most religions, however, such clear-cut statements become a good deal more nuanced.

‘Radicalism’ is not a term confined to Muslims: some of the movements and people we are expected to venerate the most – desert fathers, monks, mendicant orders, all sought to return to the roots [Latin ‘radix’] of the apostolic church without the benefit of C S Lewis’s dictum that ‘If there is one prayer God never answers it is ‘Encore!.’

As with biblical studies, there is a good deal of traditional Christian spirituality that may have served a purpose while the faith was in its early spread and development, that probably need re-evaluating before we fall into the trap of taking it for granted. This Lent why not pick up a classic from a different spiritual tradition; partly for interest and enjoyment, but partly also to find common cause and different insights into our own devotional thought and practice.

The further down the river from its source, the more it gathers what T S Eliot described as ‘cargo,’ – branches, tin cans, etc, that can cause serious damage if not properly managed and disposed of – which is part of what the reformation was about, and as Fr Richard Rohr states, Protestantism had the chance to bring about a renewal of Christian spirituality and they blew it. Perhaps we have another chance right now: God never gives up.

Have a good positive Lent and treasure ALL the gifts and opportunities that God offers you.