

## THE MARTYRS OF BETHLEHEM

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DURING the Christmas season, the liturgy of the Church is characterized by a spirit of joy and exultation. Christ, the Man-God, has come. As the Babe of Bethlehem, He invites us to receive Him into our hearts. Holy Mother Church, wise in the way of Light, urges us to cleanse our hearts from all imperfections and make them worthy habitations for the Infant Saviour. During the octave of Christ's nativity, she places before our eyes the feasts of Saints whose lives exemplify how this may be accomplished.

On one of these feasts, that of the Holy Innocents, the spirit of jubilation pervading the season's liturgy is repressed, for on this day the Church commemorates the massacre of the male children of Bethlehem, who, Saint Augustine says, "died not only for Christ but instead of Christ." Ordinarily, on the feasts of her martyrs, the Church clothes her ministers in red, symbolizing the profuse shedding of blood by which the martyrs entered into eternal glory. On this day, purple is substituted for red because the Martyrs of Bethlehem died at a time when they could not attain the beatific vision. Besides the use of purple vestments, the Church also suppresses the *Alleluia* and *Gloria* in the Mass unless the feast occurs on Sunday. This is done in sympathy and compassion for the mothers from whose arms the children were torn to die for Christ.

Concerning the history of the Feast day we know very little. It was first celebrated in the Roman Rite about 485. After that, we find it in the Greek, Syrian, Chaldean and Armenian liturgies. The exact date of the occurrence of the massacre is unknown, as is also the number of children who were killed. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, does not mention the massacre in his account of the reign and deeds of Herod. For this reason we conclude that the number of infants murdered was rather small—less than one hundred. Another reason for this conclusion is that at the time Bethlehem itself was only a village. Thus, the number of 64,000 to 144,000 infants accepted by early writers seems to be an exaggeration.

Regardless of the number of infants murdered, however, the significance and importance of the Feast remains undiminished. From the Mass and Divine Office of the day, we can derive some very important lessons. It is noteworthy that the Angel appeared to Saint

Joseph instead of the Blessed Virgin. We may recall that before God cast Adam and Eve from the garden of Paradise, He made Eve subject to her husband, "And thou shalt be under thy husband's power and he shall have dominion over thee."<sup>1</sup> It was very fitting then, that a command of the All-High God to Joseph and Mary should be delivered directly to Joseph who should then command Mary, the mother of the child. Joseph was absolutely obedient to the order, for he "arose, and took the child and his mother, by night, and retired into Egypt."<sup>2</sup> What an example of obedience for us to imitate! What trust and confidence in God for us to cultivate!

In the Officium or Introit of the Mass, we see the foundation or basis for a doctrine which Christ was to teach later: "Unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven."<sup>3</sup> The Officium reads, "Out of the mouths of infants and sucklings thou hast perfected praise, O God, to confound thy enemies." Children, who had as yet not attained the use of reason, are used by Almighty God to disconcert the plans of an impious monarch, Herod, to murder the Son of God. The privilege of martyrdom thus offered the children has not been underestimated by the Doctors of the Church, for St. Bernard writes: "Will anyone doubt that a crown was given to these Innocents? If you ask me what merit could they have that God should crown them? Let me ask you, what was the fault for which Herod slew them? And whilst Herod could put these babes to death, who had done him no injury, may not Jesus crown them for dying for Him? The Innocents were martyrs to no other eye than thine, O God!"<sup>4</sup> In Rome, the station Church for this feast is at St. Paul's outside the Walls, where some of the Holy Innocents are buried. During the sixteenth century, Pope Sixtus had a portion of their relics transferred to St. Mary Major's and placed near the relic of the Crib.

In the Offertory prayer, "Our soul has been delivered, as a sparrow, out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken and we are delivered,"<sup>5</sup> we find the sentiments of the Holy Innocents themselves expressed. They sing, rejoicing over their deliverance from the trials and troubles of this life from which they have been spared by shedding their blood for Christ. Then, as a fitting tribute to the sorrowing and disconsolate mothers who saw their children butchered, the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Homily on the Feast of Holy Innocents.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 123: 6 and 7.

words of Rachel lamenting over the Fall of the Holy City (for the captives were gathered at her tomb before beginning their exile to Babylon) are used as a Communion prayer, "A voice in Rama was heard, lamentations and great mourning: Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted because they were not."<sup>6</sup> How fitting it is that the Church though rejoicing in the crown of glory merited by the infants should remain mindful of the parents who witnessed the ruthless murder of their children without realizing the inestimable reward awaiting them. From this we, too, can learn the lesson of resignation to the holy Will of God, even though we cannot understand the reasons for which things occur.

We have treated in detail various extracts from the liturgy of this feast day. By a careful and prayerful consideration of them, we can hope to reap in our own lives, the benefits which the Church asks for us in the Collect of the Mass, "O God, whose praise the martyred Innocents confessed this day, not in speech but in their death: destroy in us the evil of all vice, that our lives may show forth in our deeds that faith in Thee which our lips profess." Only then can we confidently hope for the reward which the Holy Innocents have received.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 31, 15.

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