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Heroism

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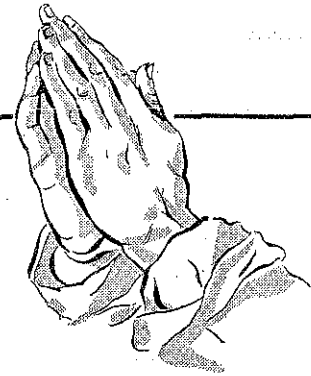


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Heroism

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

IT was in the days before Christ, and the enemy of the Jews, King Antiochus, had conquered Palestine. Not content with a victory which gave him the land of the Jews, the king sought to conquer the Jewish soul. Antiochus knew that the Jews were forbidden to eat pork. In order to force them to abandon God, the king ordered that the Jews be brought in and made to eat the pork placed before them.

Among the Jews brought into Antiochus' palace was a Jewish mother with her seven grown sons. The mother and her sons steadfastly refused to deny their God by eating the flesh of swine. They were all whipped with scourges. Then the eldest of the seven spoke boldly to the king, "We are ready to die rather than to transgress the laws of God." Antiochus was enraged and ordered a huge griddle to be heated. Then he commanded the soldiers to cut off the tongue of the eldest son and that he be scalped. In the presence of his mother and his brothers his hands and feet were chopped off. The king next ordered that he be brought to the fire and be fried on the griddle. While he was suffering these torments, his mother and brothers stood by exhorting him to die manfully.

So when the eldest was dead, they brought forth the next oldest son and tortured him in like manner. As he was gasping his last, this son cried out to the king, "You, indeed destroy our earthly life, but the King of the world (God) will raise up us, who die for His laws, in the resurrection to eternal life."

After the second son had died, the third son came forward and offered the king his tongue and hands, saying, "These God gave me. Rather than break the law of God, I now offer them to you. I know that God will restore them to me in the life to come."

When it was the fourth son's turn, he spoke thus to the king, "It is better to look for hope from God than from man, for He will raise us up again. But as

for you, you will never see the resurrection to life."

When the sixth son was brought forth, he said, "Do not be deceived. You shall not escape punishment, for what you have attempted here is to fight against God."

All during these torments the mother stood by, encouraging her sons to die as worthy sons of the chosen nation.

The seventh son was called to the foot of Antiochus' throne. The king made an oath to the youngest son that he would make him a rich and happy man and would take him for his friend, if he would eat the pork and thus deny his God. But the young man was not moved by these promises of earthly happiness. In a last effort, the king turned to the mother and asked her to speak to her son so that he might live. The mother bowed mockingly to the king and spoke to her son, "My son, have pity on me, your mother who carried you nine months in her womb and suckled you three years at her breasts. Do not fear this tormentor. Make yourself worthy of your brothers' death. Once again, have pity on me; receive death so that because of your pity I may receive you together with your brothers in the next life."

The last son then addressed the king, "I will not obey you, Antiochus. My brothers have undergone a short pain and have the promise of eternal life. And I, like my brothers, offer up my life and my body for the law of God."

The mother stood by while her youngest son was tortured. After his death, she herself died at the hands of the king.

Belief in God can be inconvenient, as the seven brothers and their mother experienced in their pain. The inconvenience of faith is no respecter of persons. Neither the sons nor the mother were priests of the Old Testament. They were simple lay people. Yet they were called upon to lay down their lives for their belief in God.

What the mother and her seven sons

suffered most lay people will never be called upon to suffer. Yet the vocation to heroism is implicit in the very name of Christian. Empty Christianity of the heroic and you empty it of Christ.

There is a tendency to identify the heroic with the impossible. God never demands the impossible. He does demand the difficult; He even demands the very difficult. Being human we may well be dismayed by the prospect of doing the difficult. But God does not ask us to do the difficult alone. In all things, much more in the difficult, God strengthens us with His strength and sustains us with the hope of living His life for all eternity.

There is another tendency, to identify the heroic with what is momentarily difficult. Heroism is, indeed, to stand up and be counted at one big moment as the mother and her sons did. But it is much more of the essence of heroism to stand up and be counted each day. The martyr who, strengthened by God's grace, places his head on the block and neatly stretches out his neck for the executioner's ax may be less heroic than the husband who daily works at a job he does not like, lives in a district he despises, endures the noise of four healthy children. The heroism of a Christian is not usually that of a single act, but a heroism which goes on and on through an entire life. The martyr who dies at the stroke of an ax dies quickly, but the man or woman who willingly submits to the hardships of being a dutiful parent dies a slow death, or in St. Paul's words, "dies daily."

The heroism of the Christian is not one which ends in the hopelessness of a last defiant gesture, nor in the nobility of a proud death. Christian heroism, like that of the mother and her sons, has for its hope eternal life. Like them, we know that whether we are heroes for one big moment or are heroes day by day, "the King of the world will raise up us, who die for His laws, in the resurrection to eternal life."