

The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time *January 27, 2019*

“He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day.” (Luke 4:16)

“In Abitene, a small village in present-day Tunisia, forty-nine Christians were taken by surprise one Sunday while they were celebrating the Eucharist, gathered in the house of Octavius Felix, thereby defying the imperial prohibitions. They were arrested and taken to Carthage to be interrogated by the Anulinus. Significant among other things is the answer a certain Emeritus gave to the Proconsul who asked him why on earth they had disobeyed the Emperor’s severe orders. He replied: ‘*Sine dominico non possumus*’: that is, we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. We would lack the strength to face our daily problems and not to succumb.” (Benedict XVI, *Heart of the Christian Life, Thoughts on Holy Mass*, p. 12)

Have you ever been tempted to not attend Church on Sunday? Have you ever heard a Catholic respond to question of church attendance with an answer similar to this: “I do not need to attend a church to pray to God. He is everywhere and I can pray to him wherever I am.” Let us consider this response for a moment. If this statement holds the truest understanding of the Third Commandment (Remember to keep holy the Lord’s Day), then why would these forty-nine African Christians so foolishly throw their lives away? Secondly, why would Jesus have maintained the custom of attending synagogue on the Sabbath? It would seem that Jesus, himself being God, could have easily used this reasoning, and yet, He did not. Rather, He attended synagogue as any other faithful Jewish person would have done. This leads me to ponder a final question: If Jesus, the Apostles, and the members of the early Christian community all came together to worship God in a synagogue or church, then why are so many modern-day Christians not attending?

I must confess that I cannot conceive of a standard answer to this most complex question. Some could point to the Catechism and rightly say that we have an obligation to attend under the pain of grave (mortal) sin. Yet I find this answer, albeit correct, fails to touch the beauty and depth of the answer given by the forty-nine African martyrs: “*we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist.*”

The daily lives of these martyrs were not so different from our own. They had worries and concerns no different from ours. They wanted to protect their children, as do we, from the dangers of the world. They wanted to have a deep relationship with a “Living God”, a God who accompanied them on their journeys through life. They did not give their lives for an idea or theory, but for a person. They came together as a family to joyfully celebrate this chosen relationship and receive “food for their journey”. They understood this food (Eucharist) is the person of Jesus who walked with them during this journey. Please understand, this journey, our journey, is not some random journey. It is, rather, the journey to true and lasting happiness. It is the journey to God. Jesus knew this and therefore left us His example of synagogue attendance. These martyrs knew this and left us the examples of their attendance even to the point of death. This journey, our journey, has the potential to lead us to discover who we truly are and what can

fulfill our innermost longing; our need for rest, for peace, for happiness. We must remember this and invite others to join with us as we journey this life together.