

About 60 years after the birth of Jesus, a great fire broke out in Rome. It burned for over a week. Rumors spread that Emperor Nero had ordered the fire. Perhaps he wanted to destroy the old city of Rome, rebuild a new one, and name it after himself? Nero did his utmost to stop the rumors, but they refused to die. Finally, in desperation, he seized upon a scapegoat to blame. He falsely accused the Christian community in Rome of starting the fire.

Nero's accusation touched off a religious persecution that lasted for nearly 300 years. One Roman historian describes the persecution in Nero's time this way: "*The Christians were treated with unusual brutality. Some were dressed in animal skins and torn apart by enraged dogs. Others were put on crosses and, at night, burned as torches to light the darkness.*" (The irony is that is what a saint does: light the darkness of our world.)

Yes, great persecutions followed well into the 4th century. Being a son and brother to a dentist, it was **St. Apollonia** of Alexandria, patron saint of dentists, who was tortured, having all her teeth broken out with pincers. When asked to give up her faith or be burned, she leapt into the fire.

St. Cecilia (died 117), the patron saint of musicians (a nod to Patrick Carlin and his 25 years), was ordered to sacrifice to false gods, but she refused and was beheaded as a martyr. It was said that just before being beheaded, that she died singing a hymn of love for Jesus, her true spouse. Her tomb was opened in 1599, and her body found incorrupt.

Then there was **St. Lawrence** who was being burned alive, cried out, "*Turn me over, I am done on this side!*"

In order to protect themselves, so that they could practice their religion, many Christians literally went underground. They dug elaborate networks of tunnels in the soft volcanic subsoil of Rome. Some of these tunnels extended for miles and were designed like mazes to confuse the authorities. It was in these underground tunnels that Christians celebrated Mass, baptized their young, and buried their dead. **St. Jerome** says in his writing that as a boy he and his friends used to play in the catacombs. Jerome lived from 331-420. As an adult, he translated the bible into Latin, which was the universal language of that time. He could be rather crabby, as he had a taste for personal sarcasm and intellectual overkill. He and **St. Augustine** had a running battle of words for years. And yet, they both passionately loved our Lord and his people. Jerome shows us there is no neat category of holiness, as it comes in all kinds of people with their varied personalities.

Centuries after St. Jerome, Roman boys still played in the catacombs. One day a group of boys was wandering through these mazes of tunnels. Then their flashlight gave out. The boys were trapped in total darkness with no idea of the way out. Near panic, one of the boys felt a smooth groove in the rock floor of the tunnel. It turned into a path that was worn smooth by the feet of thousands of Christians in the days of the Roman persecutions. The boys followed the footsteps of the saints of old and found their way out of the darkness into sunlight and safety.

A path of rough stone made smooth by the lives of saints – a tremendous price paid for their faith. It is the saints who continue to pay the price, to plow a path before us when we stumble around in the darkness not sure of where to go. In following the footsteps of saints, we find the

way to the light and life out of the darkness of this world. From those early days of persecutions many have followed, continuing to walk and smooth the path for every generation of Christians.

Our saints come from every country, every walk of life, and every economic level possible. Some are highly educated, such as **St. Thomas Aquinas**, who was once called a dumb ox by his classmates, went on to become the most brilliant mind the Church had experienced at that time.

Others struggled mightily, such as **John Vianney (1786-1859)**. Born of an uneducated peasant family, he showed nothing promising. He desired nothing else but to be a priest, but his humble background and life of education made this look unlikely. Eventually he was accepted, but a miserable student. With grave reservations he was eventually ordained.

His strength was certainly not intellect, but what dawned upon his parishioners was that their souls mattered to this holy priest and that he suffered for their sins. As a confessor, he had the ability to read souls. With disarming simplicity, he was able to discern the secrets of his penitents and unlock barriers that prevented them from knowing and loving God. He would hear confessions from 10 to 18 hours a day. He is the patron saint of all parish priests. (**St. Steven the Martyr** for deacons.)

Some were rich and powerful - even queens, such **St. Hedwig** – who was married and had a number of kids. When her husband died, she traded the wealth with that of the poor of her country.

All led disciplined lives – often at the price of terrible suffering and hardship. All had an unusual capacity for loving God and other people – living far beyond their own wants and comforts. Not all of them started out that way. I have a favorite expression: *All Saints have and past and all sinners a future*. One such example is the patron saint of our Diocese, **St. Vincent De Paul (1580-1660)**. He was born of a peasant family, who hoped, along with Vincent, for a better life through his priesthood. Vincent was ordained at age 19 with a very worldly attitude toward his vocation. Once, in the seminary, he was visited by his father, but was so ashamed by the old man's shabby peasant clothes that he refused to receive him.

It was not long before he had risen to become chaplain in service of the Queen. His charm and social skills gained him entry into the highest levels of society. Soon he was chaplain/tutor to the wealthiest of all families in Paris. Thus he might have passed his life as one of the worldly clerics living off the wealth of others.

In midlife, however, Vincent underwent a great transformation after being summoned to hear the dying confession of a peasant. The man remarked that had it not been for Vincent, he would have perished into hell because of his many grave sins. Vincent was then struck by the seriousness of his vocation. He determined that henceforth his priesthood would be dedicated to the service of the poor and the spiritual impoverishment of the rural masses and the poor formation of the clergy.

He was particularly adept at attracting the services of aristocratic women. He convinced a number of them to don gray habits and to undertake a personal ministry to the poor and destitute.

Eventually these women would be known as Daughters of Charity and they were described in this way: "*Their convent is the sickroom, their chapel the parish church, their cloister the streets of the city.*" It was from this religious order of nuns that the Diocese of Richmond would be settled.

There were few charitable projects in which Vincent was not engaged - founding hospitals and orphanages, as well as homes for the mentally infirm. He had a personal ministry to prisoners and galley slaves and also raised money to ransom slaves held captive in North Africa. He was a legend, with the rich endowing his projects and the poor accepted him as their own. "*The poor are your masters and you are their servants.*" His final words: "*We have done what you commanded; do now what you have promised.*"

Some left written accounts of their anxieties and temptations. Although they appear heroic, in their own lives they felt they were weak and insignificant. Cardinal Basil Hume wrote that "*If one becomes holy, it is because God has made you so and you will not know it, anyway.*" And yet like all of us, they lived in a world subject to sin and darkness.

They show us that it is right to be content with what we have but never with what we are. **Mother Teresa** tells us that while we live in this world we are to do ordinary things with great love. This truly defines a saint, as they were ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives.

And finally it was St. Augustine who put it like this: "*If others can become saints, why can't I?*"

Perhaps we could ask ourselves the same thing... "*Why can't I?*"