

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2016

November 6—His name is Father Ernest Simoni. He was ordained a priest in Albania in 1956. It was just at that time that the ruthless and brutal Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha came into power and began one of his top efforts to eliminate all religion in Albania through persecution, and by enacting laws forbidding the free practice of religion in the country. While celebrating Christmas Eve Mass in 1963, a young Father Simoni was arrested and placed in solitary confinement. The priest was beaten, tortured, and ordered to renounce Christ and the Catholic Church. Father Simoni steadfastly refused and for this refusal, he was sentenced to death by firing squad. But when that sentence was commuted, he was instead sent to hard labor and for the next 28 years worked as a slave in the mines and sewerage canals. Through it all, Father's faith and commitment to Christ never wavered.

My friends, like the brothers in our first reading [Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14] who were ordered by the King to violate the tenets of their Jewish faith and deeply-held beliefs, Father Simoni and all of us can expect the same challenges in our day-to-day lives. It is not often as dramatic or as life-threatening as these two examples,

but each moment in a world that is becoming more secular and anti-religious by the day, you and I have challenges that we must face.

We come here each week to hear God's word, to receive the Body and Blood of His Son, and to be with others who have chosen to live a life of virtue, goodness, and faith. Like the early Church and those first disciples, we gain strength in knowing that we are not alone and that there are others with us in this holy cause, for it is no secret that Judeo-Christian principles are no longer the foundation of our society. However, we must be strong since we have been assured by a Risen Savior that if we stand for Him and with Him, and if we are proud to be His followers even when others denounce us for it, then the rewards from Him will be great.

Oh by the way, the priest of whom I spoke at the outset of this homily, Father Simoni, is now 86 years old and in 2014 he met His Holiness Pope Francis during the Pope's pastoral visit to Albania. When Pope Francis heard about the life and long suffering of this good and holy priest, Francis, we are told, was moved to tears as he embraced this faithful follower. And he didn't forget him, for on October 9, 2016 His Holiness announced his selection of 17 new cardinals. All of the candidates come from a long line of Bishops and Archbishops, save one: the man named Father Simoni who was raised from simple parish priest to a prince of the

Church. When asked about this unusual choice, the Pope said, *“He was a priest who rendered a clear Christian testimony.”*

My friends, may God bless His Eminence, Ernest Cardinal Simoni, and may we have the courage and the faith each day—even, and especially, when troubles come—to never be afraid to render the same clear Christian testimony to Christ as Cardinal Simoni did.

God Love You.