

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The story is told of three pastors who decided to go fishing one day. Alone in the boat, in the middle of the lake, one of them said, “The fish aren’t biting. We’ve talked ourselves out. How about we confess to each other our secret fault.” They agreed to do so and then pray together for forgiveness. The first said, “I have a terrible weakness for gambling. I’ve even gotten up in the middle of the night and driven all the way to Atlantic City to gamble until sun-up.” The second pastor admitted, “I have a terrible problem with anger. I get so angry sometimes I want to hit people.” The third pastor sat in silence as the other two waited...and waited...and waited. The first said, “C’mon, we agreed. What is your secret fault.” The third pastor finally spoke up. He said, “Well I just can’t help myself. I am a hopeless gossip. I can’t wait until we get back to shore to tell everyone about the two of you.” When the boat arrived back to shore, the one pastor said to the other remaining pastor, “I’ll bet he wished he had kept his big mouth shut.” Terrible!!!

Has anyone noticed that we’re in the middle of election season in our nation. Can you remember that only about six months ago we had 17 Republicans and 4 Democrats vying for their party’s nomination for the presidency. Now we’re down to 4 Republicans and 2 Democrats. While policy differences may have something to do with so many dropping out, it seems those left standing are simply better at publicity. They are better at manipulating their public image than those left behind. Some are famous just for being famous. They’ve found ways to keep their names in the headlines.

I think it's kind of a shame that the Apostle Thomas didn't have a better press agent. Thomas, as you know, has become known in history because of just one, tiny episode in his life. He gained a reputation, I think, a tarnished reputation, that has stuck to him for over 2,000 years. In Scripture, he is called Thomas, or Didymus, which means "twin", so undoubtedly he had a twin brother. But, when we call him to mind, we invariably refer to him as "Doubting Thomas".

Who in the Scriptures has been more unfairly branded? We can think of Judas, the Betrayer, which he was. Or Pontius Pilate who washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus' death, for which he was. Or even Peter, the Deny-er, which he did. But Thomas, I contend, is unjustly branded as just a Doubter.

With your permission, I will now make the case to reverse the reputation of this unjustly accused young man. Today I would propose to you that he should no longer be known as "Doubting Thomas", but rather as "Daring Thomas".

In today's Gospel passage we are given only a passing glimpse of Thomas as more daring than doubting. I suppose we hardly notice this more positive picture of him because it is contained in this dramatic event of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

As the event unfolds Jesus and the disciples are days away from Bethany where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Martha and Mary. Word comes to Jesus that Lazarus is sick. Jesus decides to go to these friends whom he apparently loved a great deal. John tells us, “Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair”. She and Martha loved the Lord; probably had seen him heal many others; and believed that he would come and heal their brother too.

But the disciples, on hearing Jesus say that he wanted to go to them in Bethany, which was only two miles from Jerusalem, were upset and afraid. Just weeks before the Pharisees, Sadducees, and their disciples had taken up stones and tried to stone Jesus to death for insinuating that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. They thought it was too dangerous to go back there. Yes, they were afraid for Jesus, but, I suspect, they were also afraid for themselves.

Thomas would have none of it. He boldly steps forward and challenges the rest, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” This is not the timidity of a Doubter! This is the courage of a true Believer! This is a young man thoroughly committed, ready to die with Christ. Therefore, I contend that we should no longer refer to him as Doubting Thomas, but rather as Daring Thomas.

There are many people who call themselves Christians, but how many of us would actually be willing to die for him.

In a Church publication there’s a cartoon character named PONTIUS PUDDLE. He is very much like you and me in his good intentions, but he’s not exactly ready to set the world on fire. The cartoonist depicts Pontius’ style of worshipping with a take-off on the old Superman movies and TV show:

Look in the pew! Able to drop a dollar in the offering without embarrassment...Capable of waking from a dead sleep to stand and kneel at the right times!

Look! Out in the pew! It's a teacher! It's an usher! No! It's a PEW POTATO! And Pontius Puddle is snoring away!

You're all familiar with couch potatoes. This is the description given to a PEW POTATO:

A PEW POTATO wants to be cared for, but doesn't know how to care;

A PEW POTATO wants to be visited, but never visits a Church member in need;

A PEW POTATO wants all the benefits of Church membership, but leaves the work to someone else;

A PEW POTATO is quick to point out the faults and mistakes of others, especially the pastor's, but somehow sees no faults of his or her own;

A PEW POTATO has not only forgotten what he or she used to be, but has also lost sight of what he or she could become;

NEW POTATOES become PEW POTATOES when they stop growing and giving, and just vegetate, wither, and die.

Sad to say, I've known more than a few PEW POTATOES in my day.

A few years ago a priest-friend of mine told of his niece who had become a Medical Mission nun. She told him that she was being sent to Uganda, that was in a state of civil unrest, where Christians were being persecuted and put to death. He told her that there were plenty of other places here in our own country and other places in the world where she was needed that were a lot safer. But, she was adamant. This is where she was being sent. This is where the Lord wanted her to serve. Upset about her decision, he still went to the airport to see her off. As he saw her walk to her plane, he said, “I always wanted her to be a respectable Christian, not a real one.”

Many of us, if we were honest, would confess that we come closer to the profile of a respectable Christian, not a real one. Sacrifice and commitment are really not a part of our vocabulary.

It takes the daring of the young Apostle Thomas, ready to go up to Jerusalem and die with Christ, to be a real Christian. It takes the commitment of the young Sister Maureen Walsh to go to the sick and dying in one of the most violent places in the world to be a real Christian.

What it comes down to, my Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is not only who or what are you willing to die for, but who or what are you willing to live for? I have no doubt that many of you parents would willingly give your lives for your children. Many of you, and many more of our young people today are willing to put their lives in harm’s way in the armed service of our country in places like Afghanistan and Iraq or in our own country as police and firefighters. And we honor and are grateful for their commitment to our country.

Interestingly an Evangelical researcher has found that many more Americans are willing to die for their country than for their faith. They view themselves as Americans first and Christians second. That's a little disturbing. In this land that professes "In God we trust", most of us consider it noble to die for country, but not so much for God.

The question is, who or for whom would you give up your life? Does Christ come first in your life? Would you die for Christ? Let's be honest. Many of us find it hard to go to Church every week to worship him, much less die for him.

Relax! The good news today is that most of us will probably never be asked to die for Christ. What we are asked to do is to make our lives a living sacrifice for him. Can you go that far? Will you put Christ first in your everyday life?

Young John joined the Navy, and shortly before he was to be deployed, he asked his commander for a pass to attend his sister's wedding. The commander told him he had to be back on ship by 7:00 on Sunday evening. John said, "Sir, you don't understand. I'm in the wedding." The commander said, "No, you don't understand, You're in the Navy."

When you make a commitment to the armed services, it takes priority over the rest of your commitments. So it is when you make an authentic commitment to Christ. Every area of your life will be affected by that commitment. Thomas had that kind of commitment. Sr. Maureen had that kind of commitment.

Thomas was an enthusiastic, willing young man who was passionate about serving Christ. Sr. Maureen is equally enthusiastic in her passion to serve Christ among the poorest of the poor, without any consideration for her own well-being.

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once said, “This age will die, not from sin, but a lack of passion.”

Thomas may have had his moment of doubt, but he was far more daring in his passion to follow Christ. After the Resurrection, Thomas, like the other Apostles, became a leader in the early church. Peter and Paul went to Greece and Rome, and we know that Mark went to Egypt and Syria, which were all part of the Roman Empire at the time. Thomas, however, made his way to India, where he preached the Gospel, for which he was martyred. One of the oldest Catholic communities ascribe their faith to the missionary work of Daring Thomas.

My prayer is that there’s a bit of Daring Thomas in us. Let’s stop taking our faith for granted. We would not be gathered here today if earlier generations of Christ’s followers had taken their faith for granted. We probably will never be asked to die for Christ, but we are asked to put him first in our lives. That is our challenge. We are asked to put him first in our homes, by praying together as a family. We are asked to put him first on our jobs and in our schools by our exemplary Christian behavior in what we say and what we do. We are asked to put him first in our lives by giving of our time and talents to make our community, our nation, and our world a better place for the generations to follow us. We are asked to put him first in our finances by giving generously of all with which we are blessed to our church and for the poor.

Can Christ count on you? Can you be as daring as Thomas and Sr. Maureen in living your faith? Or will you just be content to be a PEW POTATO?