

## **ORDINARY SUNDAY XXXIII “B”**

**SAINT CELILIA FEAST DAY CELEBRATION**

**NOVEMBER 17/18, 2012**

Like all the saints, Saint Cecilia is someone who can serve as a model for our personal, and collective parish community, following of Jesus as his disciples.

While said to have suffered martyrdom sometime in the 200s of the present era and enjoying a popular cult, the first accounts of her life date from sometime in the 400s. Like many of the early saints, Saint Cecilia’s story comes to us by way of legend, lacking the biographical and historical accuracy we are accustomed to (and demand) today.

It is said that Cecilia came from a noble Roman family, in our terms, middle-to-upper middle class. She was raised as a Christian and although she wished to totally consecrate her life to God as a virgin, she was betrothed by her father (as was custom through an arranged marriage) to a young man, Valerian. The legend says that on their wedding night Cecilia told Valerian that an angel watched over her and that if he “touched her in any way of marriage” the angel would be angry and cause him suffering. Valerian asked to see the angel. Cecilia told him that if he received baptism he too would see the angel. Remarkably, Valerian consented.

As a Christian couple Cecilia and Valerian dedicated themselves to charitable works, especially on behalf of the poor, particularly the dangerous task of burying the bodies of martyrs. Eventually they were arrested and ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Upon their refusal they were executed. According to the story, the soldier assigned to behead Cecilia failed to accomplish his mission after three attempts. He left her for dead, though she lingered for three days before succumbing and in the process asking that her home be transformed into a church. In time a church was built over the supposed site of her martyrdom. Her name, along with other early church martyrs, was proclaimed in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass where it still is today in the First Eucharistic Prayer.

What lessons does Saint Cecilia offer us? In light of today’s Scriptures I’d suggest two.

First, while we may smile at the legend of her betrothal to Valerian and the marriage night, her story speaks to us about ordering the priorities of our lives.

In his letter to the Philippians Saint Paul states: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ph. 3:20). Saint Cecilia teaches us that before all else, through baptism, our fundamental identity is as members of the body of Christ, the Church. All other sources of identity: family, culture, race, vocation, occupation, political party—all take a back seat to our “being in Christ”. In a culture (and yes, sadly at times even a church) that has become fractured and separated into “us and them” in various ways, Saint Cecilia challenges us to embrace and live the unity that is ours through Christ especially here in the Eucharist. As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, in the Eucharist, Jesus as priest and victim re-presents his one sacrifice offered for our sins in which we experience holy communion with him and each other. “Catholic/Christian” is not just a moniker on our resume, it is the very essence of who each of us has been made for God and called to be for each other.

Second, today’s reading from the prophet Daniel and Jesus’ words in the Gospel speak of the “last things”—death and the final judgment. Saint Cecilia and Valerian, can serve as models in how we are to live as “we await the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” According to the legend Cecilia and Valerian were arrested and martyred for their efforts in performing one of the traditional corporal works of mercy—burying the dead. Jesus in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Saint Matthew’s gospel with its parable of the final judgment, states that eternal reward or eternal punishment is based on daily Christian love; care and concern (or lack thereof) to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the stranger/immigrant, the sick, the imprisoned. In daily acts of kindness, forgiveness, justice, and compassion, done in love for Christ that salvation is assured, that our names are found “written in the book” of life (Dn. 12:1).

Saint Cecilia’s depiction in art with a musical instrument and her designation as patroness of music is attributed to line in her biography that states on her wedding day she sang to the Lord. We join her today in singing to the Lord as we join with her at the wedding feast of the Lamb of God.