The History of the Catholic Church

Resources: Prayer Services

Praying with the Saints in the Catacombs

Use this complete prayer service with Chapter 2, Section 2 or 3 of The History of the Catholic Church. *You may also choose to use only individual parts of the prayer service.*

Needs:

- copies as needed or projection

Prayer Introduction

The first centuries of the Church were a time of rapid growth, but also persecution. The catacombs of Rome are a testament to the profound impact the witness of the martyrs held on the early Christians, who reverenced them in their ultimate love of Christ, even to death. This is why the writer Tertullian could say, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Today you will hear the accounts of some of the early Church martyrs. Though it may seem like they had courage beyond your wildest abilities, theirs is still a story of hope amongst darkness and sin. Their lives were seemingly ordinary for their time, yet it was the hope of Christ that compelled them to do the extraordinary. May the heroism of the martyrs stir in you a boldness of faith.

Opening Prayer

Leader: (Have students sit and begin with the Sign of the Cross.) The first reading is from the martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Saturus.

First Reading

Reader 1: The day of the martyrs' victory dawned. They marched from their cells into the amphitheatre, as if into heaven, with cheerful looks and graceful bearing. If they trembled it was for joy and not for fear.

Perpetua was the first to be thrown down, and she fell prostrate. She got up and, seeing that Felicity was prostrate, went over and reached out her hand to her and lifted her up.

Both stood up together. The hostility of the crowd was appeased, and they were ordered to the gate called Sanavivaria. There Perpetua was welcomed by a catechumen named Rusticus. Rousing herself as if from sleep, she began to look around. To everyone's amazement she said: "When are we going to be led to the beast?" When she heard that it had already happened she did not at first believe it until she saw the marks of violence on her body and her clothing. Then she beckoned to her brother and the catechumen, and addressed them in these words: "Stand firm in faith, love one another and do not be tempted to do anything wrong because of our sufferings."

Saturus, too, in another gate, encouraged the soldier Pudens, saying: "Here I am, and just as I thought and foretold I have not yet felt any wild beast. Now believe with your whole heart: I will go there and be killed by the leopard in one bite." And right at the end of the games, when he was thrown to the leopard he was in fact covered with so much blood from one bite that the people cried out to him: "Washed and saved, washed and saved!" And so, giving evidence of a second baptism, he was clearly saved who had been washed in this manner.

The people, however, had demanded that the martyrs be led to the middle of the amphitheatre. They wanted to see the sword thrust into the bodies of the victims, so that their eyes might share in the slaughter. Without being asked they went where the people wanted them to go; but first they kissed one another, to complete their witness with the customary kiss of peace.

The others stood motionless and received the deathblow in silence, especially Saturus, who had gone up first and was first to die; he was helping Perpetua. But Perpetua, that she might experience the pain more deeply, rejoiced over her broken body and guided the shaking hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her throat. Such a woman – one before whom the unclean spirit trembled – could not perhaps have been killed, had she herself not willed it. Bravest and happiest martyrs! You were called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Responsorial Verse

Reader 2: Christ Jesus is seated at God's right hand, and there he pleads on our behalf.
All: What can separate us from the love of Christ? Not suffering, hardship, persecution, not hunger, destitution, peril or sword.

Reader 2: In all of these trials the victory is ours, because of Christ who loves us.
All: What can separate us from the love of Christ? Not suffering, hardship, persecution, not hunger, destitution, peril or sword.

Second Reading

Leader: The second reading is from a letter written by St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Church in Rome as he neared his martyrdom.

Reader 3: You have never begrudged the martyrs their triumph but rather trained them for it. And so I am asking you to be consistent with the lessons you teach them. Just beg for me the courage and endurance not only to speak but also to will what is right, so that I may not only be called a Christian, but prove to be one. For if I prove myself to be a Christian by martyrdom, then people will call me one, and my loyalty to Christ will be apparent when the world sees me no more.

I am writing to all the churches to declare to them all that I am glad to die for God, provided you do not hinder me. I beg you not to show me a misplaced kindness. Let me be the food of beasts that I may come to God. I am his wheat, and I shall be ground by the teeth of beasts, that I may become Christ's pure bread.

I would rather that you coaxed the beasts to become my tomb and to leave no scrap of me behind; then when I have died I will be a burden to no one. I shall be a true disciple of Christ when the world no longer sees my body. Pray to Christ for me that by these means I may become a sacrifice to God.

Now as a prisoner I am learning to give up my own wishes. How happy I will be with the beasts which are prepared for me! I hope that they will make short work of me. I shall even coax them to devour me quickly and not to be afraid of touching me, as sometimes happens; in fact, if they hold back, I shall force them to it. Bear with me, for I know what is good for me. Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible rob me of my prize, which is Jesus Christ! The fire, the cross, packs of wild beasts, lacerations, rendings, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of the whole body, the horrible tortures of the devil – let all these things come upon me, if only I may gain Jesus Christ!

Responsorial Verse

Reader 4: I still live within this human body,
but I live now by faith in the Son of God,
All: who loved me, and gave himself up for me.

Reader 4: With Christ I have been nailed to the cross,
and I live now no longer my life,
but the life of Christ who lives in me.
All: who loved me, and gave himself up for me.

Closing Prayer

Leader: O God, who has blessed us by the bright example of so many courageous witnesses, keep us strong in our faith, that we may only be called Christian, but prove to be one. Through Christ, our Lord.

All: Amen.