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“I will never forsake you or abandon you” (Hebrews 13:5).

Heb 13:1-8; Mark 6:14-29

Today’s mass commemorates two martyrs. St. Agatha was a 15-year-old girl who was tortured and killed during the persecution of Roman Emperor Decius in the third century. Our Gospel from Mark tells of the beheading of John the Baptist by King Herod. Both saints gave their lives obedient to their beliefs.

Mark describes King Herod as a vacillating and superstitious ruler who was both afraid of and fascinated by John because he was prophet. He arrested him for criticizing his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife. During a banquet, Herod ordered John beheaded in the dungeon to please his stepdaughter when she danced for him and his guests. Urged by her mother, who hated John, she asked for his head on a platter.

The death of John the Baptist held the added drama of his anxiety about whether he had correctly identified Jesus as the messiah. John’s uncertainty meant that he entered paradise headless, that is, without fully understanding his success as precursor. Jesus called him the greatest person ever born.

Tertullian, an early Christian author who lived around the time of the Decian persecution that claimed the life of Agatha, wrote that “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of conversion.” Heroic stories of suffering and death by Christians were one factor in the rapid growth of the early church before it was elevated to official status under Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. People were attracted to the faith as something worth dying for.

We are left to wonder if we would have the courage to die for our faith. Martyrdom continues in our world in many places, including Nigeria and in Iraq. The author of Hebrews encouraged the early church during a time of persecution by reminding believers of the many who had kept the faith before them. God promises throughout the scriptures to be with them: *I will never forsake you or abandon you.*

Thus we may say with confidence: *The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?*

While few among us will be tested to this extent, the real question is not whether we would be willing to die for the faith, but whether we have the courage to live it.

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