

- As most of you know, this past week I returned from a two-week mission trip to Uganda with a handful of our parishioners. In many ways this was the trip of a lifetime, and certainly a trip that I will never forget.
- As I consider all the people that we met and all that we saw in Uganda, what made the deepest impression on me was the very palpable faith of the good people of that country.
- Unlike our own country, which is very sadly becoming increasingly secular and even hostile to public expressions of faith, in Uganda there is a sense of piety and religiosity that pervades the cultural fabric of their society.
- Everywhere you turn you find elements of faith being expressed, whether it be by the Catholics, the Anglicans, or the Muslims, who comprise the three primary religious groups in Uganda. Moreover, despite the very grave poverty in Uganda, the people are joyful.
- Interestingly, while the Christian faith in Uganda is deeply embedded within the hearts and souls of many people, Christianity is still relatively new as the first Christian missionaries didn't arrive until 1875.
- However, as the early Christian author, Tertullian, once wrote: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" (*Apologeticus pro Christianis* 50).
- And the faith of the people of the people of Uganda has been well nourished and fed by the blood of St. Charles Lwanga and his companions who were martyred for the faith in 1886 by the king, Kabaka Mwanga.
- King Mwanga, who ascended to the throne in 1884 at the age of 17, did not tolerate the presence of foreigners in his kingdom, and in 1885 when a new group of missionaries arrived in Uganda, he had them brutally tortured and murdered.
- The king was quickly rebuked by one of his Catholic servants for this action, and so in turn the king beheaded this servant and began persecuting the other Christian men who served within His court.
- Some of the Christians were speared and hacked to death. Others were rolled in reed mats and slow roasted over an open fire after being brutally tortured first. Eye-witnesses report that many of these brave young men went to their deaths singing joyfully.
- They were joyful because they knew the reward that was awaiting them on the other side of death: nothing less than eternal life!
- They were joyful for the opportunity to share in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection rather than betray their faith. They were joyful to mingle their blood with the Blood of Christ, which as our second reading tells us today, reconciles us to God.
- In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul tells us today that we "who were once far off have become near by the blood of Christ."
- By His suffering, death and resurrection, Christ Jesus has abolished the barriers that separate us from God and from one another so that we may be joined together as one body in Christ.
- Moreover, St. Paul tells us that it is when we are joined to Christ that we find true peace, for Christ Himself – and Christ *alone* – is our peace. This is because it is only in Christ that we have access to God the Father through the Holy Spirit.
- Therefore, my friends, if we wish to find true and lasting peace in this world, it is incumbent upon us that we seek to unite ourselves to Jesus, and we can only unite ourselves fully to Jesus in this world through His one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

- The Church is Christ's Body, and it is only in the Church that we can experience Christ fully through the sacraments. Thus, as Catholics it is our joy and our duty to commit ourselves fully to Christ and His Church through our obedience and love.
- Furthermore, our commitment to Jesus and His Church must be so strong and unshakeable that we would rather suffer torture and death, like St. Charles Lwanga and the Uganda martyrs, rather than betray or renounce our faith.
- As the Gospel of John tells us, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one goes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Therefore, we cannot allow our faith in Jesus to be half-hearted or lukewarm. Nor can we allow ourselves to place anything before God.
- One of the things that I noticed in Uganda is that the poverty and lack of material goods actually helps the faith of the people. Unencumbered by the disease of materialism, the poor are freer to give themselves fully to God.
- Yet all of us, rich and poor alike, are called to commit ourselves fully to Christ and His teachings. All of us are called to love God above all things and to make Him our highest priority in life.
- You see, my friends, the great question that lies before humanity is not whether God loves us. God has demonstrated this point to us over and over again throughout history. And He has shown that His love for us is all-merciful, all-encompassing, and everlasting.
- No, my friends, the great question that humanity faces is how we are going to respond to the love of God! And make no mistake about it: if we are attached to the things of this world, if we are half-hearted in our beliefs or lax in our practice of the faith, then we will not be able to love God as we should.
- God must be first in our lives. And to love Him as we should, we must be willing to renounce everything – even our very lives – for the sake of Him and His Church. Is this difficult? Yes! Is this impossible? No; with God all things are possible.
- To love God fully, completely, and without reservation, we must first pray and learn to detach ourselves from the things of this world through sacrifice and penance. We must also generously serve the poor and obediently follow the teachings of the Church.
- And most importantly, we must worthily partake in the sacramental life of the Church, most especially by receiving Holy Communion frequently and going to confession regularly.
- For when we receive Holy Communion, we drink of our Lord's blood, and when we go to confession, we cover ourselves in His blood. As St. Paul tells us, it is Christ's blood that reconciles us to Him and draws us close to Him. And it is in Christ that we find our peace.
- Brothers and sisters, is God your highest priority in life? Are you willing to die for our faith?
- Perhaps you think my questions extreme, and if so, I encourage you to look at the crucifix. Is not God's love for us extreme? Should not our love for Him, then, be extreme as well?
- My dear friends, make God your highest priority in life. Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mk 12:30). Love Him above all other things, even life itself. And trust that in so doing, you will one day enjoy the eternal promise of peace that Christ makes to those who love Him.
- St. Charles Lwanga and companions, pray for us.