

I hope I don't die for a while, but I do have a will, and when I had it drawn up, I used it to express some priorities. I included members of my family, of course, but I also included my church. I wanted my parish and diocese to have some share in my leftover funds as well. This idea appealed to me because I thought it would make my death a generous death. I support my favorite charities while I live, but I liked the idea of supporting them again with my last breath – that the freedom of my soul from this life would also free up my possessions to help others.

Not all of us will have a death as horrifying as the sons of the Maccabees do in today's first reading. This book was one of the last ones written for the Old Testament, and that is one reason why we hear from it near the end of the church year, shortly before Advent begins. It helps us meditate on the passing of one age and the arrival of another. This reading reports how the Jews were being persecuted. The Temple in Jerusalem had been breached by non-believers. The ruling monarch, Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to eliminate the Jews in his own personal holocaust. He tortured them with whips, forced them to eat pork, and demanded that they renounce the faith of their ancestors. They wouldn't do it. We hear just a part of the story in today's first reading – seven sons are tortured and put to death one after another, each in the sight of the diminishing survivors and of their mother. But they do not give in. They do not give up the faith they received from their ancestors. They courageously accept death rather than renounce all that they believe.

What are you willing to die for? Most parents would die for their kids. Soldiers would die for their country. Firefighters and police officers would die for the safety of ordinary citizens. Would you die for your faith? That's the challenge posed by this reading. Would you give it all up for what you believe?

What helped the sons of the Maccabees was a belief in the resurrection. Now, this story takes place more than 100 years before Jesus was born. People did not have a clear image of the resurrection, but the concept was already coming to light. Jesus was born into an age that was ready to hear the news of resurrection and to experience its immense power. Belief in the resurrection can give us courage to accept whatever challenges lie on our path, even threats to our life.

We may never be asked to die for our faith, to trade our life for something we believe in. But we can still die in a way that expresses our faith. Our death can put into motion acts of charity and sacrifice. Next week is pledge Sunday for the Bishops' Annual Appeal. It gives you a chance to say that the Catholic Church in this part of Missouri is worth the sacrifice. And the next time you rework your will, think about doing it in a way that expresses your priorities. Whom do you want to help the most? Your family? Your parish? Your diocese? If so, then make your last breath a final gift of life to those for whom you would gladly give up everything that God has graciously allowed you to have.