

God protects his people. That idea comforts us and may explain why we keep religion as part of our lives. Things get out of control and we need one who is powerful. Our faith and experience tell us that God protects his people.

Today's Gospel, then, provides great comfort. The scene is the Last Supper and Jesus is praying with one petition: that the Father will protect the apostles when Jesus is gone.

Did this prayer for protection get any results? At first glance, it looks like the answer is no. The men seated tranquilly at table with Jesus that evening suffered violent deaths. According to the tradition (this is not in Scripture), Peter was crucified upside down, Andrew was crucified on an x-shaped cross. Bartholomew was skinned alive, Matthew died by the sword. James was thrown from the top of the temple in Jerusalem and then clubbed to death on the ground. The only one who escaped martyrdom was John. Not because they didn't try--They poisoned him, they boiled him in oil, but he died of natural causes. If Jesus prayed that the Father would protect the apostles it looks like this prayer failed.

However, although God did not protect them from violence, God did protect their faith. In addition, he gave them victory over death and stirred the faith of their followers. So God protected not only them, but us too.

When bad things happen to us, we fear that we've lost the protection of God. We feel defenseless, as if the shield is broken. But God's protection is there, though it can be difficult to see, as I'm sure it was for the apostles.

My brothers and sisters, in the Catholic Church we are often defenseless before the world. For example, we speak for the value of human life in a society which encourages abortion, in a country with enough armaments to wipe out the world several times over. We speak for the sacredness of marriage in a world where lasting commitments are difficult. We have religious who promise never to marry as a sign of simplicity of life and devotion to contemplation, but other people miss the point and wonder why they do it.

To be a Catholic is to be opposed to the world. You've noticed it when you try to be honest at work, you've noticed it when you want your family and friends to be spiritual. It's hard work.

But the struggle is not a sign that we've lost God's protection. The struggle is a sign that we depend on God's protection. And if Jesus has prayed for us, surely that protection is ours.