

Today's Martyrs – Nijole Sadunaite



In the annals of the persecution of Christians in the last hundred years there are many accounts of momentous fidelity and courage. One such notable event occurred on June 16-17, 1975, in the then Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. A 36 year old woman named Felicity Nijole Sadunaite went on trial for libel against the Soviet state, because she had been caught copying a chapter of *The Chronicles of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, an underground history of persecution. Only her brother Jonas was permitted to attend. A court which normally assigned two guards to an accused murderer assigned her six, and all were carefully selected Russians who could not understand the Lithuanian language. After one session a guard asked her “What kind of trial is this? I have never seen anything like it. It was as if you were the prosecutor! What did you say that frightened them like that?”

The events described here are not recent, but their lesson and import are certainly meant for us today. Here are excerpts from Nijole’s opening statement to the judges of the court:

“I would like to tell you that I love all of you as my brothers and sisters and, if need be, without hesitation, would give my life for each one of you...A thief steals money, you rob people by taking from them that which is of greatest value – loyalty to their own beliefs and the opportunity to pass that on to their children...These and hundreds of other facts witness that the atheist purpose – to make everyone their spiritual slave – justifies any means: lies, slander, and terror. And you rejoice in your triumph? What remains after your triumphant victory? Moral ruin, millions of unborn fetuses, defiled moral values, weak debased people overcome by fear and with no passion for life? All of that is the fruit of your labors. Jesus Christ was correct when he said ‘You shall know them by the fruits’. Your crimes are propelling you to the garbage heap of history at an ever increasing rate of speed...What is due to Caesar is but the remains of that due to God. The most important thing in life is to free one’s heart and mind from fear, since concessions to evil are a great crime.”

Nijole concluded her defense the following day with these comments, among others:

“This is the happiest day of my life. I am being tried on account of *The Chronicles of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which is struggling against physical and spiritual human tyranny. That means I am being tried for the truth and the love of my fellow man...I will joyfully go into slavery for others and I agree to die so that others may live...Thus let us love one another and we shall be

happy. He alone is unhappy who does not love. Yesterday, you were surprised by my happy disposition at a hard moment in my life. That proves the fact that my heart is filled with love for my fellow man, since loving others makes everything else easy! We must sternly condemn evil, but we must also love our fellow man, even though he has erred. That can be learned only in the school of Jesus Christ, who is the only truth, way, and life for all...”

The court sentenced her to three years’ imprisonment in a forced labor camp, followed by three years’ internal exile in Siberia. She survived and returned to her home in Lithuania. Her many miraculous escapes from physical dangers and the wiles and schemes of her captors were added to *The Chronicles* and later republished in a book entitled *A Radiance in the Gulag*.

The KGB attempted twice to arrest Nijole after her return to Lithuania, once from inside a KGB psychiatric hospital, but she both times escaped. After the second attempt she went into hiding, lived off the charity of friends and family and compiled more chapters of *The Chronicles*. Her prophecy of the collapse of the Soviet Union came true sixteen years after her trial, and she then publicly acknowledged that she had become a professed religious sister.

Before the trial one interrogator had ingratiatingly commented on her smiling demeanor, still present after five months’ in jail. Nijolie replied “Even if you kept me in a psychiatric hospital all my life, as long as I knew that no one had suffered on my account, I would go around smiling. A clear conscience is more precious than liberty or life. I do not understand how you, whose conscience is burdened by the spilled blood and tears of so many innocent people, can sleep at night. I would agree to die a thousand times rather than be free for one second with your conscience!” The interrogator turned pale and averted his eyes. He had bragged upon her arrival that he had heard many brave words from all he had crushed, but in the end he failed to crush her spirit. This is a tale for us all, with lessons to be drawn about faith and spirit and truth, and above all about love and fear. Sister Nijole Sadunaite gazed upon those who held the power to take everything from her, and she smiled with love at them even as she witnessed to the truth. Today she continues to speak and smile to Lithuanians at home and abroad. She has shown that the commands of Jesus to “Love one another as I have loved you” and “Do not fear” are ultimately inseparable.



Today’s Martyrs
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