

How to practice for martyrdom

“As my dad said, the New York City police are 15,000 of the finest people you could ever meet.” The speaker was a conservative journalist, and a Catholic, who came from a line of New York policemen. “Unfortunately,” he added, “there are 25,000 New York cops.”

It was an old joke, as I found when other children of policemen told it. Telling the joke, they ruefully admitted that some cops were bad cops, some very bad.

Among all the officers who went [to the twin towers on 9/11](#), there would have been some bad ones. Still, they went there knowing they might die.

A testimony

It's a testimony to the spiritual value of duty. Even bad cops had signed up to risk their lives. They knew someone or something could kill them. It's rare, but it happens. Maybe they were following the family tradition. Maybe they were young and idealistic. Maybe they didn't really think about it. But when they signed the contract, they knew that they were promising to do something dangerous.

People who knew the world of the police well said this was typical. It may seem paradoxical to us outsiders, that men could exploit their job and still, when required, do it at the risk of their lives. It was their job [to go to the twin towers](#). It's what they'd signed up for, what they did, part of who they were. You make a commitment and you keep it. You do your duty.

We should admire that. Being heroic doesn't excuse the corruption and abuse, but it does balance it out a little. It's a virtue to do your duty, even if you only do it in the extreme cases. It's a virtue to make a commitment to serve

others and then keep it when keeping it might kill you, even if you don't keep it very well day by day. You do your duty when it counts most.

Most of us are like them, I think. We made the commitment, but we struggle to do what we should in day-to-day life. We might well give our lives if we're ever asked to do so, especially if we face it as a yes or no choice. It's what we signed up for. We pray God will give us the grace.

We're like the little girl in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." "The child," as the 12-year-old main character is called, wants to be a saint, though for selfish reasons. She knows she would never be one. "She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one. ... She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick."

Being martyrs

To increase the odds that we would give our lives for Christ and for others, we practice by ... giving our lives to Christ and others now. [By doing our duty](#). By doing what we signed up for. We train ourselves for martyrdom by being tiny martyrs. By doing what we've agreed to do as spouses, parents, neighbors, parishioners, friends, citizens, especially by doing it when it costs us.

And more, by trusting in God no matter what we're given to deal with, and doing our duty. That's the way a Christian becomes someone who can face the lions in the coliseum.

We may not be so good at it. That's why priests offer confession and why God, through the priest, forgives our sins and challenges us to do better. That is, to love him more.

Franciscan Father Mychal Judge spoke about this in a homily he

preached to firemen the day before 9/11. A chaplain to the New York Fire Department, he was the first [first responder](#) killed that day. "It's fantastic," he said, "how I can sometimes begin a day and go through a day, but not realize that everything that happens – every single thing that happens – is somehow within the divine plan."

The priest told the men, some of whom would die the next day: "You do what God has called you to do. You show up. You put one foot in front of another. You get on the rig and you go out and you do the job. Which is a mystery. And a surprise. You have no idea what you get on that rig. No matter how big the call. No matter how small. You have no idea what God is calling you to."

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