

One of the biggest events that I've witnessed in my life is what happened in 1990 and 1991, as one by one with the fall of the Berlin Wall, freedom came to the countries that had been under the Iron Curtain. And a big reason why that happened without a Third World War is because people in those countries were willing to stand up and speak the truth even when the forces against them were seemingly overwhelming.

Among the many heroes to emerge from the Cold War was Jerzy Popiełuszko, a catholic priest who was beatified in 2010.

Fr. Popieluszko was born to a poor farming family in the small village of Okopy in northeastern Poland, near the border with the USSR in 1947. He was apparently kind of quiet and shy as a child, and served as an altar boy through high school, after which he decided to enter the seminary.

However, at this point Poland was a satellite of the Soviet Union, and while the Church existed, there was much intolerance of the faith. It started in his teen years. Each morning before classes began Fr. Jerzy would walk three miles to serve Mass, and then after classes were over in the evening, would return to the Church to pray the Rosary. His spirituality was ridiculed and he was accused by his teacher of praying too much. He even didn't tell anyone on the staff of his school that he planned to go to seminary after graduation out of fear they would altar his grades.

A year into seminary, he was forced to serve in the army, despite there being a 1950 agreement between the Church and State that seminarians wouldn't be drafted. The plan was to draft clerics into service and indoctrinate them with communism so they could lose their vocation. He was ordered to reject his religious faith and throw out his prayer book and rosary. He refused, and when he didn't crush his rosary beneath his heel he was beaten and put in solitary confinement for a month. When he didn't remove a medal, he stood hours in the freezing rain. For saying the rosary he had to crawl around the camp on his hands and knees. The abuse resulted in him having to have life threatening surgery after his two years due to damage to his heart and kidneys from the beatings. But, he never abandoned his faith. In his words: **“I have turned out to be very tough. I can't be broken by threats or torture...One doesn't suffer when one suffers for Christ.”** Those are words that he would continue to live out throughout his priesthood.

When his army service ended, he worked in Warsaw as a chaplain to medical students, then worked in a parish that served a number of steelworkers, who were involved in the early days of the anticommunist movement, Solidarity. The Communist regime tried to destroy it, but it continued to grow stronger. Martial law was even imposed for a two year stretch, when human liberties were curtailed and Lech Walesa, the Solidarity leader, was jailed. The message was clear: the State is in control, and you have no right to speak out. None of this though deterred Fr. Popieluszko. Just two months after martial law, he celebrated his first “Mass for the Homeland,” when he spoke out on civil rights, personal liberties, and the freedom of human conscience. They were broadcast by Radio Free Europe and copied by many other priests throughout his country.

His message was a simple one taken from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans: **“Overcome evil with good.”** He did this not just from the pulpit, but through action. In a room at his church was a map that had political detention centers marked throughout the country. Fr. Popieluszko was the message center for the Solidarity Underground, keeping activists in touch with one another. As you might expect, this got him the attention of the local authorities who obviously did not want him speaking out. The government grew more frustrated with him, because people were flocking to him. At one point there were even guards to watch him; he went out of his way to be kind to them, even bringing them coffee in the cold Polish winter.

There is also evidence that some in the Church were made to feel uncomfortable. The Archdiocese was pressured to “rein him in,” and while it resisted for the most part, Poland's former Catholic prelate, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, admitted giving the priest “paternal reprimands” due to pressure from the regime. Some have also accused the Archdiocese of distancing itself from the good padre; and Fr. Popieluszko's diary stated that after some of the meetings with the cardinal, he had been shown “greater respect by the secret police.” And so you have a man who is serving God, answering His call, but is meeting such pain on the way: abuse from the army; threats by the State, and even some higher-ups in his Church who are luke-warm, at best, caught between the government and the people. It would seem every motivator would be to simply go back into the shadows. But that wasn't his way. And for it, he would pay with his life.

It was in October of 1984 that the State authorities, knowing they could not defeat him, that the SB, the Polish Secret Police, took his life. The initial plan was for him to die in a car accident. When this failed, he was kidnapped, and 11 days after his disappearance his bound and gagged body was found. The martyrdom's goal was to intimidate, but instead it backfired completely. By the time of his body's recovery, his story was broadcast throughout the world, and more than 400,000 came for his funeral. More than 100,000 turned out for his beatification Mass in 2010, and there are at least 80 city streets and squares named for him, along with 18,000 schools, charities and youth groups. He was also awarded posthumously given the highest honor the government of Poland gives, the White Eagle, and he was also given a special anniversary coin and stamp. But he doesn't sound like a man who worried much about getting on a stamp. Instead he was a man who worried about getting people to heaven, and giving people some hope, and doing the work in the vineyard of the Lord.

He could have looked at the reality around him, which was that he was a frail, shy man in a country that was brutally oppressed, and felt that, having been under the Iron Curtain his entire life, and asked how on earth could he do anything to change the situation?

Perhaps he said the words of Jeremiah from our first reading: You duped me O Lord and I let myself be duped. Jeremiah was much like Fr. Jerzy in that his life wasn't easy. God called him, and initially he said no, I'm too young, but he could not resist the call. And when he did answer it, the message he was given was to tell Israel that because of their infidelity, God was going to use Babylon to punish them, and they would be defeated. God would not revoke the covenant

though, so the people were to surrender to them as they entered into captivity, eventually returning to their homeland. However, the people, understandably, don't much care for this. And because of that, he is mocked, rejected, thrown in prison, ridiculed, and possibly killed like Fr. Jerzy was, while he was in exile.

In the end though, the message did matter. The people did go into exile, but they returned. And because of Fr. Jerzy's persistence, he may have lost his life, but he did so much for Poland to give people hope, and eventually the iron curtain fell, thanks partly to his message of hope that he kept preaching despite all of the threats around him.

All of us are called to do the same thing. Most of us will not be martyred, but faith is costly. Jesus says as much in our Gospel - that he must suffer, and when Peter doesn't want to hear of this, he is rebuked. It comes across as a little harsh, but Jesus is trying to stress that suffering is part of discipleship. So what does this mean for us?

For one, we also must realize that we have a job to do like Jeremiah, like Fr. Jerzy. You and I are called to evangelize. God gives us each a mission - to go out and set the world on fire. To help others grow in their faith. And this takes many forms. For those of you who have said yes to the vocation of being a parent, you are called to educate your children in the faith and pass it on to them. Any parent knows that's not easy, but also a parent sees how a child changes over the years and matures, because they were willing to use tough love, and remembered that being a parent did not always entail being a friend. But we also have to take it out into the world. And the world can be a bit hostile. Some see religion as a private matter; others openly mock the faith, saying we Christians cling to an invisible God, or that religion is responsible for the major wars through the centuries, or that religion is about limiting one's freedom to enjoy life by saying "no" to so many things. "Leave me alone" and "do whatever you want" is the attitude of so many in the world. Well we respect free will. We don't force our beliefs on others. But like Fr. Jerzy, we have to be a voice for what is good and true, because we love others. If we really love someone, we want them to get to heaven. We want them to make a good decision, and see how to respond to the love of God. And the reality is, sometimes people aren't going to like what we say. When we speak out against abortion, when we speak out against euthanasia, when we talk about natural family planning, when we condemn racism and sexism, or when we say we love all people, but same sex marriage is wrong and that a person with a same sex attraction is called to chastity. People can get angry, but we can't keep these things private or to ourselves. We need to learn what the Church teaches and why, and then not be afraid to have conversations, to engage people, to truly bring out faith outside of the Church into the world as Jesus tells us to do. For when we do this, we can truly help people to find their way, even if it entails suffering along the way.

Second, we should remember, we are not on our own in this. Fr. Jerzy was the voice for the thousands who stood with him, as evidenced by the 1,000 priests and 6 bishops and thousands upon thousands who came for his funeral, and the 18 million who have visited his grave since his

martyrdom. God journeys with us, giving us the virtue of fortitude, which helps us to conquer fear. He also gives us the gift of Himself in the Eucharist as food for the journey. People stand by us too to give us courage and strength. When I've faced difficult moments and tough decisions, I've been able to turn to both God and to others for advice and counsel who have helped me do what needed to be done.

And finally, never give up. Jeremiah is frustrated, but note his attitude - he can't resist the word of God. God's word "becomes like a fire burning in my heat, imprisoned in my bones, I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it." He doesn't live to see much success, and neither did Fr. Jerzy, but because of their persistence, things got better for others. Sometimes in life it can be hard to see past the suffering, or past the frustration of people we care about not seeing the truth of what we are trying to tell them. But we can't give up. If someone we love doesn't go to Mass, or lives a life with values contrary to what our faith teaches, we still love them, greet them with a smile, hug them, and remind them they are part of our family or our friend. But we keep praying for them too, looking for times to have a conversation and not a fight with shouting, and keep trying to set a good example for them. We may not even live to see all of the changes, but God can do great things with mustard seeds, and sometimes that work continues after we die too. God needs you and me to keep evangelizing, so let's make sure we never give up.

No matter what your vocation in life, through our baptism and confirmation, we are all called to be a priest, prophet and king through our confirmation and baptism. God has given us such a great gift with his love - like Jeremiah, let's make sure we don't keep that light under a bushel basket, but bring it to the world. Some in the world might not always see it, and may look down on us, ridicule us, or turn their back on us. But because of our persistence, we also might just one day be in heaven past the suffering and pain, and see people there who look to us and say "I'm here because you never gave up on me." Jesus didn't give up on us and loved us to the end, may we strive to do the same for one another.