

DECEMBER 28 — The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

THE FEAST of the beloved Disciple is followed by that of the Holy Innocents. The Crib of Jesus, where we have already met and venerated Saint Stephen, the Prince of Martyrs, and Saint John the Evangelist, the Eagle of Patmos, has today standing round it a lovely choir of little Children, clad in snow-white robes, and holding green branches in their hands. The Divine Babe smiles upon them: he is their King; and these Innocents are smiling upon the Church of God. Courage and Fidelity first led us to the Crib; Innocence now comes, and bids us tarry there.

Herod intended to include the Son of God among the murdered Babes of Bethlehem. The Daughters of Rachel wept over their little ones, and the land streamed with blood. But the Tyrant's policy can do no more: it cannot reach Jesus, and its whole plot ends in recruiting an immense army of Martyrs for heaven. These Children were not capable of knowing what an honor it was for them to be made victims for the sake of the Savior of the world; but the very first instant after their immolation, all was revealed to them: they had gone through this world without knowing it, and now that they know it, they possess an infinitely better. God showed here the riches of His mercy: He asks of them but a momentary suffering, and that over, they wake up in Abraham's bosom: no further trial awaits them. They are in spotless innocence, and the glory due to a soldier who died to save the life of his Prince belongs eternally to them.

They died for Jesus' sake; therefore their death was a real

Martyrdom, and the Church calls them by the beautiful name of *the Flowers of the Martyrs*, because of their tender age and their innocence. Justly then does the ecclesiastical Cycle bring them before us today, immediately after the two valiant Champions of Christ, Stephen and John. The connection of these three Feasts is thus admirably explained by Saint Bernard: "In Saint Stephen, we have both the act and the desire of Martyrdom; in Saint John, we have but the desire; in the Holy Innocents, we have but the act... Will anyone doubt whether a crown was given to these Innocents? ... If you ask me what merit could they have that God should crown them? Let me ask you what was the fault for which Herod slew them? What! Is the mercy of Jesus less than the cruelty of Herod? And whilst Herod could put these Babes to death, who had done him no injury, Jesus may not crown them for dying for Him?"

"Stephen, therefore, is a Martyr by a Martyrdom of which men can judge, for he gave this evident proof of his sufferings being felt and accepted, that, at the very moment of his death, his solicitude both for his own soul and for those of his persecutors increased; the pangs of his bodily passion were less intense than the affection of his soul's compassion, which made him weep more for their sins than for his own wounds. John was a Martyr, by a Martyrdom which only Angels could see, for the proofs of his sacrifice being spiritual, only spiritual creatures could ken them. But the Innocents were Martyrs, to none other eye save thine, O God!"

*Commentary from The Liturgical Year by Dom Prosper Guéranger, O.S.B. (1805-1875).
Illustration: Massacre of the Innocents (detail), 1304-06. Giotto di Bondone (c.1266-1337).*



Proper Prayers of the Mass in the Extraordinary Form

ADDENDUM:

COMMEMORATION OF THE HOLY INNOCENTS



SECOND COLLECT

DEUS, cujus hodierna die præcõnium Innocentes Mártyres non loquendo, sed moriendo confëssi sunt: omnia in nobis vitiõrum mala mortifica: ut fidem tuam, quam lingua nostra loquitur, etiam mõribus vita fateatur. Per Dõminum ...

O GOD, whose praise the martyred Innocents on this day confessed, not by speaking, but by dying: destroy in us all the evils of sin, that our life also may proclaim by deeds Thy faith which our tongue confesses. Through our Lord ...

SECOND SECRET

SANCTõRUM tuõrum, Dõmine, nobis pia non desit oratio: quæ et múnera nostra conciliat, et tuam nobis indulgẽntiam semper obtineat. Per Dõminum ...

LET NOT the loving prayer of Thy Saints fail us, O Lord: may it render our offerings pleasing to Thee, and ever obtain for us Thy pardon. Through our Lord ...

SECOND POSTCOMMUNION

VOTIVA, Dõmine, dona percipi-mus: quæ sanctõrum nobis præcibus, et præsentis, quæsum-us, vitæ pariter et æternæ tribue confërre subsidium. Per Dõminum nostrum Jesum Christum ...

WE HAVE partaken, O Lord, of these votive Gifts: grant, we beseech Thee, that by the prayers of the Saints they may procure aid for us both in this life and in the life to come. Through our Lord ...

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