

From the Pastor

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The world around us has revived the ancient pagan view of the human body. Many of the most common and prominent sins of our society flow directly from the mistaken idea that the body doesn't really have a spiritual meaning, like it is not connected to our soul, not really part of our deepest self.

I want to share with you the story of St. Afra who is a prime example of someone who fiercely fights against this pagan view of a human body.

Afra lived in the Roman Empire, in what is today southern Germany, under the Emperor Diocletian who unleashed the most hideous and systematic persecution of the Church in Roman history, right around the year 300. Afra was one of the victims. She had been a common prostitute before converting to Christianity, and this was well-known to all the officials in her town. When she was asked to give worship to Roman gods, she refused. She publicly told the governor, Gaius, that she believed in Christ and would worship no other god. But Gaius knew her background and began trying to undermine her faith. He told her that Christ could never accept such a sinner as she had been. She replied: "Our Lord Jesus Christ has said that he came down from heaven to save sinners. The Gospels testify that an abandoned woman washed his feet with her tears, and obtained pardon, and that he never rejected the publicans, but permitted them to eat with him."

But the governor insisted, ordering her to go back to an easy life and make some more money, then threatening to have her whipped in front of her former customers, describing the tortures he would inflict on her, and returning again to the point that Christ would never have anything to do with a former prostitute. She conquered every attack, finishing with: "It is true, I am unworthy to bear the name of a Christian; but Christ has admitted me to be one." In the end, she was condemned, taken to a nearby island, and burned to death.

Three of her former companions in sin and fellow converts watched from a distance, and then, with Afra's mother, brought the saint's body to be buried in the family tomb. While they were still there, Gaius sent guards to arrest them and force them all to sacrifice to the Roman gods. But they followed Afra's example and refused to renounce Christ. So the guards filled the tomb with branches and logs and set them on fire - with the four women locked inside. How easy it would have been for all of them to compromise, to say one thing in their soul ("I believe in you Jesus") and to say another with their body by burning a tiny piece of incense to the false gods! How easy it would have been for them to go back to their old way of life of impurity in order to be saved from such horrible suffering! But Afra and her companions were Christians. They knew that God loved them body and soul, and they refused to defile the temple of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they "glorified God in the bodies."

May the Lord give us at least a little portion of that courage to resist today's culture of bodily pleasures and keep our bodies holy and united with the soul where the Holy Spirit dwells.

+ *Father Roger*