

Homily
Memorial of Saint Peter Claver, Priest
Monday of the 23rd Week in OT
September 9, 2024

The first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, is best known for his saying, “Forward ever, backward never.” Throughout the Old Testament, we hear the prophets and kings making decisions that either move forward toward life or backward toward death. And because we live in the dimension of time, if we do nothing, if we stand still, everything moves past us, which is the same as moving backward, towards death.

St. Peter Claver always moved forward. He was born to a prosperous family in Spain, and after earning his first degree, entered the Jesuits. There, he was inspired by St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, the doorkeeper at the college, to go to the missions in America. Peter arrived and settled in Caragena, Columbia, one of two ports where slaves from Africa arrived to be sold in South America. He was ordained and proceeded to minister to the needs daily for the 10,000 slaves arriving every year. He first provided for their temporal needs, providing food and health care, before providing for their spiritual needs. He is quoted, “We must speak to them with our hands before we speak to them with our lips.” He catechized and baptized more than 300,000 before succumbing to the plague. He called himself the slave to the slaves and is the patron of enslaved people and missionaries to Africans.

We all choose our actions. Sometimes we choose what is good and right, we move forward and we embrace life. Sometimes we choose what is evil and wrong, we move backward and we embrace death. We cannot change our past and we cannot change other people’s pasts, but we can change our minds and choose to do what is good and right; we can choose to love people, forgive them, and provide out of our many gifts what we can; we can choose life by our actions and our words. What we say and do can support life and love. And what we say and do can also, sadly, bring about death and decay.

Jesus offered the scribes and Pharisees a choice; life and good and the healing of a withered hand, or death and evil and ignoring the suffering of someone in need. We all have that choice, just as St. Peter Claver did. He chose to do good in a culture of death. We can choose to do good in this culture of death. All around us are opportunities to do good and bring about life. It may be as simple as smiling when someone snubs you or biting your tongue when someone offends you. Or it may mean going out of your way even to the point of an inconvenience to help out someone who needs some of your money or some of your time.

In everything we do or say, we are either moving forward or moving backward, either storing up treasures in heaven or focusing on selfish things. And we rely on God’s greatest gift of His only Begotten Son, who provides us with the Sacraments to heal us, strengthen us and encourage us to keep moving forward towards life until we hear those glorious words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”