

Attica

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Summary: Reflects on the massacre of forty-two in the Attica prison uprising and sees new repression and brutality forthcoming. Asks us to reflect on Jesus who forgave his torturers. Suggests that no one would know the majority profess being Christians in this country. (DDLW #512).

In the prison uprising at Attica, New York, the news on September 15 was of forty-two dead, prisoners, hostages and guards, all of them of gunshot wounds. As to the atrocity stories of throat cuttings, how these contributed to precipitate the attack on the prison, we do not yet know. How much was dramatic threatenings and rhetoric? No guns were found in the intensive search of the prison, so it is agreed that the prisoners did not participate in the shootings. It was indeed a slaughter of a body of desperate men, willing and knowing that it was inevitable that they were going to lay down their lives in this protest. It was the lives of many guards. There were indeed knives and homemade bombs of some kind or another, and gasoline at hand to wreak further havoc, but there were no guns and the deaths all were, as far as we know now, from shootings. It was indeed a massacre. Now reflection begins which does not seem to lead to less repression or any mitigation of the brutality and savagery, or of the cold cruelty which makes up the lives of prisoners and guards to a great extent. The main complaint of the rioters was that they were not treated as men, but as beasts. They were thrown into prisons and forgotten. Nobody cared. Eighty-five percent of the prisoners at Attica were black or Puerto Rican.

All this morning the words have been in my mind, “What you have done to the least of these, my brethren, you have done to me.” How hard and terrible a thing is the Christian religion, which teaches us that those who take the sword will die by the sword, that we must forgive our enemies, who are to be found in “our own household,” Jesus Christ said.

We call ourselves Christian, we citizens of the United States, the majority of us, but no one would ever know us as Christians. Reflect on the life of Jesus who came to call sinners, who was born in poverty, who lived as a worker for thirty years. He was an itinerant teacher, walking the roads of Palestine, who hungered and thirsted and was fatigued to the point of exhaustion, who was tempted in all things like us but He did not sin, because He was also God. As the apostles said, we are called to be other-Christ, we are called to put off the old man and put on Christ, we are told to see Christ in our brother. Hard sayings and who can understand it. Only the Spirit can teach us. It is some comfort to remember those further words, when Christ himself died because His whole way of life was revolutionary—He spoke them from the torture in which He hung, nailed as He was to a cross—“Father, forgive them

for they know not what they do.” And He also said to the thief dying by His side, “This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

I hope all priests who have read in the papers and seen on television these terrible happenings, will be offering Christ’s holy sacrifice of the Mass for our brothers who have had such a long enduring agony, which led to their death.

I am afraid of what is before us, because what we sow we will reap. It is an exercise in courage to write these words, to speak in this way when it is revolting to consider how much we profess and how little we perform. God help us.