

**Homily**  
Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)  
*Revelation 7: 9 -17 alt*

In today's passage from Revelation John the Seer describes his vision in heaven of "a great multitude which no one could count from every nation, race, people and tongue": He hears from one of the elders, "These are the one who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." They are the martyrs of the Roman persecution, the "great distress" of John's time, killed for their faith in Christ.

But the "great distress" isn't only a first-century phenomenon. From the news:

*CAIRO – December 13, 2015 (Crux, story by John Allen)*

*If there were a Nobel Prize for enduring misery, Nabil Soliman would be an awfully compelling candidate. Two years ago, the 54-year-old Egyptian Christian was a security guard in his small Upper Egyptian village of Nazlet El Badraman, where his family had lived for generations. Though hardly rich, he and his wife Sabah, along with their six children and five grandchildren, were comfortable and proud of Nabil for being the lone Christian in town to hold such a position of trust.*

*Then, the sky fell in.*

*In November 2013, Islamic radicals in his village went on a violent rampage, angry over the removal of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi as the country's president. Christians, who represent roughly 10 percent of Egypt's population, made convenient targets.*

*Soliman's was among the first homes to be torched. Rather than restraining the mob, town police instead arrested Soliman, and, as they hauled him away to the station house, invited bystanders to beat him.*

*He and his family were forced to flee the village or be killed. Soliman lost his job, his pension, and his home. His family survives today in a stifling Cairo flat, living on a share of the meager income two of his sons generate selling second-hand clothes in the streets. He can't afford the rent, or even to buy the medicines he needs.*

*Understandably, Soliman is full of questions about his fate and his future. But none of them is "why." "This is all because we're Christians," he said in an interview this summer. "There is no other reason."*

We need to remember that what John writes about is still happening; this is why we read Revelation, to "pull back the curtain" on what we hear on the news.

Back to the reporter:

*A diverse set of motives drives the persecution. In much of the Middle East and parts of Africa, it's Islamic radicalism; in India, it's Hindu fundamentalism; in China and North Korea, it's police states protecting*

*their hegemony, and in Latin America, it's often vested interests threatened by Christians standing up for peace and justice.*

Note the list here: Islamic radicalism; Hindu fundamentalism; police states protecting their hegemony; vested interests threatened. Listen to what Saint John has to say as he goes on, a few chapters after the passage we just heard. (Again, the language is veiled so he can save his neck from the Romans, but his audience – and today, Nabil Soliman – would be quite clear what he's talking about):

*I saw a beast emerge from the sea; ... the whole world marveled and followed the beast. They prostrated themselves in front of ... the beast, saying, "Who can compare to the beast? Who can fight against him?" The beast was allowed to mouth its boasts and blasphemies ... It was allowed to make war against the saints and conquer them, and given power over every race, people, language, and nation; and all people of the world will worship it, that is, everybody whose name has not been written down since the foundation of the world in the sacrificial Lamb's book of life. Let anyone who can hear, listen. This is why the saints must have perseverance. [Rev. 13:1- 9]*

Saint John's call for perseverance in the face of persecution from what "everybody worships" is hardly obsolete today. We discover this if we ask, What sorts of ideas today are "given power over every race, people, language, and nation; and all people of the world worship" them? Is it the love of "safety" from threats of terrorism? The system of advertising-buying-discarding consumer stuff? Love of one's own group and suspicion of others? Confidence that violence – personal or military – is an appropriate last resort in every situation?

Who are those who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"?

Certainly people like Nabil Soliman and the countless Christians today in the Middle East, in parts of India, in North Korea, and in other lands where Christians are persecuted for their faith. But also, much closer to home, Christians are saying quieter "no"s to the cultural forces around them, sometimes at a price.

These everyday people who "have washed their robes" refuse to cheat on their income taxes because followers of Christ don't do that; they accept low-pay, low-status jobs because they love caring for the Image of Christ in sick or elderly people; they undergo regular tussles with their kids because they won't let the kids have the latest gadgets or clothes; they think about the upcoming elections and how to vote in terms of the Church's teaching on "faithful citizenship."

Christians are quietly "washing their robes" by taking into their homes kids from parents who can't care for them, by caring for disabled people, by insisting when they coach kids' sports that winning isn't the

most important thing. In high school and college Christian young people are “washing their robes” by asking themselves what God wants them to do with their lives, instead of asking where the biggest salary or most prestigious title is to be found.

But lots of people don’t understand “the worship of the beast” and are still being deceived by smoke and mirrors about what matters for success and for happiness and for a meaningful life. Lots of people are still being taken in by what “everybody worships.” That’s why we read John, to invite him again and again to “pull back the curtain” and to show that ideas and ideals that are inviting our allegiance are sometimes “the beast from the sea,” a caricature of the One who is truly in charge of history.