

SS. Fabian and Sebastian

The Rev. Dr. Al Starr

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On January 20th our Church honors SS. Fabian and Sebastian—two holy and “ordinary” people who lived extraordinary lives.

St. Fabian was a pope who died a martyr in 250 AD during the persecution of Emperor Decius. As a point of reference, he was the first layman to be elected pope. In a letter written shortly after Fabian’s death, St. Cyprian explained just how Fabian was elected.

As the group of clergy and people were preparing for the election, a dove flew in and settled upon the head of Fabian. This sign united the votes and he was chosen unanimously.

He led the Church for some 14 years. St. Cyprian also wrote to his successor that Fabian was an “incomparable” man whose glory in death matched the holiness and purity of his life.

We know very little historically about St. Sebastian except that he was a Roman martyr, was venerated in Milan in the time of St. Ambrose and was buried on the Appian Way, probably near the present Basilica of St. Sebastian.

Devotion to him spread rapidly, and he is mentioned in several martyrologies as early as 350 AD.

Sebastian became widely known from the early centuries of the Church. As a Roman captain, he was known for his goodness and bravery. During the persecution by Diocletian, Sebastian would not renounce his Christian faith.

Mauritanian archers shot arrows into his body and left him for dead. When a holy widow came to bury him, she was shocked to find him still alive.

She took him home and nursed his wounds. When Sebastian was well enough, the widow tried to persuade him to escape the dangers of Rome. However, Sebastian was a brave soldier and would not run away.

After regaining his strength, Sebastian approached Diocletian and urged him to stop the persecution of Christians. Diocletian refused, and ordered that Sebastian be clubbed to death. He died in 288 AD.

It always surprises me that we seem to know so little about these blessed men that lived so many years ago. Very little is “written down.”

Most of what we do know comes to us mostly through legends or stories. Thankfully, in the case of St. Fabian, we have the writings of St. Cyprian to remind us of the holiness and purity of his life.

And, as Tertullian reminds us, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

But, I suppose that if I were writing history, I could have written volumes about these “pillars” of the faith.

But now, they are but “names on a calendar—or only names on a list.” What does that mean,—“names on a list?”

Sometimes, we think of ourselves as just names on a list. And, at times, we don’t even know where the list is but we firmly believe that God has a list and He has our names written upon it.

God interacts with us in our lives and is present to us. Indeed, “God with us”—the Incarnation.

And, perhaps many years after we leave this earth, possibly even centuries, people will not know us or about us. But that doesn’t mean that our lives are unimportant.

In speaking about the Apostles, St. John tells us that they are the foundation of the church. And Christ builds His church upon the foundation.

And, St. John also says that you and I are building a dwelling place with God in the spirit.

Just as SS. Fabian and Sebastian’s lives were vital to the church in their time and beyond, so your life and mine are important to the church here and now.

Your life and mine is the Gospel being preached in the far reaches of the earth. The Church grows because of us. Our goodness affects the whole world.

As we honor the lives of the martyrs, we take confidence in the fact that God loves us individually—as we are.

And like SS. Fabian and Sebastian, we too, have unique gifts to give. Our lives are important because we have been called. God blesses us and calls each one of us to be a saint!

As we, people of faith, gather in community together to worship and pray to God with our concerns, we pray that all people may look beyond appearances and see that ALL life is precious and important—and indeed, a gift from God. The important thing is to give our gifts from God to each other—completely—with love and compassion.