

Holy Innocents

Feastday: December 28

No one is less deserving of death than a Baby

Herod the Great was not great. He was evil. Herod the Sociopath, or Herod the Devil, would be more accurate titles. Herod murdered his own wife and preserved her corpse in honey. He had two of his own sons strangled to death. He routinely liquidated anyone suspected of disloyalty. He had a harem of five hundred women, a brood of illegitimate children, and a taste for the pages who served in his palace. The Roman Emperor Augustus, Herod's patron, stood in awe of his bloodthirst. A contemporary historian wrote that Herod was "a man of great barbarity toward everyone." Herod was simply the most ruthless king of his time. It was this Herod whose son beheaded John the Baptist. It was this Herod who frightened Joseph and Mary to flee into Egypt. It was this Herod whose fury would have hung each of the three wise men from a beam if they had not been warned by an angel to return home by another route. And it was this Herod whose savagery is commemorated today, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. He ordered the slaughter of numerous male babies in and around Bethlehem in the hope of eliminating just one. Weighed on Herod's distorted moral scales, many deaths were worth one cancelled threat.

In the Old Testament, Pharaoh ordered the drowning of all Jewish baby boys in a desire to suppress the Israelite population and a possible threat to his rule ([Exodus 1:22](#)). As they grew to manhood, both Moses and Christ surely were made aware of the hard sacrifices others had endured so that they could live and fulfill God's plan of liberation for their people. Moses and Christ are united by the twin effort of harsh rulers to snuff out their lives like a candle. Moses also stands at Christ's side at the Transfiguration, which evokes Moses' own transformational encounter with God at the burning bush. In many ways, then, Christ is a new Moses, the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy that God would raise up a prophet like himself to speak all that the Lord commanded ([Deuteronomy 18:15-19](#)).

Today's innocents are considered the first martyrs of the Church, although it is more precise to say that they died *instead* of Christ rather than *for* Him. In both Scripture and secular history, innocents die so that the hero survives to achieve his mission. We can only imagine mothers' faces creased with pain and fathers' eyes filled with horror as their babies were forcibly torn from their arms, never to be returned to the soft cradle of family life. Many of these Innocents never bounced on grandma's knee, took a wobbly first step toward their mother's open arms, or built castles in the sand. There is a more bitter sadness in the unknown of every "might have been" than in any "had and lost." In dying so that Another might live, the Holy Innocents were other Christs. The fruits of many martyrs' sacrifices are harvested long after their deaths, and today is no exception.

Perhaps the Holy Innocents are very close to the altar of God in heaven right now. Perhaps they were the first to welcome Christ to His throne at His Ascension into

heaven. Perhaps these first buds of Christian martyrdom flowered into adults in heaven. It is a truism of justice that it is better for nine guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to be punished. No one is more innocent than a baby. Yet these babies died in the ultimate hate crime so that their own redemption could be accomplished.

Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, you died unnamed at the hands of a madman. May your pristine souls, washed in blood, give hope to all who suffer unjustly, that one day their sacrifice will be rewarded with triumph, if not for themselves, then for those who follow.