

20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

SOULS ON FIRE

1. Soul on Fire. Let's start with a funny one-liner. "When tempted to fight fire with fire, remember that the Fire Department usually uses water." Well, even the Fire Department needs to be fired up to fight fires. Fire is a rich metaphor not only for destruction but also for purification and renewal. In about two months, come 10th October, 2025, a Hollywood directed biographical film is planned for release in the US and Canada, with the title "Soul on Fire", portraying John O'Leary. John survived a massive explosion at the age of 9 when he was playing in his parents' garage in St. Louis, experimenting with matches and gasoline. At one point, he was given a 1% chance of surviving. Today, O'Leary is a motivational speaker and bestselling author who credits this experience with shaping his desire to inspire others. Regarding "Soul On Fire", he stated recently "My hope is that this film will inspire audiences to recognize the fire burning within them and to live with greater courage, passion, and purpose." In the National Catholic Register, he wrote: "...And I hope this movie does a wonderful job of reminding people that God is still God, that prayer still matters, and the best is yet to come." Sisters and Brothers, I'm glad that faith in God is showing up in more and more Hollywood movies. For today's readings, the O'Leary's story gives us a living metaphor: surviving the destructive power of external fire and discovering the purifying action of fire of God's love in our hearts, in our souls. Wow. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed the purifying fire, dispelling darkness from our souls, purifying our hearts and minds but sometimes causing apparent disagreements even between relatives. Yes, Christ has set the world on fire. Since He came, the world has been on fire: "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Lk 12:49).

2. Purifying Fire. Yes, some fires cause destruction. Fires of pride, hatred, lust, greed, anger and other passions can destroy individuals and communities. In the 1st reading (Jer 38:4-6, 8-10) some princes tried to destroy Jeremiah out of hatred for the Word of God that Jeremiah preached. But God used Ebed-Melech the Cushite, to rescue Jeremiah. Our responsorial Psalm teaches us how to pray in the midst of destructive fires: "Lord, come to my aid!" (Psalm 40). The 2nd reading (Heb 12:1-4) reminds us of the ways God comes to our aid, including through the good example of others. Yes, "...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). The purifying fire of Christ kindles other purifying fires in the saints and in us, further lighting up the world. Today's Gospel reading inspired St Ignatius who often told Jesuits going on mission: *ite, inflammate omnia*—"go, set the world on fire."

3. School. Since many students return to school this time of the year, let's remind ourselves how the Gospel kindles the purifying fire of Divine Love through the process of education. Yes, some parents may be worried at this time: Will my children keep their Christian faith? Will they overcome the temptation to substance abuse? Will they do well in school? Will their education give them the skills they need to succeed in life? Well, whenever education is allowed to embrace truth in all its forms: intellectual truths, mathematical truths, economic truths, scientific truths, spiritual truths; whenever the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are presented in their entirety, the truth of human nature as destined for salvation gets encountered even in our classrooms. Let me mention just one modern day saint who started out as an atheist in high school but received the faith in university. Edith Stein was born a Jew but lost faith in God and became an atheist at 14, before going to college. Later, as a student at the University of Göttingen, she became fascinated by phenomenology, an approach to philosophy. Edith read widely and deeply and earned a PhD in 1916. But while in college, her search for truth led her into reading the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila. That sparked a spiritual journey that led to her baptism in 1922. Her education led her to Christian faith. She became a professor of philosophy and an ardent Christian, teaching men and women both the profoundest philosophies as well as instructing people in the Christian faith. It did not end there. Edith Stein became a nun and took the name Sr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She is now St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Virgin and Martyr, having received the crown of martyrdom at Auschwitz in 1942. On the way to the gas chamber at Auschwitz, she offered her suffering as an offering "for the conversion of atheists...for the Nazi persecutors, and for all who no longer had the love of God in their hearts." Her attitude reflects what a soul on fire with God's love can do. May our schools and campuses become places where faith, hope and charity are nourished for the good of human societies and the salvation of souls. Amen.

https://youtu.be/jFMsrGjIW66Y?si=5_m7uwl6Xp6m5fQk

****We are grateful to Fr Andrew Ekenyong of St Mary Magdalene Catholic Church, Omaha, USA, for accepting to be our online homilist this year, 2025***