Giving Your Life for Another

Jesus' words in John 15:13 have been acted on in different ways by different people. He said, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his for his friend." Some have lived out these words in self-sacrificing service to others. Some have actually given their own lives so that the lives of others might be spared.

In the recent past, this literal "laying down" of one's life has been part of the story of an Orthodox monastic saint, Mother Maria Skobtsova. She was imprisoned in the Ravensbruck concentration camp during World War II, having for years helped Jewish people and others escape arrest by the Nazis. Though her health quickly deteriorated in the camp, she was able to inspire other inmates with her unwaveringly certain and even cheerful faith in God. Survivors remember that she kept many other prisoners from complete despair.

It is said that Mother Maria took the place of a hysterical young woman in line to enter the gas chamber. So the nun met her death on Holy Friday of 1945.

Another saint, many centuries earlier, laid down his life to save someone else. He is Saint Alban, the first martyr or protomartyr of Britain. Alban was a pagan living in Roman Britain in the fourth century, during the harsh persecutions that took place under the Emperor Diocletian. One day a priest, fleeing the pagan magistrate, hid near Alban's door. Alban saw him, took him in, and gave him refuge.

Over the next days, Alban saw how the priest prayed, thanking God and asking Him to keep others safe. Alban observed the man's piety, gentleness, and joy in the Lord. He asked many questions of the priest, and finally decided to become a Christian himself.

It wasn't long before the authorities came looking for the priest, having heard that Alban was harboring a fugitive. In order to give the priest a chance to get away, Alban put on the other man's cloak and let the soldiers take him away believing that he was the priest they were seeking.

The magistrate, while questioning Alban, discovered the deception. Furious that a fugitive had been allowed to escape, he threatened that his prisoner would face the execution that had been intended for the priest. He became even more angry when Alban didn't protest, saying that if the price of his new faith was death, he was willing to pay it.

The magistrate ordered Alban to be beheaded, and the sentence was promptly carried out. Today, churches, abbeys and shrines all over England bear the name of this first martyr.

In 1928, the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius was founded to promote interaction and understanding between Christians of the West and the East.

The group continues its work today, inspired by the memory of its two patrons. The first is Saint Sergius of Radonezh, and the second is Saint Alban, who gave his life so that another might live.

Troparion - Tone 4

You became a bride of Christ,
O venerable Mother,
And offered your body and soul
To Him as a living sacrifice.
You exposed the evil side of humanity's ways
By allowing the light of the Resurrection
To shine forth from you.
We celebrate your memory in love.
O Martyr and Confessor Maria,
Pray to Christ our God
That He may save our souls.