



Statistically, it is estimated that in forty years, six of the top ten Christian countries in the world will be in Africa. Not everyone sees this as positive. Powerful sectarian extremists and even governments in some of these countries can see this news as a threat, and so persecutions grow right along with the Church. Still, it is rare that the American media focuses on these atrocities. One example, last month there were reports out of Africa estimating the number the recent martyrs (clergy and laity) in Ethiopia to be nearly a thousand, including a massacre of 750 people at the most famous church in Ethiopia, where it is claimed the Ark of the Covenant is there enshrined.

This Sunday, February 7th, our Parish dedicates a recently completed icon (by Teresa Satola Coey) of St. Maurice, who was a third century martyr. St. Maurice and the Theban Legion were Africans (from Egypt) but their martyrdom took place in the Alps of Europe. The Roman army was cosmopolitan, and often legions from one part of the empire would be sent to another part of the empire to serve. The story of St. Maurice is connected with a legendary spear (which we see painted into this icon) that became a relic with its own fascinating history. Other details in this icon include the symbol we see painted on his shield that is based on medieval documents suggesting this was the Theban Legion's insignia. In our icon, St. Maurice also holds the gladius (or the famous short sword of the Roman Imperial Infantrymen).

St. Maurice was the commander of this legion, and was the patron saint of the Holy Roman Empire (and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire). A coronation sword that was used for seven centuries in the crowning of emperors is named in honor of St. Maurice, and it was kept with his relics. Interestingly, that sword would have been used last at the coronation of Blessed Karl von Habsburg (whose relic we have at OLM). Consequently, it is fitting that Maurice's icon will hang nearby our shrine to Blessed Karl. St. Maurice is the patron saint of the US Army, and perhaps not surprisingly, the Catholic Church at Fort Benning, Georgia, is dedicated to this saint. St. Maurice has long been one of the most popular saints in Western Europe, where they never forgot the courage of the Theban Legion for refusing to offer sacrifices to false gods and for refusing to persecute innocent Christian communities. So the name of Maurice has been long cherished among Catholics, even the surname Morris is derived from this saint. St. Maurice, pray for us!