

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – SATURDAY, 19TH OCTOBER, 2024
PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE – writer and Catholic theologian

Good morning.

Today is the 40th anniversary of the death of Catholic Polish priest and martyr, Jerzy Popiełuszko, a man on the path to sainthood after he was tortured and beaten to death by three agents of Poland's Security Service, later convicted of his murder. He was thirty nine. He had been an outspoken critic of the communist regime, and aligned himself with the Solidarity trade union movement. He knew that his life was in danger, but he said it was the role of a priest to die for the truth, if necessary. He said, "Telling the truth with courage is a way leading directly to freedom. A man who tells the Truth is a free man despite external slavery, imprisonment or custody."

In the fifth century, Saint Augustine sounded a note of caution about the zeal for martyrdom among some early Christians. He argued that only those who are killed for a just cause are true Christian martyrs. Martyrdom is not a masochistic desire for suffering, but a refusal to be enslaved by fear and falsehood. For some, this demands the highest imaginable price, but in this age of fake news, AI, and what some call the Wild West of social media, if we value freedom we must seek justice and truth amidst the conflicting ideologies that surround us.

For people of faith, this means resisting the claim that religion and politics don't mix. It's one thing to say that, in a secular democracy, politics should be free from religious domination, but it's quite another to say that religious believers should keep out of politics. The Christian faith is about God entering into the suffering and confusion of the human condition in Jesus Christ, who was crucified because of the threat he posed to the political and religious powers of his time.

The way people of faith vote is a religious responsibility. Many have died in the struggle for democracy, but that is only martyrdom if the democratic process is a quest for justice. We see today how vulnerable democracy is to populism, when voters are lured by the politics of division based on appeals to religious, nationalist or racist hatreds and prejudices. When Christians pray "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven", it means a commitment to embody God's justice, compassion and love in politics as best we can, including through the ballot box. I also believe that we must be vigilant about the fragility of peace and the turbulent powers of violence that fester when injustice takes hold.