

J. Christopher Stevens (1960-2012)

By Sulpician Father Robert F. Leavitt

On Sept. 11, J. Christopher Stevens died, along with three other Americans – Tyrone Woods, Glen A. Doherty, and Sean Smith – in what now appears to be a well-planned assault at the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya. From everything we’ve heard since then about Chris Stevens, he was a highly dedicated, smart, and idealistic young lawyer and, since the early 90s, a member of U.S. Foreign Service who had literally fallen in love with that part of the world, fallen in love with Libya of all places, and with its people.

After the end of the Gaddafi regime, Stevens went to Tripoli in May 2012, as Special Representative to the National Transitional Council, arriving in a cargo ship. He went there simply to be of assistance to the new government and to the Libyan people. He also went to Libya, having previously served in Jerusalem, Damascus, Riyadh, and Cairo, fully aware of the dangers such an unstable political situation carried for an American diplomat.

On the news, we’ve heard much already and are learning more about the bizarre circumstances through which an obscure internet film directed by a convicted criminal for the intention of mocking Islam supposedly provoked the storming of the Libyan embassy. It has also been reported that the maker of the film has ties to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, the Coptic Christian Church in Egypt, which has condemned the movie. But, I don’t want to discuss these matters nor weigh in on the political debates which inevitably follow upon tragedies like this. I am writing as a Catholic priest.

The Sunday following Stevens’ death is when I’m putting these thoughts down. This is Martyr’s Day in Libya. It is Sept. 16, a national holiday there. The Scripture readings at the Eucharistic Liturgy on this day mention two martyrs, both of whom speak to us and to this event across the centuries. In the first reading from the Book of Isaiah, one anonymous and enigmatic martyr, whom biblical scholars call the

Suffering Servant, speaks about a mysterious connection between his undeserved suffering and the salvation of the Jewish people. Among the most beautiful texts in the entire Bible, the Four Songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, bring us face to face with what might be called the tragic destiny of truth, the tragic dimension of love. In many personal circumstances, these two gifts come at some price, sometimes in history at a great price, and sometimes, as in Benghazi, Libya for a young diplomat, at the price of a life.

In the Gospel of Mark read in the Mass the Sunday after Stevens' death, Jesus, who in faith we recognize as God in the form of a martyr, directly condemns Peter's naïve and optimistic assessment of Christ's religious mission and destiny. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says of Peter's imperial, rather Napoleonic, version of Christ's victory. Jesus will have none of it. Brave saints and soldiers know better.

Christopher is a name of ancient Greek roots meaning "Christ bearer." St. Christopher himself, of course, was removed some years ago from the official Catholic canon of saints as a pious legend. The name, though, still matters. It matters even if Chris Stevens, a member of the Chinook Indian Tribe, may not have been Christian. I don't know.

Some four hundred miles due west from Tripoli, Libya on the North African coast is the town in present day Algeria where Saint Augustine served as bishop for nearly forty years. The place was known then as Hippo Regius. When Augustine lay there dying in 430 C.E., barbarians were literally storming the gates of the city. Who knows today who those violent men were? Who cares? But, Augustine? There's someone to remember and reckon with.

At the same time as the news broke about Ambassador Stevens' death, Pope Benedict XVI was visiting Lebanon pleading and arguing for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. Muslim representatives joined him in the condemnation of violence. Many intellectuals and religious leaders in Islam abhor, as the pope does, the use of religion to justify violence. Many Christians also forget that the Wars of Religion in Europe after the Reformation cost many lives - Catholic and Protestant. Bayonets and swords, not rocket grenades and suicide vests, were the usual weapons then. Religious toleration and freedom were born from that inner

Christian conflagration. One can pray that enlightened leaders in the Middle East find their own way and in the logic of their own culture to this same conclusion.

May the killers of Chris Stevens and the others, the fanatical types who use religion or even the insult to religion as a provocation to murder, be brought to justice. And, may Islam and Christianity be able to flourish one day alongside each other in the land of St. Augustine. Finally, may Christopher Stevens, whose surname bears such a burden of destiny, "Christ-bearer," even in and perhaps mysteriously because of his tragic death, be an instrument for that. May he even be remembered as an authentic martyr for justice and peace on an American 9-11 and on Martyr's Day in a new Libya.

Sulpician Father Robert F. Leavitt is the former rector of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park and a France-Merrick Professor of Theology.