



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
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Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 9. *Witnesses: the martyrs*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After talking about evangelization and talking about apostolic zeal, after considering the witness of Saint Paul, the true “champion” of apostolic zeal, today we will turn our attention not to a single figure, but to the host of *martyrs*, men and women of every age, tongue and nation who gave their life for Christ, who shed their blood to confess Christ. After the generation of the Apostles, they were the quintessential “witnesses” of the Gospel. Martyrs: the first was the deacon Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death outside the walls of Jerusalem. The word “martyr” derives from the Greek *martyria*, which means precisely, *witness*. A martyr is a witness, one who bears witness to the point of shedding their blood. However, very soon in the Church the word martyr began to be used to indicate those who bore witness to the point of shedding their blood. [1] That is, at first the word “martyr” meant giving daily witness. However, it was later used to indicate those who give their life by shedding [their blood]. Saint Augustine often underlines this dynamic of gratitude and the gratuitous reciprocation of giving. Here, for example, is what he preached on the feast of Saint Lawrence: “He performed the office of deacon; it was there that he administered the sacred chalice of Christ’s blood; there that he shed his own blood for the name of Christ. The blessed apostle John clearly explained the mystery of the Lord’s supper when he said, ‘Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we too ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1 Jn 3:16). Saint

Lawrence understood this, my brethren, and he did it; and he undoubtedly prepared things similar to what he received at that table. He loved Christ in his life, he imitated him in his death” (Sermons 304, 14; pl 38, 1395-1397). In this way, Saint Augustine explained the spiritual dynamism that inspired the martyrs, with these words: martyrs love Christ in his life and imitate him in his death.

Today, dear brothers and sisters, let us remember all the martyrs who have accompanied the life of the Church. As I have already said many times before, *they are more numerous in our time than in the first centuries*. There are many martyrs in the Church today, many, because for confessing the Christian faith, they are banished from society or end up in prison... there are many. Vatican Council II reminds us that “martyrdom makes the disciple like his master, who willingly accepted death for the salvation of the world and through it he is conformed to him by the shedding of blood. Therefore the Church considers martyrdom the highest gift and supreme proof of love” (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 42). Imitating Christ and with his grace, martyrs turn the violence of those who reject the proclamation into the supreme proof of love, which goes as far as the forgiveness of their own persecutors. This is interesting: martyrs always forgive their persecutors. Stephen, the first martyr, died as he prayed, “Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Martyrs pray for their persecutors.

Although martyrdom is asked of only a few, “nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross” (*ibid.*, 42). But, were these persecutions something of those times? No, no: today. Today there are persecutions of Christians throughout the world, many, many. There are more martyrs today than in the early times. Martyrs show us that every Christian is called to the witness of life, even when this does not go as far as the shedding of blood, making a gift of themselves to God and to their brethren, in imitation of Jesus.

And I would like to conclude by recalling the Christian witness present in every corner of the world. I am thinking, for example, of Yemen, a land that, for many years, has been wounded by a terrible, forgotten war, which has caused many deaths and still causes many people to suffer today, especially children. In this very land there have been shining witnesses of faith, such as that of the Missionary Sisters of Charity, who gave their life there. They are still present today in Yemen, where they offer assistance to elderly people who are sick and to people with disabilities. Some of them have suffered martyrdom, but the others continue; they risk their lives, but they keep on going. These sisters welcome everyone, of any religion, because charity and fraternity have no boundaries. In July 1998, while they were returning home after Mass, Sister Aletta, Sister Zelia and Sister Michael were killed by a fanatic because they were Christian. More recently, in March 2016, shortly after the beginning of the still ongoing conflict, Sister Anselm, Sister Marguerite, Sister Reginette and Sister Judith were killed together with some laypeople who helped them in their charity work among the least. They are the martyrs of our time. Among these laypeople killed, as well as Christians there were some Muslim faithful who worked with the religious sisters. It

moves us to see how the witness of blood can unite people of different religions. One should never kill in the name of God, because for him we are all brothers and sisters. But together one can give one's life for others.

Let us pray, then, that we may never tire of bearing witness to the Gospel, even in times of tribulation. May all the holy martyrs be seeds of peace and reconciliation among peoples, for a more humane and fraternal world, as we await the full manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven, when God will be all in all (cf. *1 Cor* 15:28).

[1] Origen, *In Johannem*, II, 210: "Now everyone who bears witness to the truth, whether he support it by words or deeds, or in whatever way, may properly be called a witness (martyr); but it has come to be the custom of the brotherhood, since they are struck with admiration of those who have contended to the death for truth and valour, to keep the name of martyr more properly for those who have borne witness to the mystery of godliness by shedding their blood for it."

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, the Netherlands, India, Australia and the United States of America. In the joy of the Risen Christ, I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you all!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. My hope for all of you is that, as you leave the Eternal City and return to the places where you live, you will bear witness to a renewed commitment to active faith, thus contributing to making the light of the Risen Christ shine in the world.

And let us persevere in our closeness and prayers for battered Ukraine, which continues to endure terrible suffering.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on apostolic zeal, we now turn to the

example of the martyrs, those men and women of every age, nation and tongue who have given their lives in testimony to the Gospel. In an outstanding way, the martyrs bore witness to the love that we celebrate in every Mass: the love that led Christ to lay down his life for us and that we in turn are called to imitate (cf. *1 Jn* 3:16). While all Christians must be prepared to testify to their faith in the face of persecution, martyrdom represents, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “the highest gift and supreme proof of love” (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). Martyrs for the faith in our own time are even more numerous than in the early days of the Church. We can think, for example, of the two groups of Missionaries of Charity who assisted the elderly and disabled in Yemen, and were brutally killed during the ongoing conflict in that country. May the example of the martyrs continue to inspire our efforts to bear witness to the Gospel as we await the coming of God’s kingdom of universal reconciliation, justice and peace.