



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Bearing witness to Christ

Tuesday, 6 May 2014

(by L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly ed. in English, n. 19, 9 May 2014)

Pope Francis reflected on the power of Christian witness in light of the day's first Reading from the Acts of the Apostles (7:51-8:1a), which recounts the martyrdom of St Stephen. "It is a replica of the martyrdom of Jesus: the jealousy of the leaders who were trying to eliminate him, the false witnesses, the rash judgment". Stephen said to his unbelieving persecutors: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit". The Pope remarked that "Jesus spoke these words in one way or another, even literally: 'As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?'".

The Pope noted that Stephen's persecutors were certainly not men of peace. Indeed, "they had hatred in their hearts". Then, reading from the Acts of the Apostles, he said: "when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against Stephen". They were "hateful", the Pope said. "It was not that they did not agree with what Stephen was preaching: they hated" him, and "this hatred was sown in their hearts by the devil. It is the devil's hatred for Christ".

"In martyrdom we clearly see the battle between God and the devil," the Pope explained. "We see it in this hatred. There was no peaceful discussion". And yet, he added, "to be persecuted, to be martyred, to give one's life for Jesus is one of the Beatitudes". For "Jesus did not say: 'Poor you if these things happen to you!'. No, he said: 'Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad'".

It is clear, then, that “the devil cannot abide the Church’s holiness” or the holiness “of a person without reacting. He stirred up hatred in the hearts of those people against Stephen, to persecute him, to revile him, and to utter all kinds of evil against him. Thus they killed Stephen, who “died like Jesus, forgiving”. In fact, he noted, “in the Acts of the Apostles we read that Stephen prayed and said: ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’”. Stephen then repeated “the very words of Jesus: Lord, do not hold this sin against them”.

“Martyrdom, following the Greek tradition of the word, means witness,” the Pope explained. “Thus we can say that the road for a Christian follows in the footsteps of Jesus’ witness, in order to bear witness to him”. Many times this witness ultimately leads to the sacrifice of one’s life, Pope Francis added. In fact, “one cannot understand a Christian without this witness and this testimony”.

The central issue, the Pontiff argued, is that Christianity is not a religion “only of ideas, of pure theology, of aesthetics, of commandments. We are a people who follow Jesus Christ and bear witness, who want to bear witness to Jesus Christ. And this witness sometimes leads to the giving of one’s life”.

The martyrdom of Stephen is thus an eloquent witness of this fact. Indeed, the Pope continued, the passage from the Acts of the Apostles goes on to say that: “On that day a great persecution arose against the Church in Jerusalem”. Therefore, “at Stephen’s death, a persecution against everyone broke out”. The persecutors “felt that they were strong: the devil aroused them to begin this great persecution”, a persecution so brutal that “they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles”. Indeed, the Pope said, “the persecution scattered Christians far and wide”. However, “they explained the reason” for their flight to the people whom they encountered along the way; “they explained the Gospel, they bore witness to Jesus. And the mission of the Church began. Many were converted through hearing these people”.

The Bishop of Rome then recalled that “one of the Fathers of the Church said: ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians’”. And this is exactly what happens: “Persecution breaks out, Christians are scattered and they preach the faith by their witness”. For “bearing witness is always fruitful”: it is fruitful when it happens in daily life, but also when it is lived out in time of difficulty or when it leads to death”.

Indeed, the Church “is fruitful and a mother when she bears witness to Jesus Christ. However, when the Church withdraws into herself, when she thinks of herself as a university of religion with many beautiful ideas, with many beautiful places of worship, with many beautiful museums, with many beautiful things, but she does not give testimony, she becomes barren”.

The Pontiff added that the same reasoning is valid for individual Christians: if “one does not bear witness, one remains sterile, without bearing the life one has received from Jesus Christ”.

The Acts of the Apostles emphasizes that “Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit”. For indeed, “one cannot bear witness without the presence of the Holy Spirit. In difficult moments, when we must choose the right path, when we must say ‘no’ to many things that perhaps tempt and seduce us, there is the prayer to the Holy Spirit: it is he who strengthens us to follow along this path of witness”.

In conclusion, Pope Francis noted that several questions arise as we look upon the “two icons” presented in the day’s liturgy — Stephen who dies and the Christians who give testimony everywhere. “What sort of witness do I give? Am I a Christian witness to Jesus, or am I a simple member of a sect? Am I fruitful because I bear witness, or do I remain barren because I am not able to allow the Holy Spirit to lead me on in my Christian vocation?”