



The Holy See

ECUMENICAL COMMEMORATION OF THE WITNESSES TO THE FAITH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II

Third Sunday of Easter, 7 May 2000

1. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* (Jn 12:24). With these words on the eve of his Passion, Jesus foretells his glorification through his death. We have just heard this challenging truth in the Gospel acclamation. It resounds forcefully tonight in this significant place, where we remember the “witnesses to the faith in the twentieth century”.

Christ is the grain of wheat who by dying has borne fruits of everlasting life. And down the centuries his disciples have followed in the footsteps of the Crucified King, becoming a numberless multitude “from every nation, race, people and language”: apostles and confessors of the faith, virgins and martyrs, bold heralds of the Gospel and silent servants of the Kingdom.

Dear Brothers and Sisters united by faith in Jesus Christ! I am especially happy today to offer you my brotherly embrace of peace, as we commemorate together the witnesses to the faith in the twentieth century. I warmly greet the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and of the other Orthodox Sister Churches, as well as those of the ancient Churches of the East. I likewise thank the representatives of the Anglican Communion, of the worldwide Christian Communities of the West and of the Ecumenical Organizations for their fraternal presence.

Gathered as we are at the Colosseum for this meaningful jubilee celebration, our coming together this evening is for all of us a source of great emotion. The monuments and ruins of ancient Rome speak to humanity of the sufferings and persecutions endured with fortitude by our forebears in the faith, the Christians of the first generations. These ancient remains remind us how true are the words of Tertullian who wrote: “sanguis martyrum semen christianorum” — the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians (*Apol.*, 50,13: *CCL* 1, 171).

2. The experience of the martyrs and the witnesses to the faith is not a characteristic only of the Church's beginnings but marks every epoch of her history. In the twentieth century, and maybe even more than in the first period of Christianity, there has been a vast number of men and women who bore witness to the faith through sufferings that were often heroic. How many Christians in the course of the twentieth century, on every continent, showed their love of Christ by the shedding of blood! They underwent forms of persecution both old and new, they experienced hatred and exclusion, violence and murder. Many countries of ancient Christian tradition once more became lands where fidelity to the Gospel demanded a very high price. In our century "the witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 37).

The generation to which I belong experienced the horror of war, the concentration camps, persecution. In my homeland, during the Second World War, priests and Christians were deported to extermination camps. In Dachau alone some three thousand priests were interned. Their sacrifice was joined to that of many Christians from other European countries, some of whom belonged to other Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

I myself am a witness of much pain and many trials, having seen these in the years of my youth. My priesthood, from its very beginning, was marked "by the great sacrifice of countless men and women of my generation" (*Gift and Mystery*, p. 39). The experience of the Second World War and of the years following brought me to consider carefully and with gratitude the shining example of those who, from the beginning of the twentieth century to its end, met persecution, violence, death, because of their faith and because their behaviour was inspired by the truth of Christ.

3. And there are so many of them! They must not be forgotten, rather they must be remembered and their lives documented. The names of many are unknown; the names of some have been denigrated by their persecutors, who tried to add disgrace to martyrdom; the names of others have been concealed by their executioners. But Christians preserve the memory of a great number of them. This is shown by the numerous replies to the invitation not to forget, received by the "New Martyrs" Commission within the Committee for the Great Jubilee. The Commission has worked hard to enrich and update the Church's memory with the witness of all those people, even those who are unknown, who "risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:26). Yes, as the Orthodox Metropolitan Benjamin of Saint Petersburg, martyred in 1922, wrote on the eve of his execution: "The times have changed and it has become possible to suffer much for love of Christ . . .". With the same conviction, from his cell in Buchenwald, the Lutheran Pastor Paul Schneider asserted once more in the presence of his prison guards: "Thus says the Lord, 'I am the resurrection and the life!'".

The presence of representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities gives today's celebration particular significance and eloquence in this Jubilee Year 2000. It shows that the example of the heroic witnesses to the faith is truly precious for all Christians. In the twentieth

century, almost all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities have known persecution, uniting Christians in their places of suffering and making their shared sacrifice a sign of hope for times still to come.

These brothers and sisters of ours in faith, to whom we turn today in gratitude and veneration, stand as *a vast panorama of Christian humanity in the twentieth century*, a panorama of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, lived even to the shedding of blood.

4. *“Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Mt 5:11-12)*. How well these words of Christ fit the countless witnesses to the faith in the last century, insulted and persecuted, but never broken by the power of evil!

Where hatred seemed to corrupt the whole of life leaving no escape from its logic, they proved that “love is stronger than death”. Within terrible systems of oppression which disfigured man, in places of pain, amid the hardest of privations, through senseless marches, exposed to cold and hunger, tortured, suffering in so many ways, they loudly proclaimed their loyalty to Christ crucified and risen. In a few moments we shall hear some of their striking testimonies.

Countless numbers refused to yield to the cult of the false gods of the twentieth century and were sacrificed by Communism, Nazism, by the idolatry of State or race. Many others fell in the course of ethnic or tribal wars, because they had rejected a way of thinking foreign to the Gospel of Christ. Some went to their death because, like the Good Shepherd, they decided to remain with their people, despite intimidation. On every continent and throughout the entire twentieth century, there have been those who preferred to die rather than betray the mission which was theirs. Men and women Religious lived their consecration to the shedding of blood. Men and women believers died offering their lives for love of their brothers and sisters, especially the poorest and the weakest. Many women lost their lives in order to defend their dignity and purity.

5. *“Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25)*. A few minutes ago we listened to these words of Christ. They contain a truth which today’s world often scorns and rejects, making love of self the supreme criterion of life. But the witnesses to the faith, who also this evening speak to us by their example, did not consider their own advantage, their own well-being, their own survival as greater values than fidelity to the Gospel. Despite all their weakness, they vigorously resisted evil. In their fragility there shone forth the power of faith and of the Lord’s grace.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the precious heritage which these courageous witnesses have passed down to us is a patrimony shared by all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities. It is a heritage which speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division. The ecumenism of the martyrs and the witnesses to the faith is the most convincing of all; to the Christians of the twenty-first century it

shows the path to unity. It is the heritage of the Cross lived in the light of Easter: a heritage which enriches and sustains Christians as they go forward into the new millennium.

If we glory in this heritage it is not because of any partisan spirit and still less because of any desire for vengeance upon the persecutors, but in order to make manifest the extraordinary power of God, who has not ceased to act in every time and place. We do this as we ourselves offer pardon, faithful to the example of the countless witnesses killed even as they prayed for their persecutors.

6. In the century and the millennium just begun may the memory of these brothers and sisters of ours remain always vivid. Indeed, may it grow still stronger! Let it be passed on from generation to generation, so that from it there may blossom a profound Christian renewal! Let it be guarded as a treasure of consummate value for the Christians of the new millennium, and let it become the leaven for bringing all Christ's disciples into full communion!

It is with a heart filled with deep emotion that I express this hope. I pray to the Lord that the cloud of witnesses which surrounds us will help all of us who believe to express with no less courage our own love for Christ, for him who is ever alive in his Church: as he was yesterday, and is today, and will be tomorrow and for ever!

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