



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The Church of martyrs

Tuesday, 21 April 2015

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 17, 24 April 2015)

“Today the Church is the Church of martyrs”. And among these martyrs are “our brothers whose throats were cut on the beach of Libya; that young man burned alive by companions for being a Christian; those immigrants on the high seas thrown overboard for being Christians; those Ethiopians assassinated for being Christians”. In the chapel of Casa Santa Marta on Friday morning, recounting the story of the first martyr, St Stephen, Pope Francis recalled the many present-day martyrs: including those whose names we do not know, who are suffering in prisons or who are defamed and persecuted “by so many modern Sanhedrins”, or for living “the faith within their own family”.

The Pontiff began his homily by pointing out what all martyrs have in common: they are those “who in the history of the Church bore testimony to Jesus” without having “need of other bread: for them Jesus alone was enough, because they had faith in Jesus”. And, Francis said, “today, the Church makes us reflect and offers us, in the Liturgy of the Word, the first Christian martyr”, in the Acts of the Apostles, which speak of St Stephen (7:51-8:1a).

“This man did not hunger, he did not need to turn to negotiations, to compromises with other types

of bread, to survive”, the Pope stated. With this manner “he testified of Jesus” until his martyrdom. Referring to the previous day’s Liturgy of the Word, Pope Francis recalled that “yesterday the Church began speaking about him: several ‘Freedmen’ of the Synagogue, arose and began to dispute with Stephen but they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke”. In fact, the Pope explained, “Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and spoke with the wisdom of the Spirit: he was powerful”. And thus these people “instigated a few men to say that they heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God, and gave false testimony”. With these accusations “they stirred up the people, the elders, the scribes: they came upon him, they seized him and brought him before the Sanhedrin”.

The Pope pointed out that “the story of Stephen” is “curious” in that it follows “the same steps as that of Jesus”, meaning the tactics of “false witnesses” were used in order to “stir up the people and bring him to judgement. Today we heard how this story ends, because in the Sanhedrin, Stephen explains the Gospel of Jesus, he gives a long explanation”. However, his accusers “didn’t want to listen, their hearts were closed”. Thus, “in the end, Stephen, with the power of the Spirit, tells them the truth: ‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears’ — pagans, in other words — ‘you always resist the Holy Spirit’”.

“One of the characteristics of stiff-necked people before the word of God” is “resistance to the Holy Spirit”, the Pope explained, repeating the words of St Stephen: “As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?”. Thus, Stephen “recalled many prophets who had been persecuted and killed for being faithful to the word of God”. Then, “when he confessed his vision of Jesus, which God showed him at that moment”, and as Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit, they were scandalized and cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears”. This, the Pope said, was a “real sign” that “they didn’t want to listen”. And thus, “they rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him”.

This has always been “the story of martyrs”, even “those of the Old Testament, about whom St Stephen was speaking in the Sanhedrin”. The problem is that “certain hearts never like the word of God; the word of God is bothersome when you have a hardened heart, when you have a pagan heart, because the word of God challenges you to go forth, searching and being fed with that bread that Jesus spoke of”.

“In the history of the revelation”, Francis affirmed, there are “so many martyrs who were killed on account of faithfulness to the word of God, to the truth of God”. Thus “Stephen’s martyrdom really resembles Jesus’ sacrifice”. And as they stoned him, Stephen prayed, saying: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”. How can one forget Jesus’ words on the Cross: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit”? Then, the Acts of the Apostles tell us that Stephen “knelt down and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’”. Again, Jesus said: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”. Here is “that Christian magnanimity of forgiveness, of praying for the enemy”.

However, of “those who persecuted the prophets, those who persecuted and killed Stephen and so many martyrs”, Jesus said that “they believed they were giving glory to God, they believed” that in doing so they were being “faithful to God’s teaching”. And, the Pope said, “today I would like to recall that the history of the Church, the true history of the Church, is the history of saints and martyrs: the persecuted martyrs” and also the many who are “killed by those who believe they are glorifying God, by those who believe they have the truth: corrupt hearts, but the truth”.

Even today, “how many ‘Stephens’ there are in the world!”, the Pope exclaimed. He referred to recent accounts of persecution: “Let us think of our brothers whose throats were cut on the beach in Libya; let us think of that young man burned alive by companions for being a Christian; let us think of those immigrants on the high seas who were thrown overboard by the others for being Christians; let us think — the day before yesterday — of those Ethiopians, assassinated for being Christians”. And still, he added, “so many others that we don’t know, who suffer in prisons because they are Christians”.

Today, Francis continued, “the Church is the Church of martyrs: they suffer, they give their lives, and we receive God’s blessing through their testimony”. And then, “there are also hidden martyrs, those men and women, faithful to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the voice of the Spirit, who make way, who seek new ways to help their brothers and sisters and to better love God”. And for this reason they “come under suspicion”, they are “defamed, persecuted by so many modern Sanhedrins who believe themselves masters of the the truth”. Today, the Pontiff stated, there are “so many hidden martyrs”, and among them are many “who, for being faithful, suffer greatly within their families, for their faithfulness”.

“Our Church is the Church of martyrs” Francis reiterated, before returning to the celebration of Mass during which he said “the ‘first martyr’ will come to us, the first who bore witness and, even more, salvation to all of us”. Thus, the Pope exhorted, “let us unite with Jesus in the Eucharist, and let us unite with so many brothers and sisters who are suffering the martyrdom of being persecuted, defamed and killed for being faithful to the one bread that satiates, namely to Jesus”.