



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Persecuted for being Christian

Monday, 7 September 2015

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 37, 11 September 2015)

The horror of the persecution taking place in the world today, as terrorists cut the throats of Christians in the “complicit silence of so many authorities”, began with Jesus himself and has continued throughout the history of the Church. This is why Christianity cannot exist without martyrdom. The witness of the Armenian community, which is being “persecuted simply for the fact of being Christian”, must teach each person to have the same courage as those martyrs, in case “one day persecution should happen here”. This was stated by the Pope on Monday morning during Mass at Santa Marta.

The celebration was the occasion for the signification of the *ecclesiastica communio* conceded to His Beatitude Grégoire Pierre XX Ghabroyan, the new Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenians. Concelebrating with the Pope and the Patriarch were Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, Archbishop Cyril Vasil', Secretary, and Fr Lorenzo Lorusso, Undersecretary, along with all the bishops comprising the Patriarchal Synod of the Armenian Catholic Church, as well as several priests.

For his reflection on martyrdom, in addition to Armenian Christians, Pope Francis drew inspiration from the day's passage of the Gospel according to Luke (6:6-11), which tells that on the Sabbath,

Jesus heals a man whose right hand is withered. However, “Jesus’ preaching and manner of acting”, the Holy Father noted during his homily, “was not appreciated by the doctors of the Law”. And for this reason, “the scribes and Pharisees watched him to see what he would do: they spied on him because they had bad intentions in their heart”. Thus, “after Jesus opens a dialogue and asks whether it is lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, they do not speak. They remain silent”. Luke recounts that, after the miracle was performed by the Lord, “they were beside themselves with fury” — and here the Gospel uses a truly strong expression — “they discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus”.

In short, they began arguing over how to kill the Lord. The Pope pointed out that this scene is repeated many times in the Gospel. Thus, these doctors of the Law do not say, “we don’t agree, let’s talk”. Instead, they are furious and, unable to control their fury, “they begin persecuting Jesus, unto death”.

St Peter too, the “loyal disciple of the Lord, suffers the same”, the Pope recalled. To confirm this is the passage from the Letter to the Colossians (cf. 1:24-2:3) read during the Liturgy: “Brethren, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I complete with is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church”.

Paul’s path, the Pontiff remarked, is “the very path of Jesus: the head of the Church, is followed by the body, the Church”. After all, “the Church has been persecuted since the earliest days”. How long will it last? Certainly “up to today”, the Pope said. Indeed, he continued, “today so many Christians, perhaps more than in the early times, are persecuted, killed, pushed out, stripped just for being Christians”. Thus, as Paul writes, “they follow in the body of the Church the Passion of Christ, bringing it to fulfillment”.

Francis repeated that “there can be no Christianity without persecution”. And he recommended that we remember the “last of the Beatitudes: when they bring you to the Synagogues, persecute you, insult you: this is the fate of a Christian”. Moreover, “today, before this fact that is happening in the world, in the complicit silence of so many authorities that could stop it, we are faced with this Christian fate: to take the very path of Jesus”.

In particular, the Pontiff said, “today I would like to recall one of the many great persecutions, that of the Armenian people, on the occasion of our communion. A people, the first nation that converted to Christianity, the first, persecuted simply for the fact of being Christian”.

“Today in the newspapers”, he affirmed, “we are horrified over the actions of certain terrorist groups, who cut people’s throats simply because they are Christians”. Francis invited those present to think “of these Egyptian martyrs, recently, on the shores of Libya: their throats were cut as they pronounced Jesus’ name”. Returning to the Armenian people, he explained that this people “has been persecuted, pushed out of its homeland into the desert, without help”.

Francis then pointed out that “today, the Gospel tells us where this story began: with Jesus”. And, the Pope said, what “they did to Jesus, historically, has been done to his body, which is the Church”. In this perspective the Pope turned directly to the Armenians: “Today, on this day of our first Eucharist, as brother bishops, dear brother Patriarch and all of you, Armenian bishops and faithful and priests, I would like to embrace you and remember this persecution that you have suffered, and remember your saints, so many saints who have died of hunger and from the cold, from torture and in the desert, for being Christians”.

Francis prayed that the Lord “may give us the awareness to see there what Paul says” and “give us abundant intelligence to understand the mystery of God that is in Christ”. He then added, “the mystery of God that is in Christ brings the cross: the cross of persecution, the cross of hatred, the cross which comes from the fury of these men, the doctors of the Law”. But “who causes the fury? We all know: the father of evil”.

“May the Lord make us feel today in the body of the Church”, the Pope continued, “the love of our martyrs and also our martyrial vocation. We do not know what will happen here. We don’t know!”. But, he concluded, “should this persecution happen here one day, may the Lord give us the grace of testimonial courage that all of these Christian martyrs had and especially the Christians of the Armenian people”.