

BENEDICT XVI

Homily

Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Tiber Island, Rome

7 April 2008

Strive to Imitate Their Courage and Perseverance

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We may see our meeting in the ancient Basilica of St Bartholomew on Tiber Island as a pilgrimage in memory of the martyrs of the 20th century, countless men and women, known and unknown, who shed their blood for the Lord in the 1900s. It is a pilgrimage guided by the Word of God which, like a lamp to our feet, a light on our way (cf. Ps 119[118]: 105), brightens the life of every believer with its light. This church was especially designated by my beloved Predecessor John Paul II as a place for the memorial of the 20th century martyrs and entrusted by him to the Community of Sant'Egidio, which this year is thanking the Lord for the 40th anniversary of its foundation.

I greet with affection the Cardinals and Bishops who have wished to take part in this liturgy. I greet Prof. Andrea Riccardi, Founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, and I thank him for his words; I greet Prof. Marco Impagliazzo, President of the Community, the Chaplain, Mons. Matteo Zuppi, as well as Bishop Vincenzo Paglia of Terni-Narni-Amelia.

In this place full of memories let us ask ourselves: why did these martyr brothers and sisters of ours not seek to save the irreplaceable good of life at all costs? Why did they continue to serve the Church in spite of grave threats and intimidation? In this Basilica where the relics of the Apostle Bartholomew are preserved and the mortal remains of St Adalbert venerated, we hear the resonance of the eloquent witness of those who, not only in the 1900s but from the very beginning of the Church, putting love into practice, offered their lives to Christ in martyrdom.

In the icon set above the main altar, which portrays some of these witnesses of faith, the words of the Book of Revelation stand out: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation" (Rv 7: 13). The old man who asks who the people dressed in white are and where they came from is told: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rv 7: 14). At first it appears a strange answer. However, in the coded language of the Seer of Patmos it contains a precise reference to the clear flame of love that impelled Christ to pour out his blood for us. By virtue of that blood, we have been purified. Sustained by that flame, the martyrs too poured out their blood and were purified in love: in the love of Christ who made them capable of sacrificing themselves for love in their turn.

Jesus said: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15: 13). Every witness of faith lives this "greater love" and, after the example of the Divine Teacher, is ready to sacrifice his life for the Kingdom. In this way we become friends of Christ; thus, we are conformed to him, accepting the extreme sacrifice without limiting the gift of love and the service of faith.

Stopping by the six altars that commemorate the Christians who fell under the totalitarian violence of Communism, Nazism, those killed in America, Asia and Oceania, in Spain and Mexico, in Africa, we retrace in spirit numerous sorrowful events of the past century. So many fell while they were carrying out the evangelizing mission of the Church: their blood mingled with that of the indigenous Christians to which they had transmitted the faith.

Others, often in a minority condition, were killed in hatred of the faith. Lastly, many sacrificed themselves, undaunted by threats and dangers, in order not to abandon the needy, the poor or the faithful entrusted to them. They were Bishops, priests, men and women religious and faithful lay people. How many they are! At the Ecumenical Jubilee Commemoration for the new martyrs celebrated at the Colosseum on 7 May 2000, the Servant of God John Paul II said that these brothers and sisters of ours in the faith stand as a vast panorama of Christian humanity in the 20th century, a panorama of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, lived even to the shedding of blood. And he was in the habit of repeating that Christ's witness to the point of bloodshed speaks with a stronger voice than the divisions of the past.

It is true: it seems as though violence, totalitarianism, persecution and blind brutality got the upper hand, silencing the voices of the witnesses to the faith who humanly speaking appeared to be defeated by history. But the Risen Jesus illumines their testimony and thus we understand the meaning of martyrdom. Tertullian says of this: “Plures efficimur quoties metimur a vobis: sanguis martyrum semen christianorum — Our numbers increase every time we are cut down by you: the blood of martyrs is the seed of [new] Christians” (Apol. 50, 13; CCC, PL 1,603).

A force that the world does not know is active in defeat, in the humiliation of those who suffer for the Gospel: “for when I am weak”, the Apostle Paul exclaims, “then I am strong” (II Cor 12: 10). It is the power of love, defenseless and victorious even in apparent defeat. It is the force that challenges and triumphs over death.

This 21st century also opened under the banner of martyrdom. When Christians are truly the leaven, light and salt of the earth, they too become the object of persecution, as was Jesus; like him they are “a sign of contradiction”. Fraternal life in common and the love, faith and decisions in favour of the lowliest and poorest that mark the existence of the Christian community sometimes give rise to violent aversion. How useful it is then to look to the shining witness of those who have preceded us in the sign of heroic fidelity to the point of martyrdom!

And in this ancient Basilica, thanks to the care of the Sant’Egidio Community, the memory of so many witnesses to the faith who died in recent times is preserved and venerated. Dear friends of the Community of Sant’Egidio, looking at these heroes of the faith, may you too strive to imitate their courage and perseverance in serving the Gospel, especially among the poorest. Be builders of peace and reconciliation among those who are enemies or who fight one another. Nourish your faith by listening to and meditating on the Word of God, daily prayer and active participation in Holy Mass. Authentic friendship with Christ will be the basis of your mutual love. Sustained by his Spirit you will be able to help build a more fraternal world. May the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Martyrs, sustain you and help you to be genuine witnesses of Christ.

Amen.