



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

Martyred with white gloves

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(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 27, 4 July 2014)

Today is still the time of martyrs: Christians are persecuted in the Middle East where they are forced to flee, even handled “in an elegant manner, with white gloves”. On the day in which the Church commemorates the martyrs of the first centuries, Pope Francis encouraged prayer “for our brothers and sisters who live in persecution today”. Because, he stated, today “there are no fewer martyrs” than in Nero’s time.

The Holy Father referred to the opening prayer of the day’s Mass, in which the Lord was asked, “O God, who consecrated the abundant first fruits of the Roman Church by the blood of the Martyrs”. This is an appropriate invocation, he explained, for the commemoration of “the first martyrs of this Church”. What’s more, he added, “their bones are so close”, referring to the catacombs in Rome.

It is especially meaningful, the Pope noted, that we invoke the Lord, asking him to make fruitful the seeds: he made the first fruits abundant. Thus, the prayer “speaks of growth and of a plant: this makes us think of the many times that Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed”. And the Apostle Peter also tells us in his letter that “we have been born anew by an imperishable seed”. And this “is the seed of the word of God. This is what gets planted: the seed is the word of God, says the Lord. It gets planted”.

Jesus explains in a parable that the Kingdom of Heaven is just “like a man who has sown the

seed, then goes home, relaxes, works, keeps watch by night and by day, and the seed grows, it sprouts, without his knowing how”.

The central question, Pope Francis explained, therefore asks, “how is it that this seed of God’s word grows and becomes the Kingdom of God, it grows and becomes the Church”. The Bishop of Rome identified “two sources” that accomplish this task: “the Holy Spirit — the power of the Holy Spirit — and Christian testimony”.

First of all, the Pope explained, “we know that there’s no growth without the Spirit: it’s he who builds the Church, it’s he who makes the Church grow, it’s he who summons the community of the Church”. However, he continued, “Christian witness is also necessary”. And “when the testimony is finished, when historical circumstances call for strong witness, there are martyrs: the greatest witnesses!”. And it is here that the “Church is watered by the blood of martyrs”. This is truly “the beauty of martyrdom: it begins with testimony day by day, and may end with blood, like Jesus, the first martyr, the first witness, the faithful witness”.

However, to be true, the testimony “must be unconditional” the Pontiff declared. The Gospel reading of the day’s liturgy (Mt 8:18-22) is clear on this point. “We heard what the Lord said”, when a disciple asked for a condition in order to follow him: “Lord, let me first go and bury my father”. But “the Lord stopped him: ‘No!’”. In fact, the Pope indicated, “testimony is unconditional, it must be firm, it must be decisive, it must have that language, so powerful, of Jesus: ‘yes yes, no no!’”. And this is precisely “the language of testimony”.

Examining the history of “this Church of Rome, which grows, guided by the blood of martyrs”, the Pope then encouraged consideration “of today’s many martyrs who give their lives for the faith: the persecuted Christians”. Because, he said, “if in Nero’s persecution, there were many, today there are no fewer martyrs, persecuted Christians”. The facts are well known. “Let us think about the Middle East”, he said, “about the Christians who must flee from persecution” and “about the Christians killed by persecutors”. And “also about the Christians handled in an elegant manner, with white gloves: that is also persecution!”

To the present day, the Pope repeated, “there are more witnesses, more martyrs in the Church than in the first centuries”. And “commemorating our glorious ancestors in the Mass here in Rome”, he called for thoughts and prayer also for “our brothers and sisters who live in persecution, who suffer and whose blood causes the seeds of many tiny Churches to grow”. Yes, he concluded, “let us pray for them and for us as well”.