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"Let us recall the Christian witness present in every corner of the world"

In his 19 April general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about the witness of the martyrs.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After talking about evangelization and talking about apostolic zeal, after considering the witness of Saint Paul, the true “champion” of apostolic zeal, today we will turn our attention not to a single figure, but to the host of *martyrs*, men and women of every age, language and nation who have given their life for Christ, who have shed their blood to confess Christ. After the generation of the Apostles, they were the quintessential “witnesses” of the Gospel. The martyrs: the first was the deacon Saint Stephen, stoned to death outside the walls of Jerusalem. The word “martyr” derives from the Greek *martyria*, which indeed means *witness*. That is, a martyr is a witness, one who bears witness to the point of shedding their blood. However, very soon in the Church the word martyr began to be used to indicate those who bore witness to the point of shedding their blood.^[1] That is, a martyr can be one who

witnesses every day. But it was used afterwards for one who gives their blood, who gives their life.

The martyrs, however, are not to be seen as “heroes” who acted individually, like flowers blooming in a desert, but as the ripe and excellent fruit of the vineyard of the Lord, which is the Church. In particular, Christians, by participating assiduously in the celebration of the Eucharist, were led by the Spirit to base their lives on that mystery of love: namely, on the fact that the Lord Jesus *had given his life for them*, and therefore that they too could and should *give their life for Him and for their brothers and sisters*. A great generosity, the journey of Christian witness. Saint Augustine often underlines this dynamic of gratitude and the gratuitous reciprocation of giving. Here, for example, is what he preached on the feast of Saint Lawrence: in that Church of Rome,

said Saint Augustine, “he performed the office of deacon; it was there that he administered the sacred chalice of Christ’s blood; there that he shed his own blood for the name of Christ.

The blessed apostle John clearly explained the mystery of the Lord’s supper when he said, ‘Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we too ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1 Jn 3:16). Saint Lawrence understood this, my brethren, and he did it; and he undoubtedly prepared things similar to what he received at that table. He loved Christ in his life, he imitated him in his death” (Sermons 304, 14; PL 38, 1395-1397). In this way Saint Augustine explained the spiritual dynamism that inspired the martyrs. With these words: the martyrs love Christ in his life and imitate him in his death.

Today, dear brothers and sisters, let us remember all the martyrs who

have accompanied the life of the Church. As I have already said many times before, *they are more numerous in our time than in the first centuries*. Today there are many martyrs in the Church, many of them, because for confessing the Christian faith they are banished from society or end up in prison... there are many. Vatican Council II reminds us that “the Church considers martyrdom”, this disciple, “as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love. By martyrdom a disciple is transformed into an image of his Master by freely accepting death for the salvation of the world – as well as his conformity to Christ in the shedding of his blood” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 42). The martyrs, in imitation of Christ and with his grace, turn the violence of those who refuse the proclamation into a great occasion of love, supreme, which goes as far as forgiveness of their own tormentors.

This is interesting: the martyrs always forgive their tormentors. Stephen, the first martyr, died praying, “Lord, forgive them, they know not what they do”. The martyrs pray for their tormentors.

Although martyrdom is asked of only a few, “nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make the profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross” (*ibid.*, 42). But, were these persecutions something of those times? No, no: today. Today there are persecutions of Christians throughout the world, many, many. There are more martyrs today than in the first times. Many. The martyrs show us that every Christian is called to the witness of life, even when this does not go as far as the shedding of blood, making a

gift of themselves to God and to their brethren, in imitation of Jesus.

And I would like to conclude by recalling the Christian witness present in every corner of the world. I think, for example, of Yemen, a land that has for many years been afflicted by a terrible, forgotten war, that has caused many deaths and still causes many people, especially children, to suffer today. In this very land there have been shining witnesses of faith, such as that of the Missionary Sisters of Charity, who have given their life there. They are still present today in Yemen, where they offer assistance to the elderly sick and to people with disabilities. Some of them have suffered martyrdom, but the others continue, risking their lives, but they keep on going. These sisters welcome everyone, of any religion, because charity and fraternity have no boundaries. In July 1998, Sister

Aletta, Sister Zelia and Sister Michael, while returning home after Mass, were killed by a fanatic, because they were Christians. More recently, shortly after the beginning of the still ongoing conflict, in March 2016, Sister Anselm, Sister Marguerite, Sister Reginette and Sister Judith were killed together with some laypeople who helped them in their work of charity among the least. They are the martyrs of our time. Among these laypeople killed, as well as Christians there were some Muslim faithful who worked with the religious sisters. It moves us to see how the witness of blood can unite people of different religions. One should never kill in the name of God, because for Him we are all brothers and sisters. But together one can give one's life for others.

Let us pray, then, that we may never tire of bearing witness to the Gospel, even in times of tribulation. May all

the holy martyrs be seeds of peace and reconciliation among peoples, for a more humane and fraternal world, as we await the full manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven, when God will be all in all (cf. *1 Cor* 15:28). Thank you.

^[1] Origen, *In Johannem*, II, 210: “Now everyone who bears witness to the truth, whether he support it by words or deeds, or in whatever way, may properly be called a witness (*martyr*); but it has come to be the custom of the brotherhood, since they are struck with admiration of those who have contended to the death for truth and valour, to keep the name of martyr more properly for those who have borne witness to the mystery of godliness by shedding their blood for it.”

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