

Ecumenism Service, January 24, 2016

As we gather today to celebrate our common faith in Jesus, we pray that the desire he expressed at the last Supper that his disciples may be one, will be fulfilled. Prayer is the foundation for ecumenical activity, since it is not by our human efforts that true Christian unity will be achieved: such human efforts are bound to be inadequate. The most that can be expected of them is a kind of political unity based on the lowest common denominator of faith, a unity bound to break down over time, for it is founded on the sand of human consensus rather than on the rock of divine faith. We must go deeper than that, and the theme for this year's ecumenical prayer services around the world reminds us of the proper disposition for all of the disciples of Jesus. Together, we are "Called to proclaim the mighty acts of God." (I Peter 2:9) We pray that one of the mighty acts of God will be the re-establishment of the unity of Christians.

As we seek to discover God's will, and to draw closer to God in prayer and in lives that are governed by a humble submission to Jesus and to the living of his Gospel way, we will inevitably be drawn closer to one another.

"Let strife among us be unknown, let all contention cease. Be Christ's the glory that we seek, be ours his holy peace."

If this is our fundamental disposition, then we will be able fruitfully to engage in the necessary, but in themselves insufficient, activities of ecumenism: the development of bonds of friendship as fellow disciples of Jesus united already in baptism and together witnessing to Him in this world; the intellectual study of the important matters of faith on which we do not agree, as well as those on which we do; and the common actions of practical service to those most in need in

which we can effectively work together long before the full unity we desire is achieved.

Theologically, faith gives us the supernatural vision of reality, of divine providence, that instills in each of us the energy of hope, which in turn bears fruit in resolute practical actions of love that cannot be impeded by the evils of this world, because they arise out of faith and hope, and not out of a mere human desire to do good. But in the personal experience of Christian discipleship, as also in the advance towards communal Christian unity, often in practice we actually begin with charitable action in common, and action fostering social justice, and that leads us to new hope, which opens the door to faith.

These are all sunny pathways of discipleship, and they lead to Christian unity. But in these days, as has been the case down through the centuries from apostolic times, Christian discipleship and Christian unity have also been forged in the fire of persecution, and in the common experience of the dark power of evil.

Each year, in fact, we celebrate this ecumenical event near the feast of the conversion of St Paul, the violent persecutor who became a great apostle by God's grace, and no doubt with the intercession of St Stephen, the first martyr, whose killing he approved.

The blood of martyrs is indeed the seed of the church, and countless instances of the conversion of persecutors, or of bystanders, are found in the accounts of martyrdom in the days of the Roman Empire. So it has been through history.

The common experience of persecution has also brought Christians together, despite their differences. It has been a stimulus to the ecumenical movement in more recent years, as Christians suffered together in the prisons of the Nazis and the Communists, and came to find that in those loathsome places the bright light of their common

faith in Christ burned brighter and sustained them, and gave them hope, amid the enveloping darkness.

Today's Gospel, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, tells us: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is in such a world that we must be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus makes clear that his disciples will be called to take up their cross, like him. Catholic churches usually have the Stations of the Cross set out along the walls of the church, so that disciples may follow symbolically and in prayer the way to Calvary, in the footsteps of their Lord, in order that they may do so as well in the circumstances of their daily lives. For many, many of our brothers and sisters in Christ, now more than at any other time in the history of the Church, each day is way of the cross.

The reading from the First Letter of Peter articulates the vision of the Christian life for disciples who were suffering persecution. The whole letter reminds us of the virtues they needed: they are to imitate Christ himself, who was "rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight" (I Peter 2: 4). Christians must follow in the footsteps of their Lord, and take up their cross.

As in the Apocalypse, in which the glory of the Lord and his heavenly court is revealed most radiantly against the darkness of the world of the four horsemen, so also in I Peter it is in a human context of poverty, oppression, and persecution that the Christians are urged "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Peter 2: 5). They are suffering in this world, but they see beyond the evil of persecution to receive the mission that gives purpose and energy to their lives: despite their suffering and rejection, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Pope Francis has spoken of an ecumenism of blood, and that is what we are experiencing as never before in these days of persecution of Christians throughout the world. In his journey to Africa he visited the shrines of the Ugandan martyrs, Catholic and Anglican, young men who in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century offered their lives rather than give in to the unchaste demands of the King, and so suffered a most horrible martyrdom. Together we have also recently commemorated the centenary of the Armenian genocide, when many Armenian Christians were martyred, as well as Chaldeans, Assyrians, and other Christians. Last year Pope Francis approved the beatification of the holy Syriac Catholic bishop and martyr Michael Malke, who gave his life for Christ at that time, a hundred years ago. So many holy martyrs.

In very recent times we have seen increased persecution of Christians all around the world, not only in the Middle East: martyrs who are killed not because they are Catholic, or Orthodox, or Protestant, but because they are Christian. Recall last year the university students in Kenya who were gathered together, and the Christians identified and killed. Think of the martyrs of the Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad a few years ago, or the 21 Coptic martyrs in Libya more recently.

This is the ecumenism of blood.

It is Christians who are, by far, the single most persecuted group in the world today, and all over the world, not just in the Middle East. But we must not forget that the elimination of Christianity in the Middle East, where Christians have lived for two thousand years, is being carried out even as we gather peacefully in prayer in this cathedral.

What to do?

Here are some points which I propose that we consider:

- 1) We need to unite in prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being driven from their homes, and are suffering martyrdom.

- 2) Given the choice of apostasy or death, they are willing to die. They will not deny Christ. They are willing to die for Christ. Are we willing to live for Christ? Their example inspires us in the much less dramatic circumstances of our life in Christ in this secular society, where the challenges to the Gospel are more subtle, though just as real.
  
- 3) I have been inspired as I hear of those who in the midst of their grievous suffering loving prayer for their persecutors. They inspire us all by their fidelity to the message and example of love shown by Our Lord Jesus in the face of evil, who on the cross said “Father, forgive them.”
  
- 4) We must be sure that the memory of those who are being martyred is not lost. The commemoration of the Armenian genocide was an occasion to assure that, as are the sadly so common similar commemorations of other more recent martyrs. But we also need to be pro-active in assuring that the people of our country do not remain unaware of what is happening right now.
  
- 5) We need to unite in common action to insist that our government, and any others that will take a stand, do whatever can be done to stop the persecution.
  
- 6) We need to assist the work of organizations like the Catholic Near Eastern Welfare Association, CNEWA, and other such groups, to assist the persecuted communities in their homelands.

No one should be driven from their home, and although since the alternative is the death of the persecuted we must do all that we can to help refugees, we must acknowledge that one result of that is that Christianity is being obliterated in the land of its birth. That is a grave wrong. Indeed, we must take what practical steps we can to be assure that Christianity is eventually re-established in places where it has been so violently obliterated.

- 7) We need to help all who are caught up in violence, whatever their faith, and offer them refuge: Muslims as well as Christians, and other minority groups. But let it not be forgotten that it is the Christians and other such minorities who are the most vulnerable, the most persecuted. We must together act to assist the suffering Christians in whatever way we can.

Sadly still divided in many important areas of faith, and with such divisions growing even greater in recent years, we are united in baptism, in our faith in Christ, and in our common practical loving service of all of those who suffer, whoever they are, of whatever faith. It has ever been our conviction that we help others not because they are Christian, but because we are Christian. And we always must do that: we must help all people, and we do. But the most vulnerable, at this time, are the persecuted Christians.

The blood of martyrs is indeed the seed of the church. It puts our real divisions into perspective, as we honour the martyrs, and are inspired by them, and seek to help those who are suffering so grievously.

On this day of prayer for Christian unity, may the martyrs intercede for us before the throne of God, that we may all be one, according to the will of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

