THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT ANDREW BOBOLA

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Beloved in Christ the Lord, we gather this Sunday within the Octave of the Ascension, and together with the apostles we gaze up at the heavens, into which the Lord Jesus ascended on Thursday, on the fortieth day after the Resurrection.

And today we hear difficult words, words that may frighten us, for it is the Lord Jesus who foretells that their hour will come — theirs, that is, the enemies of Christ's Church, the servants of the devil. And when that hour comes, as the Lord Jesus foretells, they will put us out of the synagogues, and whoever kills us will think that he is doing a service to God. And they will do this to us because they have not known the Father, nor Me.

Difficult words, words that inspire dread. All the more so among us, Catholics living in the twenty-first century. Among us, Catholics, who are afflicted with an extraordinary weakness, both of body and of spirit. This weakness, which we experience every day, is on the one hand a consequence of the wounding of human nature by original sin, and on the other of the persistent efforts of the servants of the devil, who poison us — who poison our bodies, but above all poison our spirit.

And so, my dear ones, it is worth our applying a certain remedy to this human weakness, which we feel so painfully. It is worth, my dear ones, our looking today at an outstanding figure who bears witness to us that with the help of God's grace a man can overcome everything for the name of the Lord Jesus. And we too, my dear ones, however much we may be poisoned by pseudo-food, pseudo-medicine, however much we may be poisoned by falsified teaching, pseudo-Catholicism, however hard the devil may try to deprive us of God's grace, leading to the invalidity of the Holy Mass and of the other sacraments through the post-conciliar rites — then, my dear ones, with the help of God's grace, following the light with which the Lord God endows us, we can overcome all these obstacles. We can overcome the fear with which the devil tries to paralyse us. We can overcome the weakness that paralyses us.

Dear faithful, today I want to say a few words about the great — perhaps even the greatest — son of the Polish land, namely Saint Andrew Bobola, the anniversary of whose martyric death, the feast — his birthday into heaven — we celebrated yesterday. He is a special example, a special consolation for all of us who must face persecutions — perhaps not yet open, not yet bloody, but even so the whole apparatus of the state and the false church, in alliance, are doing everything they can to deprive us of the Catholic faith, hope and true charity.

LIFE AND MISSION

Dear faithful, Saint Andrew Bobola is an exceptional figure. The Holy Father Pius XII, on the 300th anniversary of his martyric death, on the 16th of May 1957, published an encyclical in his honour, which he entitled *Invicti athletae Christi* — „To the Invincible Hero of Christ." As he noted at the beginning of that encyclical: „It is Our ardent desire that all throughout the whole world who share the glorious name of Catholics, and especially those sons of the beloved Polish land, for whom the invincible hero of Christ, Andrew Bobola, is a glory and a magnificent model of Christian fortitude, should on the 300th anniversary of his death consider with devout heart and mind his martyrdom and his holiness."

Encouraged by these words of Pope Pius XII, let us turn our thoughts today to the person of Saint Andrew Bobola, who was born in the year of the Lord 1591. He entered the Society of Jesus, the order of the Jesuits, where he prepared for the reception of priestly ordination, which he received on the day of the solemn canonization of the founder of the Jesuits, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and he took it to heart to spread the Catholic faith everywhere he possibly could, sparing no effort, by sermons and missionary journeys.

And so Providence decreed that he spent many years of his life also in the eastern lands of the Commonwealth, where the Catholic faith was in great danger from the Orthodox schismatics and heretics. And there Saint Andrew went, travelling through towns, small towns, villages, in order, by sermons and conversations, to convert people from the Orthodox schism and to lead souls to the true Church, to the Catholic Church. One could say that he followed the example of the Lord Jesus Himself. He went about doing good. He sowed the seed, strengthened those who wavered, brought lost sheep back into Christ's fold.

FROM CAPTURE TO JANÓW

This missionary activity of his was bound to meet, inevitably, with the hatred of the devil and his servants — in this case the Cossacks, brutal, cruel Cossacks, whose blood, to some degree, after all, flowed in the veins of the Banderite criminals who committed the massacre in Volhynia.

And in 1657, on the 16th of May, Saint Andrew Bobola was staying near Janów, doing what he had done all his life, preaching the true religion. That day the Cossacks decided to take the opportunity and capture him. At first they began to urge him kindly to abandon the Catholic faith and to accept Orthodoxy. But when the servant of God firmly opposed this, when he would not yield to their insistence, they flew into a rage, tore the cassock from him, led him to a fence, tied him to a post and began to beat him.

Many people were working in the fields at that time. It was spring, the season of field work. So they ran together, gripped by curiosity as to what was happening. Hence there were many witnesses to the martyrdom of Saint Andrew Bobola, who testified under oath and described what then took place.

And so, my dear ones, Saint Andrew Bobola was scourged, but he would not renounce his faith. Therefore the Cossacks proceeded to more ingenious tortures. They broke off fresh oak branches and wound them around Saint Andrew's head in the shape of a crown, and, twisting their ends together, began to squeeze it like pincers. They struck him in the face so that they knocked out several of his teeth, and they flayed the skin from the upper part of one of his arms. And so the blood began to flood over his body. When the holy martyr still would not renounce the Catholic faith, but rather tried to convert his tormentors, they decided to take him to Janów and hand him over into the hands of the Cossack elders.

So they tied the great apostle of Christ with ropes to two horses and dragged him thus for four kilometres. When Saint Andrew fell, they beat him with lances, hurrying him on. In a crown woven of oak twigs, barefoot, stripped, drenched in blood, livid from the blows, with bleeding wounds, dragged between the horses, Saint Andrew arrived at Janów, where a market happened to be taking place, and a crowd of people ran together to look on at this spectacle.

When word was brought to the elders that a Lach, a Pole, a Catholic priest, the missionary Andrew Bobola, had been captured, they came to him and asked him: „Art thou a Latin priest?" And then Saint Andrew Bobola declared with joy: „I am a Catholic priest. I was born in this faith and I want to die in this faith. My faith is the true faith, which leads to salvation. I cannot deny my holy faith. Be converted and do penance, for you will not be saved in your errors. Accept my faith, and you will come to know the true God and save your souls."

And those words, as we may guess, provoked real fury among the Cossacks. One of them drew his sabre and swung at Saint Andrew. By an involuntary movement he shielded himself with his hand, which was wounded, and then he received a second blow, a blow to the foot. A vein was cut, the steel of the sword struck the bone. Saint Andrew fell to the ground and, lying bloodied after receiving these wounds, made another profession of faith: „I believe and I profess that there is one true God. Just as there is one true Church, one true Catholic faith, revealed by Christ, proclaimed by the apostles. For it, like the apostles and many martyrs, I gladly suffer and will die."

As the witnesses noted, Saint Andrew spoke these words with extraordinary gentleness, with kindness, and again they provoked the fury of the Cossacks. One of them gouged out the great priest's right eye with the tip of his sabre. Saint Andrew in all these torments was extraordinarily calm, quiet, accepting

with humility the suffering that fell upon him, aware of what a grace he was receiving at that very moment from the Lord God.

After these courageous professions of faith, the enraged Cossacks decided to use the most dreadful torments in order to induce Saint Andrew Bobola to abandon the Catholic faith. And they decided that the most convenient place would be the local slaughterhouse. Saint Andrew was dragged along the ground by the leg, thrown onto the butcher's table, and subjected to terrifying tortures.

TORTURES AND DEATH

There were four of these Cossack executioners. When they had stretched out the great priest and tied him to the butcher's table, they began to confer about what tortures to apply in order to break his stubbornness, his perseverance, his fortitude. And first they decided to use fire. They gathered sticks scattered here and there, kindled them and held them to the body of Saint Andrew Bobola, scorching it and crying out that he should renounce the faith of the Lachs, and in that case they would stop the further tortures. To this Saint Andrew replied that the Catholic faith is indispensably necessary for salvation, and he called on them to be converted, for otherwise in their errors they would not save their souls from eternal damnation.

And this stirred them once more to still greater ferocity. One of the Cossacks reached for a knife, made splinters out of wood and cried: „With these hands you say Masses, so we will adorn them for you." And they began driving splinters under the fingernails of Andrew Bobola. A second said: „You dress yourself in a chasuble; we will adorn you more beautifully." And they began to strip the skin from Saint Andrew in the likeness of a Roman chasuble. Another said: „The tonsure on your head is too small; we will make you a bigger one." And he began to tear the skin from Saint Andrew's head.

These priestly hands, anointed on the day of ordination, hands through which the consecration was effected, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood, hands that absolved, that anointed, aroused particular fury, hatred among the torturers. Therefore the barbarians cut off the index finger, cut off the first joints of the remaining fingers with which Saint Andrew had celebrated Holy Mass, stripped the skin from the palm of the right hand, and the left they tormented still more, for they tore the muscles out of it together with the skin.

Saint Andrew, throughout all these torments, prayed for their conversion, cried out „Jesus, Mary," and would not renounce the Catholic faith despite this suffering, these torments which the godless schismatics inflicted on him. And unable to bear that he kept praying all the time, they decided to cut out his tongue. But how did they do it? They cut open the throat, cut off the tongue at the root and tore it out. And Saint Andrew Bobola was still alive. Covered all over in blood, repeating now wordlessly, in his soul: „Jesus, Mary."

And it was three o'clock in the afternoon when the Cossack commander decided that it was time to bring this slaughter to an end. One of the Cossacks drew his sabre, approached the mutilated body and aimed a blow at the neck. Blood spurted, but the Cossack sabre did not manage to cut off the head. The killer struck again, and again the head could not be cut off. Then the murderers gave up, went away, and left the dying priest.

Dear faithful, his body was taken to the church and dressed in priestly vestments. For two weeks it was exposed to public view and did not undergo decay. And to this day it is preserved in Warsaw, on Rakowiecka Street, as a testimony that he was truly an invincible hero of Christ. In the records of his beatification process it was noted that the history of the Church knows no equally cruel torments as those which this martyr endured for the name of Jesus.

BOBOLA TODAY

And, my dear ones, we ought to ask ourselves: what would happen if Saint Andrew Bobola rose from the grave today? What would happen if Saint Andrew Bobola walked through Warsaw today, the capital of what was once a Catholic Poland? What would happen if he learned that thousands of his countrymen cannot get a grave in Volhynia, countrymen who perished at the hands of equally godless, criminal men?

What would happen if he learned that the descendants of those criminals are now guests in Poland, privileged, and without the slightest difficulty pay homage to Banderite leaders?

What would happen if Saint Andrew Bobola went to Mass today even to a Jesuit church? If he saw what is going on there today. What would happen if Saint Andrew Bobola heard the letter of the Polish-speaking episcopate calling for visits and prayer in the synagogue? What would happen if Saint Andrew Bobola saw an ecumenical meeting with the participation of the supposedly Catholic hierarchy and heretics, schismatics, Jews, Muslims, pagans, for whose conversion he strove all his life?

Most likely, if he stood among us today, Saint Andrew Bobola's heart would break. His heart would break from a grief that would pierce his body, a grief still more terrible, a pain still more terrible than the one he felt during his martyrdom. For then it was the open enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ who tortured him. But today it is our nation, the Church, that is being tortured, by hidden enemies, by enemies who have dressed themselves in the vestments of Catholic bishops, priests, in the garments of Catholic Polish statesmen.

PERSEVERANCE AND FORTITUDE

Dear faithful, it is worth our turning today to Saint Andrew Bobola, whose relics *ex ossibus*, bones, rest today on the altar, with a plea that he obtain for us perseverance and fortitude. We do not know what awaits us. We do not know what horrors still lie ahead of us. One thing is certain: that if we do not form in ourselves perseverance and fortitude, we will not endure, we will fall.

And look, my dear ones, returning to what I said at the beginning: what weak people we are. The smallest adversities, hardships, some little pain make us feel as if we were paralysed. We are not able, my dear ones, to fight. We are not able to overcome our weaknesses. We are not able to overcome even a small pain. We are not able to offer anything to the Lord Jesus. And if we are not able to do this today, if we are not able to sacrifice a trifle today, what will happen when real, bloody persecution comes?

WORDS OF PIUS XII

Dear faithful, in closing, let us listen to the words that Pope Pius XII addressed to us in 1957: „And if We direct these Our fatherly instructions and wishes to all the shepherds of the holy Church and to their flocks, Our thought turns most of all to those who live in the Polish lands. For since Andrew Bobola came forth from their nation and has made their land glorious not only with the splendour of manifold virtues but also with his martyr's blood, he is for them a magnificent ornament and glory. Let them therefore, following his shining example, continue to defend the faith of their fathers against all dangers. Let them strive to bring their customs into conformity with Christian norms. Let them hold it in firm conviction as the greatest glory of their homeland, if through the unflinching imitation of the unshaken virtue of their forefathers they achieve that Poland may always be faithful, still the bulwark of Christendom. For history, as the witness of the times, the light of truth and the teacher of life, seems to indicate that God has appointed precisely this role for the Polish nation. Let them therefore strive with a courageous and steadfast heart to fulfil this role, avoiding hostile snares and overcoming, with the help of God's grace, all adversities and trials. Let them look to the reward which God promises to all those who, sparing no effort, with the highest fidelity and ardent love live, act and fight for the preservation and spread on earth of God's kingdom of peace.

„On this occasion, through the words of this encyclical, We cannot but turn directly to all Our very dear sons of Poland, especially to those holy priests who for the name of Jesus Christ have borne suffering and affliction. Continue to go forward courageously, but with that Christian courage which goes hand in hand with prudence and with that wisdom which knows how to look keenly and to foresee. Preserve the Catholic faith and unity. Let faith be the girding of your loins. Let it be proclaimed throughout the whole world. Let it be for you and for all that victory which overcomes the world. And do all this looking to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith. He it was who, instead of the joy that was set before

Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. By so acting, you will also achieve this: that all the saints, especially those who came forth from your stock, from that eternal happiness in which they now rejoice, together with the Queen of Poland, the Mother of God, Mary, may look kindly upon you and upon your beloved homeland, to watch over it and defend it."

Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Praised be Jesus Christ.