HARDNESS OF HEARTS AND THE FRUIT OF MARTYRS' BLOOD

Bp. Michał Stobnicki

In Christ the Lord! We gather today at Christ's altar to pay honour to Saint Stephen, the first martyr. And it may surprise us that right after the feast of Christmas the holy Church commands us to listen to this extremely brutal story of the death of the deacon Stephen. And somewhere deeper in the soul we wonder whether this is not some mistake, whether it could not have been arranged somehow better in the liturgical calendar. After all, this brutal description of martyrdom shatters the magical atmosphere of Christmas for us; it does not fit at all our contemporary vision of that feast, called in the West by now the winter holiday, so as to erase any connection with the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, my dear brethren, nothing could be further from the truth. For today the holy Church pays honour to the first martyr. Remember that the first Christians called the day of a martyr's death *dies natalis*, the day of birth into heaven. And rightly indeed did the holy Church ordain that right after the day on which we venerate the mystery of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, our thoughts are directed to death, that is, one should say, to the birth into heaven of the first martyr, that is, Saint Stephen, who was the first to shed his blood because he was a confessor of the living and true God, because he served the one true God, without whom no man can be saved.

Dear faithful, this feast of Stephen and this lesson from the Acts of the Apostles which we have just heard is extremely instructive for all of us because we find many analogies between those times and those people who brought about the martyrdom, that is, to put it plainly, the murder of the innocent deacon Stephen, and our times and the criminals who surround us. Look, my dear brethren, at this account of the martyrdom.

NOT WORRYING WHAT TO SAY

The first lesson. So often we human beings worry about what will be. We are so worked up, we search the internet for various news, we want to be up to date, we want to know everything, and we worry more and more, we wind ourselves up, wondering how we shall cope when the persecution of the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ begins, of this handful of faithful Catholics who still remain in the world. We wonder how we shall behave then, what we shall say, so that we do not deny our God.

The story of Saint Stephen is meant to remind us all that we should not worry too much, because the Holy Spirit Himself will strengthen those who by God's grace receive this great gift, the possibility of laying down their lives in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. So we should not worry about what we shall say then, or whether our strength will suffice. Because humanly speaking, of course, that strength would not suffice for us; we would run away to the ends of the earth. But if the Lord God is willing to grant us the gift of the grace of martyrdom, then at the same time He will give us the strength needed to bear that martyrdom, to give up our life, to confirm with our own blood that our faith was a living faith, a true faith, that we know whom we serve, to whom we render honour, what is the meaning and purpose of our life, that is, the attainment of the reward of eternal life.

HARDNESS OF HEARTS

The second lesson, my dear brethren. Note how the faithless Jews behaved when the deacon Stephen boldly proclaimed to them the name of Jesus. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles: *When the Jews heard him, they were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth at him.* How much, my dear brethren, this reminds us of the contemporary world. When you try, with your closer or more distant acquaintances, with members of your family, to talk about what is happening in the contemporary world, when you try

to bring home to them a little the question of the crisis which the Church has been experiencing since the time of the brigand Second Vatican Council, then so often you meet with exactly the same reaction. People gnash their teeth, stop their ears, do not want to accept the truth, because contemporary man has turned his ears away from hearing the truth and has turned to fables, as Saint Paul writes. And this is the drama of contemporary man.

An elderly priest once said, when we were talking about what is happening in the world and in the Church, that the Lord God has now sent upon us an 11th plague, far worse than those 10 which He sent upon Egypt. And that plague is hardness of hearts. And it is precisely such people, hardened, blinded, plugged into television sets, who surround us today. People who are not in the least interested in the truth, because they have given their whole heart to the lie. Because they prefer to live in an illusion, they prefer to live in their fairy-tale, invented world than to stand eye to eye, face to face with the reality that surrounds them.

FRUIT OF MARTYRS' BLOOD

And the third lesson, flowing from the story of the martyrdom of Saint Stephen. That martyrdom was extremely cruel: stoning, something horrifying. It is hard for us even to imagine how much the holy deacon must have suffered when the godless Jews hurled at him one hard, cold stone after another, how much he must have suffered when his body was being torn apart under the weight of those stones. And it may seem to us, humanly speaking, that his death, this cruel martyrdom, was so senseless. A young man died, a deacon, a pious one. Did the Lord God have no pity? Why did He permit such a cruel death of a man who was His faithful servant here on earth, who was no traitor, was no Judas, who even in the face of direct confrontation with the godless Jews, aware that death threatened him, did not cease to proclaim the true religion, did not cease to convince the Jews that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah whom they await, the Saviour of the world, the Son of God?

My dear brethren, see that this martyrdom of Stephen had a very deep meaning and bore an extremely abundant harvest, which is mentioned in this passage of the Acts of the Apostles that you have just heard. For when the Jews went to stone Stephen, then, as we read, they laid down their garments at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul. That Saul who will soon be struck down to the ground at the gates of Damascus, to whom our Lord Jesus Christ will appear. That Saul, my dear brethren, who today is a witness of the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen, will soon experience conversion and become Paul, Saint Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles.

This is, my dear brethren, an extremely instructive lesson, a reminder that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity, that the blood of the martyrs is never shed in vain, that their suffering, humanly impossible to bear, that their suffering has a purpose, has a meaning and bears abundant fruit. Just as Stephen's blood converted Saul, who became a zealous apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ, so too the blood of our ancestors in the faith, shed in Rome in the arenas of the amphitheatre, converted the whole Roman Empire. And perhaps, my dear brethren, our [...] is needed, so that the contemporary pagan empire of evil may be converted.

My dear ones, on this feast of Saint Stephen let us give thanks for this great gift, this great witness, and these lessons flowing from the story of his martyrdom, these lessons which for each of us become a source of strengthening, a source of hope that the evil that surrounds us will come to its end, that Christ the Lord will become the victor over death, hell and Satan. For this He came into the world, for this He died on the cross and rose from the dead, to conquer hell, death and Satan and to lead all those who faithfully serve Him to the kingdom of heaven.

Let us therefore ask Saint Stephen that with his help, imitating him, through his intercession, if it be God's will, we may be able to accept with a ready heart the grace of martyrdom, if only the good God is willing to grant us such a grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.