THREE LESSONS FROM THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. STEPHEN

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After Christmas, Holy Church pays honour to the first martyr, a witness of the Catholic faith, who testified with his blood to his love and fidelity toward the true God: the holy deacon Stephen. The red of the liturgical vestments and the reading from the Acts of the Apostles describing the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen shatter the magical atmosphere of the holidays and remind us how true are the words of St. Bede the Venerable, one of the Fathers of the Church: the manger always stands in the shadow of Christ's cross.

Truly, this is something that modern man, the modern world, does not want to remember. Somehow we are able to accept the infant in the manger, who does not speak, but God forbid that the Lord Jesus should begin to instruct us, begin to tell us how we are to live.

My dear ones, as Catholics we ought to understand perfectly why the Lord Jesus came into this world: that this infant lying in the manger is to be a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins. We ought to understand perfectly that it is no error, no mistake, no spite on the part of the Church that right after Christmas we celebrate the *dies natalis*, the birthday of St. Stephen. You may ask: how can it be a birthday, when we are bending over his death? But this is precisely how the day of a martyr's death was described in the first centuries of the Church: it is the *dies natalis*, the day of birth into heaven.

On this *dies natalis* of St. Stephen we are to draw a threefold lesson from his martyrdom.

NOT FEARING MARTYRDOM

First, my dear ones, we ought not to be afraid and wonder what will happen if God wishes to grant us the grace of martyrdom. We see this in the example of St. Stephen: with what courage he bears the palm of martyrdom, with what courage he speaks to the Jews, with what courage he expounds to them from Sacred Scripture that all the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled in the person of the Lord Jesus, that the Messiah has come, that there is nothing left to wait for. The Messiah has come and by Jewish hands was condemned to death.

We see, my dear ones, how great is the wisdom with which St. Stephen speaks. A wisdom that does not come from him. A wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit. We can be certain that if God decides to call someone to martyrdom, He gives at the same time all the strength and graces needed to accept that martyrdom. It is not the case that the one who suffers for Christ is alone, that God abandons him. God gives the strength to offer one's life for the faith. Humanly speaking it would be impossible, unachievable. The instinct of self-preservation is so strong that a man of sound mind does what he can to save his life.

So let us not worry, let us not think too much about what tomorrow will bring, when God's chastisement will come, what persecutions lie ahead of us. "Sufficient for the day is the trouble thereof," says Sacred Scripture. And whatever God, by His will, either permits or wishes us to live through, will come. But together with the suffering, together with the persecution, there will also come the grace to bear that persecution, that suffering, that hardship.

HATRED OF TRUE FOLLOWERS

The second lesson we are to draw from the martyrdom of St. Stephen: the true followers of the Lord Jesus have been, are, and always will be hated. "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also," said the Saviour. And we see in the Acts of the Apostles how the Jews react when St. Stephen sets the truth before them, when he tries to show them that they are in error, when he points out that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Saviour. When the Jews hear the words of truth, then, as we read in the Acts of the

Apostles, they murmured in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him; or further on: "And crying out with a loud voice, they stopped their ears, and with one accord ran violently upon him."

Such is the reaction of the sons of this world, the sons of the devil, to the truth. We cannot expect that this reaction will be any different. The devil hates the truth of the true God. Therefore the devil also hates those people who wish to serve the true God, who do not want to agree to the lie, to propaganda, who hold fast to the true religion against all pressures and lies. How much the devil hates those who remain faithful to the Lord Jesus, we find out for ourselves, after all, every day. Perhaps we are not yet being murdered, perhaps we are not yet being locked up in prisons, but every one of us has tasted what it means to be a Catholic in the modern, godless world. How much ill will, more or less concealed hatred from the sons of this world! Spiteful comments, remarks, perhaps a tap on the forehead, jokes, perhaps some rolling of the eyes, being treated as lunatics, fools, because we are not like everyone else, because we desire to belong to Christ.

Wherever a Catholic is a Catholic, a true Catholic, not an asymptomatic Catholic, but wherever a Catholic is truly a Catholic, wherever he lives as a Catholic, thinks as a Catholic, says something as a Catholic, he must, he must meet with a reaction from hell, smaller or greater, but with some attack, resistance, ill will. Those who serve the devil are not able to accept the truth. They hate the truth. We must therefore, my dear ones, be aware of this and ready for it. There is no friendship between a Catholic and the sons of this world. There is none, and there cannot be. If from godless people, from pseudo-Catholics, we meet with no ill will at all, then we should ask ourselves: what is wrong with my Catholicism, what is wrong with me, what is wrong with my faith?

TWO FUNERALS

We see, my dear ones, ever since the anti-council Vatican II, incessant attempts to reconcile Catholicism with the world. This cannot be reconciled. Either you are Christ's or you are the devil's; either you serve the true God or the devil.

Think, for instance, of the funeral of John Paul II. The whole upper crust of the mighty of this world gathered in the Vatican, they sat down at the funeral ceremonies, applause, praise. That alone should give us pause, that something was wrong with this man. If all those scoundrels, bandits, criminals gather at his funeral, applaud him, praise him to the skies, then this, my dear ones, is already a signal that something was wrong with this man.

And compare the funeral of John Paul II with the funeral of Pius IX. A great pope of the nineteenth century, an enemy of liberal Catholicism, of Freemasonry, of Modernism. When the funeral procession with the coffin of Pius IX was passing through Rome, Masonic gangs attacked the procession, pelted it with stones, and wanted to seize the body and throw it into the Tiber. And this is a sign that we were dealing with a true Catholic pope. And hence the hatred on the part of the enemies of the Lord Jesus: the Jews, the Masons. By this one can recognise a faithful servant of Christ: that he will meet with hatred, or at least ill will, from non-Catholics.

FRUIT OF MARTYRS' BLOOD

And finally the third lesson we are to draw from the martyrdom of St. Stephen: the blood of a martyr is never shed in vain. Suffering bears fruit. In the first centuries of the Church it was said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity. And truly, it is precisely so. The blood of a martyr always yields an abundant harvest.

So it was also in the case of the first martyr, St. Stephen. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that those who stoned the holy deacon laid down their garments at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul. This is the very Saul who will soon be converted and from a fierce persecutor, burning with hatred for Christians, will become a faithful, the most faithful follower of Jesus Christ, His servant, the apostle of the nations, who will devote his whole life to leading men to the true God. This is the concrete, great fruit of the martyrdom of St. Stephen.

When we think of the history of the Church, when we think of the first three centuries, full of persecu-

tions, full of Catholic blood, we should realise that this blood was needed, that without this blood it would not have been possible to convert pagan Rome. Proud Roman soldiers, seeing Christians, men, women, children, the elderly, who calmly, with song on their lips, endured cruel torments and death, clutched their heads and asked: "Who is this God, who gives these people strength, who gives them such peace?" The blood of the martyrs converted pagan Rome 2000 years ago. In all likelihood the blood of martyrs, of Catholic martyrs, is needed today to convert both pagan Rome, and pagan Brussels, and pagan Warsaw, and the whole modern world, sunk in the darkness of paganism.

LEARNING TO VALUE SUFFERING

Dear faithful, how grateful we ought to be to St. Stephen for the example he gave us. He is called the protomartyr, the model, the prototype of all martyrs. This threefold lesson, which we wish to draw today by observing his martyrdom, resounds after all through the 2000 years of the history of the Church, a history of the Church that is filled with the blood of martyrs, that is filled with suffering, but suffering offered to God, suffering that has borne wonderful, great fruits.

We must, my dear ones, learn to value the suffering, the hardships, the crosses that God sends us in life. Not every one of us — God grant that at least one soul among those present here today may be able to receive this honour of shedding his blood for the Lord Jesus. But let us learn to offer every day every kind of suffering, hardship, and unpleasantness that we experience from other people, often those closest to us, family, acquaintances. Let us learn to offer all this to the Most Holy Trinity in reparation for our sins and those of others, of our neighbours. In particular, my dear ones, also for those who are our enemies, who hate us, who persecute us, who are criminals, criminals murdering body and soul. After the example of St. Stephen we must pray for their conversion.

St. Stephen, pray for us.

...and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.