

# + Saints Peter and Paul

June 29, 2020

In the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,  
My very Dear Sons,

The color for today's solemnity, as we are all well aware, is deep red, symbolizing the blood of martyrs. It is no secret that the Holy Apostles died the death of martyrs, excepting Saint John, who, according to a tradition reported by Saint Jerome, underwent a trial of death at the Latin gate of Rome under the order of the Emperor Domitian, but miraculously escaped from the cauldron of boiling oil into which he had been thrown. He lived many years afterward in God's Providence in order to care for the Blessed Virgin Mary, confided to his keeping at the Cross. From his home at Ephesus, he led the churches of Asia Minor and completed his Gospel, no doubt, and the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse. As for the other Apostles, especially these two giants among them, Peter and Paul, it was a closer imitation of the Lord that they were called upon to accomplish as their special testimony of faith. The intimation of his future martyrdom was given to Saint Peter from the very lips of Jesus, after the Resurrection, though in the mysterious terms that Saint John interprets for us:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (This He said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this He said to him, “Follow me.”<sup>1</sup>

The end of Saint Paul was also foreshadowed by the Lord, who unveiled in the following terms to Ananias, as we read in the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, the great suffering that the Apostle of the Gentiles would enter into:

And the Lord said to him [that is to say to Ananias]: Go thy way; for this man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.<sup>2</sup>

It is in order to honor this dignity of martyrdom for the faith conferred upon the Apostles, that the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church are dressed in red, as the Popes, more than once in the history of the church, have reminded those receiving the dignity of the “red hat.” In February 2012, for example, Pope Benedict recalled this tradition. Referring to the cardinals of a recent consistory he explained, “From now on, they devote even more to work with me in governing the universal Church, and to be witness to the Gospel to the point of sacrificing their own life. This is the meaning of the red color in their clothes.”<sup>3</sup> Closer to us Pope Francis, just one day after addressing twenty cardinals, was shocked to see a video of Coptic Christians being led to their death by beheading at the hands of militant Islamists. The lesson was clear.

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<sup>1</sup> John 21:18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 19: 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Dwight Longenecker in *Aleteia* of Feb 25, 2015, article, *The Church was Built on Martyrdom*

We often think of the time of the early Church as the age of martyrdom, remembering among other great monuments the Colosseum in Rome, the place of the death of many Christians thrown to the lions. But the reality of bloody martyrdom has marked many pages of the great story of the Church, as wars and revolutions have brought about the coming into power of men hostile to the very Christian name. During the French Revolution many Catholics perished for their faith, including the Carmelites of Compiègne, who went to the scaffold chanting God's praises. Here is how a recent scholar relates details of their heroic death at the guillotine in Paris:

These nuns even improvised a hymn which they sang to the tune of the *Marseillaise*, according to which the day of their execution was to be their own *jour de gloire*, "day of glory." Before mounting the scaffold, each sister kissed a small terracotta statuette of the Madonna and Child held by the prioress; then each asked her, their legitimate religious superior:

"Permission to die, mother?"

"Go, my daughter."

Each sister then mounted the scaffold in turn. The first to go, the young Sister Constance, began to intone Psalm 117, *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes*, "Praise the Lord, all you peoples!" The others took up the chant, "singing at the scaffold" in truth. The psalm goes on to affirm that, in the translation used by the author, "His mercy is confirmed upon us," thus placing the martyrdom of these sisters in the context of God's mercy.<sup>4</sup>

The lesson of all of this is that we have to be ready, as Christians, for the possibility of having to face martyrdom as did the Carmelites of Compiègne, imitating so many others in the course of history. It is a present reality for the Christians in Nigeria and many African lands. It could happen here. All the same, for most Christians in most times and places, the witness required of us is the martyrdom of leading a faithful existence, according to our state of life. Just to work and live at founding and raising a family has its crosses. This is quite true as well of the secular priesthood. Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict teaches that it is through patience, putting up with the ordinary struggles of life in the monastery, that his monks "participate in the Passion of Christ".<sup>5</sup> In the end, let us leave to God in His Divine Providence and wisdom the particular martyrdom He may have in store for us. The important thing is that other "red" reality—red like the rose—the theological love of charity that unites to God and which is at the heart of sanctity. Knowing the love of Christ, love that we must learn each day from Our Lady and all the Saints, living and understanding with the Church, in the Church, founded on the witness of the Apostles, we will be able to face with serenity whatever comes our way. It is a Roman question and a question of authentic love. Rome in Latin spelled backwards gives the word "love." *Roma, Amor.* Amen. Alleluia.

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth D. Whitehead, "Following the Lamb", *First Things*, May 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Holy Rule*, Prologue.