

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo
Wednesday, 11 August 2010

The significance of martyrdom

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today in the Liturgy we commemorate St Clare of Assisi, Foundress of the Poor Clares, a luminous figure of whom I shall speak in one of the forthcoming Catecheses. But this week as I already mentioned at last Sunday's Angelus we are commemorating several holy Martyrs, from the early centuries of the Church such as St Lawrence, Deacon, St Pontianus, Pope, and St Hippolytus, Priest; and from the nearer past, such as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, Patroness of Europe, and St Maximilian Mary Kolbe. I would then like to reflect briefly on martyrdom, a form of total love for God.

On what is martyrdom founded? The answer is simple: on the death of Jesus, on his supreme sacrifice of love, consummated on the Cross, that we might have life (cf. Jn 10: 10). Christ is the suffering servant mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 52: 13-15), who gave himself as a ransom for many (cf. Mt 20: 28). He urges his disciples, each one of us, to take up his or her cross every day and follow him on the path of total love of God the Father and of humanity: "he who does not take his cross and follow me", he tells us, "is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10: 38-39). It is the logic of the grain of wheat that dies in order to sprout and bring new life (cf. Jn 12: 24). Jesus himself "is the grain of wheat which came from God, the divine grain that lets itself fall to the ground, that lets itself sink, be broken down in death and precisely by so doing germinates and can thus bear fruit in the immensity of the world" (Benedict XVI during his Visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Community at the "Christuskirche", Rome, 14 March 2010). The martyr follows the Lord to the very end, freely accepting death for the salvation of the world in a supreme test of love and faith (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42).

Once again, where does the strength to face martyrdom come from? From deep and intimate union with Christ, because martyrdom and the vocation to martyrdom are not the result of human effort but the response to a project and call of God, they are a gift of his grace that enables a person, out of love, to give his life for Christ and for the Church, hence for the world. If we read the lives of the Martyrs we are amazed at their calmness and courage in confronting suffering and death: God's power is fully expressed in weakness, in the poverty of those who entrust themselves to him and place their hope in him alone (cf. 2 Cor 12: 9). Yet it is important to stress that God's grace does not suppress or suffocate the freedom of those who face martyrdom; on the contrary it enriches and exalts them: the Martyr is an exceedingly free person, free as regards power, as regards the world; a free person who in a single, definitive act gives God his whole life, and in a supreme act of faith, hope and charity, abandons himself into the hands of his Creator and Redeemer; he gives up his life in order to be associated totally with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In a word, martyrdom is a great act of love in response to God's immense love.

Dear brothers and sisters, as I said last Wednesday we are probably not called to martyrdom, but not one of us is excluded from the divine call to holiness, to attain the high standard of Christian living, and this entails taking up our daily cross. All of us, especially in our time when selfishness and individualism seem to prevail, must take on as a first and fundamental commitment the duty to grow every day in greater love for God and for our brothers and sisters, to transform our own lives and thereby transform the life of our world too. Through the intercession of the Saints and Martyrs let us ask the Lord to set our hearts on fire so that we may be able to love as he has loved each one of us.