



## **Homily of Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto Prayers for Peace Ecumenical Service – September 10, 2017**

### **Faith, Hope, and Love: the Key to Life and Victory in a world of Persecution The Situation: Witnesses to Christ persecuted for their Faith**

Look up to the ceiling of the sanctuary of our cathedral. You will see IC XC NI KA: *Jesus Christ conquers*. That is our faith, which gives us hope, to strengthen us to offer a witness of love in a world which persecutes the disciples of the Lord Jesus, and always has, since he himself was crucified for us, so that through his death and resurrection he might set us free from the egoism and violence of this fallen world.

The light of Christ came into the darkness, and the darkness did not understand it, and did not overcome it. That is our faith: Jesus Christ conquers darkness, and selfishness, and sin, and invites each of us to follow him, to take up our crosses whatever they may be, and through the imitation of his witness of love to let the light shine in this dark world.

And it is a dark world which his love illuminates. We see natural disasters all around us, for we live on a dangerous planet: that is the setting for our earthly journey. We are not in the heavenly Jerusalem yet, and so we face hurricanes, plagues, fire, earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornados: this world is not, and cannot be, our lasting home. These disasters of nature put pressure upon us, and sometimes bring forth the worst in human nature, as looters and swindlers take advantage of them for cheap gain; but they also, far more often, bring out the extraordinary goodness of human nature, transformed by grace, as people heroically give witness to the love which pierces the darkness of this valley of tears.

As above the altar of this Cathedral Basilica we see the message: “Jesus Christ Conquers,” directly below the altar, in the crypt chapel, is the tomb of our first bishop, Michael Power. In the summer of 1847, when 40,000 refugees from Ireland arrived here because of the natural disaster of the potato famine, made worse by human iniquity and incompetence, he showed how Jesus Christ conquers, not by the sword, but by sacrificial love: he and many other Torontonians cared for these strangers who suddenly arrived among them, and on October 1, 1847, Bishop Michael Power died of typhus that he had contracted while caring lovingly for the Irish refugees. He was indeed a martyr of charity, and we hope that in due time he will be formally recognized as a saint.

The light of Christ shines in a world made dark not only by natural disasters, but also by human iniquity. And today as we gather in this service of peace we remember the victims of violence, terror and persecution around the world, and especially our Christian brothers and sisters in Egypt and throughout the Middle East.

The last time we had such a prayer service here was a few years ago when we gathered after the murderous attack on the Syriac Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, in which so many gave their lives for Christ. And we must think of the Christians of Mosul, driven into the desert by evil persecutors, and of those in both west and east Africa who have been martyred. It is a fact: a clear fact: a fact that is simply unrecognized – that the most persecuted people the world, in the middle east, in Asia, in Africa, in the Americas and throughout the world are Christians. Thus it was in the days of the apostles, and it is even more so today.



In a particular way today we recognize the suffering of our Coptic brothers and sisters, who have experienced numerous attacks. We think of the young men who not long ago were martyred on the beach in Libya, proclaiming Jesus as Lord as they offered their lives for him. And in Holy Week just this year so many of our brothers and sister in Christ, gathered for worship in Egypt were brutally murdered because of their faith. These are glorious martyrs, and we must be attentive to their witness to the Lord of Life for whom they died.

Jesus Christ conquers. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.

What are we to do?

Certainly, at the level of natural human justice and decency we appeal to people of all faiths and of no faith to be attentive to the massive reality of the religious persecution of people of different faiths, not only Christians, but especially Christians, who in fact are by far the most persecuted people in the world in our time.

Such justice and human decency requires:

- First, that every human effort be made by governments and all of us to do whatever can be done on a human level to protect those who are being persecuted, and to help them as much as possible, so that they will not be driven from their homes, but may remain where they and their ancestors have lived for thousands of years. I recommend support for the Catholic Near Eastern Welfare Association, and other such groups, which seek to help people to stay where they live, and to flourish there. When people are driven from their homes, it is a victory, at least temporary, for the persecutors.
- Secondly, that all of us, and especially our Canadian government, by word and deed, offer practical assistance to those who are persecuted and who seek refuge here, and obviously, especially, to those who are the *most* persecuted and the *most* vulnerable.
- And also, that we do what we can to raise awareness in our secular society, of the plight of all of those, of all religions, who are suffering persecution, and especially of our forgotten brothers and sisters in Christ, who are the most persecuted people in the world.

These are things that must be done, for the sake of justice and human decency.

But we as Christians are called to go deeper, and to see with the eyes not only of natural reason but of supernatural faith. In fact, we must frame our response, in prayerful solidarity, in the context of faith, hope, and love.

## **FAITH**

As we look upon the violence and persecution which our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing throughout the world, we do so with faith. For that matter, we also need to do so as, closer at hand, we respond to the more subtle persecution which we ourselves face if we proclaim our Christian faith with



clarity and charity in this politically correct world in which we live. The threat we face, will not be murder but rather will more likely be mockery or social marginalization. This is what we face if we clearly live as faithful disciples of Jesus, for example, proclaiming the natural and supernatural covenant of marriage between a man and a woman faithful in love and open to the gift of life, or the sanctity of life from conception to natural death.

But whatever faithful Christians face as the earthly penalty for fidelity, they must see and act not using the merely natural norms of secular society, but rather the principles of faith. Every challenge that we face during our brief journey through this valley of tears on our way home to the house of the Father must be illuminated by our Christian faith. We walk in the imitation of Christ. Such was the case of the disciples in Corinth to whom St Paul writes in our second reading today. They too were facing their own challenges in living in a society alien and hostile to the Good News of Jesus. And so Paul reminds them of the consolation that they receive from seeing their own afflictions, whatever they might be, in the perspective of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Worldly vision is insufficient to recognize deep reality: “Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”

Paul insists that the Corinthian Christians understand their situation truly, by interpreting it in the light of Christ. And he also shows that even when things seem most bleak, because of the experience of evil, and they are tempted to despair, they will draw divine strength through their faith: he writes “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had experienced the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” We are tempted to rely on ourselves, but that is not the way. Our afflictions force us to recognize that we rely on God: Jesus Christ conquers. We don’t conquer.

## **HOPE**

Our faith is the foundation for the energy and endurance in affliction that come from Christian hope. Not optimism: for as we look at the power of evil, violent far away and subtle closer to home, it is not humanly reasonable to be optimistic. But when we recognize in faith that God is in control, nothing can overcome us. Our human responses to affliction, though worthy enough, are utterly inadequate. In the first reading today, as the Jewish people were experiencing exile in Babylon, and were tempted to put their trust in human maneuvering to solve their problems, the prophet Jeremiah reminds them that they must go deep, in faith, to find the real and unconquerable source of their hope: the provident hand of God. He writes to the exiles: “surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.” As each of us struggles to find a way forward in the face of persecution, seemingly unstoppable, we must go deeper and deeper into prayerful reflection on the plan of God, in whose provident hand we trust. That is what gives us unconquerable hope, based not on the illusion of optimism, but on the reality of divine providence revealed by faith. Nothing can overcome that.



## LOVE

Faith gives us the light to see the powerful source of our real hope, and that gives us the strength, in the face of whatever evil we encounter, to respond not with the weapons of this world, but with love. Jesus Christ shows us how he conquers, when we meditate upon his cross, and his words “Father, forgive them.” This is madness to the world, but it is divine madness which alone is sanity in a world that is insane.

There is a wonderful and profound book, written by a most holy Christian, “The Lord of the Rings”, in which the author, J.R.R. Tolkien, who himself had experienced the evil and violence of World War I, shows us a small fellowship of honourable people who are called to battle seemingly irresistible forces of evil. They have with them a ring of earthly power, which comes from the evil one, and which will instantly give immense earthly power whenever one of them puts it on his finger. They must get rid of it, but the temptation they must always resist, and it is incredible difficult, is to use evil power to defeat the evil one. But evil power only corrupts those who use it. Only love defeats the evil one.

We must always act in the imitation of Christ. Jesus Christ conquers, and he conquers, in the witness of his death on the cross, through unconquerable love. In today’s Gospel we hear his voice: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you: if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”

Jesus is the first witness, the first martyr. Down through history, those who witness to him in a wicked world witness through love, which the world does not understand, and will not overcome. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does understand it or overcome it.”

That is the only way. It is the way of Christ. As we look to the example of the saints, and especially of so many holy martyrs, far more abundant today than in any age of the history of the Church, they inspire us, strengthen us, and challenge us, for they call us to a life illuminated by faith that gives us hope and which makes possible the love that alone can conquer evil. Love conquers all. From the earliest days, and in these days, what touches the heart and changes the lives of those who are far from faith is the witness of love, and never more powerfully than when it is shown in martyrdom. Pope Paul VI once said: when it comes to faith, people will listen to witnesses, not teachers, and only to those teachers who are also witnesses.

All of us, with our own struggles, and the challenges we face, whatever they may be, are called to be witnesses, which is what the word “martyr” means. We are inspired by our brothers and sisters who die for Christ. We may or may not be called to die for Christ, but we are all called to live for Christ, and to offer in our daily lives a witness of practical, compassionate, radiant love, energized and made enduring by a hope that arises out of deep faith.

As we hear in our opening prayer: “O God, who in your inscrutable providence will that the Church be united to the sufferings of your Son, grant, we pray, to your faithful who suffer for your name’s sake a spirit of patience and charity, that they may be found true and faithful witnesses to the promises you have made.”