

Courtesy translation

Vatican City, 17 April 2022

Dear brothers and sisters,

Illustrious Dames and Knights,

I would like to share with you a reflection that has accompanied me in these days close to Easter, as I have reminded Benedict XVI's words: "*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)*".

The testimonies of so many Christians who gave their lives for Christ in different ways acquire meaning on Resurrection Sunday, in the death and resurrection of the Lord. Thus the Apostle reminds us: "*If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is also in vain*" (1 Cor 15:14).

This year, the strong connection between these two events, the Easter of the Lord and the memory of martyrdom, is clear in the liturgy by the proximity of the liturgical celebrations between Holy Easter (17 April) and the memory of St George (23 April), our patron saint. The memory of the martyrs of the first centuries should be particularly dear to us, members of the Constantinian Order, who recognise Constantine the Emperor as our founder. After the *Edict of Milan*, the persecutions began to end with Constantine.

What makes the testimony of martyrdom great is not human voluntarism, nor man's courage, or apparent and tireless human dedication; what makes this testimony great is rather the action of God's grace that works mysteriously even in martyrdom and suffering, making the martyr a witness to a "*form of total love for God*". Firstly, the greatness of the martyr is not in the shedding of blood, but rather in the desire to let God operate in his life, capable of giving "*a supreme proof of faith and love*".

This is also what martyrs' *Acts* and *Passions* teach us: during the martyrdom it is not the martyr who suffers, but Christ who suffers in his flesh. Thus, even weak men and women, fragile in their condition, victims of torture and

abuse, can face martyrdom. In this way, Saint Felicitia, unable to contain her pain during birth, stands strong during martyrdom: *"The woman was assailed by the pains of childbirth, which were particularly severe, as they are in the eighth month. She was suffering from a very difficult birth, and one of the servants in charge asked her: "If you complain like this now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts you despised, when you refused to sacrifice?" She answered: "Now I am the one who suffers: there will be Another one in me who will suffer for me, because I suffer for him"*. It gives us the key to understand the importance of this testimony: the grace of God acts in the martyr! In addition, Benedict XVI reminds us: *"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 a human effort, but they are the response to an initiative and a call from God, they are a gift of His grace, which makes us capable of offering our lives for love of Christ and the Church"*. We could say that indeed *"the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians"*, but only because Christ is the true Seeder, the one who gave his life for us.

May the grace that the Lord bestows on us be as daily as the bread that we ask for. My wish for all of you and me is that we may be daily instruments of the Lord's grace for all our brothers and sisters. The *"great things that the Lord has done for us"* often pass through small daily gestures and humble signs of fraternal solidarity, as long as we are always open to God's grace and his love. Pope Francis reminds us that martyrs, simple men and women, *"in flesh and blood", "are the true winners"*. By looking at them *"we can learn to live a full life, welcoming the martyrdom of daily fidelity to the Gospel and conformation to Christ"*.

Everything is about trying to respond with love, recognising the truth of what is written: *"Deus caritas est"*. Benedict XVI concludes: *"In a word, martyrdom is a great act of love in response to the immense love of God"*.

In these days close to Easter, we should allow ourselves to be questioned by the love of God that comes to meet us and ask for the grace to welcome it into our lives.

Entrusting you to the intercession of Saint George and the holy martyrs,

I wish each one of you the joy of a Holy Easter.

Χριστός Ανέστη: Αληθώς Ανέστη!

Renato Raffaele Cardinal Martino