

Blood of Martyrs, Seed of Communion

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MARTYRDOM AND COMMUNION

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From the Apostolic Church of Antioch, where “the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11: 26), I send you the apostolic blessing, with sincere love and a brotherly embrace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

“For I think that God hath exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted, and homeless and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat...” (1Co4: 9-13).

These words of Saint Paul properly express the condition of the Church of Antioch and her constant struggle to witness for God and her Faith through the ages. In fact, shortly after the times of persecution under the Pagan Roman Empire, the Conquests reached the thresholds of our Levantine bishoprics. Again, there came times of witness and martyrdom, kindled by the conquests of the Persians, the Mongols, the Mameluk and other foreign armies' invasions. After these came the Ottoman tide that led to the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the Eastern World. It is as if our Church were doomed to exist under the shadow of the conquerors and of all the religious oppression that followed, together with the many historical violations that helped fragmenting the body of the Antiochian Church into diverse ecclesiastical entities...

However, the Church of the East has remained not only an open gateway to the inter-Christian dialogue, at any price, but also a friendly hand ever ready to reach for the others and provide care in evangelical love, and the hope “that does not put us to shame”. (Rom. 5:5)

Today, as you know, our children and our country are tempest-tossed by wars that only fell upon us to tear our communities asunder, blowing away whatever remained of their characteristic simplicity, warmth, unhurriedness, and beautiful expectations. These are wars waged by strangers on our land; the wars of extremist movements that lack a minimum of humane feeling, sensibility and sense.

Dear Brothers, we are people that love and long for peace. We had enough of historical wars, and we abhor weapons, having realized, as ages went by, that violent confrontation only ends in destruction, dispersion and desolation. Indeed, we realize well that violence cannot build nations, nor can it establish democracies and any kind of freedom; it rather disseminates such plagues as animosity, enmity and division.

Hence, the Christians of the Levant are looking for someone to hear their call; but in vain. In our country, we are ones who call for peace; we call for reconciliation, for harmony and fraternity. We do not beg the powers of this world for mercy, but we rather shout at them: enough takfirism, terrorism, and garbling reality; enough exporting barbarism and displaying propaganda; enough of your fabricated statements that call nations to receive Christians. The world would assist both Christians and Moslems much better if it spreads the culture of dialogue in our Levant and wipes away the culture of the sword... Release our country from the grasp of terrorism; stop the flow of weapons, and retrieve your ships! The vessels of war cannot protect us, nor can the ships of emigration! Only implanting peace in our mainland can protect us, for we have been rooted here for two thousand years now! We were born here, we have lived here, and here will we die.

Once again, we say: Is it not high time for the world to awake? Is it not high time for humankind to understand that the terrorism and takfirism targeting our people and churches do not limit themselves in our East, but touch every part of the world? Is it not time for the lobbies of the nations to act for the case of the bishops John Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, and of so many priests kidnapped over the last three years? Is it not time that the world community to ask itself, even for one time: why does it blockade its markets against a hungry people, while striking more weapons' deals?

Our country lives a very painful reality. We are facing very hard times where many segments of society are systematically persecuted by extremist religious groups in utter discordance with our local concepts of religion. This extremist tide which promotes exclusion and rejection is an ideology that has nothing to do with religion. Undoubtedly, it directly stems from major unbridled political schemes that have sowed hatred and have led the whole humankind to reap terror and death.

The inhabitants of hundreds of villages and dozens of cities find themselves homeless now. Thousands of mothers lost their children, houses are being demolished, the places of worship are being defiled, and provinces are being emptied from their original inhabitants since the beginning of time.

Shall I say more? I lack time to tell you about the kidnapped, the captives, the enslaved and the hopelessly injured. Could I describe the condition of the tortured bodies, the misery of the enslaved women, or the strife of the children and of the people enrolled by force? What should I say about the parents of the kidnapped, spending sleepless nights waiting for their long gone children? Truly the biblical saying is fulfilled in our case: "Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more". (Mt2: 18; Jer31: 15)

"We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men" (1Co4: 9-10). I really find it hard to fathom how the political leaders of this world can stand, crossing their arms, watching the bloody violence in our country, but only giving priority to the economic and strategic interests that serve their short-sighted inhumane politics.

My brothers, the world today stands aghast and in chaos, expecting from us Christians to be the icon of prayer, of true communion, and of a real unity that transcends historical obstacles, sins, and wounds. Today, the world is in dire need of a Christian witness based on convergence and accord. It seeks a unified and clear Christian discourse that gives one answer from the gospel to questions that face modern man in all his crises of contemporary society. Globalization may well unite our societies in the fields of economy, politics and communication; yet, when it comes to ethics, to human feelings, and to spiritual values, our societies are lost, confused. Without a common belief and a united heart, what witness could we bear, or what needs could we meet?

Has not the time come for our theological debates to transcend the obstacles and complexes of history; has not the time come for us to grasp that our schisms render our witness sterile in a barren land abused by materialistic and nihilistic values, where perverse models are promoted and self-imposed as the only basis, criteria and principle?

Confused as we are, how can we stand against the absurd exploitation and political subjugation of religion? How could we be heard as messengers of peace in a world that only sees in us schisms, conflicts and segmentation? If our mutual relationships do not emit the peace of God, can we give this peace to the world? How shall we testify that Christianity is liberation from all kinds of bondage and slavery, the very principle of true freedom, when we find ourselves enmeshed by our ancient discords, burdened by history, and bound to self-sufficiency? Being the Churches of Christ, how is the verse "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2Co13: 14) mirrored in the reality of our dissensions?

The blood of martyrs has always been a leaven that ferments the whole dough. It regenerates the Church as Body of Christ, and renews in it the grace of the Holy Spirit. We share with our martyrs and brave confessors of faith unbearable pain, and yet we are ever comforted by their infinite divine glory. "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1Co12: 26).

The martyr gives his testimony to the passionate love he died for. He is a martyr of love. The glory of the Church throughout history was wrought by the martyrs for Truth. It is from this testimony for Truth inscribed by the King of Glory on the Cross that we come to you in love, from a Church both wounded and glorious: wounded by the course of events, and resplendent in the glory of its righteous martyrs.

In our days, Christianity in the Levant bears an excellent witness to the Lord, our Resurrected Savior. This Christianity hangs on the cross of the Levant, and treads the path of Golgotha; yet, at her twentieth century, it looks up to the light of Resurrection, in full trust that the Resurrected Master abides in its midst, notwithstanding the strife. Although the crown of these present times stains its face with blood, it realizes well that it has Jesus for companion; that it is the daughter of The Thorn-Crowned, of the One slumbering in the tomb. It knows well that the slumber in the tomb has been wiped away by the Resurrected Lord, Who shattered the locks of Hell, shining the faithful with the Radiance of Resurrection.

Our Church in the Christian East realizes well that her sisters and brothers in the West are also affected by the flames of costly persecution. In fact, the evil of extremist ideologies does not differentiate between Eastern and Western Christians. In 2008, the language of violence and blood started by kidnapping the Archbishop of the Chaldeans Mar Paulos Faraj Rahho in Iraq, launching by his martyrdom a new tide of persecutions in our lands. Moreover, we can only stand in reverence at the memory of the Jesuit Dutch Father Frans Van der Lugt killed in Homs after a life offered in service and generous ministry. We can only bow in respect before the twenty-one Coptic martyrs slaughtered on the Libyan coast, as they called upon Jesus our Lord and Savior, the thirty Ethiopian martyrs whose faith in Christ the Son of God cost them their life, and so many others who were killed for the name of our Lord and Savior. To these we combine the living martyrs who suffer physical and moral excruciating pain, only because they belong to the Lord Jesus. A short while ago, Father Jacques Hamel joined the martyrs, having been "murdered between the sanctuary and the altar", as the Bible writes (Mt. 23: 35), not to mention the martyrs of Uganda, Armenia, Russia, Eastern Europe, Charles de Foucauld, Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, Oscar Romero, Alexander Menn, and others. So many faces and names have testified and confessed that the love of Christ is not confined but "calls everyone to be united".

The Church of the East understands that the contemporary martyrs are the premise of our unity in Christ. No matter what denomination they belong to, the martyrs have joined the Lord of Glory now. Their names are written in the Book of Life; but they await our struggle, here on earth, as we hope to please God by exerting a vigilant and ruthless effort to watch over God's People and Holy Church. Indeed, the tortures of the Christian community in our days prompt us to think plainly of our Christian unity, and set this unity as a primordial goal to achieve.

The blood of the martyrs calls us to be united with the One Body of Christ, in such a way that history is ransomed and sanctified. The blood of the martyrs defies us to achieve a complete and real unity in the Church, having the Father's will in the Church "on earth, as it is in heaven". But shall we listen to this call? Shall we answer it? Or shall we only boast in the feats of these holy martyrs, praising them in hymns and lauds that touch neither our hearts nor our reality?

The contemporary martyrs in our Church remind us that what we have in common widely exceeds our differences. But practically, how do we answer their call? Is each of us ready to admit his responsibility in multiplying the apples of discord between our respective churches? Is any of us ready to reckon their mistakes throughout history, confessing sins by which the body of Christ was torn? Do we sincerely seek to heal the past wounds and do away with any reminiscence of enmity?

We need to walk in unwavering steps towards reconciliation with the blood of our new martyrs. History burdens each of us with disputes, misunderstandings, and harsh prejudices that consolidate the "wall of enmity" among the churches. It is indispensable to find practical measures that would blow down this fence and ensure the full communion, at the example of the martyrs of this new era.

Indeed, the communion of suffering brings the Christians and the churches closer together. Thus, we are given an opportunity to reconsider our priorities, and our various approaches towards the twenty-first century ecumenical work.

Hence, after being used in the past decade to talk about "spiritual ecumenism", or the "ecumenism of blood", I would like today to call for an "ecumenism of repentance". We are in urgent need of a common ecumenism based on repentance, in the Pauline sense of *metanoia*, ???????, to renew our frame of mind by admitting our mistakes. We ought to get out of our ecclesiastical isolation in order to embrace the other. We heal the common ecclesiastical ego by reconciliation and heartfelt forgiveness. Otherwise we shall abrogate the powerful effects of the martyr's blood, depriving the world of the much needed witness of Christian unity, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn10: 10).

Christian unity is built and completed depending on our personal effort to be united with and drawn to Christ. I am united with my fellow Christian in as much as we both live a union with Christ unaffected by historical situations, a union that blows away the trivial and the superficial, that is braced and chiseled by the true dogma, and the faith transmitted for generations.

Let us pray for each other, soliciting the holy martyrs and saints to intercede for us and protect our peoples from evil, schisms and dispersion. Let us entreat the Divine Spirit to enlighten our hearts, and guide our steps so that we find peace, reconciliation and unity, let us beseech Him to give us strength to come closer to our brothers, so that we may find light by entering in His life-giving communion, where God is "All in all" (1 Cor. 15: 28).

Brothers, to venerate martyrdom and martyrs does not mean the least to despise human dignity and the sacred life on earth. We like to live; it is our right to find a peaceful living, but in case we are compelled to speak out against error, we shall do so, not fearing death.

"Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy." (2 Cor. 7: 2-4)

Indeed, my brothers. In Antioch, despite our agony, the many tribulations, kidnappings, dispersion, deprivation of the basics needs for a respectable existence, we still love our brothers and perceive any encounter and authentic dialogue as an image of hope, and as a witness to Him who conquered death. And shone upon on the third day the Light of His Resurrection and great mercy.

Glory to Him in everything. Amen.

John X
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East