

A FAITH WORTH DYING FOR; A FAITH WORTH LIVING FOR

Dear friends at the ITI, it is a pleasure and an honour for me to have been invited here by Christiaan to give this lecture to commemorate the Dies Natalis of this wonderful institute. Let me begin, then, by wishing you many happy returns of the day, as the English expression has it. I have loved the ITI ever since I first went to Gaming, where it then was, to visit my good friend Professor John Saward in 2001. It is strange to think that the ITI was then only 6 years old and only an infant. Since then I have seen the beautiful child grow under the fatherly guidance of its Chancellor Cardinal Schönborn and under the tutelage of three great Presidents, Michael Waldstein, Monseigneur Larry Hogan and now of Christiaan until today, at 18, that child has at last come of age. This beautiful schloss and especially its two glorious chapels which testify to the riches of the Catholic Church when She breathes with both lungs is, I believe, a vital presence in the heart of Europe and the heart of the Church. The formation which you will receive here will prepare you for life at the service of Church, and never has the Church been more in need of men and women imbued with the fullness of the faith, dedicated to prayer and witness and ready to proclaim the truth in all its fullness to a world which so often does not want to hear and yet which in reality has a deep hunger for something that only Christ can give.

I suspect that it was because of my work for Aid to the Church in Need that Christiaan asked me to speak today on the subject of anti-Christian persecution and its implications for our Christian lives and I am very happy to be able to do so, because I cannot think of a more important issue confronting the world at this time. The first part of what I have to say will

set out in some detail the facts about the persecutions which are currently raging. Much of this will be familiar to those of you who have been able to follow the plight of their fellow Christians but, since the western media seems almost deliberately to have played down or even distorted what is going on around the world, it is not easy for any of us to know the scope of the problem so I make no apologies for spelling out the full extent of the horror. When I have done this I would like to spend some moments reflecting on the theology of persecution. I am more than a little nervous about doing this because I am talking to accomplished theologians far wiser than I: someone who can only claim to have read Theology 33 years ago at a university which has not been Catholic since 1558. I hope then that you will forgive my shortcomings in this field but I could not speak to such an audience without attempting to make some theological sense out of what at first sight seems to be merely a chaotic and malign situation. Finally, I will make an attempt to answer the question what all of this means for us in our Christian lives and how we should react if we believe that the Faith for which so many today are dying is a faith for which we want ourselves and others to live.

Every two years Aid to the Church in Need produces a report called "Persecuted and Forgotten" which considers in detail the persecutions which have been faced by Christians in that two year period. The latest one was published earlier this year and highlights 30 countries around the world from Cuba in the West to North Korea in the East where Christians have suffered persecution. In 14 of them the persecution is described as extreme; these countries include Vietnam, North Korea, China, the Maldives, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syrian, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Eritea and Nigeria which

is a pretty broadly spread list and demonstrates that the problem is by no means confined to Islamic persecution although you can see that there is a heavy concentration of the worst cases in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. I believe that we have a duty as Christians to understand the scale of this persecution and to know as many of the details as we can. At a Wednesday audience in September 2013 Pope Francis urged his listeners to add to their regular examination of conscience the following questions:

“Am I indifferent to [the fact that so many Christians in the world are suffering] or does it affect me like it’s a member of the family? Does it touch my heart or doesn’t it really affect me [to know that] so many brothers and sisters in the family are giving their lives for Jesus Christ?”

These are profound questions and we should search our consciences about them as the Holy Father asks us to do. But we can only have our hearts touched if we know the facts. I would commend the website of Persecuted and Forgotten to anyone here who wishes to know more of the details of persecution in the world today but in the meantime allow me to fill in some of the gaps.

The latest report begins by referring to a commission set up by the EU bishops’ conferences in 2010 which concluded that 100 million Christians are currently experiencing persecution of some kind. In the Middle East the problems are most acute and there is a very real danger that the Christian faith may not even survive in the lands of its birth. At this very moment Christians in Syria and Iraq are, of course, suffering the most dire persecution at the hands of ISIS who have perpetrated such outrages and on such a large scale that even the western media have at last had to notice, although it should be said even here that it was only the recent plight of the relatively small sect of the Yazidis which finally caused the

media to wake up four years after the severe persecution of Christians had begun. To look at Syria first: even as recently as 2010 Syria had actually been a haven and refuge place of choice for Christians fleeing persecution in Iraq. However, the outbreak of the rising against the government of Syria in 2013, a rising which rapidly fell into the hands of Sunni jihadists, immediately brought terror to the Christian population both amongst the longstanding indigenous Christian faithful and amongst those refugees who had taken shelter there.

Ma'loula was one of the first towns to be attacked. It had been an almost exclusively Christian town, the inhabitants of which spoke Aramaic, Our Lord's own tongue. As soon as they had control of the region, jihadists began attacking churches. In one village they fired mortars into two very ancient churches to destroy them before attacking and killing 80 Christians in their houses and forcing many more to convert on pain of death. One teenage boy offered this choice said bravely "I am a Christian, and if you want to kill me for that, I do not mind". He was then killed in cold blood. Another young Christian had his throat cut in front of his fiancée who was mockingly told by his murderers "Jesus didn't come to save him". In another village nearby three residents were stopped in the streets and asked their religion. One of the three admitted to being a Christian and was bludgeoned to death in front of the other two. At a recent conference I had the great honour of hearing Gregorius III, Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, speaking about his people. He has oversight of one of the oldest Catholic communities in the World: his see was founded by St Peter, himself, before he went to Rome and was, of course, the place where the Acts of the Apostles tells us the name Christian was first given to the followers of Christ. And yet today the very existence of Christianity in this land is threatened.

The same story can be told in neighbouring Iraq, a country where Christians have been suffering since even before ISIS came into existence. Iraq, like Syria, had a Christian church hundreds of years before our ancestors in northern and central Europe heard the Gospel. Evangelised, according to tradition, by St Thomas the Apostle the Church in what is now Iraq thrived for hundreds of years and even under Muslim rule survived to have 1.4 million members by the time of the second Gulf War in 2003. Unfortunately the wave of violence which was unleashed after that war was catastrophic for Iraqi Christians and their population is now reduced to about 20% of what it was 10 years ago. Last year, when he first met Pope Francis the Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako told the Pontiff that 950 of his faithful had been martyred. Today the number would be much higher. The recent attack by ISIS on Mosul (which is the ancient biblical city of Nineveh) saw 1,000 Christians killed and the entire remaining population of 30,000 driven out of their homes. For the first time in 2,000 years, Mass is no longer celebrated anywhere on the Nineveh plain. One of the Mosul priests, Fr Amir Jaje, has told how all of the possessions of the refugees, wedding rings, money even blankets were confiscated by ISIS guards at the check points. In total 100,000 Christians have fled from their homes in the Erbil region. Those who were too ill or infirm to flee have been forced to convert or have been killed. The refugees, meanwhile, again stripped of all their possessions are living in unimaginably bad conditions packed into large, unsanitary halls in their hundreds deprived of all privacy and dignity save for the faith to which they have so bravely held.

The third ancient centre of Christianity which is now threatened with extinction is that in Egypt. Consider what a cradle of Christian theology and culture Egypt and especially Alexandria once was. Here the mighty St Athanasius fought contra mundum to overcome

the Arian heresy, here the great St Clement of Alexandria taught his sublime doctrines and here the glorious St Cyril of Alexandria fought against the Nestorian heresy until the Council of Ephesus, led by his teachings, proclaimed Mary to be Theotokos. Even after the Muslim invasions of the seventh century Coptic Christianity survived and thrived in a way which no other North African church did and there were still 6 million Copts in Egypt at the point when western interference helped to topple the government of Hosni Mubarak. Almost immediately after that, anti-Christian violence, which for years had simmered below the surface and had been only half heartedly dealt with by the authorities, erupted. The situation grew much worse with the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, a development which many of us viewed with alarm but which was at first hailed by western governments as the triumph of democracy in Egypt. Across the country Christian houses were daubed with red crosses to mark them out and 90 churches were burned. In Cairo a cross hanging above a school run by Franciscan nuns was torn down and the nuns frogmarched through the streets to shouts of abuse. Deacon Wahid Jacob was kidnapped, tortured, killed and his body dumped in a field. My friend David Alton, a tireless chronicler of human rights' abuses, has called this night Egypt's Kristallnacht and it is no coincidence that whilst most of the western world was complacently congratulating itself on having brought democracy to Egypt one of the few voices in the west to speak out about what was really happening was that of Lord Sachs, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, who expressed his astonishment at the silence of the Christian world in the face of what he called "the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing".

In Africa the Islamist threat to Christianity is equally fearsome. Nigeria is estimated to be the country which has produced the most Christian martyrs in the last ten years. In 2011

alone 430 churches were attacked, 65,000 Christians driven from their homes and 800 killed as Boko Haram declared war on Christianity. More recently of the 1,200 Christians estimated to have been martyred in 2012 791 of them were in Nigeria. I fear that Iraq and Syria will have over taken Nigeria in this ghastly league table in 2013 when we have the statistics, but the situation in Nigeria remains horrific. The western press gave some considerable attention to the kidnapping of 200 school girls by Boko Haram earlier in the year. The press focused on the anti-educational objectives of the terrorist group but very few bothered to point out that this had been a Christian school so that this was yet another example of anti-Christian persecution. The awful presumption that most of these girls will have been sold into slavery is too horrible to contemplate and we must again ask ourselves with Pope Francis how hurt are we by this? Do we react as if those girls were members of our own families.

To continue to list and describe more examples would take all day and would probably not add very much. But let me finish this part of the lecture by making one or two observations. First, if we are tempted to despair on hearing such terrible stories let us remember Tertullian's words in his "Apologeticus" that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"; we should not despair of the ultimate triumph of the Church through all Her tribulations.

Secondly, let us remember that it has ever been thus and persecution has been a mark of the church throughout history. If it was not Islam that was persecuting the Church it was the pagan Roman Empire determined to make all her citizens worship the Emperor, or in my own country Queen Elizabeth I and her successors in the seventeenth century enacting that priests should be hanged, drawn and quartered rather than that Englishmen should have an

allegiance to a Pope outside their realms, or the forces of twentieth century atheism determined to stamp out the faith lest men doubt that the secular power of the state was supreme. In his magisterial biography of Pope Saint John Paul II, "Witness to Hope" George Weigel describes how the Church in Poland suffered under the Nazi occupation. 3,646 Polish priests were imprisoned in concentration camps and 2,647 of them were killed; 1,117 nuns were imprisoned of whom 238 were executed and 25 died from other causes. He describes the Dachau concentration camp as the world's largest monastery housing 1,474 Polish priests and hundreds more from other countries. 120 Polish priests were subjected to medical experiments. And yet the Polish church, subjected to decades of further persecution by Communism after 1945, remained throughout the twentieth century by far the strongest church in Europe. Truly there the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

I would like to turn now to the theology of persecution and martyrdom to attempt an understanding of they are marks of the Church. We have already seen one answer in Tertullian's dictum but I think that dictum points to something more profound. For whilst it is true that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, there is certainly no guarantee that the seed will grow where the blood was split. After all Tertullian was himself writing in what was then the most fervent and thriving of all the Christian Churches, that of North Africa with its glorious army of martyrs from Saints Felicity and Perpetua through to Saint Cyprian and yet the Church in North Africa was wiped out within a few decades of the seventh century Muslim invasions never to this day to return. I think we must conclude that martyrdom strengthens the church not merely in a psychological and practical way, as her members take strength from seeing the sacrifices which have been made for the faith, but

also in a mysterious and providential way which is profoundly linked to the mystery of the Cross.

Certainly Our Lord left us in no doubt that His followers would always suffer persecution.

The seminal texts here are the apocalyptic passages in the 21st Chapter of St Luke's gospel and the eighth beatitude and the following verse in St Matthew's gospel. In the first of these we are told:

“They will lay hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake... You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you will be put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake”.

In the beatitudes Our Lord tells us:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in Heaven”.

St Gregory of Nyssa, in his Homilies on the Beatitudes, says of this last beatitude that “like a pinnacle of all the Beatitudes [it] stands at the highest point of the good ascent”. St Gregory sees that at this point the beatitudes, though at root standing in the classical tradition of eudaimonistic ethics, depart from that tradition by exalting a higher good than those envisaged by Aristotle. Aristotle had written in the “Nichomachean Ethics” that for happiness a man requires

“the goods of the body, external goods and the gifts of fortune”

And he went on to say that:

“Consequently those who say that if a person is good he will be happy even when on the rack...are...talking nonsense.”

Gregory says this is not so for the Christian:

“It is truly blessed to be persecuted for the Lord. Why? Because to be hotly pursued by evil becomes the reason for achieving a good result. Estrangement from evil becomes a starting point for belonging to the Good and beyond every good is the Lord Himself, towards whom the persecuted person runs. Truly blessed therefore is the one who uses his enemy as a help towards the good”.

History gives us countless examples of persecuted Christians who suffered with joy knowing that in doing so they were truly blessed. St Paul tells the Colossians that he rejoices in his sufferings for their sake. St Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to Rome to face martyrdom, writes that he exults that soon he would become “God’s wheat ground fine by the lions’ teeth to become purest bread for Christ”. St Thomas More, shortly to be executed himself for the faith, sees from his prison cell six Carthusian friars being taken to their most painful torture and execution at Tyburn and says to his daughter “Lo doest thou not see, Meg, that these blessed fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to the marriage”. St Philip Howard imprisoned for life in the Tower inscribes on the wall of his cell, an inscription which I saw again only a few weeks ago, “The more affliction we endure for Christ in this life, the more glory we will share with him in the next”. Yes, the martyrs of the Church have always known the truth of the eighth beatitude.

In seeking to understand a little more of how persecution can not only bring blessedness to the martyr but good to the whole Church there is no better place to seek the truth than that most profound of Apostolic Letters written by Pope St John Paul II, "Salvifici Doloris". In this letter, written at the height of the Pope's physical strength in 1984, St John Paul the Great, who was himself to go on to become almost a living icon of what he had so prophetically written in that encyclical, explores the mystery of human suffering. What he teaches about human suffering in general is never more true than of the sufferings of the martyrs.

He writes this:

"One can say that with the passion of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation... in the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed... [each Christian is] called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished... In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ".

And this teaching echoes the striking phrase of St Paul writing to the Colossians which is quoted at the very beginning of the encyclical "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church".

St John Paul explains that although the merits of Christ's death are infinite and inexhaustible and so in the fullest sense need nothing to complete them, nevertheless Christ has chosen to involve us in that suffering for the good of the Church. He goes on to explain how this is:

“The mystery of the Church is expressed in this: that already in the act of Baptism, which brings about a configuration with Christ, and then through His sacrifice – sacramentally through the Eucharist – the Church is continually being built up spiritually as the Body of Christ. In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way He is united with those who suffer.”

So in his second letter to the Corinthians St Paul speaks of the intimacy between Christ and the suffering believer

“afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies”.

Of this Pauline teaching St John Paul says:

“In this dimension – the dimension of love – the Redemption which has already been accomplished, is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished ... Yes, it seems to be part of the very essence of Christ’s redemptive suffering that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed”.

Surely this is the real force of Tertullian’s phrase. By entering fully into the way of the Cross the martyrs and those suffering other kinds of persecution become part of this unceasing completion of the redemptive act of Christ’s sufferings and through their doing so God releases to the Church the unbounded gifts of His generous promise that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against Her.

What then for those of us who, mercifully and at least for now, do not suffer persecution?

How are we to live our lives in the light of the sufferings of our brothers and sisters? The

answer is suggested in both of the texts at which we have already looked. In his Homily on the Eighth Beatitude St Gregory notes an apparent contradiction in scripture. On the one hand this beatitude teaches us that it is by being persecuted that we inherit the Kingdom of Heaven but yet, he asks, how is this compatible with the teaching in the parable of the sheep and the goats where the heavenly reward is given to those who show, as he says “compassion, mutual assistance and love for one another”. He then employs what the patristic scholar Robert Louis Wilken calls “the familiar homiletical and rhetorical technique of exposing an apparent inconsistency and then resolving it”. His question is “what has being persecuted got in common with compassionate acts of love”. The resolution is found in his answer that on the one hand works of mercy and on the other the suffering of persecution “converge and merge under a single goal”, the Greek word he uses is *skopos*, a word which signifies the end one has in view, and that end is Christ. Similarly St John Paul ends his great meditation on the salvific power of human suffering by pointing to the Good Samaritan as the authentic human response to suffering. He reminds us that “Gaudium et Spes” teaches that man cannot “fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself”. This, of course, was the very epicentre of St John Paul’s anthropology and, in particular, of his theology of the body. Here he uses it to point to another paramount explanation for human suffering, and so for our purposes for suffering under persecution, in particular. He says:

“suffering is also present in order to unleash love in the human person... The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions”.

So I want to suggest that being stirred up in love is the response which we must make to the current persecutions with which we are surrounded but do not yet experience for ourselves.

First and foremost we must be stirred up in love towards those who are persecuted. We must pray for them daily and fervently that they may not give way to the temptation to abjure the faith, that they may be strengthened in their sufferings, that those sufferings may be shortened and that their enemies may fail and be converted. Beyond that we should give as much effective material help to alleviate their sufferings as possible and, if I may be allowed a commercial moment, there is no better agency through which to do this than Aid to the Church in Need whose sole focus is on the suffering church. But beyond this we must unite ourselves with them by being filled with holy charity towards the needy wherever we come across them. By dedicating ourselves to works of mercy we unite ourselves intimately with those who are persecuted because, as St Gregory of Nyssa said, what we then do and what they suffer “converge and merge towards one end”.

This is very close to the teachings of the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est” in which he says that the Church’s deepest nature is expressed in what he calls her three-fold responsibility of “proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments and exercising the ministry of charity.” He goes on:

“These duties presuppose one another and are inseparable. For the Church charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being”.

This is a very strong claim indeed because it exalts charity to the level of being of the esse of the Church. But as if this were not enough Benedict tells us, quoting St Augustine, “If you see charity you see the Trinity”. And it is precisely in organs of the Church like Aid to the Church in Need that Pope Benedict locates the fulfilment of the Church’s duty for, as he says:

“Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility of each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level. As a community the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community”.

Moreover in Benedict’s teaching, pre-eminent amongst all of the objects of charity for the Christian are those who are persecuted for Christ, for he reminds us that whilst the parable of the Good Samaritan makes it clear that the responsibility of love is a universal one, nevertheless it is first and foremost directed towards our fellow Christians and he quotes here St Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians

“So then, as we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially towards those who are of the household of faith.”

“Deus Caritas Est” is speaking directly to each of us when it says

“Those who carry out the Church’s charitable activity...should be guided by the faith which works through love. Consequently, more than anything, they must be persons moved by Christ’s love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour” .

So we are to be people moved by Christ’s love, people whose hearts are conquered by his love so that just as those who are persecuted make up in their bodies what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ so we too can radiate that love and march with the martyrs towards the single goal which is Christ.

St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, speaking to her sisters in the Carmel at Echt on September 14th 1939, just two years before she was to suffer martyrdom for Christ wrote

“The world is in flames. The conflagration can also reach over our house. But high above all the flames towers the cross. They cannot consume it. It is the path from earth to heaven. It will lift one who embraces it in faith, love and hope into the bosom of the Trinity”.

To that same Holy and Undivided Trinity be ascribed all glory, honour, power and might for ever and ever. Amen.