



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AND BLESSING OF THE SACRED PALLIUM
FOR THE NEW METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOPS
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL, APOSTLES

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Vatican Basilica
Monday, 29 June 2015

[Multimedia]

The reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, speaks to us of the first Christian community besieged by persecution. A community harshly persecuted by Herod who “laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the Church... proceeded to arrest Peter also... and when he had seized him he put him in prison” (12:1-4).

However, I do not wish to dwell on these atrocious, inhuman and incomprehensible persecutions, sadly still present in many parts of the world today, often under the silent gaze of all. I would like instead to pay homage today to the courage of the Apostles and that of the first Christian community. This courage carried forward the work of evangelisation, free of fear of death and martyrdom, within the social context of a pagan empire; their Christian life is for us, the Christians of today, *a powerful call to prayer, to faith and to witness.*

A call to prayer: the first community was a Church at prayer: “Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the Church” (Acts 12:5). And if we think of Rome, the catacombs were not places to escape to from persecution but rather, they were places of prayer, for sanctifying the Lord’s day and for raising up, from the heart of the earth, adoration to God who never forgets his sons and daughters.

The community of Peter and Paul teaches us that the Church at prayer is a Church on her feet, strong, moving forward! Indeed, a Christian who prays is a Christian who is protected, guarded

and sustained, and above all, who is never alone.

The first reading continues: “Sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side... And the chains fell off his hands” (12:6-7).

Let us think about how many times the Lord has heard our prayer and sent us *an angel*? An angel who unexpectedly comes to pull us out of a difficult situation? Who comes to snatch us from the hands of death and from the evil one; who points out the wrong path; who rekindles in us the flame of hope; who gives us tender comfort; who consoles our broken hearts; who awakens us from our slumber to the world; or who simply tells us, “You are not alone”.

How many angels he places on our path, and yet when we are overwhelmed by fear, unbelief or even euphoria, we leave them outside the door, just as happened to Peter when he knocked on the door of the house and the “maid named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the door” (12:13-14).

No Christian community can go forward without being supported by persistent prayer! Prayer is the encounter with God, with God who never lets us down; with God who is faithful to his word; with God who does not abandon his children. Jesus asked himself: “And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?” (*Lk 18:7*). In prayer, believers express their faith and their trust, and God reveals his closeness, also by giving us the angels, his messengers.

A call to faith: in the second reading Saint Paul writes to Timothy: “But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully... So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly Kingdom” (*2 Tim 4:17-18*). God does not take his children out of the world or away from evil but he does grant them strength to prevail. Only the one who believes can truly say: “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want” (*Pss 23:1*).

How many forces in the course of history have tried, and still do, to destroy the Church, from without as well as within, but they themselves are destroyed and the Church remains alive and fruitful! She remains inexplicably solid, so that, as Saint Paul says, she may acclaim: “To him be glory for ever and ever” (*2 Tim 4:18*).

Everything passes, only God remains. Indeed, kingdoms, peoples, cultures, nations, ideologies, powers have passed, but the Church, founded on Christ, notwithstanding the many storms and our many sins, remains ever faithful to the deposit of faith shown in service; for the Church does not belong to Popes, bishops, priests, nor the lay faithful; the Church in every moment belongs solely to Christ. Only the one who lives in Christ promotes and defends the Church by holiness of life, after the example of Peter and Paul.

In the name of Christ, believers have raised the dead; they have healed the sick; they have loved their persecutors; they have shown how there is no power capable of defeating the one who has the power of faith!

A call to witness: Peter and Paul, like all the Apostles of Christ who in their earthly life sowed the seeds of the Church by their blood, drank the Lord's cup, and became friends of God.

Paul writes in a moving way to Timothy: "My son, I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (*2 Tim 4: 6-8*).

A Church or a Christian who does not give witness is sterile; like a dead person who thinks they are alive; like a dried up tree that produces no fruit; an empty well that offers no water! The Church has overcome evil thanks to the courageous, concrete and humble witness of her children. She has conquered evil thanks to proclaiming with conviction: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (cf. *Mt 16:13-18*).

Dear Archbishops who today receive the Pallium, it is a sign which represents the sheep that the shepherd carries on his shoulders as Christ the Good Shepherd does, and it is therefore a symbol of your pastoral mission. The Pallium is "a liturgical sign of communion that unites the See of Peter and his Successor to the Metropolitans, and through them to the other Bishops of the world" (Benedict XVI, *Angelus of 29 June 2005*).

Today, by these Palliums, I wish to entrust you with this call to prayer, to faith and to witness.

The Church wants you to be men of prayer, masters of prayer; that you may teach the people entrusted to your care that liberation from all forms of imprisonment is uniquely God's work and the fruit of prayer; that God sends his angel at the opportune time in order to save us from the many forms of slavery and countless chains of worldliness. For those most in need, may you also be angels and messengers of charity!

The Church desires you to be men of faith, masters of faith, who can teach the faithful to not be frightened of the many Herods who inflict on them persecution with every kind of cross. No Herod is able to banish the light of hope, of faith, or of charity in the one who believes in Christ!

The Church wants you to be men of witness. Saint Francis used to tell his brothers: "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words!" (cf. *Franciscan sources*, 43). There is no witness without a coherent lifestyle! Today there is no great need for masters, but for courageous witnesses, who are convinced and convincing; witnesses who are not ashamed of the Name of

Christ and of His Cross; not before the roaring lions, nor before the powers of this world. And this follows the example of Peter and Paul and so many other witnesses along the course of the Church's history, witnesses who, yet belonging to different Christian confessions, have contributed to demonstrating and bringing growth to the one Body of Christ. I am pleased to emphasize this, and am always pleased to do so, in the presence of the Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, sent by my beloved brother Bartholomew I.

This is not so straightforward: because the most effective and authentic witness is one that does not contradict, by behaviour and lifestyle, what is preached with the word and taught to others!

Teach prayer by praying, announce the faith by believing; offer witness by living!