

"A EUROPE FULL OF MARTYRS AND SINNERS"

Homely of Archbishop Defois

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

What type of Europe do we want to build? Today's Gospel responds: a Europe of martyrs and forgiveness, of reconciliation. If the first reading shows us Saint Paul in prison "because of our Lord" as he said, the second shows us the prophetic aspect of Jesus: he has not come for the Temple sacrifices, but rather to announce mercy and to call sinners to reconciliation. Even to the point of finding apostles and witnesses among them. We need to imagine the magnitude of the scandal as Matthew, a man of wealth, to the Lord seems to be able to be an apostle, when Paul's prison becomes a space for evangelization where faith and peace mature. It is in prison where he finds his death, as did Christ, whom he serves.

Two strong images: Paul as a prisoner in the name of his love for the Gospel, Jesus sitting at the table with the least respectable of his contemporaries to involve them in his mission. What an insult to common sense and to the conventions of a stable religion, of a society that pays reverence to religious matters. Yes, Jesus like Paul after him, offers them the contrary of the traditional image of piety without a past. They prophesied the bravery and the courage of God, who had confidence in mankind. What is surprising is Jesus' proximity to sinners, including those who are responsible for social embezzlement. It is remarkable to note that since the Acts of the Apostles, there have always been Christians in jail. And they become martyrs of faith.

It seems to me that this message from the Holy Scriptures offers a special meaning to what we have experienced and encountered over the last few days: the camps and the prisons where the innocent were sent, deported because of their faith in mankind and in God: we have visited and identified the places of detention, we have filled them with our prayers or our silence. Sinners of all kind were mentioned, from the executioners of the partisans, the traitors who sell their brothers, the police who are accomplices in the arrests, driven by their interests or their taste for violence. Sinners were there when the totalitarian systems collapsed, leaving in place today's society, divided into the rich and the poor, from fortunes gained as a result of embezzlement and stealing, violence and dominant relations. The general evil of corruption in this world called "in crisis" that leads to conflicts, to exclusion, to the marginalisation of those dependent and poor.

I must confess that, each day *Justice and Peace* shows us situations of unfairness and misery. The immigrants and the forgotten, the excluded by democracy and the illegal immigrants of all races, knock on the doors of all our countries and administrations, and I happen to ask myself if our European ambition is at the level of our hopes and our responsibilities. Many of our partners from our homelands or emigrants wandering around striving to survive ask themselves what we can expect from this old continent, rich, however with Christian roots. Tomorrow's Europe, will it have to reinvent prisons, rebuild walls like the one in Ceuta, re-open concentration camps or mark the land reserved to keep the peace of the privileged and to protect them from violence, from the victims of their own injustice?

As suggested by the Holy Scriptures read during the Eucharist, our Europe is both a land of martyrs and a land of sinners. Europe cannot forget it is the product of those generations of martyrs, men and women, even children who risked their lives so as not to lay their souls to waste. But today Europe is drowning itself in possession and in consumerism and cannot build itself upon terror and totalitarian structures. Democracy and citizenship will only be strong if based on the values of the Spirit. Values that say that mankind does not live on bread alone, but on the words and the promises from God. Our Europe has a pressing need of the prayers of martyrs in order to dare believe in the future of the European promise of solidarity that will ensure them loyalty in love, truth in justice and solidarity in peace. Here I go back to the words of a Lithuanian woman with whom we have

shared a few moments over the last few days: *“We hear the martyrs calling from beyond and the weakest become capable of lifting the loads of a giant. Let us pray with the poet. Those of you who have perished crushed under the wheels. Those of you who have been tortured to death in the silence of night. Those of you who have died in the Taïga without surrendering. Pray for us!.”* If, in the beginnings of the church it was said that the faith of martyrs was the seed of Christians, today I would say that the courage of the martyrs of faith and the salvation of mankind is the seed that makes Europe the heiress responsible for the builders of cathedrals and for the witnesses of charity.

But at the end of this seminar it has been made clear that Europe cannot exist without an ongoing process of reconciliation. I feel that more than ever, forgiveness will be the most daring act of courage in the coming years. We have felt this deep in our hearts; memories continue to bear the injuries caused by the dramas of the totalitarian state. All over Europe we have discovered wounds that haven't yet been healed and the suffering persists. This we have been told “Europe's memory hurts”. And in truth, in the profound reality of someone confronting his evil within, it is he who accepts to be freed and saved, who will show solidarity in dignity and fraternity. Otherwise, we would be dragged into a cycle of revenge and violence. At the end of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt underlined the fact that the key to the difficult situation in Europe resided in forgiveness and in promise. We know that, in effect, our faith is a covenant and a forgiveness that are bestowed upon us by the will of God. It is He who makes the promise. As Christians we are the ministers of God's initiative for the salvation of the world. And in this sense, Europe should become, thanks to all believers, a promise and a gift. As long as we continue to count our money and to sell our stones, we will not manage to build our house, it will only be a living ruin and according to the Psalm “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain”.

Therefore, inspired by what we have heard from our Lithuanian brothers, we take our leave, making a call to all those who are concerned about the Europe of today and..... tomorrow:

Europe of merchants and companies, what are you doing with the gift and the sharing?
Europe of nations, what are you doing about solidarity without frontiers and the dignity of mankind?
Europe of conquerors of lands and markets, what are you doing with the culture and the values of others?
Europe of martyrs and rebels what are you doing to your memory?
The loyalty of martyrs and the audacity of forgiveness could be the seed of European society.
Let our faith be the seed of loyalty! AMEN.