

WITNESSES OF HOPE FOR THE WORLD

1. Listen to the Word: 1Peter 3:13-17

¹³Now who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you. Do not be afraid or terrified with fear of them, ¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. ¹⁶Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, ¹⁷when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, than for doing evil.

2. Remain in the Word

The First Letter of Saint Peter the Apostle was written in Rome about two years before the Apostle suffered martyrdom under the emperor Nero. It was sent to the Christian communities of Asia Minor, where persecutions of various kinds were taking place, with the intention of encouraging them to keep their faith strong. In a few essential words, the Apostle describes the authentic face of true witnesses of hope. The passage 1Pt 3:13-17 constitutes, in fact, the beginning of the section concerning the attitude of the Christians before persecutions (3:13 - 4,19).¹

“Now who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good?” (v.13). The beginning of the passage is marked by a direct question, which shakes personal conscience and sensitivity, "Now who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good?" (v.13). This question is impressive because it draws attention and engages the reader in a direct dialogue, immersing one in reflection on the subject. It is effective because it establishes from the beginning, the condition that allows the disciple to remain firm in all circumstances: be enthusiastic for what is good.

“Suffer because of righteousness” (v.14). The reality of persecution prompts the Apostle to refer to a painful situation that the disciples might find themselves facing. He, therefore, clearly recalls the condition in which the disciples live, but at the same time remembers and emphasizes the blessedness reserved for those who undergo this suffering because of Christ and His Gospel. "But if you should suffer for righteousness, blessed are you!" (v.14). These words echo the beatitudes that Jesus proclaimed on the mountain. Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you, persecute you and, lying, say all sorts of evil against you because of Me" (Mt 5:10-11).

“Do not be afraid or terrified with fear of them, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (vv. 14-15). In the face of hostile forces that are pressing on the daily reality and threaten it, the disciples must not be disturbed because, as Jesus taught, these are "those who kill the body but have no power to kill the soul" (Mt 10:28). However, the invitation of Saint Peter is more demanding! He, in fact, exhorts the disciples to give glory to Christ "as Lord" in the depths of their hearts. This means that, according to the Major Apostle, the fierce attack of enemies not only must not disturb the disciples outwardly, but can even become an opportunity to deepen their inner life.

“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope ... with gentleness and reverence” (vv. 15-16). The Apostle Peter continues his exhortation by bringing the reflection to a further depth. He desires that the testimony of the disciples be not limited to the personal sphere, be not a simple inner conviction, but be manifested in an explicit defense of the faith ("apologia", which appears 8 times in the New Testament, of which 7 refer to the apologetic activity of Saint Paul). This testimony must be constant ("always"), ready ("available"), mild ("with gentleness and reverence") and universal ("to anyone").

“keeping your conscience clear ... suffer for doing good” (vv. 16-17). The testimony speaks for itself, but when it uses words, they exude the eloquence of blood, the courage of faith, the tenacity of love, the hope of resurrection. It is, however, the upright and virtuous life of the faithful that can put into crisis the attitude of those who persecute them. An integral conduct in Christ does not leave anyone indifferent, even those who judge and condemn. Indeed, it can lead to recognizing one's own error (v.16). Once again, it affirms the superiority of believers over the forces of evil and recognizes the inestimable value of "suffering for doing good rather than for doing evil" (v.17).

¹ Cf. VANNI Ugo, *Lettere di Pietro – Giacomo – Giuda*, Roma, Paoline 1977², 8.

3. Illumined by the Word

In *Spes non confundit* Pope Francis writes: "The most convincing testimony to this hope is provided by the *martyrs*. Steadfast in their faith in the risen Christ, they renounced life itself here below, rather than betray their Lord. Martyrs, as confessors of the life that knows no end, are present and numerous in every age, and perhaps even more so in our own day. We need to treasure their testimony, in order to confirm our hope and allow it to bear good fruit."² The martyrs, in fact, answered all those who provoked them and questioned them about their hope with the price of blood, with an ardent love, with a deep faith, and with an unshakable fidelity in Jesus Christ.

With her missionary journey in the Amazon jungle, Sister Maria Troncatti offers us today a model of "white martyrdom"³ because she lived daily martyrdom through the renunciation of herself, carrying the cross every day in the footsteps of Christ, with fidelity and total trust. In a small notebook, she wrote, "We must leave with peace our homeland and relatives... Jesus walks before us, softening the thorns but He wants us to follow Him with courage".⁴ The secret of this courage is found in a letter she wrote to her mother. "How much I would like to embrace you, mama, and tell you so many things! Every time I think of you, I cry and feel you so far away! [...] At the feet of Jesus, I comfort myself; looking at the cross that I carry around my neck gives me life and wings to work..."⁵

In contemplating this figure of holiness - "*Mother, Missionary, Artisan of peace and reconciliation*"⁶ – We are committed so that we too, together with the educating communities and the many young people we meet, may shine as little lights in daily life and be signs of the prevenient and merciful love of the Father, as was Sister Maria Troncatti."⁷

4. Pray with the Word

Holy Week is a time of grace. Pope Francis invites us: "Let's look at the Cross! What do we see from the Cross? We see Jesus stripped, wounded, and tortured. Is this the end of everything? No, our hope is there!... The wood of the cross, a sign of suffering and humiliation, has been transformed by God into the greatest sign of love. The wood of death has become a tree of life."⁸ we can ask ourselves:

- Jesus- what is the Crucified One telling me about the quality of a "witness of hope?"
- What testimonies of hope does the Paschal journey of Jesus offer to today's world?

Turning our thoughts and prayers to those who are proclaiming the Gospel of Hope today, especially to the FMA engaged in missions throughout the world, let us pray:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me bring love; where it is injury, let me bring pardon,

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith; where there is error, let me bring truth,

*where there is despair, let me bring hope..."*⁹

5. Insieme a Maria vivere la Parola

O Mary, Vergin of Hope!

In the extreme pain lived at the foot of the Cross,

You let the hope in you be strengthened in the trial.

Courageously accepting the most painful reality,

the death of your Son, you continued to believe in the faithfulness of God,

Becoming a living witness of hope for every generation.

Stand by me in the moments of trial

and help me to walk courageously on the path of hope 'against all hope' (Rom 4:18).

O Virgin of Hope, our Mother and Teacher,

grant us to proclaim with you, hope to today's world. Amen!

² FRANCIS, *Spes non confundit*, n.20.

³ A homily of the Irish monks, written in the seventh century, speaks of three types of martyrdom: besides the red martyrdom which consists in bearing death because of Jesus Christ, there is also the *white martyrdom*, which consists in abandoning everything that a person loves for the sake of God; and the third is the *green martyrdom* which focuses on extreme penance and fasting for love of God: <https://it.aleteia.org/2017/11/01/3-tipi-martirio>.

⁴ GRASSIANO MARIA DOMENICA, *Selva - patria del cuore*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1971, p.25.

⁵ CIĘŻKOWSKA SYLWIA (a cura di), *Lettere di suor Maria Troncatti FMA Missionaria in Ecuador*, Roma, Istituto FMA 2013, p.104.

⁶ Slogan chosen in view of the upcoming Canonization of Sister Maria Troncatti.

⁷ MOTHER CAZZUOLA CHIARA - FMA, *Circular 1046* "A holiness that generates life with a missionary heart".

⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, *General Audience of 5 April 2023: Our wounds can become sources of hope*.

⁹ PHANXICO ASSISI, *Peace Prayer*.