

GOSPEL

John 3:13-17

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

‘No one has gone up to heaven
except the one who came down from heaven,
the Son of Man who is in heaven;
and the Son of Man must be lifted up
as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so that everyone who believes
may have eternal life in him.
Yes, God loved the world so much
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not be lost
but may have eternal life.
For God sent his Son into the world
not to condemn the world,
but so that through him the world might be saved.’

HOMILY OF POPE LEO XIV

14 September 2025

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:14). These words of Saint Paul the Apostle, at whose tomb we are gathered, serve as an introduction to the commemoration of the martyrs and witnesses of the faith in the 21st century, on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

As we stand at the foot of the cross of Christ, the means of our salvation, also described as the “hope of Christians” and the “glory of martyrs” (cf. Vespers of the Byzantine Liturgy for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross), I welcome the representatives of the Orthodox Churches, the Ancient Eastern Churches, the Christian Communities, and the Ecumenical Organisations, whom I thank for accepting my invitation to this celebration. To all of you here present, I extend a warm greeting of peace!

We are convinced that *martyria* unto death is “the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (cf. Eph 2:13)” (Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, 84). Today too, we can affirm with John Paul II that, where hatred seemed to have permeated every aspect of life, these courageous

servants of the Gospel and martyrs of the faith clearly demonstrated that “love is stronger than death” (Commemoration of the Witnesses of Faith in the Twentieth Century, 7 May 2000).

We remember our brothers and sisters as we fix our gaze on the Crucified One. Through his cross, Jesus revealed to us the true face of God, his infinite compassion for humanity; he took upon himself the hatred and violence of the world, to share the lot of all those who are humiliated and oppressed: “He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Is 53:4).

Many brothers and sisters, even today, carry the same cross as our Lord on account of their witness to the faith in difficult situations and hostile contexts: like him, they are persecuted, condemned and killed. It is of them that Jesus says: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Mt 5:10-11). They are women and men, religious, lay people and priests, who pay with their lives for their fidelity to the Gospel, their commitment to justice, their battle for religious freedom where it is still being violated, and their solidarity with the most disadvantaged. According to the world’s standards, they have been “defeated.” In truth, as the Book of Wisdom tells us: “though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality” (Wis 3:4).

Brothers and sisters, during this Jubilee Year, we celebrate the hope of these courageous witnesses of the faith. It is a hope filled with immortality because their martyrdom continues to spread the Gospel in a world marked by hatred, violence and war; it is a hope filled with immortality because, even though they have been killed in body, no one can silence their voice or erase the love they have shown; it is a hope filled with immortality because their witness lives on as a prophecy of the victory of good over evil.

Yes, theirs is an unarmed hope. They bore witness to their faith without ever using the weapons of force and violence, but rather by embracing the hidden and meek power of the Gospel, in keeping

with the words of the Apostle Paul: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. [...] For whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

My thoughts turn to the evangelical fortitude of Sister Dorothy Stang, committed to the landless in the Amazon: when those who were about to kill her asked her for a weapon, she showed them her Bible and replied, “This is my only weapon.” I remember Father Ragheed Ganni, a Chaldean priest from Mosul in Iraq, who refused to fight in order to bear witness to how a true Christian behaves. I think also of Brother Francis Tofi, an Anglican and member of the Melanesian Brotherhood, who gave his life for peace in the Solomon Islands. There are many such examples because, unfortunately, despite the end of the great dictatorships of the twentieth century, to this day the persecution of Christians has not ended; on the contrary, in some parts of the world it has increased.

These courageous servants of the Gospel and martyrs of the faith “stand as a vast panorama of Christian humanity... a panorama of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, lived even to the shedding of blood” (John Paul II, Commemoration of the Witnesses of Faith in the Twentieth Century, 7 May 2000).

Dear brothers and sisters, we cannot and do not want to forget. We want to remember. We do so, certain that, just as in the first centuries, so too in

the third millennium, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians (cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 50, 13). We want to keep this memory alive alongside our brothers and sisters of other Churches and Christian Communities. I therefore wish to reaffirm the commitment of the Catholic Church to safeguard the memory of the witnesses of the faith from all Christian traditions. The Commission of New Martyrs, at the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, is carrying out this task in collaboration with the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

As we recognised during the recent Synod, the ecumenism of blood unites “Christians of different backgrounds who together give their lives for faith in Jesus Christ. The witness of their martyrdom is more eloquent than any word: unity comes from the Cross of the Lord” (XVI Synodal Assembly, Final Document, n. 23). May the blood of so many witnesses hasten the arrival of the blessed day when we will drink from the same cup of salvation!

Dear friends, a Pakistani child called Abish Masih, killed in an attack against the Catholic Church, once wrote in his notebook: “Making the world a better place.” May this child’s dream inspire us to bear courageous witness to our faith, so that together we may be leaven for a peaceful and fraternal humanity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or message?



Head: Why do you think the Church insists on remembering the martyrs and witnesses of the faith? How does their memory help us to understand what Jesus means when he says that God “gave his only Son” for the world?



Heart: When you hear that “love is stronger than death” (John Paul II), how does that truth touch your heart? In what ways does the Cross stir deeper trust, courage, or hope within you personally?



Hands: What step could you take this week — in prayer, witness, or solidarity with those who suffer — to live more boldly from the hope of the Cross?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the ‘Glory Be’.