

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, C
LOVE IS THE ONLY OPTION

"I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also love one another" (John 13: 34)

On the Persecutions We Must Endure: As I was reflecting on the theme of love, which arguably is the theme of today's Readings, my thoughts steadied on the words of St. Paul in the First Reading (Acts 14: 21-27): "We all have to experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14: 22). I had different threads of reflection on this verse until soberly, I remembered the priest from my diocese who was abducted last Sunday from his parish house in a remote village in the South-South region of Nigeria. He was released three days after. Still grappling with the incident as a case of the persecution of Christians that have dotted the already soar relationship between Christians and Muslims in my complex and diverse country, a message popped up: "Kidnapped Kaduna Catholic Priest Dies in Captivity." That was a report on a priest of Kaduna Archdiocese in North-West Nigeria who had died in the hands of his abductors eight weeks after he had been kidnapped. The incidents of kidnapping, maiming, killing of clerics and Christians in Nigeria have become almost a weekly affair – perhaps a "new normal." But Nigeria is not the only country where this is a happening. On Thursday morning (12/05/2022), Cardinal Zen, a 90-year-old prince of the Church, who has been an outspoken defender of human rights and democracy in Hong Kong and strongly critical of Beijing for its suppression of fundamental freedoms in the city, was arrested along with three others by the Hong Kong national security police in China, for allegedly "colluding with foreign forces." He was later discharged on bail. We remember Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, shot at and assassinated while celebrating Mass on 24 March 1980. St. Pope John Paul narrowly escaped death from the bullets of Mehmet Agca on the sacred grounds of St. Peter's Square. Thanks to the intervention of our Blessed Mother, as this occurred on 13 May 1980, the anniversary of our Her apparition in Fatima. Christians in All Saints Church in Pakistan were bombed twice by two suicide bombers in the most devastating attack in the history of the Christian minority in that country resulting in 127 deaths while at Mass on Easter Sunday 2013. On Palm Sunday 2017, there were twin bombings of Christian Churches in Egypt, St. George's Church, and St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral. At least 46 people were reported dead. On 22 April 2019, on Easter Sunday there were series of coordinated bombings targeted at Christian Churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka. Three Churches were bombed and 269 people died and 500 were injured in the massacre. In 2021, the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral was bombed by one who was thought to be a convert. Also in 2021, on Palm Sunday, there was a bombing of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, Indonesia. The list can go on.

Pope Francis on these Tragedies: Reflecting on these tragedies, Pope Francis spoke of the modern world as an age of Christian martyrdom:

There are bloody persecutions, like being torn to pieces by wild beasts to the delight of the audience in the stands or being blown up by a bomb at the end of Mass and there are “velvet-gloved” persecutions that are “cloaked in politeness”: the ones that marginalize you, take your job away if you fail to adapt to laws that “go against God the Creator.” *Persecution, I would say, is the daily bread of the Church ...* Thus, the history of the Church goes ahead with its martyrs.

Within this context Revelation 7: 14 comes alive: “These are those who have come out of great persecution: they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” These are the modern martyrs, whose blood is still the seed of the Church. The pope acknowledges that apart from the overt and bloody persecution, there is a form of covert and subtle persecution that is blown like the gentle harmless wind into your subconscious to make us succumb, albeit inadvertently, to the persuasions of popular but unchristian choices. He said:

But there is another persecution which is not much spoken about, a persecution camouflaged by culture, by modernity, by progress in disguise: it is a persecution I would ironically describe as polite. It’s when someone is persecuted for wanting to manifest the values of the gospel: It’s persecution against God the creator in the person of his children! ... It’s the kind of persecution that deprives one of freedom, and of the possibility of conscientious objection. This is the persecution of the world.

Humanity Has Lost Love: The only reason for all these tragic incidents is because the world has lost it. Humanity has lost the heart to love. The *imago Dei* has been slaughtered by our selfishness, and what is left is the raw man in the state of nature, where life was basically selfish, brutal, and short – a survival of the fittest. But we cannot continue to live in hate with the love of self as the ultimate value. We cannot afford to live under a system that enthrones and rewards greed and affluence without scrutiny. The world that lives by the rules of revenge and retaliation is a world heading towards self-annihilation. As I write these lines, cities in Ukraine are bombarded daily by Putin’s Russia in a war that is completely avoidable. Lives are destroyed not only through death, but because they have been deprived of their basic needs of a home to shelter, clothes to warm their backs, and all means of dignifying livelihood. Wars are results of our unpreparedness to dialogue, to negotiate, to shift grounds, and to mutually agree on issues. St. James tells us that these are brewed from the unsatisfactory and discontent hearts (James 4: 1-2). One thing we must note is that a little love from every corner can go a long way to solving the hatred of the world. This becomes the responsibility of each and all of us to love one another “just as I have loved you.”

The Only Option Is Love: Therefore, the Gospel injunction enunciated by Jesus must not only be articulated by us but must be lived out by all from our little corners. St. Mother Teresa once wrote: “If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.” The model of love that Jesus offers us in the Gospel (Jn. 13: 31-35) is Himself: “I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also love one another” (Jn. 13: 34). The emphasis here is: “just as I have loved you.” Compared to the Old Law of the Old Covenant presented by Moses, which measured the love given by the love of self – “Love one another as yourself”; the New Moses of the New Covenant offers a New Law that goes beyond the limits of oneself. It sets a higher standard that is unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial. It is love that seeks not its own good or advantage but seeks to die for the beloved to live. It is a self-emptying love that forgives all hurts and bears all the weaknesses of the other. Our world groans in agony because this kind of love is lacking.

My dear friends, the challenge to change the world is our challenge, our duty, and our responsibility. St. Teresa of Calcutta reminds us that “We have not come into the world to be numbered; we have been created for a purpose; for great things: to love and be loved.” In this challenge of love, no one must wait for anyone to be the first to take the bull by the horns. We must all put our hands on deck leaving no stone unturned in our efforts. Each man doing his own bit of loving, giving, forgiving, and sharing. If we can all see one another as brothers and sisters from a common Father; if we can accommodate our differences and allow each person his own space; if we permit the mistakes of others, giving them a second chance, time after time; if we can imitate Christ and love as He has taught us to love, then the world would be a home to live in peace as intended by God who created us in love and sent His Son to die so that we may have life and have it in full (Jn. 101: 10).