

Cappella Papale for the Canonization of 123 new Saints

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday 1 October 2000

1. "Your word is truth; sanctify us in your love" (*Gospel Acclamation*, Italian Lectionary; cf. *Jn 17: 17*). This invocation, an echo of Christ's prayer to the Father after the Last Supper, *seems to rise from the host of saints and blesses* whom the Spirit of God continues to raise up in his Church from generation to generation.

Today, 2,000 years since the beginning of Redemption, we make these words our own, while we have before us as models of holiness *Augustine Zhao Rong* and his 119 companions, martyrs in China, *María Josefa of the Heart of Jesus Sancho de Guerra*, *Katharine Mary Drexel* and *Josephine Bakhita*. God the Father "sanctified them in his love", granting the request of the Son, who opened his arms on the Cross, put an end to death and revealed the resurrection, in order to win for the Father a holy people (cf. *Eucharistic Prayer II, Preface*).

I extend my cordial greeting to you all, dear brothers and sisters, gathered here in great numbers to express your devotion to these shining witnesses of the Gospel.

2. "The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart" (*Responsorial Psalm*). These words of the Responsorial Psalm clearly reflect the experience of *Augustine Zhao Rong* and his 119 companions, martyrs in China. The testimonies which have come down to us allow us to glimpse in them a state of mind marked by deep serenity and joy.

Today the Church is grateful to her Lord, who blesses her and bathes her in light with the radiant holiness of these sons and daughters of China. Is not the Holy Year the most appropriate moment to make their heroic witness shine resplendently? *Young Ann Wang*, a 14-year-old, withstood the threats of the torturers who invited her to apostatize. Ready for her beheading, she declared with a radiant face: "The door of heaven is open to all", three times murmuring: "Jesus". And 18-year-old *Chi Zhuzi*, cried out fearlessly to those who had just cut off his right arm and were preparing to flay him alive: "Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you that I am Christian".

The other 85 Chinese men and women of every age and state, priests, religious and lay people, showed the same conviction and joy, sealing their unflinching fidelity to Christ and the Church with the gift of their lives. This occurred over the course of several centuries and in a complex and difficult era of China's history. Today's celebration is not the appropriate time to pass judgement on those historical periods: this can and should be done elsewhere. Today, with this solemn proclamation of holiness, the Church intends merely to recognize that those martyrs are an example of courage and consistency to us all, and that they honour the noble Chinese people.

Resplendent in this host of martyrs are also the 33 missionaries who left their land and sought to immerse themselves in the Chinese world, lovingly assimilating its features in the desire to proclaim Christ and to serve those people. Their tombs are there as if to signify their definitive belonging to China, which they deeply loved, although with their human limitations, and for which they spent all their energies. "We never wronged anyone", Bishop Francis Fogolla replied to the governor who was preparing to strike him with his sword. "On the contrary, we have done good to many". (In Chinese) God sends down happiness.

3. Both the first reading and the Gospel of today's liturgy show us that the Spirit blows where he wills, and that God, in every age, chooses individuals to show his love to mankind and raises up institutions called to be privileged instruments of his action. So it was with *St María Josefa of the Heart of Jesus Sancho de Guerra*, foundress of the Servants of Jesus of Charity.

In the life of the new saint, the first Basque to be canonized, the Spirit's action is remarkably visible. He led her to the service of the sick and prepared her to be the Mother of a new religious family.

St María Josefa lived her vocation as an authentic apostle in the field of health, since her style of care sought to combine motherly and spiritual attention, using every means to achieve the salvation of souls. Although she was ill for the last 12 years of her life, she spared no effort or suffering and was unstinting in her charitable service to the sick in a contemplative atmosphere, recalling that "care does not only consist in giving the sick medicine and food; there is another kind of care ... and it is that of the heart, which tries to adapt itself to the suffering person".

May María Josefa of the Heart of Jesus help the Basque people to banish violence for ever, and may Euskadi be a blessed land and a place of peaceful and fraternal coexistence, where the rights of every person are respected and innocent blood is no longer shed.

4. "*See what you have stored up for yourselves against the last days!*" (Jas 5: 3).

In the second reading of today's liturgy, the Apostle James rebukes the rich who trust in their wealth and treat the poor unjustly. Mother *Katharine Drexel* was born into wealth in Philadelphia in the United States. But from her parents she learned that her family's possessions were not for them alone but were meant to be shared with the less fortunate. As a young woman, she was deeply distressed by the poverty and hopeless conditions endured by many Native Americans and Afro-Americans. She began to devote her fortune to missionary and educational work among the poorest members of society. Later, she understood that more was needed. With great courage and confidence in God's grace, she chose to give not just her fortune but her whole life totally to the Lord.

To her religious community, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, she taught a spirituality based on prayerful union with the Eucharistic Lord and zealous service of the poor and the victims of racial discrimination. Her apostolate helped to bring about a growing awareness of the need to combat all forms of racism through education and social services. Katharine

Drexel is an excellent example of that practical charity and generous solidarity with the less fortunate which has long been the distinguishing mark of American Catholics.

May her example help young people in particular to appreciate that no greater treasure can be found in this world than in following Christ with an undivided heart and in using generously the gifts we have received for the service of others and for the building of a more just and fraternal world.

5. *"The law of the Lord is perfect, ... it gives wisdom to the simple" (Ps 19: 8).*

These words from today's Responsorial Psalm resound powerfully in the life of *Sr Josephine Bakhita*. Abducted and sold into slavery at the tender age of seven, she suffered much at the hands of cruel masters. But she came to understand the profound truth that God, and not man, is the true Master of every human being, of every human life. This experience became a source of great wisdom for this humble daughter of Africa.

In today's world, countless women continue to be victimized, even in developed modern societies. In St Josephine Bakhita we find *a shining advocate of genuine emancipation*. The history of her life inspires not passive acceptance but the firm resolve to work effectively to free girls and women from oppression and violence, and to return them to their dignity in the full exercise of their rights.

My thoughts turn to the new saint's country, which has been torn by a cruel war for the past 17 years, with little sign of a solution in sight. In the name of suffering humanity I appeal once more to those with responsibility: *open your hearts to the cries of millions of innocent victims and embrace the path of negotiation*. I plead with the international community: do not continue to ignore this immense human tragedy. I invite the whole Church to invoke the intercession of St Bakhita upon all our persecuted and enslaved brothers and sisters, especially in Africa and in her native Sudan, that they may know reconciliation and peace.

Lastly, I address an affectionate greeting to the Canossian Daughters of Charity, who are rejoicing today because their sister has been raised to the glory of the altars. From the example of *St Josephine Bakhita* may they be able to draw renewed encouragement for generous dedication in the service of God and neighbour.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, encouraged by this time of Jubilee grace, let us renew our willingness to be deeply purified and sanctified by the Spirit. We are also drawn to this path by the saint whose memorial we celebrate today: Theresa of the Child Jesus. To her, patroness of the missions, and to the new saints we entrust the mission of the Church at the beginning of the third millennium.

May Mary, Queen of All Saints, support the steps of Christians and of all who are docile to the Spirit of God, so that the light of Christ the Saviour will spread to every part of the world.