

Courageous witnesses of faith

REV. FR. BERNARDO CERVELLERA, P.I.M.E.*

I would like to express my gratitude for having been invited to take part in this Congress. My thanks to the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Korean Bishops' Conference, to all of you lay representatives of the Asian Churches, Churches that are among the most heroic and vibrant in the universal Church.

Allow me to also express my gratitude to those who are the fathers of the faith here in Korea and who, thanks to the universality of the Church, I can also define as "my" fathers in faith.

We have just celebrated the 400th anniversary of the death of an Italian missionary Matteo Ricci, who brought the Gospel to China, creating a strong cultural and religious bridge between East and West. Unfortunately, during the celebrations for Matteo Ricci, it was not sufficiently emphasized that the Gospel spread to Korea through laity who had read a text written by him in Chinese, and hence the evangelization of Korea. Very soon, persecution arose and the first Korean baptized, Peter Yi Sung-hun, the son of a dignitary, was killed for the faith in 1801, along with many of his companions.

Our faith today, this very conference, owes its existence to the testimony of these our fathers in faith.

Peter Yi Sung-hun was baptized in 1784. During those same years, in Austria the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, composed the *Solemn Vespers of the Confessor*, one of the high points in sacred music by Mozart and perhaps in history.

This work encompasses the entire spectrum of expressions of the confession of faith: the dramatic promise of the Messiah's victory over his enemies (*Dixit Dominus – Ps. 108*); the resolve of the man who fears God whose mercy, compassion and justice is spread among the poor and society (*Beatus Vir, Ps. 111*), to the airy sweetness of the *Laudate Dominum (Ps. 116)*, which embraces all peoples of the earth in the victory of Peace and Truth.

* Director of *AsiaNews* press agency, missionary with the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME)

Then comes the robust *Magnificat*, which thrusts the humble servant Mary and all humble into the light with triumphant sounds that are a contrast between loud and soft, a harmony of bass and treble that unites heaven and earth.

It is curious that still today no-one knows to which confessor these Solemn Vespers are dedicated. I think they can be rightly applied primarily to Peter Yi Sung-hun, a contemporary of Mozart - although unknown - and then to all the martyrs, the renowned and the unheard of, whom John Paul II defined "unknown soldiers of the great cause of God".

In the Apostolic Letter he wrote in preparation for the Jubilee of 2000, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, he says: "At the end of the second millennium, *the Church has once again become a Church of martyrs*. The persecutions of believers —priests, Religious and laity—has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world. The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants... *In our own century the martyrs have returned*, many of them nameless, "*unknown soldiers*" as it were *of God's great cause*. As far as possible, their witness should not be lost to the Church".¹

MARTYRDOM AND BLESSING

Martyrdom is a blessing for Churches. "The blood of martyrs, says Tertullian, is the seed of new Christians". In our communities we never really fully appreciate how much we are in debt to the martyr, even for the conversions that his death inspires. In China, due to persecution and martyrdom of many Christians, university students, intellectuals wonder if Christianity is not exactly what China needs to establish a society based on respect for the inalienable human rights of the individual. And in the new China of savage capitalism, many professionals are wondering what is so important in Christianity that it defeats love of money, wellbeing, tranquillity, that pushes ordinary people to give their lives for Christ.

It is worth mentioning that "thanks" to the communist persecution Catholics have more than quadrupled in the last 60 years. In 1949 there were only 3 million, today, official and underground Catholics are more than 12 million and there are tens of thousands of newly baptized (adults) each year.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 37.

Martyrdom is also a blessing for society: the fact that in the many hells of the world there are people who give their lives for the love of Christ and man, reconciling and forgiving, gives us a chance to see the earth not as an apocalyptic place, doomed to destruction and violence, but a place predisposed to hope.

With great pastoral sensitivity on November 24, 2008 the bishops of Japan beatified the 188 martyrs of Nagasaki. One of my PIME confreres, a missionary in Japan, said at the time: "People in Japan are searching for strong values. They are faced every day with painful problems such as suicide, juvenile delinquency, the disintegration of families, the economic crisis ... All these things are destroying their old securities and this leads them to search for values that are more durable and demanding. People are really looking for God. The beatification of the martyrs may suggest an answer to this desire for truth for life".

TWO TYPES OF MARTYRDOM

Not all Christians are called to martyrdom. The theologian Hans Urs von Bathasar said there are two types of martyrs: there are those who give blood once and for all, and those who give their blood drop by drop, by the daily witness of their faith and the transformation of their lives. This second type of martyrdom is also a blessing for the Church and society.

In the reflection of the General Audience on Wednesday, 11 August 2010, Pope Benedict XVI explained that martyrdom is based on the invitation of Jesus to his disciples to "take up his cross daily and follow the path of total love for God and humanity".² The martyr therefore expresses a total love of God, which "enriches" and "enhances" his freedom: "The martyr - he said – is a supremely free person, free from the power of the world".³

Of course, Benedict XVI stated, not all are called to martyrdom, "but none of us are excluded from the divine call to holiness, to live our Christian life to high standards and that means taking the cross upon ourselves every day".⁴

² BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Wednesday, 11 August 2010.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

He concluded: "Everyone, especially in our time when individualism and selfishness seem to prevail, must make our first and fundamental commitment that of growing every day in a greater love for God and for mankind, to transform our lives and in doing so transform our world"⁵.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

To enable the faith and Christians to transform the world there is, however, one condition: religious freedom is necessary, a human right that is still struggling to establish itself in Asia.

Religious freedom – and this is true also for the UN - implies the freedom to practice or not practice a faith, freedom to associate with people of the same faith, to travel, to be led by teachers of one's chosen faith, to change religion according to one's own personal search for truth.

Freedom of religion is not only one right among others. It is a kind of synthesis of all human rights. As John Paul II and Benedict XVI have always stated, religious freedom is the foundation of all rights⁶, the litmus test⁷ that checks whether there is real freedom in a society.

Suffocating religious freedom also means suffocating civil liberties group. Religious freedom actually entails the freedom to publicly profess and express the reasons for one's belief (freedom of conscience); freedom to spread one's faith by voice, writing, film and other media (freedom of speech and press); freedom to meet members of one's community at home and abroad (freedom of association). Limitations on religious freedom in fact limits

⁵ *Ibid.*; cf more in "AsiaNews.it", *In Japan 188 martyrs to quench the thirst for God*, 24/11/2008.

⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, Monday, 7 January 2008: "Even religious freedom, "an essential requirement of the dignity of every person [and] a cornerstone of the structure of human rights" (*Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace*, Preamble) is often undermined. There are many places where this right cannot be fully exercised. The Holy See defends it, demands that it be universally respected, and views with concern discrimination against Christians and against the followers of other religions".

⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Address to the participants in the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, Friday, 10 October 2003, n.1

the civil liberties of speech, press, publication and dissemination, of association, of movement.

ASIA, THE CONTINENT OF VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Asia, this continent which is by now a protagonist in the global economy and international politics, still presents far too many imbalances and violations of religious freedom.

In 2008, Aid to the Church in Need published the "2008 Report on Religious Freedom in the World". *AsiaNews* has for some time now collaborated in drafting the Asian section of this report. From this, one can clearly see that violations of religious freedom largely take place on the continent of Asia. In a list of 13 countries where there are "serious limitations to religious freedom", 10 are Asian: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, China, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and North Korea. African nations such as Nigeria and Sudan keep them company, along with Cuba

And that is not all: 15 other Asian countries are among those where there are "restrictions on religious freedom". Again, all over the rest of the world there are only nine.

These violations come in a variety of forms: ranging from Saudi Arabia which, in declaring itself "entirely" Islamic, continues to prohibit any public expression of faith that is not Islamic (carrying a Bible, wearing a crucifix, a rosary, a pendant of Buddha, praying in public, having a meeting place) to Bhutan, where non-Buddhist missionaries are prevented from entering, where the building of non-Buddhist places of worship is restricted or not permitted, where all citizens must wear clothes of the Ngalop ethnicity, which is mostly Buddhist, in public offices, monasteries, schools and during official ceremonies.

From Myanmar, and the bloody suppression of Buddhist monks, to North Korea, where the practise of any faith is forbidden still there is no trace of a single priest or monk, in all likelihood killed in the past decades. According to testimonies collected by the few Christians who practice their faith in secret, after the division of the Korean peninsula, 300 thousand Christians were massacred in the North.

And then there is India, infamous for the anti-Christian pogroms in Orissa, and China, with the systematic oppression of Churches, Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uyghurs, with priests and pastors in prison; and even the tourist paradise of the Maldives where the

Constitution reserves all political judicial and administrative offices to Muslims, where the government applies Sharia, and prohibits any public display of other religions.

Currently, out of more than 52 Asian countries, at least 32 in some way limit the mission of religions: Islamic countries (from the Middle East to Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia) make it difficult for those who want to convert to a religion other than Islam but also create problems and violence for Muslim minority groups. We only have to look at Pakistan, home to sporadic violence by Sunnis against Shiites and against the Ahmadi minority.

Even in India and Sri Lanka there is an increasingly insistent lobby for anti-conversion laws. In India, indeed, there are five states that include it in their legislative body.

Central Asian countries limit religious freedom: just look how they treat groups linked to the Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and even some Islamic groups are not guaranteed by these States.

The communist countries (China, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea) suffocate or even persecute the Catholic Church, Protestant domestic churches, Buddhism, all religions.

VIOLENCE AGAINST SCHOOLS AND DEVELOPMENT

Violence against religious freedom is first and foremost an attack on people. But it is also an attack against society and the social and economic progress of a country. Whoever oppresses or stifles religious freedom in fact chooses to keep his or her people in a state of underdevelopment.

The pogrom against Christians in Orissa in 2008-2009 had as its slogan: "Kill the Christians, destroy their institutions". In eliminating religious freedom it is not enough to suppress people, you must also seek to destroy the institutions: hospitals, community centres and schools in particular.

The destruction of schools (or gagging them) is an element of persecution that is almost a trend: in China, Hong Kong, Indonesia (even universities – in the Moluccas), Nepal, India, Pakistan. In this case not only do they want to stifle the faith of a community (which perhaps through education would communicate their faith to the younger generation) they also want to destroy the possible social influence of the religion, particularly Christianity.

School means the end of illiteracy, it means learning a trade, obtaining a degree, education, career, social transformation. Therefore schools are destroyed not only to kill a faith, but also to impoverish, to frustrate the people, to smother social perspectives.

Hindus who fight against the Protestant and Catholic schools want to keep the outcastes in a slave like status under their dominion, Muslims (in cahoots with the army) that burn the University of Ambon do not want Christians to find work or the Moluccas to fall prey to external influences.

In China, the government said OK to private schools. But then imposed a veto: no religiously motivated schools. Other schools teach techniques, careers, productions, but no freedom. The regimes are increasingly seeking slaves, not interlocutors.

Hong Kong Catholic schools are recognized by all as having the best quality, modern and far-reaching education. Yet Beijing is doing everything it can, to close them down or gain control of them.

A few months ago a news report spoke of a bus of 50 young Christians targeted in an attack in northern Iraq⁸. The students "were travelling by bus from the University of Mosul, despite the constant threats under which they live," said Nissan Karoumi, Mayor of Hamdaniya. The university has been in the crosshairs of Islamic extremist groups fighting for the conversion of young students for over five years. Often leaflets circulate in the universities that promise to "kill every Iraqi girl who does not wear a veil" and threatening to kill anyone wearing "Western" clothes.

In Iraq, the persecution of Christians goes hand in hand with eliminating Iraqi intelligentsia. Sunni and Shia violence is in fact targeting the intellectuals and university professors, physicists, engineers, journalists, so-called moderate Muslims who are opening dialogue with other cultures, and are likely to "pollute" the purity of Islamic fundamentalism. From this point of view, the killing, kidnapping, of intellectuals and scientists in Iraq is impoverishing the nation and condemning its people to underdevelopment more than the war and insecurity.

In Islamic countries, governments support the fundamentalist Islamic schools is laying the foundations for the Islamic terrorists of tomorrow (Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan), instead of supporting the freedom of education and giving space to different religions.

⁸ Cf. "AsiaNews.it", *Car bomb targets Christian student's bus near Mosul*, 03/05/2010.

Our conclusion is that the power that stifles religious freedom, lays the foundations for the destruction of society. In Muslim countries because there will be a growth of fundamentalism. In atheist countries, because the lack of religious freedom creates an increasingly intense social conflict. Without human dignity guaranteed by the religious dimension and without social solidarity, technical progress creates injustice, division and conflict. Think about what happens in China. According to figures from the Ministry of Security of China, last year there were over 100 thousand "mass incidents", in other words, clashes between police, army and population, with deaths on both sides.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It could be argued that China, India, Maldives, Vietnam, although they stifle religious freedom, they are now highly developing countries. In reality, violence against religions is a sign of a profound imbalance present in their society, which undermines the "human quality" of this development.

Let us analyze for example the price paid by China for this development: death in its mines; unemployment, pensioners without help, families without health care and schools, migrants who work like slaves, desperate and suicidal young people, capital punishment; corruption.

Added to this the enormous ecological and agricultural problems created by this savage and "not religious" development, disrespectful of God, nature and man. According to official figures 90% of rivers and lakes are polluted in China. Over 320 million peasants have no sources of drinking water and 190 million drink contaminated water, which is also used to irrigate the fields. Among them there are high rates of cancer patients. According to government experts pollution problems cost the country between 8 and 13% of Gross Domestic Product⁹. Even literacy, pride of Mao, has become a luxury item, at least 80% of the children of peasants leave school to go work in cities as desperate migrants. As you know the fast and chaotic economic development is creating a storm of protest that is sweeping through Hunan, Guangdong, Henan, Hebei, Zhejiang, Shaanxi with dozens of deaths and arrests. According to the Communist Party itself, social injustice – the result of unbalanced development – is now the greatest danger to the stability of China.

⁹ Cf "AsiaNews.it", *In Yixing 80,000 people are without water for a month*,. 14/03/2007.

The case of Vietnam is also significant: here religious persecution is linked to an attempt to eliminate or at least marginalize minority groups of the so-called Montagnards, the mountain tribes, which are denied not only the expression of their faith, but also the minimum services to aid their development: schools, healthcare, roads, land, homes. The faster the pace of industrial and economic development in Vietnam, the faster it expropriates houses, churches, lands in the name of the party, only to be pocketed by some local leader as private property to be resold on the housing market. This is also happening with the probable complicity of those Western companies that are investing in Vietnam, transferring their production chains to this wonderful country famed for its natural beauty and capacity for production.

These imbalances and inequities are created by the lack of religious freedom, the marginalization of the religious dimension in society.

It is worth mentioning here as Benedict XVI said in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*: "God is the guarantor of the true development of man," because, "the deliberate promotion of religious indifference or practical atheism on the part of many countries obstructs the requirements for the genuine development of peoples, depriving them of spiritual and human resources".¹⁰

And again: "When the State promotes, teaches, or actually imposes forms of practical atheism, it deprives its citizens of the moral and spiritual strength that is indispensable for attaining integral human development and it impedes them from moving forward with renewed dynamism as they strive to offer a more generous human response to divine love".¹¹ Without religious freedom, the "super growth" of many Asian countries, remains plagued by "underdevelopment" which damages "authentic development".

CONCLUSIONS

I think I can say that violations of religious freedom are increasingly motivated by power and contempt for the human and social development of mankind. In the past it was much more common to find motives of fanatic fundamentalism that wanted to annihilate

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, n. 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

other confessional communities; the rejection of religions (like Christianity) connected to a colonial past, the Marxist ideological motivations, which wanted to destroy religion as the "opiate of the people" . Now it is clear that even in communist countries the struggle against religions is a struggle against freedom, to save the power and business affairs of the party oligarchy.

Even the persecution in India, although with a strong dose of Hindu religious fundamentalism, is motivated by interests of political parties and land-owners to keep enslaved tribals and Dalits who convert to Christianity and open to a new social and economic emancipation of their lives.

From this point of view muzzling religion means muzzling the voices that speak of freedom of expression, justice against corruption, development and dignity. The forces of power which struggle against religious freedom want to keep their countries closed, locked, without economic development, to preserve their monopolies and interests.

It must also be said that there is less and less interest on the part of world governments in the issue of religious freedom. Globalization has made worldwide civil society more cohesive, but it has also made governments subservient to the economy. And I fear that with the global recession we are seeing, this neglect will become increasingly abysmal.

It is true that in the world there are parts of civil society, who take to heart this or that situation, inform, demonstrate, support, sympathize. These links and these relationships that are created against the prevailing trend - against indifference and blind mercantilism - are also seeds of hope for the world.

Christians must contribute to this by offering the testimony of a commitment to the dignity of man, made in the image of God and loved by Jesus Christ. All this is a duty that comes from our mission.

I end with the words of Benedict XVI, from his encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, quoted in abundance in his *Letter to Chinese Catholics*. What our Holy Father says can be applied to all of us, Asians and Europeans, East and West: "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not

of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply ".¹²

¹² IDEM, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 28.