

## THE FIRST MARTYRS OF ROME

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Hanceville, Alabama

30 June 2009

During the night of July 18, 64 AD, a fire broke out in the merchant district of Rome. At that time, much of the Imperial City was still built from wood, so fanned by summer winds, the flames spread quickly, consuming everything in its path for six days and seven nights. The historian Tacitus, who was in Rome at the time of the fire, wrote the following eye witness account: "...Now started the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced. ... There were no walled mansions or temples, or any other obstructions, which could arrest it. First, the fire swept violently over the level spaces. Then it climbed the hills - but returned to ravage the lower ground again. It outstripped every counter-measure. ... When people looked back, menacing flames sprang up before them or outflanked them. When they escaped to a neighboring quarter, the fire followed."<sup>1</sup>

When it subsided, seventy percent of the city was left in smoldering ruins and it wasn't long before rumors began to sweep through the population as rapidly as the flames had. Some said that the Emperor Nero had ordered that the fire be set for his own amusement and that he watched it consume the city while playing his lyre on a nearby hilltop. Some people thought that Nero did it because he wanted to build a new city of marble and stone in his honor. We have no evidence that there was any truth to it, but in the end, the people needed a scapegoat and so, to deflect the blame away from him, Nero blamed the fire on the Christians, whose revolutionary beliefs caused such suspicion among the Romans. It began with the arrest of just a few of them, but before long, the authorities brought in as many Christians as they could find and began to put them to death for the amusement of the people.

Tacitus also mentioned this, saying that "In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport."<sup>2</sup> Some of the tortuous deaths the Christians had to endure were as perverse as they were cruel. Some were sewn up in wild beast skins and fed to wild dogs while still alive. Some were nailed to crosses. And still others were covered in pitch and wax, and after being more or less impaled on stakes in Nero's gardens, set on fire. It became a grand spectacle, with Nero's own garden players providing the background music. Their names are known only to God.

During His last days in Jerusalem before He would be crucified Jesus predicted His own death and said that His followers would also follow Him in death for the sake of His name. He was very clear about the fact that if they would treat Him that way, they would do the same to them. He predicted the persecutions of the first Roman martyrs that we commemorate today and He wanted His followers to realize that persecution would certainly come in the lifetime of many of His listeners. But, at the same time, He was alerting Christians of all times, that from that time on they would have to suffer persecution. He was telling them that Christians would always be hated and that persecution would always be part of the Christian experience.

What we call the "age of persecutions" ended when Emperor Constantine the Great issued a decree in 313 allowing Christians to freely practice their religion. But

actually, persecution never really ended because Satan has always been trying to destroy the Church. It doesn't take much to recall examples of persecution throughout the Church's entire 2000-year history. Five times, Constantine himself, the Christian Emperor, exiled St. Athanasius, who saved the Church from the heresy of Arianism. In the seventh century, thousands of Christians either died at the hands of Mohammed's new followers or converted to avoid the sword. Queen Elizabeth I of England hunted down Catholic priests and executed them. And the so-called enlightened French Revolution undertook a persecution of the Church that could have rivaled some of the ancient Roman persecutions.

John Paul II repeatedly pointed out that some of the worst persecutions of the Church have taken place in the twentieth century—particularly at the hands of the Nazi and Communist regimes. And with the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, persecutions of Christians have not decreased but are actually increasing once again and spreading around the world—in Iraq, India, Vietnam, Nigeria, just to name a few of the places—as well as in countries of the western world, including here in America.

John Paul wrote that persecutions today are often similar to those described in the Martyrology of the Church of past centuries. They include various types of discrimination against individual believers, as well as against the whole community of the Church. In fact, he writes that such forms of discrimination are often practiced at the same time that freedom and tolerance are recognized as fundamental rights.<sup>3</sup>

America has always had a strain of anti-Catholicism, but after a period of relative tolerance in recent times, we are once again beginning to see forms of social persecution. For instance, the government is presently attempting to remove the conscience clause for health care workers, which would mean that a doctor or nurse would either be forced to perform abortions, or if not, potentially go to jail or leave their profession, potentially leaving us without Catholic doctors and nurses. Then, what will happen with us priests if same-sex unions are legalized and mandated everywhere? We aren't yet physically tortured as the early Christians were but more and more we may experience a social suppression, which penalizes us for being Catholic.

Every effort is now being made to promote division among Catholics, silence the Church and to render Her incapable of having an influence in public life. Enemies of the Church are resorting to legal means to push Christianity out of all phases of public life. Most of you are probably not aware of a bill that was introduced in Connecticut a number of months ago, that if passed would have placed all Roman Catholic parishes in the state under a lay-elected board, free of any authority by the pastor or bishop. Bishop Lori of Bridgeport organized a massive public protest at the Connecticut State House and now, the state's office of ethics is claiming that this protest actually constituted lobbying and that the diocese is potentially subject to civil penalties.

There is a campaign to systematically eradicate all remnants of religious faith and symbols from public life. The latest attack is the ban by PBS on all new religious programming. Current shows can continue but perhaps, this is just the first step to have them banned also. Prominent voices are trying to keep certain people out of public office merely on the basis of their Catholicism. And the media are playing a very large role in this war against Catholicism. They are working hard to form a negative public opinion about the Catholic Church, by deliberately distorting, and often falsifying the truth, just like the accusations made against the Christians by Nero.

Many people might find it hard to conceive that we are in the midst of a new persecution against the Church because no one is being thrown to lions or burned at the stake. But social, psychological and legal persecution can be just as damaging to individual Catholics and to the Church as a whole. The late Jesuit Fr. John Hardon repeatedly pointed out that today many in the Church are suffering not red martyrdom, but white martyrdom. And although this type of persecution seems to characterize our times, it is, however, not inconceivable that this could in time develop into something even more insidious. After all, who in pre-revolutionary France would have dreamt that a new regime based on liberty would degenerate into a blood bath? The social climate presently dominating our country claims to promote tolerance and respect for all, when in fact, it is an ideology of radical intolerance for anyone, especially Catholics, who don't agree with the prophets of hedonism and secular materialism.

Just recently, several pro-life groups have received death threats following the murder of abortionist George Tiller but this is just one more manifestation of a disturbing trend that has been with us for a number of years. Human Life International has documented more than 8,519 acts of homicide, violence and illegal activities by pro-abortionists against pro-life Christians. Deadly pro-abortion violence against them has been reported at least since 1965 and is escalating rapidly, with 269 homicides and other killings committed in just the last six years. Most of these victims have been Christians. Their only crime is that they are struggling to uphold the teaching of their faith.

Christ promised us that we would be hated because of His name and we are already seeing this. He said that they would persecute us, and we are seeing this also, because, as Pope Benedict recently stated, "the real problem at this moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects." "In vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel"<sup>4</sup>

Pope John Paul II said that "the Church has become once again a Church of martyrs."<sup>5</sup> We are now living in the new Rome. We live in the richest and most powerful empire in the world, just as Rome was. We live in a culture that is as hedonistically pagan as ancient Rome was. For many, the life of others has as little significance as it did for the Romans, for whom slaves were property that could be sold, bought or disposed of as a commodity. Abortion, infanticide, suicide are as common and accepted now as they were then. We live in unprecedented splendor and technological advancement but permeated with decadence and the seeds of our civilization's own internal destruction.

It is time for us to take our heads out of the sand and realize that being Catholic once again means that we may be persecuted. We can no longer trudge on through life thinking that it will all eventually go away. "For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens."<sup>6</sup> The battle about which St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians was not fancy biblical poetry. It is as real now as it was then, and perhaps even more intense than ever.

If we realize that there is an enemy, who is trying to destroy us, it should help us mobilize and really do something even more. We are living in times when anything could happen. As we are now entering our own Passion, we should rejoice that we have been found worthy to take part in it for the sake of Christ, to make up in our flesh what is

lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for after it follows the Resurrection and the glory of life everlasting.

Today, we remember the martyrdom of the first Christians in Rome to die for Christ. In time to come, the Church will certainly commemorate the martyrs of our times—perhaps even people that we may have known. Most, like the first Roman martyrs will not be known by name. But whatever we may encounter, if it be red martyrdom or white martyrdom, we all must persevere in the trials that we may have to endure, hope that we will not be tried beyond our strength and through great courage always remain faithful. We live in interesting times, but interesting times can also be dangerous—especially if one professes to follow Jesus.

Stand firm! Always stay in a state of grace. Be faithful to the end. Persevere. As St. Paul said: “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. . . . put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground . . . stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all (the) flaming arrows of the evil one.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Burning of Rome, 64 A.D.” (<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/rome.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> “Nero Persecutes the Christians, 64 A.D.” (<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/christians.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, “Pope John Paul II’s Teaching on the Martyrs of Our Century.”

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, “Letter.”

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 6:11-16.