

Pope: Church is made of martyrs; leaders must respond to victims' cries

By Carol Glatz

Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY - With so many women and men being killed because of their faith in Christ, the church today is a church of martyrs, Pope Francis said in a morning homily.

And, in a message to the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, he also urged the world's leaders to hear the cry of all the Christians who are victims of violence, cruelty and killings.

"The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard by everyone who can still distinguish between good and evil. All the more this cry must be heard by those who have the destiny of peoples in their hands," the pope told Patriarch Mathias of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in a message sent April 20.

Pope Francis sent his condolences to the patriarch for the execution of more than 20 Ethiopian Christians at the hands of Islamic State militants in Libya. A video of the killings was released April 19.

"With great distress and sadness I learn of the further shocking violence perpetrated against innocent Christians in Libya," the pope wrote.

He assured the patriarch of his "closeness in prayer at the continuing martyrdom being so cruelly inflicted on Christians in Africa, the Middle East and some parts of Asia. It makes no difference whether the victims are Catholic, Copt, Orthodox or Protestant. Their blood is one and the same in their confession of Christ."

At a time when Christians worldwide were still celebrating the joy of Easter, he said, “we know that the life we live in God’s merciful love is stronger than the pain all Christians feel, a pain shared by men and women of good will in all religious traditions.”

Pope Francis highlighted the fate of the martyred Christians April 21 at his early morning Mass in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, as the day’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles (7:51-8:1) described the stoning and killing of St. Stephen – the church’s first martyr.

“How many Stephens there are in the world these days. We think of our brothers whose throats were slit on the beach in Libya; we think of that young boy burned alive by his fellow citizens because he was Christian; we think about those migrants who were thrown into the high seas by others, and many others whom we don’t know about, who suffer in prisons because they are Christians,” he said.

“Today the church is a church of martyrs: They suffer, they give their life and we receive God’s blessings for their witness,” the pope said, according to Vatican Radio.

Those who judged and persecuted St. Stephen could not bear to hear his condemnation of their sins and their opposition to the Holy Spirit, he said.

That’s because “the word of God always displeases certain hearts. The word of God irritates when your heart is hardened, when you have a pagan heart because the word of God asks you to go further, searching and feeding you with that bread Jesus spoke of” that comes from God, he said.

Those who persecuted St. Stephen and the prophets believed that they were acting on God’s behalf, “to give glory to God, they believed that (by doing) this they were faithful to God’s doctrine,” the pope said.

However, he said, their hearts were corrupt and hardened to the work of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, there are also “hidden martyrs, those men and women who are faithful to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the voice of the Spirit, who make inroads, who look for new ways to help brothers and sisters and to love God better,” he said. For that

reason “they come under suspicion, are slandered, persecuted by many ‘modern Sanhedrins’ who believe they own the truth,” he said.

“Let us unite ourselves with so many brothers and sisters who suffer the martyrdom of persecution, slander and murder in order to be faithful to the only bread that satiates – Jesus,” he said.

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