



The Holy See

BEATIFICATION OF 44 SERVANTS OF GOD

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sunday, 5 March 2000

1. "I will praise you, O God my Saviour; I will give thanks to your name, for you have been ... my helper and have delivered my body" (*Sir* 51: 1-2).

You, Lord, have been my helper! I hear these words from the Book of Sirach echoing in my heart as I contemplate the wonders God has wrought in the lives of these brothers and sisters in the faith who have won the palm of martyrdom. Today I have the joy of raising them to the glory of the altars, presenting them to the Church and to the world as a shining witness to God's power in the frailty of the human person.

You, Lord, have delivered me! This is the cry of André de Soveral, Ambrósio Francisco Ferro and 28 Companions, diocesan priests, lay men and women; Nicolas Bunkerd Kitbamrung, diocesan priest; Maria Stella Adela Mardosewicz and 10 professed sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Nazareth; Pedro Calungsod and Andrew of Phú Yên, lay catechists.

Yes, the Almighty was their powerful help in their time of trial and now they are experiencing the joy of eternal reward. Although these humble servants of the Gospel, whose names are for ever written in heaven, lived in different historical periods and in very diverse cultural contexts, they are linked by an identical experience of fidelity to Christ and to the Church. They are united by the same unconditional trust in the Lord and the same deep passion for the Gospel.

I will praise you, O God my Saviour! With their lives offered for the cause of Christ, these new blessed, the first of the Jubilee Year, proclaim that God is "Father" (cf. *ibid.*, v. 10), God is "protector" and "helper" (cf. v.2); he is our Saviour who listens to the appeals of those who trust in him with all their heart (cf. v. 11).

2. These are the sentiments that fill our hearts as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the evangelization of Brazil, which occurs this year. In this immense country, the implanting of the Gospel encountered many difficulties. The Church's presence was gradually strengthened through the missionary activity of various orders and religious congregations and by priests of the diocesan clergy. The martyrs beatified today came, at the end of the 17th century, from the communities of Cunhaú and Uruaçú in Rio Grande do Norte. Fr André de Soveral, Fr Ambrósio Francisco Ferro and 28 lay companions belong to this generation of martyrs who watered their homeland, making it fertile for a generation of new Christians. They are the first fruits of the missionary work, the protomartyrs of Brazil. One of these, Mateus Moreira, had his heart ripped out through his back while he was still alive, and yet he had the strength to proclaim his faith in the Eucharist, saying: "Praised be the Blessed Sacrament".

Today, the words of Christ recalled in the Gospel ring out again: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (*Mt 10: 28*). The blood of defenceless Catholics, many of whose names are unknown - children, the elderly, whole families - will be an incentive for strengthening the faith of new generations of Brazilians, reminding them especially of the value of the family as an authentic and irreplaceable teacher of faith and moral values.

3. "I shall praise your name unceasingly and gratefully sing its praises" (*Sir 51: 10*). Fr Nicolas Bunkerd Kitbamrung's priestly life was an authentic hymn of praise to the Lord. A man of prayer, Fr Nicolas was outstanding in teaching the faith, in seeking out the lapsed, and in his charity towards the poor. Constantly seeking to make Christ known to those who had never heard his name, Fr Nicolas undertook the difficulties of a mission through the mountains and into Burma. The strength of his faith was made clear to all when he forgave those who falsely accused him, deprived him of his freedom and made him suffer much. In prison, Fr Nicolas encouraged his fellow prisoners, taught the catechism and administered the sacraments. His witness to Christ exemplified the words of St Paul: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (*2 Cor 4: 8-10*).

Through the intercession of Bl. Nicolas, may the Church in Thailand be blessed and strengthened in the work of evangelization and service.

4. God was also a true "protector and helper" for the martyrs of Nowogródek - for Bl. Maria Stella Mardosewicz and her 10 sisters, professed religious of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Nazareth. For them he was a helper throughout their lives and at the moment of their terrible test, when for an entire night they awaited death; he was a helper especially on the way to the place of execution, and finally at the moment they were shot.

Where did these women find the strength to give themselves in exchange for the lives of

imprisoned residents of Nowogródek? From where did they draw the courage to accept calmly the death sentence that was so cruel and unjust? God had slowly prepared them for this moment of greater trial. He sowed the seed of his grace in their hearts at the time of holy Baptism and then, tended with great care and responsibility, it developed firm roots and bore the most beautiful fruit, which is the gift of life. Christ says: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (*Jn 15: 13*). Yes, there is no greater love than this: to be ready to lay down one's life for one's brothers and sisters.

We thank you, O blessed martyrs of Nowogródek, for your witness of love, for your example of Christian heroism and for your trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. "Christ chose and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit in your lives and that your fruit should abide" (cf. *Jn 15: 16*). You are the greatest inheritance of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Nazareth. You are the inheritance of the whole Church of Christ for ever!

5. "If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven" (*Mt 10: 32*). From his childhood, Pedro Calungsod declared himself unwaveringly for Christ and responded generously to his call. Young people today can draw encouragement and strength from the example of Pedro, whose love of Jesus inspired him to devote his teenage years to teaching the faith as a lay catechist. Leaving family and friends behind, Pedro willingly accepted the challenge put to him by Fr Diego de San Vitores to join him on the Mission to the Chamorros. In a spirit of faith, marked by strong Eucharistic and Marian devotion, Pedro undertook the demanding work asked of him and bravely faced the many obstacles and difficulties he met. In the face of imminent danger, Pedro would not forsake Fr Diego, but as a "good soldier of Christ" preferred to die at the missionary's side. Today Bl. Pedro Calungsod intercedes for the young, in particular those of his native Philippines, and he challenges them. Young friends, do not hesitate to follow the example of Pedro, who "pleased God and was loved by him" (*Wis 4: 10*) and who, having come to perfection in so short a time, lived a full life (cf. *ibid.*, v. 13).

6. "If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven" (*Mt 10: 32*). Andrew of Phú Yên in Việt Nam made these words of the Lord his own with heroic intensity. From the day he received Baptism at the age of 16, he strove to develop a deep spiritual life. Amid the difficulties to which all who adhered to the Christian faith were subjected, he lived as a faithful witness to the risen Christ and tirelessly proclaimed the Gospel in the "Maison Dieu" association of catechists. For love of the Lord he spent all his energy in serving the Church and assisting priests in their mission. He persevered to the point of bloodshed in order to remain faithful to the love of the One to whom he had totally given himself.

The words he repeated as he resolutely advanced on the path of martyrdom are the expression of what motivated his whole life: "Let us return love for love to our God, let us return life for life".

Today Bl. Andrew, protomartyr of Viêt Nam, is given as a model to the Church of his country.

May all Christ's disciples find in him strength and support in trial, and be concerned to strengthen their intimacy with the Lord, their knowledge of the Christian mystery, their fidelity to the Church and their sense of mission!

7. "Fear not, therefore" (*Mt* 10: 31). This is Christ's invitation. It is also the exhortation of the new blessed, who remained steadfast in their love of God and of their brothers and sisters, even in the midst of trial. This invitation comes to us as an encouragement in the Jubilee Year, a time for conversion and profound spiritual renewal. Let us not be afraid of trials and difficulties; may we not be hindered by obstacles from making courageous decisions consistent with the Gospel!

What do we have to fear, if Christ is with us? Why doubt, if we remain on Christ's side and accept the commitment and responsibility of being his disciples? May the celebration of the Jubilee strengthen our determination to follow the Gospel. The new blessed are an example to us and they offer us their help.

May Mary, Queen of Martyrs, who at the foot of the Cross shared fully in her Son's sacrifice, sustain us in courageously bearing witness to our faith!

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