

BEATIFICATION OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD
JOSÉ APARICIO SANZ AND 232 COMPANIONS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 11 March 2001

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. *"The Lord Jesus Christ will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil 3: 21).* These words of St Paul, which we heard in the second reading of today's liturgy, remind us that our true homeland is in heaven and that Jesus will transfigure our mortal body into a glorious body like his own. The Apostle comments in this way on the mystery of the Transfiguration of the Lord which the Church proclaims on this Second Sunday of Lent. Jesus, in fact, wanted to offer a sign and a prophecy of his glorious Resurrection, in which we are also called to share. What was accomplished in Jesus, our Head, must also be fulfilled in us who form his Body.

This is a great mystery for the life of the Church, since we should not think that the transfiguration will happen only later after death. The saints' lives and the martyrs' witness teach us that if the transfiguration of the body will occur at the end of time with the resurrection of the flesh, that of the heart takes place now on this earth with the help of grace.

We can ask ourselves: What are "transfigured" men and women like? The answer is very beautiful: they are people who follow Christ in living and dying; who are inspired by him and let themselves be imbued with the grace that he gives us; whose food is to do the Father's will; who let themselves be led by the Spirit; who prefer nothing to Christ's kingdom; who love others to the point of shedding their blood for them; who are ready to give him their all without expecting anything in return; who - in a word - live loving and die forgiving.

2. This how José Aparicio Sanz and his 232 companions lived and this is how they died, being killed during the terrible religious persecution which scourged Spain in the 1930s. They were men and women of all ages and states: diocesan priests, men and women religious, the fathers and mothers of families, young lay people. They were killed for being Christians, for their faith in Christ, for being active members of the Church. Before dying, all of them, as stated in the canonical processes for their declaration as martyrs, forgave their executioners from their heart.

The list of those who are being raised to the glory of the altars today for confessing their faith and dying for it is long. There are 38 priests from the Archdiocese of Valencia, with a large group of men and women, members of Catholic Action, also from Valencia; 18 Dominicans and two priests from the Archdiocese of Zaragoza; four Friars Minor and six Friars Minor Conventual; 12 Friars Minor Capuchin with five Capuchin women religious and a Discalced Augustinian; 11 Jesuits with a young lay man; 30 Salesians and two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; 19 Third Order Capuchins of Our Lady of Sorrows with a laywoman cooperator; one Priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Dehonian); the chaplain of La Salle College of Bonanova, Barcelona, with five Brothers of the Christian Schools; 24 Carmelite Sisters of Charity; one Servite Sister; six Sisters of the Pious Schools with two laywomen cooperators from Uruguay, who are the first blessed of this Latin American country; two Little Sisters of the Abandoned Elderly, three Third Order Capuchins of the Holy Family; a Claretian Missionary Sister; and lastly, Francisco Castelló y Aleu, a young member of Catholic Action in Lleida.

The testimonies we have received speak of honest, exemplary people whose martyrdom sealed lives that were interwoven with work, prayer and religious commitment in their families, parishes and religious congregations. Many of them in life had already enjoyed a reputation for holiness among their countrymen. It could be said that their exemplary conduct prepared them in a way for the supreme confession of faith that is martyrdom.

How can we not be deeply moved at hearing the accounts of their martyrdom? The elderly María Teresa Ferragud was arrested at the age of 83 with her four contemplative religious daughters. On 25 October 1936, the feast of Christ the King, she asked to accompany her daughters to martyrdom and to be executed last so that she might encourage them to die for the faith. Her death made such an impression on her executioners that they exclaimed: "This is a true saint". No less edifying was the witness of the other martyrs, such as the young Francisco Castelló y Aleu, 22 years old, a chemist by profession and a member of Catholic Action. Realizing the gravity of the situation, he did not want to hide but to offer his youth as a loving sacrifice to God and his brethren; he left us three letters, an example of strength, generosity, serenity and happiness, written a few moments before his death to his sisters, his spiritual director and his fiancée. Or the newly ordained priest, Germán Gozalbo, 23 years old, who was shot only two months after celebrating his first Mass, after endless humiliations and abuses.

3. How many examples of serenity and Christian hope! All these new blessed and many other anonymous martyrs paid with their blood for the hatred of the faith and of the Church which was unleashed by the religious persecution and the outbreak of the Civil War, the immense tragedy that Spain experienced in the 20th century. During those terrible years many priests, religious and lay people were killed simply because they were active members of the Church. The new blessed being raised to the altars today were not involved in political or ideological struggles, nor did they want to be concerned with them. This is well known to many of you who are their relatives and are taking part in this beatification today with great joy. They died solely for religious motives. Now, by this solemn proclamation of their martyrdom, the Church wishes to recognize these men and women as examples of courage and constancy in faith, helped by God's grace. For us they are models of consistency with the truth they professed, while at the same time they honour the noble Spanish people and the Church.

May their blessed memory remove forever any form of violence, hatred and resentment from Spanish soil! May everyone, especially young people, know the blessing of peace in freedom: peace forever, peace with everyone and for everyone!

4. Dear brothers and sisters, on various occasions I have recalled the need to preserve the memory of the martyrs. Their witness must not be forgotten. They are the most eloquent proof of the truth of the faith, which can give a human face even to the most violent death and show its beauty even in the midst of atrocious sufferings. The particular Churches must do everything possible not to forget those who suffered martyrdom.

At the beginning of the third millennium the pilgrim Church in Spain is called to live a new springtime of Christianity, since she has been watered and fertilized by the blood of so many martyrs. *Sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum!* The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians (Tertullian, *Apol.*, 50, 13: CCL 1, 171)! Today these words, coined during the persecutions of the first centuries, must instil hope in your apostolic initiatives and pastoral efforts in the often difficult task of the new evangelization. For this you can rely on the incomparable help of your martyrs. Remember their valour: "*Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever*" (Heb 13: 7-8).

5. I would like to entrust an intention deeply rooted in your hearts to the intercession of the new blessed: the end of terrorism in Spain. For several decades you have been put to the test by a horrible sequence of violence and killing. At the root of these deeply regrettable incidents is a perverse logic which must be denounced. Terrorism is born of hate and in turn feeds it; it is radically unjust and increases the situations of injustice, since it seriously offends God and the dignity and rights of individuals. With terror, man is always the loser! No motive, cause or ideology can justify it. Only peace builds peoples. Terror is the enemy of humanity.

6. Dear friends in the Lord, the Father's voice also said to us in today's Gospel: "*This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him*" (Lk 9: 35). Listening to Jesus means following and imitating him. The cross has a very special place on this journey. There is a direct connection between the cross and our transfiguration. Imitating Christ in death is the way that leads to the resurrection of the dead, that is, to our transformation in him (Phil 3: 10-11). Now, in the celebration of the Eucharist Jesus gives his Body and his Blood so that, in a certain way, we can have a foretaste here on earth of our final state, when our mortal bodies will be transfigured in the likeness of Christ's glorious body.

May Mary, Queen of Martyrs, help us to listen to and imitate her Son. Let us ask her, who accompanied her divine Son in his earthly life and remained faithful to him at the foot of the Cross, to teach us to be faithful to Christ at every moment without losing heart in the face of difficulties; may she grant us the same strength with which the martyrs confessed their faith. In calling upon her as our Mother, I implore the gifts of peace, happiness and steadfast hope for everyone present here today and for your families.