

June 3rd: Saint Charles Lwanga and Companions, martyrs

Gospel text (Mt 5,1-12a): When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

«Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness»

Fr. Josep M^a MASSANA i Mola OFM

(Barcelona, Spain)

Today we celebrate the memory of the martyrs of Uganda: St. Charles Lwanga and his followers, who were killed between 1885 and 1887 by King Mwanga cruelty and his loathing of the faith professed for Jesus and because they refused to accede to the king's sexual advances. Twenty-two Catholics died: the youngest one, St. Kizito, twelve-year-old. There were also a score of Anglicans. It was a very Ecumenical martyrdom. While they were imprisoned, St. Charles Lwanga urged them to be faithful, by fortifying them with their faith and love for Jesus. The first to die, Joseph Balikuddembe, said to his executioner: "Tell the King, that we die unfairly, but we forgive him; and tell him to repent too".

Namungongo, with a Cathedral dedicated to the martyrs, is the symbol, fertilized with the blood of the martyrs, of all Ugandan Christian churches, and not only of the Catholic faith.

The Beatitudes we are pondering today fit very well with the martyrs, but especially the one that says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:10). Uganda martyrs were persecuted and martyred "for righteousness". Their virtue and sanctity were an abhorrent for the unjust. Also that one: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8). Purity of heart grants contemplative capacity.

The Pope has frequently insisted that the Church needs more testimonies rather than teachers. The martyrs are very much so by definition, since the word "martyr" means "testimony". The martyrs of Uganda have been authentic witnesses of Jesus, without fear or shame, although this brought them to death. They are, thus, an example for today's world, little predisposed to risk one's life for the sake of the Kingdom.

Insofar as we may give testimony of Jesus, we are "martyrs" too, not by spilling our blood but with our courage to risk our life for our faith in Him.