

## **Martyr or Crusader?**

All have been commissioned to spread the faith. It is Jesus himself who calls us to do so: “Go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (*Mk 16:15*). No believer can avoid this. Of course, there are different ways to engage in proclamation. And this will also differ according to the vocation one has received. Proclaiming the Gospel, for example, is explicitly part of the mission of a priest. Besides presiding in the celebration of the liturgy and performing ministry, he has the explicit mission of proclaiming the Gospel. But other believers will also contribute to this proclamation in their own way. For some, this will be participation in confirmation catechesis, while others will proclaim through their exemplary religious life and their service work within the Church. With Cardinal Newman, it resonates that we all need to shine, radiate, let the light of the Lord and His love shine in the world. “Let me preach You without preaching, not by words, but by my life and by the compelling power, the sympathetic influence of all I do.” Newman is not saying that we should not preach, for he himself was a great preacher, but that before anything else we should live and experience the gospel authentically, in a way in which it is attractive to others. It will be from this intense experience of the gospel that we will find the right words to effectively proclaim the gospel too.

There must be total congruence between what we say and the way we live. If not, we become a caricature of what we proclaim.

Is that not the problem why many proclaimers are not taken seriously, because the fine words they utter do not match their own way of life? In fact, every proclamation should be accompanied by a serious examination of conscience. Isn't that also what Jesus reproached the Pharisees and scribes for, that their beautiful words were anything but a reflection of their own way of life?

Until previously, the ‘conversion’ aspect was a regular feature and one of the objectives of proclamation. In the past, how many missionaries went out to convert entire peoples and bring the Good News to them? Today, this is met with pity and even reproach and accusation by some, because this would have meant showing too little or even no respect for one's own culture and the natural religions that these people usually lived. However, the aim was to free these people from the dark powers that were inherent in many of these nature religions and bring them the liberating message of the Gospel. And in most places, it was also accompanied by the development of care and education, as an expression of the diaconate they wanted to bring along with the proclamation. In the whole woke movement, let us nevertheless be careful in unilaterally condemning these practices that also took place in a totally different time frame. The reaction of some missionaries after the council, to focus only on social service work, could certainly not be seen as a balanced response to the criticism expressed.

Proclamation of the Gospel remains an essential task within the church and each person must give it an appropriate interpretation in line with the situation in which they find themselves. Proclamation in a totally secularised environment where people have completely forgotten the name of Jesus and proclamation in an environment where people have never heard of Jesus will naturally require a different and appropriate approach. But in both areas, proclamation can still be expected, but perhaps more in the spirit as St Francis of Assisi expressed it, “Let us proclaim the message of the Gospel, in appropriate ways, if necessary by preaching about it.” Saint Pope Paul VI was also clear in this when he pointed out that people today listen more to witnesses than to

teachers, and when teachers do have to proclaim, they do so from the testimony of their lives. Again, and again, the importance of also living authentically what one teaches and proclaims resonates here. That will remain the criterion of 'success', if we may speak of success in this context, in every proclamation and every methodology developed around it.

Recently, I bumped into another text by Cardinal Newman that also makes us think. "The Church's greatest victories were all won before Constantine, in the days when there were no Christian armies and when the true Christian soldier was the martyr, whose testimony for Christ was non-violent. It was the martyrs who won Rome for Christ with a victory stable for 20 centuries. How long were the Crusaders able to keep Jerusalem?" Surely this is a confrontational observation that throws yet another light on the proclamation. It is from this reflection by Newman that I chose as my title: 'Martyr or Crusader?'

For many years, I have had the opportunity to walk regularly through Rome and visit the many places that remind us of the martyrs. When we enter ancient Rome, we realise how much blood flowed here of people who sacrificed their lives for Jesus, for their faith. Of ancient Rome, with its many temples, only ruins have been preserved, but the Catholic faith shines there not only through Rome's many churches, but also through the living faith we may meet there. "Martyrs whose witness for Christ were non-violent." This is how Newman describes those who laid the foundations on which the Church was built. It began with the two pillars of the Church: Peter and Paul. Even though Paul is always depicted with the sword in his hand, we know that it is the symbol of his inexhaustible struggle to proclaim the faith everywhere, and at the same time the gear with which he died martyrdom.

Martyrdom as a non-violent witness for Christ is not over. Even today, people still die for the sake of their faith and persecution of Christians

continues. Shortly before he himself died as a martyr at the foot of the altar, Bishop Romero said it would be a counter-witness and it would even be a disgrace if, in the fight against unjust structures, Christians and priests did not die as martyrs. After all, when we live our faith in a radical way, as Jesus calls us to do in the Gospel, it is inevitable that we will clash with situations and structures where anti-values prevail, and where people are not respected in their human dignity. As Christians, we neither can nor should stand on the side-lines and pretend our nose is bleeding.

Today, this means that we cannot remain silent when faced with trends in society where life is no longer respected, when it becomes like an obvious thing to kill unwanted life in the mother's womb. We must not remain silent in the face of that culture of death where anyone's life that is valued as useless in the eyes of society can simply be liquidated. We must not be silent towards a world that seems completely unhinged in terms of gender, where people want to become their own creators.

When Christians react against this, they do so from a clear vision of man and see man as the image and likeness of God, i.e. divine. When man is touched or man touches himself, something divine is touched. And there are limits to this that must be respected, that cannot be crossed. Now it seems as if there are no more boundaries. After all, once one has crossed the boundary of the divine, nothing or no one can stop man from going further. This is a taboo that has fallen in our Western society, tempting man to go ever further in what is described in the creation story as primal sin or original sin: wanting to be one's own god. But to realise this, one has to eliminate God himself. Here a new image of man and society emerges where man claims total ownership. What he had received from God's hand as custodian, he now claims ownership of. We see what the revolution that is all about with artificial intelligence brings about and what boundless aspirations are awakened, fuelled and nurtured in man.

That is where we stand, either as crusaders or martyrs. To the name 'martyr' belongs the word 'non-violent.' Non-violence does not mean that we should crawl into our shell and shroud ourselves in total silence, and that out of mere self-preservation. No, we retain the mission as Christians to proclaim the faith, by living radically and authentically ourselves according to the Gospel before anything else. It is from this basic attitude that we will and must speak and bring God present again, even if this will bring resistance and even persecution. That remains our lot as Christians in a world where God has been declared dead and where man has placed himself on God's throne. No, the winged phrase attributed to Nietzsche, is not yet a thing of the past. Once Pope John Paul II spoke that God had left the world. Some did not know what they were hearing.

But then the Pope continued, saying that man no longer offers God a place to be present and remain present in the world. It is up to us, in the environment where we live, to create this free space for God, to offer it to God and to bear witness to God's presence through our lives. There will always be those who want to do this as crusaders, by violently defending the faith. Surely these should think back to the Crusades, how temporary and short-lived their success was. Everything to do with faith cannot be captured and locked up in success stories. Therefore, we should also rightly have questions when people want to proclaim faith through marketing techniques. What we need today more than ever is that spirit of the martyrs who go out into the world from prayer, to bear witness to their faith with the power of God's grace, on occasion, if need be with words.



**Photos from  
SEDOS Annual General  
Assembly and Christmas Party**

