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Homily of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints during the Mass for the Beatification of Teodoro Illera Del Olmo and 15 companion martyrs in Barcelona

The following is the homily pronounced by His Eminence Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu, prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, during Mass this morning in the Basilica of the Sagrada Família, Barcelona, for the beatification of Teodoro Illera Del Olmo, professed priest of the Congregation of Saint Peter in Chains, and and fifteen companion martyrs, killed during the religious persecution in Spain during the years 1936 to 1937:

Homily of Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (*Rom*, 8: 35)

Dear brothers and sisters,

This is the question posed by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians of Rome. At that time he had before his eyes the sufferings and persecutions of the first generation of disciples, witnesses of Christ. The words of tribulation, anguish, hunger, nudity, danger, persecution, torture, massacre “as sheep to be slaughtered” (v. 36) described a situation of suffering and martyrdom that would later become the experience of many of those who were united with Christ and had accepted His love in faith. And today the Church in Barcelona, looking to the Blessed Teodoro Illera Del Olmo and fifteen fellow martyrs, asks itself “who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”.

Saint Paul is quick to give a certain answer to this question: “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God Who is in Jesus Christ our Lord”, nothing, not even death, nor the mysterious forces of the world, nor the future, nor any creature (see verses 38-39). Since God sent His only Son into the world, and this Son gave His life for us, such love will never fail. He is stronger than anything and He keeps in eternal life those who have loved God to the point of giving their lives for him. The regimes of persecution pass, but this glory of the martyrs remains.

These our Blessed brothers and sisters are men and women, consecrated persons and laypeople who were killed in different places, circumstances and dates, in the same episode of martyrdom. The thirteen religious belong to three different Institutes: the Congregation of Saint Peter in Chains, the Congregation of the Capuchin Sisters of the Mother of the Divine Shepherd; and the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Hearts. In the specificity of their respective charisms and distinct apostolic perspectives, these witnesses of the faith have lived with generosity and courage the values of religious life that provoked the perseverance of the persecutors, determined to destroy the Church in Spain. The three lay faithful killed in La Rabassada consistently lived their Christian vocation to charity, becoming apostles of fraternal help and caring hospitality towards the religious of the Congregation of Saint Peter in Chains, and were brought together in the same death sentence. Today, our brothers and sisters tell us: "We are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us" (*Rom 8: 37*).

This is the victory they brought in the period marked by a climate of persecution against all those who professed to be members of the Catholic Church, whether they were consecrated or lay faithful. The new Blessed were faithful to the Church and for this reason they spread goodness both in the parishes and in the colleges where they taught and in other activities related to their state of life. At the supreme moment of their existence, when they had to confess their faith, they were not afraid: they accepted death because they did not deny their identity as men and women religious or committed lay people. The motive of their killing is purely religious, determined by the hatred of the oppressors towards the faith and the Catholic Church, which was targeted in that historical context in Spain. Hatred of the Church prevailed and oppressed human dignity and the principles of freedom and democracy.

Despite this climate of intolerance and persecution of Christians, Blessed Teodoro Illera Del Olmo and the fifteen fellow martyrs were determined to remain faithful - at the risk of their lives - to what their faith demanded. Although aware of looming dangers, they did not withdraw, and experienced their detention and death with great trust in God and in eternal life. Thus they imitated the seven Maccabean martyr brothers and their mother, as we heard in the first reading, who endured "with a good courage, for the hope that she had in God" (*2 Mac 7: 20*). In the Blessed we celebrate today, whose life was sealed by martyrdom *in odium fidei*, the Church recognizes a model to be imitated so that the believers of all time will journey more swiftly towards the heavenly Jerusalem they already inhabit.

The similitude of Jesus, which we have heard in the Gospel, summarizes well the existence of the new Blessed: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (*Jn 12: 24*). To bring fruit, the grain of wheat must die. These brothers and sisters, who today were proclaimed Blessed, in all their choices were "grain" because they accepted to die little by little in the daily life, spending themselves in the service of the Gospel, up to their final heroic gesture. The fruitfulness of every proclamation and service in the Church is measured in the availability of being a grain of wheat fallen on the ground, like Jesus who brought much fruit when He died. Just as the fall to the ground is the condition of the fecundity of the grain of wheat, so by death Jesus, rising up from the earth, attracts all humanity to the Father.

Today too, in our fragmented society, marked by divisions and closure, those who wish to grow and be useful to others and to society, are called to witness the logic of the kernel of wheat. Those who wish to make their lives fruitful must make choices according to the logic of a commitment that requires sacrifice, not excluding the sacrifice of life. The meaning of the fruitfulness of the sacrifice of ourselves for the good of the community is explained again by Jesus, who warns: "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). The path travelled by the divine Master is the same that every disciple must follow. Jesus does not ask us to lose material life to have the spiritual life, but to live our existence not in the preservation of and attachment to ourselves but in giving and in love of others. Only those who totally give themselves out of love bear fruit and open themselves to true life. "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (v. 26) Jesus tells us again. Service is the true path of discipleship. Only those who are capable of serving can say that they are on the path that Jesus is going through, of being His disciple.

Today's beatification is a new stage for the Church in Barcelona, and for the religious families and for the parishes to which the new Blessed belonged. It is a profound joy for all of you to know that those who were part

of your communities are with God, to be able to admire the faith and courage of these brothers and sisters. But these martyrs also invite us to think about the multitude of believers who are persecuted today too, in the world, in a hidden and lacerating way, as it involves the lack of religious freedom, the impossibility of defending oneself, internment, civil death: the their proof has points in common with that of our new blessed. Finally, we must ask ourselves for the courage of faith, of complete fidelity to Jesus Christ, to His Church, at the moment of difficulty as in daily life. Our world, too often indifferent or unaware, expects from the disciples of Christ an unequivocal testimony, like that of the martyrs celebrated today: Jesus Christ is alive; prayer and the Eucharist are essential for us to live of His life; our attachment to the Church is one with our faith; fraternal unity is the quintessential sign of Christians; true justice, purity, love, forgiveness and peace are fruits of the Spirit of Jesus; and missionary ardour is part of this testimony; we can not keep hidden the burning lamp of our faith.

These new Blessed, as martyrs, have proclaimed the Gospel by giving their lives out of love: with the strength of their suffering they are the sign of that greatest love that encompasses all other values. They are also a silent, but very eloquent, denunciation of discrimination, racism and abuse towards religious freedom, which, as the Holy Father recently said, “a supreme good to be safeguarded, a fundamental human right and a bulwark against the claims of totalitarianism” (Address to a Delegation of the World Congress of Mountain Jews, 5 November 2018). With their fidelity with which they were able to be heroic, they teach us to seek incessantly the will of God in the fulfilment of our daily duty. They are a living testimony of how in the midst of tribulations and hostilities, the disciple of Christ is called to retain patience and meekness, together with a capacity for forgiveness, like Christ on the cross.

This beatification can thus revive our faith, our Christian witness, our life! Today it is with the blood of our Blessed that the inspired words of the Psalmist are written for us ! “Let us exalt His name together. I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears” (Ps 34). So be it for us too. For this we invoke the intercession of the new Blessed and repeat together:

Blessed Teodoro Illera Del Olmo and fifteen fellow martyrs, pray for us!
