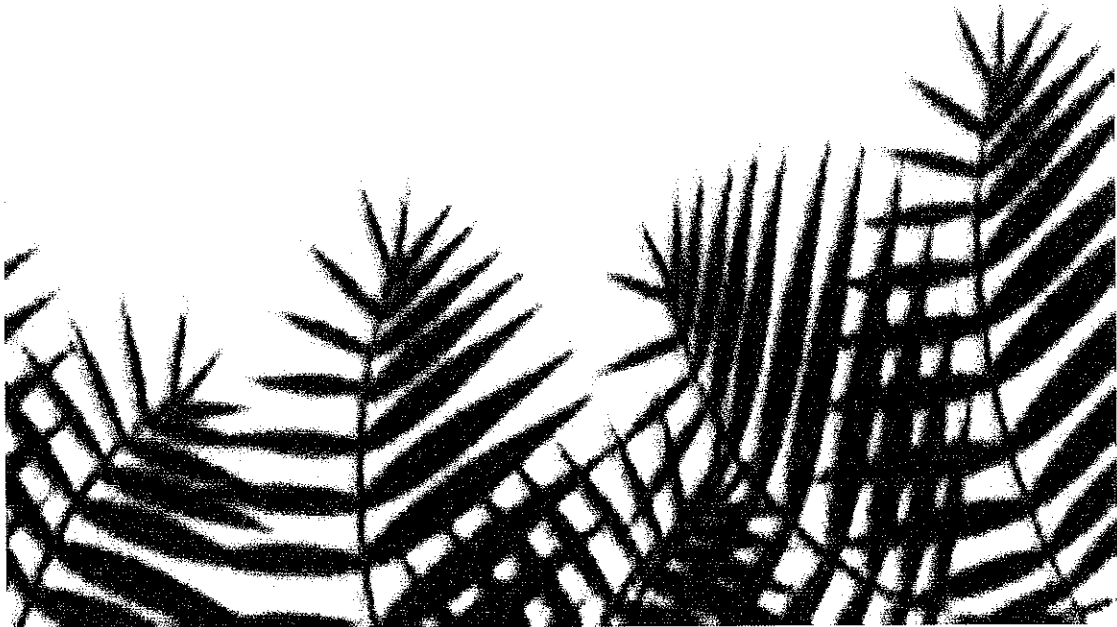


**“Peace With No Borders. Religions
and Cultures in Dialogue”**

Martyrdom: then and now

Metropolitan Paula

Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt





Martyrdom: then and now

Eminences, Excellences, Graces, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today in this meeting that pays special attention to **“Martyrs of the Present Age”**. It also gives me honor to represent the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, which is one of the most ancient churches in the world. The blessing I have for you today is the blessing of our present-age martyrs, many of whom are Copts, and some of whom are my sons who witnessed to Jesus in the Diocese of Tanta during the Mass of Palm Sunday 2017.

In the Old Testament, God used to encourage His people to testify for Him; to become His witnesses. He told them – according to Prophet Isaiah;

**“Do not fear, nor be afraid;
Have I not told you from that time, and declared it?
You are My witnesses.
Is there a God besides Me?
Indeed there is no other Rock;
I know not one.” (Isaiah 44: 8)**

God wanted them not to be afraid, and to have courage to say it boldly: we worship God, we are His people.



The understanding of the word (witness), that is (martus or martur) in Greek, has been declared in the New Testament. Just before His ascension, the Lord told His disciples;

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1: 8)

He meant to tell us all that we will be His witnesses; that is: Martyrs, all over the world.

The testimony of martyrdom has been as early as the church was. Because Jesus Christ, Our Lord, told us this Himself, saying;

“For the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.” (John 5: 36)

The very works of Him were completed on the cross where He bore witness to the whole world through His death and resurrection. Therefore, He taught us with example to witness our faith in Him through the works not fearing death because it is no more a death but a sleep; because it is the way to resurrection and eternal life. This is how we understand martyrdom in the church.

The early church gave us a famous example of this understanding that connects “witnessing” to “martyrdom” in *St Ignatius Theophorus* of Antioch. In the year 107, this early church father desired to testify to Christ through his death. When his fellow Christians tried to save him from his Roman oppressors, he said to them, **“If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human**



voice.” It was Ignatius’ desire that his witness of Christ would become even more powerful in his death. One hundred years later, *Tertullian* is credited with saying, “**The blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church.**” It is clearly manifested how holding witness to Christ has been courageous to the extent that the church fathers welcomed death to testify their strong faith.

Martyrdom has three meanings in our church now. It is

- 1- A gain not pain
- 2- A victory and joy
- 3- A road to eternal life

1) A gain not pain

We read with understanding, and pray with St. Paul saying;

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1: 21)

Yes we feel some pain when we lose our beloved to a ferocious death, and when we lose our churches to terrorist bombings. However, knowing that we only lose material bodies and gain new saints in heaven gives us comfort. Knowing that their blood is the seed of the church, we regain the buildings of our churches because we have never lost the spiritual church but rather see it becoming stronger.

2) A victory and joy

What do we sing in the Holy Week and Good Friday? We sing, pray and believe that Jesus trampled down death by death. We also trample down evil, fear, disbelief, and spiritual death by willingly carrying the cross, giving



ourselves as Our Lord has done, and accepting the death of the flesh to become victorious.

Then we can also say with great joy, and sing with St. Paul;

**“Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O, Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15: 54, 55)**

3) A road to eternal life

It follows that overcoming death with joy is but a sign on the road to eternal life, the ultimate goal and residence of every Christian. Our victory and joy are not political. We don't know resistance, or passive resistance. Our victory and joy are spiritual, only spiritual. The land we hope to inherit is heavenly Jerusalem.

“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance.” (Ephesians 1: 11)

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (Revelation 3: 21)

On Palm Sunday, April 9th, 2017, we saw all the meanings of martyrdom, of holding witness, of gain, joy, victory and open heaven in our church Mar Girgis in Tanta.

Deacons in white garments holding crosses and singing with hymns of Hosanna to the King of kings, Hosanna to the Son of David with joy, were suddenly moved from the church on earth to the heavenly church to complete their hymns before the throne and before the Lamb.

No let the Bible tell you the story:

“9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing



before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom,
Thanksgiving and honor and power and might,
Be to our God forever and ever.
Amen."

13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?"

14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know."

So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. 16 They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7)

We are proud of our new saints, proud of our church, and proud of our Christianity.

Our country Egypt has always been the home of our large and extended church. Never has extremism won over our country. Even when we face



such troubles, we never stop loving our neighbors. On the contrary, we get more support from both the authorities and all Egyptians.

We never lose hope in our country, but rather support all endeavors towards peaceful co-existence and cultural and educational development so that we achieve our mission on earth and be the salt and light of the world.

I do ask you all to pray for peace;

To pray with one heart so that God makes peace all over the world;

To pray saying:

(O King of Peace, Grant us Your Peace, Establish for us Your Peace and Forgive us our sins)

Metropolitan Paula

Metropolitan of Tanta