



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
Archdiocese of Malta

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HOMILY BY THE ARCHBISHOP DURING MASS TO COMMEMORATE VICTORY DAY

COMMEMORATION OF THE GREAT SIEGE (1565 – 2015)

This year we are commemorating the 450th year since the Great Siege. From May to September 1565, Malta was besieged by the strong and powerful Ottoman fleet. The tragic and epic account of this siege gives testimony to the cruel acts which people are capable of inflicting upon one another, as well as the courage of those who are in danger. History records that both parties not only incurred victims, but were also witness to heroic acts. No modern recounting of the story can possibly alter the fact that in 1565, the Muslim Turks attacked the territorial integrity of Malta with the aim of forcing out of the Island the Knights of the Order of St John and converting the Maltese to Islam, or taking them as slaves, as they did in Gozo in 1551. For this reason, it is right and fitting that every year, on the 8th of September, we celebrate our Victory over those who came to enslave us and recall that our cultural and religious heritage was earned and redeemed by the precious blood of some very brave men.

We are not here today to renew a belligerent spirit or to humiliate those who came, saw and returned home empty-handed. In a particular way this year, the Commemoration of the Great Siege should help us reflect upon some pertinent issues which we are presently facing.

The first reflection which I wish to share with you is that any form of aggressive attack of one country over another for the purpose of advantageous conquest is unjust, no matter who the aggressor happens to be.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that: “The fifth commandment – thou shalt not kill - forbids the intentional destruction of human life. Because of the evils and injustices that accompany all war, the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to action so that the divine Goodness may free us from the ancient bondage of war. All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2307 – 2308).

“Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation. A danger of modern warfare is that it provides the opportunity to those who possess modern scientific weapons especially atomic, biological, or chemical weapons - to commit such crimes” (CCC 2314).



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“Injustice, excessive economic or social inequalities, envy, distrust, and pride raging among men and nations constantly threaten peace and cause wars. Everything done to overcome these disorders contributes to building up peace and avoiding war: Insofar as men are sinners, the threat of war hangs over them and will so continue until Christ comes again; but insofar as they can vanquish sin by coming together in charity, violence itself will be vanquished and these words will be fulfilled: ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore’ (Is 2:4)” (CCC 2317).

How truly wonderful it is when people of different and diverse cultures live together in harmony. The true Christian strives for peace among nations, and also defends his liberty. Above all, he executes the law of love.

To quote Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 101): “Let us ask the Lord to help us understand the law of love. How good it is to have this law! How much good it does us to love one another, in spite of everything. Yes, in spite of everything! Saint Paul’s exhortation is directed to each of us: ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom 12:21). And again: ‘Let us not grow weary in doing what is right’ (Gal 6:9). We all have our likes and dislikes, and perhaps at this very moment we are angry with someone. At least let us say to the Lord: ‘Lord, I am angry with this person, with that person. I pray to you for him and for her’. To pray for a person with whom I am irritated is a beautiful step forward in love, and an act of evangelization. Let us do it today! Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!”

It is a great pity when religion becomes an instrument or an excuse for a military campaign of war and aggression. It is a great pity that many human atrocities which are being performed by the Islamic State are being justified by a cruel interpretation of the Koran.

As Pope Francis rightly teaches us: “Our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance, since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society. We must never forget that they ‘profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day’. The sacred writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings; Jesus and Mary receive profound veneration and it is admirable to see how Muslims both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and faithfully take part in religious services. Many of them also have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God. They also acknowledge the need to respond to God with an ethical commitment and with mercy towards those most in need”.

“In order to sustain dialogue with Islam, suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their



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demands and shed light on shared beliefs. We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. I ask and I humbly entreat those countries to grant Christians freedom to worship and to practice their faith, in light of the freedom which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries! Faced with disconcerting episodes of violent fundamentalism, our respect for true followers of Islam should lead us to avoid hateful generalisations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence” (Evangelii Gaudium nn. 252-253).

Indeed, where faith and reason are concerned, there is no place for violence, for force, for aggression.

In order to be in regard of human dignity “man's response to God in faith must be free: no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will ... The act of faith is of its very nature a free act (Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 10). ‘God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, hence they are bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus’ (Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 11). In fact, the Lord’s missionary mandate includes a call to growth in faith, yet he never forced anyone. ‘Christ invited people to faith and conversion, but never coerced them.’ For he bore witness to the truth but refused to use force to impose it on those who spoke against it. His kingdom... grows by the love with which Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws men to himself” (CCC 160).

“With regards to choice of religion, the human person should not be forced to act against his conscience. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits’. (Konč. Vatikan II, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 2). This right is based on the very nature of the human person, whose dignity enables him freely to assent to the divine truth which transcends the temporal order. For this reason it ‘continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it” (CCC 2106).

On several occasions, the Maltese people were on the edge of danger and we were liberated through the intercession of the sweet Mother of Jesus and of St Paul, our father in faith. Today, as we respectfully commemorate the past, let us renew ourselves with a spirit of reconciliation and solidarity among nations, among religions, with creation and between peoples.

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