



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of February 11, 2014,
Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes

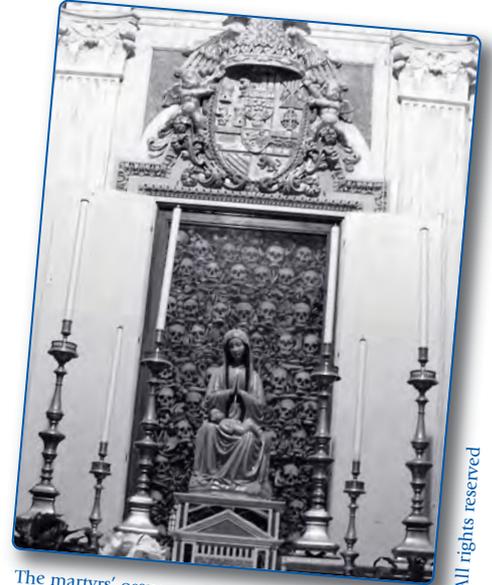
Dear Friends,

ON May 12, 2013, during the canonization of the martyrs of Otranto, Pope Francis said, "Today the Church holds up for our veneration a group of martyrs who in 1480 were called to bear the supreme witness to the Gospel together. About 800 people, who had survived the siege and invasion of Otranto, were beheaded in the environs of that city. They refused to deny their faith and died professing the Risen Christ. Where did they find the strength to stay faithful? Precisely in the faith itself, which enables us to see beyond the limits of our human sight, beyond the boundaries of earthly life, to contemplate *the heavens opened*, as Saint Stephen says, and *the living Christ at God's right hand*" (cf. Acts 7:55-56).

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire's expansion through conquest was a serious threat to Christianity. In the eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks from Central Asia, followers of Islam, invaded the Byzantine Empire. In 1299, Prince Osman, who gave his name to the Ottoman dynasty, united the Turkish clans under his domination and threatened the heart of the Byzantine Empire. In 1453, the Turks entered Constantinople, the "second Rome," as conquerors. The Ottoman sultan Mehmed (Mohammed) II, after having profaned the ancient basilica of Saint Sophia, turned it into a mosque. From then on, the entire Christian East and even a part of the Balkans were in the hands of the Muslims. But the conqueror did not wish to stop there—his goal was to force all Europe to submit to Islam.

Unfortunate city!

In 1480, Mehmed II felt the time was right to invade Italy, ravaged by internecine wars in which the King of Naples, Ferdinand of Aragon, had been involved. The sultan foresaw offensives on two fronts—one on Venice, by land through the Balkans (this offensive would be stopped by Hungarian resistance); the other by sea on what is now Apulia, in southeast Italy. Pope Sixtus IV warned his fellow countrymen of the Turkish menace in these words: "Italians, if you want to be able to continue to call yourselves Christians, defend yourselves!" His appeal fell on deaf ears. Mehmed II declared sarcastically to the Pope: "I will feed oats to my horses on the tomb of Saint Peter." For his part, Saint Francis of Paula (1415-1507), the famous hermit of Calabria, had on several occasions predicted the imminent Turkish invasion of the kingdom of Naples. At the beginning of 1480, in the presence of his confreres in the Order of Minims, the saint exclaimed, as he looked in the direction of



The martyrs' ossuary—Otranto Cathedral

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Otranto: "Oh, unfortunate city, how many corpses will be strewn in your streets! How much Christian blood will flood through you!" Francis of Paula had the king of Naples warned of the danger—he implored him to call back his troops, which were fighting a fratricidal war in Tuscany, to defend his kingdom. But Ferdinand called the saint a defeatist, and ordered him to be silent.

The Cape of Otranto, or the Salentine Peninsula, the "heel" and easternmost point of the Italian boot, juts out like a sentry towards the outlet into the Adriatic Sea, less than 100 km from Albania, which had been under Turkish rule since 1478. A Greek city in ancient times, Otranto had probably witnessed Saint Peter's arrival, coming from Antioch by sea en route to Rome. Governed for many years by the Byzantines, Otranto was in 1095 the embarkation point for 12,000 Norman crusaders led by Bohemond of Taranto. In 1219 Saint Francis of Assisi, on his return from the Holy Land, was received there with honor. Near Otranto the Basilian monastery of Saint Nicholas can be found, where the monks celebrate the liturgy in Greek.

Held in check in Rhodes by the Knights of Saint John, the Ottoman fleet—more than 150 ships—abandoned the siege of this island and headed for the Cape of Otranto with 18,000 soldiers on board. They reached sight of land on July 29, 1480. The initial objective was the Port of Brindisi, but a contrary wind forced the ships to land 50 miles further south—at Roca, several kilometers from Otranto. At the time the Turks landed, this city

had only a garrison of 400 men to count on. The people of Otranto hastened to call upon King Ferdinand for help. "If your Majesty does not take the necessary measures immediately, we are in great peril of being taken. We will do our duty, but our death will not be the worst of it. It is the injury to the service of God and to the interests of your Majesty that are to be dreaded." Yet Ferdinand did not have troops available and was unable to intervene in Otranto until several weeks later.

The keys thrown into the sea

On August 1, the Turks landed without meeting any resistance. The residents had barricaded themselves inside fortifications. Pasha Ahmed, the general of the Turkish army, sent a messenger to offer them a surrender on favorable terms—if they did not put up any resistance, the men and women would be left free, either to stay without being harmed, or to leave. After an animated discussion, the leading citizens of the city unanimously decided to resist the invader and to fight "for God and country." They did not want to betray their king, or open the door of Italy to the infidel. One of the elders of the city, Ladislao De Marco, replied to the Turkish interpreter: "If the Pasha wants Otranto, he will have to take it by force, for behind these walls are the chests of citizens." To eliminate any ambiguity, De Marco grabbed the keys to the city and publicly threw them into the sea from the top of a tower.

The Turkish siege machines then rained down a storm of large boulders on Otranto. During the night, most of the soldiers from the Neapolitan garrison escaped over the city walls by rope and fled. The inhabitants were left alone to defend their city—from then on, the battle was mismatched. At dawn on the second day, the attackers opened a breach in the city wall. They rushed in, but were forced back by the defenders. A second attack was no more successful—the citizens of Otranto poured boiling water on the Turks, who were trying to scale the walls. However, the constant bombardment of the Ottoman artillery eventually resulted in the weakest section of the wall collapsing on August 11. The assailants entered through this wide breach. The defenders of the city, led by Zurlo and Falconi, fought every inch of the way but collapsed under the number of assailants. The Ottoman hordes yelled as they rushed into the streets, looting and then burning the houses one by one, and massacring their inhabitants. A great number of the citizens of Otranto had taken refuge and barricaded themselves in the cathedral, which was defended with all the energy of desperation by a few armed men. The elderly archbishop Stefano Pendenelli, clothed in his pontifical vestments, distributed the Bread of Life to his faithful for the last time. Then a Dominican, Fra Fruttuoso, exhorted them to prepare themselves in a Christian manner for martyrdom. His words were interrupted by the crash of the church door, beaten down by the assailants' battering rams. The attackers permanently silenced the preacher, and then

rushed toward the bishop, who was seated in his chair. Ahmed asked him who he was. "I am the unworthy shepherd of this flock of Christ." One of the Turks ordered him not to say the name of Christ ever again, but only that of Mohammed. The archbishop urged his aggressor to convert if he did not wish to suffer the fate of Mohammed, who had been condemned in God's court for his impiety. Mad with rage, the pasha ordered the bishop to be beheaded. This execution was the signal for an all-out slaughter. The blood of Christians flowed in rivers in the desecrated cathedral.

After three days, Pasha Ahmed stopped the massacre and ordered the soldiers to round up all the able-bodied men over the age of 15. Around 800 men (813 according to one tradition) were brought to him. An apostate priest from Calabria stood at the Ottoman leader's side; translating his words, he tried to convince the men of Otranto to renounce Christ. "The Muslims' victory," he told them, "is proof that Mohammed is more powerful than Christ. If you convert to Islam, your lives will be saved and you will keep your property; if not, you will all be massacred."

A valiant tailor

It was then that Antonio Primaldo, a tailor already advanced in years, stood up and delivered the following speech to his companions: "My brothers, we have heard at what price we are asked to buy the right to prolong this unfortunate life. We have fought until today for our country, our lives, and our earthly masters. Now the time has come for us to fight to save our souls, redeemed by Our Lord. Since He died on the Cross for us, it is fitting that we should also die for Him, firm and constant in the faith. Through this earthly death, we will gain the glory of martyrdom and eternal life." At these words, all shouted fervently with one voice that they would rather die any death a thousand times than renounce Christ. Each exhorted his companions, some his son or father, to say "yes" to Christ and "no to Mohammed," whatever the consequences.

The leader of the Turks once again promised the Christian prisoners to leave them their wives and children and all their property if they recited the *shahada*, the ritual formula that makes one a Muslim: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is God's prophet." In reality, saying this phrase constitutes apostasy. Primaldo refused, and renewed his oath of fidelity to Christ, which all repeated with fervor. They knew that JESUS CHRIST is God, and that *there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

JESUS CHRIST is, in fact, the sole Savior of mankind, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reminds us in a document approved by Blessed John Paul II: "He alone, as Son of God made man, crucified and risen, by the mission received from the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit, bestows revelation and divine life to all

humanity and to every person. In this sense, one can and must say that JESUS CHRIST has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to Him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute. JESUS is, in fact, the Word of God made man for the salvation of all. In expressing this consciousness of faith, the Second Vatican Council teaches: "The Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh, so that as perfect man He could save all men and sum up all things in Himself. The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations. It is He whom the Father raised from the dead, exalted and placed at His right hand, constituting Him judge of the living and the dead" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 45). It is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives Him an absolute and universal significance whereby, while belonging to history, He remains history's center and goal: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end* (Rev. 22:13)" (Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, August 6, 2000, no. 15).

Irritated by the 800 prisoners' perseverance in their confession of faith, Ahmed decreed that they be condemned to death. The morning of August 14, they were led, with ropes tied around their necks and their hands bound behind their backs, to the Hill of Minerva, a few hundred meters outside the city. The Calabrian apostate priest circulated among them, showing them a tablet on which the *shahada* was written in the Latin alphabet. "Say this simple sentence, and your life will be spared." But all of the condemned, invoking JESUS and MARY, declared that they were ready to die. The pasha ordered Antonio Primaldo to be executed first. Before placing his head on the block, the old man urged his companions to be strong in the faith and to look towards the Heaven that awaited them. His confidence came from the certainty of his faith:

"Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 157).

Certain signs

Echoing the words of Saint Stephen, Primaldo cried out that he saw the heavens open and consoling angels. He was beheaded with one blow of a scimitar, but to the amazement of everyone, he stood up again. His headless corpse, in spite of the furious efforts of the executioners who pushed and pulled him with ropes, remained standing until the end of the ordeal. In the face of this miracle, one of the executioners, named Berlabei, declared himself a Christian. This conversion illustrates the assertion in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The miracles of Christ and the saints, prophe-

cies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all" (CCC, no. 156). Furious, the pasha ordered the new convert to be impaled, and so Berlabei was baptized in his blood. Four eyewitnesses (still children or adolescents in 1480) in 1539 testified to the miracle of Antonio Primaldo's decapitated body remaining standing, and of Berlabei's conversion. The Hill of Minerva, bathed in so much blood, would be called the "Hill of Martyrs" from then on, and the Minim monks would soon found a monastery there.

The fall of Otranto and the massacre of a large part of its population plunged not only Italy but all of the Christian Occident into consternation and terror. At one point, Pope Sixtus IV considered fleeing Rome which was threatened, and launched an appeal for a crusade; the frightened Italian rulers and the king of France silenced their quarrels. Within a few days Ferdinand of Naples made peace with Lorenzo de Medici. An international army of Crusaders from several European nations immediately set out for the Cape of Otranto, under the command of Duke Alfonso of Calabria, the son of the King of Naples. However, the Turks had quickly rebuilt the city's fortifications. The Crusaders were held off all winter, while the Muslims received provisions and munitions by sea, in preparation for a massive spring offensive on Apulia. But on May 3, 1481, Sultan Mehmed II died unexpectedly, and the struggle for power between his sons Bayezid and Diem diverted the Ottomans' attention away from Italy. This providential event enabled Alfonso of Calabria, after a three-month siege, to enter the martyred city as a liberator on September 10, 1481. The duke allowed himself to be persuaded to avoid an attack which would have resulted in great bloodshed. The Turkish occupants had surrendered, in return for their lives and the right to pull out on four ships. Alfonso forced them to free their Christian prisoners, whom they were about to take into slavery.

A resistance that saved

The Crusaders had scarcely arrived in Otranto when they discovered the bodies of eight hundred martyrs, intact despite having been there a year without burial. Alfonso had them temporarily buried nearby. On October 13, most of the relics were taken to the cathedral of Otranto; today one can see there, surrounding the altar of Mary, an ossuary that contains the relics of 560 bodies. The rest of the relics were transferred to Naples. The cost of the tragedy was high—out of the 22,000 inhabitants of Otranto, 12,000 were killed during or after the siege, 813 men were beheaded (the recently canonized martyrs), most of the other inhabitants, women and children, were taken into slavery. Only a very small number managed to escape the massacre or enslavement. But the two weeks of resistance by the besieged inhabitants and the sacrifice of their martyrs saved Italy, by buying enough time to enable the

Christian princes to regroup and organize an expedition to repel the invaders. The chroniclers of the day justly affirmed that the resistance of the inhabitants of Otranto saved southern Italy and perhaps even Rome itself.

Although the names of the martyrs of Otranto remain unknown, except for that of Primaldo, innumerable miracles have been performed up to the present day by invoking them, and by their holy relics: a luminous aura around the bones, sudden healings, protection of the city of Otranto against renewed Islamic onslaughts and earthquakes... On August 4, 1980, for the 500th anniversary of the event, Blessed John Paul II went to Otranto to venerate its martyrs. The Pope said to the young people who had come to meet him: "You keep in your heart, like a precious inheritance, the admirable example of these citizens of Otranto who, on August 14, 1480, at the dawn of modern times, preferred to sacrifice their lives than to renounce the Christian faith. It is a bright and glorious page in the civil and religious history of Italy, but especially for the history of the pilgrim Church on earth. The pilgrim Church must pay its tribute of suffering and persecutions through the centuries to keep its faithfulness to Her Spouse, Christ, God become Man, the Redeemer and Liberator of Man... You are the descendants of this noble and strong race that, after having courageously defended its beloved city by all available means, also defended, in a sublime manner, the treasure of the faith, which had been communicated to it by Baptism... Were these men delusional, behind the times? No, dear young people! They were authentic and coherent men. Among them were young men who, like you, wanted to live, to be happy, to love. But they made their choice, lucidly and with steadfastness: Christ! In the face of contemporary ideologies that glorify and proclaim theoretical or practical atheism, I ask you: are you ready to repeat the words of the blessed martyrs: 'We choose to die for JESUS CHRIST rather than renounce Him'? ... Being disposed to die for Christ means making a commitment to generously and consis-

tently accept the demands of Christian life, that is, living for Christ."

The diocesan process that took place in Otranto in 1539 provided the opportunity for the ten eyewitnesses to the martyrdom to give their testimony. They reported the details that we have today, in particular about the indispensable role of Antonio Primaldo. The veneration of the eight hundred martyrs "from time immemorial" was officially authenticated in 1771 by the Holy See, which is equivalent to a beatification. With a view to their canonization, in 2012 Pope Benedict XVI recognized the authenticity of a miracle, the sudden and medically inexplicable cure of an Italian nun, Sister Francesca Levote, who was suffering from an advanced-stage, incurable cancer. This miracle was obtained from the Lord in 1980 through the sick woman's prayer, invoking the intercession of the martyrs of Otranto.

Refusing rotten values

On June 23, 2013, Pope Francis addressed these words to the faithful: "In 2,000 years, a vast host of men and women have sacrificed their lives to remain faithful to JESUS CHRIST and His Gospel. And today, in many parts of the world, there are many, many—more than in the first centuries—so many martyrs, who give up their lives for Christ, who are brought to death because they do not deny JESUS CHRIST. This is our Church. ... However, there is also daily martyrdom, which may not entail death but is still a 'loss of life' for Christ, by doing one's duty with love, according to the logic of JESUS, the logic of gift, of sacrifice. ... Daily martyrs, martyrs of everyday life! And then there are many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, who 'lose their lives' for truth." In conclusion, the Pope spoke to young people: "Do not be afraid to go against the current, when they want to rob us of hope, when they propose rotten values. ... Forward, be brave and go against the tide!" (*Angelus*, June 23, 2013).

Let us ask God, through the intercession of the martyrs of Otranto, for the grace to be faithful to JESUS CHRIST in the "martyrdom of everyday life," and, if need be, to the point of martyrdom of blood. Thus one day will we see the heavens opened and Christ at the right hand of the Father.

Dom Antoine Marie O.S.B.

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