

Homily (La Marsa)
150th year of the foundation of the Missionaries of Africa
(16th December 2018)

Translated from the French by Ph Docq

One hundred and fifty years ago, an Apostle was dispatching on all the African roads missionaries for the whole of Africa.

Brothers and sisters, missionaries of Africa, it is a grace for you today to say yes again to the grace of the first love. For mission is a love story, it is only a love story. This is the good news announced to the poor. Our 19 brothers and sisters beatified in Algeria reminded us of this a week ago.

To find this first love, we must turn to the first missionary, that is, the very first who was sent, Jesus Christ. He is the Father's Envoy. He is the One who comes. What is he coming to do? Give us rules of conduct? No! He comes to tell us: do not be afraid, God is Father, he is my Father and your Father. Each of you is really my brother, my sister. Thus we can all become missionaries of his Love.

Cardinal Lavignerie, your founder, said: *"You will have for them (he was speaking of Africans) the respect and charity that faith gives. You will give proof to all by your words and deeds that you love them as brothers and sisters."* He also said: *"Charity is the master weapon, the one that penetrates hearts and wounds them with eternal life. May this be the secret of your action: love..."*. Saint Augustine did not say anything else: *"For us, to live is to love"*. This was the secret of Jesus' life summarized in this sentence from John's Gospel: *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the extreme."* It is this path of love that our blessed brothers and sisters in Algeria have followed, among whom are 4 White Fathers: Charles, Alain, Jean and Christian. It is on this path that you are walking and that we are all called to move forward and grow.

Blessed Christian Chessel, shortly before his ordination, wrote to his family: *"To become a missionary priest is to be called to bear witness more particularly to this universal aspect of the mission of the Church: **to be close to those who are far away**, be it geographically or spiritually, to tell everyone that in Jesus Christ, God has forever made himself close to man, to the point of becoming one of us; he has made himself close to everyone, men and women of every race, language, people, culture, **in such close proximity** of love and life that it opens up for us forever the way to a communion of love with God."*

The mission is indeed a matter of love. It is love that dwells in Saint Paul's heart when he says: *"It is a necessity for me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel"* (1 Cor 9:16). Mother Mary Salome, your foundress, dear White Sisters, said: *"Allow me to express one last wish for you, my dear sisters, whom I loved so dearly and for whom I will always pray, even in Heaven. May each of you, at every moment of your life, in every action and in all sincerity, apply to yourself these words of Saint Paul: "Does the charity of Christ press me?"*

In mission, following Jesus, like Saint Paul, you wanted, brothers and sisters, and you want today, to make yourselves all to all. Where you are sent, you learn the language, many languages, culture. You become Arabs with Arabs, Berbers with Berbers. The first White Fathers, the first White Sisters became African with the Africans. And you are here now, brothers and sisters from

sub-Saharan Africa, fruits of mission and missionaries in the countries where you continue to be sent.

Your lives as brothers and sisters, White Fathers, White Sisters, mean that the "today" of which the Gospel we have just read speaks, has not aged a single second. This "today" that Jesus pronounces, your lives actualize it on this great African continent. *"The Good News is proclaimed to the poor, to the captives deliverance..."*.

Many of you were able to participate in the beatification of the 19 new Blessed Martyrs of Algeria, martyrs of the greatest love, including our four White Father brothers. Why only them, only four? We remember the words of the Gospel: "Some are taken and others left behind" (Mt 24:40-41). But in the long history of the 150 years of witness of the White Fathers and White Sisters, the Church could have beatified many others. Those who have been victims of hostility, of rejection. The many men and women who have been exhausted by the disease. But all those of yesterday and today, like our blessed brothers in Algeria, had given their lives to God and this life was spent in the service of others.

Cardinal Lavigerie told you again: *"Devotion is the flower of zeal, and zeal (to be a man of fire) is the flower of charity."* It makes us *"all to all"* because we said **to the God of all: Totus tuus sum ego**". The Cardinal thus takes up what Saint Paul had told us. This is the way to the mission.

One of the important messages of the life of our blessed brothers is that of ordinary holiness, not that of those who would be without defect, but that of simple and fraternal people whose heart of life is the relationship with the others. The Pope spoke of the holiness of the people next door, of those who open their doors, who will knock on each other's doors and, as the Holy Father says, of the holiness of those who *"know how to see and nourish themselves with the holiness of their brother"*. Let us ask our Blessed ones to receive this grace today.

Dear Father Cardinal Lavigerie, dear Mother Mary Salome, and all of you, all of you White Fathers, White Sisters gathered in the Communion of Saints, pray for us, that we may receive and welcome the grace to become saints, holy apostles, holy missionaries.

+ Paul Desfarges