

The icon of the “New Martyrs” of the witnesses of the faith of the twentieth century, painted by Renata Sciachì of the Community of Sant’Egidio, represents the story of the witnesses of the last century in light of a theological reflection centered on the Book of Revelation.

At the top, in the icon, is Christ on the throne, surrounded by angels and by a crowd of the witnesses of the faith, dressed in white, carrying palms in their hands: it is the image of the Book of Revelation, chapter seven, where we read: "After this, there appeared an immense multitude, which no one could count, of every nation, race, people, and tongue. Everyone was standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb clothed in white, and holding palms in their hands. [...] Then one of the elders turned to me and said, "Those who are dressed in white, who are they and where do they come from?" I said, "My lord, you know." And he: "Those who are the ones who passed through the great tribulation and who have washed their garments, making them white with the Blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7: 9-12-14).

"Through the great tribulation": These are the words found at the center of the icon, and the key to its interpretation. Below the words we see a concentration camp, with barbed wire, which turns into a cathedral: this is the experience conveyed by many testimonies. Christian Catholics, Evangelicals, Orthodox, found themselves together in the Nazi camps, in the Soviet gulags, and in the suffering they shared in common for the Gospel, they raised together their prayer to the Lord; they learned to love and to support each other. In this cathedral there is the open Gospel, with Jesus’ words transmitted by the Gospel of John: "May all be one" (John 17:21a). The crucifix and the paschal candle, symbols of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. To the right and to the left are seen two great processions of the witnesses of the faith: one represents the Christian East, the other the West. In these two great processions we recognize persons such as Dietrich Bonhöffer, Patriarch Tichon of the Russian Orthodox Church, Father Girotti (Italian Dominican, Bible scholar, who died in the Dachau where he had preached for a long time).

Continuing further down we notice some destroyed buildings and Christians who are about to be killed; this is the memory of the genocide of the Armenians and of many eastern Christians, which took place in Turkey in 1915, the rupture of more than a thousand years of living together in that land. Also recalled are all the attempts to truly and precisely annihilate the Christian presence, such as the one in Albania: we see a priest with a child in his hands while he is killed (it is the memory of Father Kurti, sentenced to death in 1972 only because he had secretly baptized a child in the camp where he was held).

On the right side of the icon we have a series of scenes; in them we perceive how in the stories of the witnesses of faith the passion of Christ is retraced. The second scene proceeding from below shows a court judging bishops: it is the unjust trial to which so many witnesses of the faith were subjected, like Jesus before Pilate.

Going up we find a man in resplendent garments as he is beaten by two guards: it is the public humiliation that was made of so many Christians before they were killed, as a way to strike down their dignity, to discredit them in the eyes of the people. Above, the square shows a crowd that is about to be shot, in a public execution, as happened in numerous bends of twentieth-century history.

In the first picture below, on the other hand, are commemorated the many who were assassinated, those whose lives were suddenly smashed. A bishop is seen at the altar, it is Msgr. Romero, killed while he was celebrating the Eucharist. Among others who will be recognized, is Bishop Gerardi and Don Giuseppe Puglisi, killed by the mafia in Sicily.

On the left, then, the panels remind us how, in suffering, the life of the "new martyrs" is a witness of love, stronger than hatred: they have responded to evil with good. The first scene gives us a vision of the Soviet Gulag on the Solovki islands: it is a very ancient monastery, transformed by the regime into a detention camp, which mainly collected Christians. Two bishops are noticed, one young and one old, pushing a wheelbarrow: it is the representation of a testimony made by a survivor who in her diary wrote about two bishops, one old and Orthodox, the other young and Catholic, who went together to the forced hard labor, such that the young man could help the old one. It is the sign of Christians who learn again to love and help each other in the midst of the suffering of persecution.

In the scene above, from inside a Romanian jail, we recognize prisoners, each one holding in his hand a sheet of paper: these contain parts of a single Bible (which it was prohibited to possess by prison rules), which the detained had divided among themselves in order to memorize his part and recite it to others, so as not to lose the most precious treasure of the Word of God. Going up again in the iconic narrative we find persecuted Christians who nevertheless have never ceased to feed the hungry, heal the sick, to love one's neighbor who is suffering, and to communicate the Gospel to all. We see a Christian who welcomes a man dressed in a uniform that in this icon identifies the persecutors: it is the sign of the willingness of the witnesses of the faith to forgive, to trust in the possibility for every man that he changes his own heart.

In the celebration of October 12, Cardinal Camillo Ruini recalled that it was due to Pope John Paul II's desire that the Basilica of St. Bartholomew became a "memorial place for witnesses of the 20th century faith". "They - he said - are all symbolically represented in this magnificent icon, which shines in our midst and which will be blessed today. The lives and deaths of these contemporary Christians is engrafted upon the root of the ancient undivided Church, here venerated in the body of the Apostle Bartholomew and of the martyrs Marcellus and Exuperantius, killed during a wave of persecution in the fourth century; it intertwines with that of bishop Adalbertus, who died in 997 while announcing the Gospel. It is a memory kept by a living community, that of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which, as we have heard, gathers here

in prayer and fraternity. The life and death of these Christians are thus engrafted in us all and in our Churches, so that they give fruits worthy of the Gospel. The century that has closed the millennium has truly gone back to being a century of martyrs! "

This is Emilio G. Chávez's translation of the explanation of the Icon of the new martyrs found on this page of the Community of Sant'Egidio:

<http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/799/langID/it/L-icona-di-S-Bartolomeo-Icona-dei-Nuovi-Martiri-e-testimoni-della-fede-del-XX-secolo.html>