

**C.I.E.L. SYMPOSIUM, the Hermitage in Versailles,**

**Homily for the Mass on 11 November 2000,**

**Dom Hervé COURAU, Abbot of TRIORS.**

My dear Brothers,

The Gospel we have just heard is taken from St Luke. It celebrates the holiness of the Apostle of Gaul, the great Martin, by speaking of a lamp and light, of faith and the eye (Lk 11:33–36). The eye of the body illustrates, in a brief parable, the spiritual function of the theological virtue that places the soul in the light of God, for God is light, as St John tells us (1 John 1:5). St Catherine of Siena speaks of faith as *the thought of God grafted onto the pupil of our inner eye*.

St Matthew, too, speaks of the lamp that is not to be placed under a bushel; he includes these words of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:15 & 6:22ff). St Luke places this teaching of the Saviour in a turbulent context. Just before the passage we heard a moment ago, the scribes and Pharisees question the Master in order to make him lose face and discredit his influence over the crowds (Luke 11:15ff). Their intentions are not honourable; they are not asking questions to find enlightenment in his answers; they are not posing questions, but setting traps, and they are arrogantly demanding signs.

The life of St Martin includes episodes in which he suffered in a similar way, particularly in Milan, when he was at loggerheads with the Arian bishop Auxentius—who preceded the great Ambrose—and later in Trier, where the court of the Western Emperor was then situated: a regional synod was convened to condemn certain errors of his time, but he suffered from the bishops' ambition, concealed beneath a false pretence of prudence, and from the exaggerated importance placed on diplomacy, which prevented them from speaking honestly and in keeping with the dignity of their office. He shunned such ambiguous situations, the kind in which we see the Lord himself suffering during his public life.

Yet Saint Martin did not shed his blood. He is the first non-martyr saint to have been honoured in the West, and Sulpicius Severus, his biographer, has given us a sense of the enthusiasm that this great figure—both monk and bishop—aroused among the faithful. He draws a parallel between him and the great Anthony, whose life Saint Athanasius had recently written. The fervour for holiness in those days surpassed anything we can imagine. Evidence of this remains in the fact that so many places and churches are dedicated to him: 4,000 parishes and 500 localities bear his name in France alone.

His reputation as a miracle-worker drew crowds to him, but the liturgy first and foremost extols what is deeper and more divine: namely, his faith—the light that illuminates his entire life even before his outward miracles. The Gospel reading for this Mass has been chosen with this in

mind. Light and faith: these are the effective weapons the saint employed, which are ultimately more prestigious than his miracles. Mother Church wishes us to admire, first and foremost, this faith so pure and so radiant. Miracles are but a fringe aspect of his mysticism.

St Martin, rich only in his faith, helps the Christian people to remain true to their faith, to that profound integrity of which the Pharisees were so lacking. There can be no integrity where bias, passion and selfishness reign (cf. Dom Delatte, op. cit., Gospel commentary, vol. 1, p. 325).

The theme of our reflections over these three days invites us to look beyond St Martin. The saints are an epiphany of God: they show just how deeply the Lord is present in the life of the Church. The Incarnate Word, light born of light, came to enlighten every person in this world because God so loved the world—loved it to such an extent—that this light ascended the candlestick of the Cross to enlighten all humanity. Yet that was the hour of darkness; but that darkness was dispelled by the light of his obedience and humility. He thus taught us the redemptive lesson, the only lesson capable of overcoming the pride and selfishness inherited from the beginning.

The great witness, the first martyr, is Jesus. The martyrs are a visible extension of Jesus, the light that illuminates the world. But martyrdom itself, insofar as it is a clash between darkness and light, has no other purpose than the radiance of the light. The Polish poet Norwid, whose insights have nourished the Holy Father's reflection, emphasises that light is meant to shine unhindered, without needing bloody martyrdom to prove itself, finding nothing left to obstruct it: *The mystery of humanity's progress*, he writes (quoted by Didier Rance in *Affermis tes frères*, Bibliothèque A.E.D., p. 217), *fundamentally depends on the fact that, through the incarnation of goodness and the manifestation of truth, the most powerful, unique and definitive weapon – that is to say, martyrdom – becomes unnecessary on earth.*

Martin shines like the light without having shed his blood. Yet he directs our gaze towards the Lord present in the life of his Church through the power of his own martyrdom, the one and only Sacrifice of the Cross. In Martin, Jesus, the true light, illuminates a country, an era and many others throughout history. In Martin, faith proves victorious over a world hostile to the light. St John told us that our victory over the world is our faith (1 John 5:4). The Lord's presence in the Church's liturgy brings faith to triumph; it continues to evangelise through beauty and to captivate minds and hearts.

A contemporary hymn of St Martin, probably attributed to St Ambrose, sings of the Lord as this conquering light intended for our minds and hearts: *Splendor paternæ gloriæ... Splendour of the Father's glory, radiant with the same brightness, light from light and source of light, Day who illuminates the day. O Sun of truth, shining with eternal brightness, come down and pour into our hearts the light of the Holy Spirit* (Monday at Lauds).

Let us entrust to Our Lady the spiritual fruits of our efforts, so that our souls may find this path of light and purity, amen.

