

***“Be always ready to witness
the hope which is in you”***
(1Pt. 3,15)



***Pastoral letter of Monsignor Luigi Padovese
To all the faithful of the Vicariate of Anatolia
2006 - 2007***

Dear brothers and sisters,

Last year in my pastoral letter, I suggested for your reflection: *“To think and live as Christians in a non-Christian world”*. I don’t know whether you made it points of reflection in your meetings with families and with young people. However, in continuity with that first letter, this year I address you with another reflection taking as reference an expression which Peter, the Apostle, used when writing to the early Christians of our land of Turkey. *“Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have” (1Pt 3,15)*.

You have all known of the difficulties which our Church in Anatolia has lived this past year: the murder of Don Andrea Santoro at Trabzon, the wounding of Fr Pierre Brunissen at Samsun, the threats to the Fathers at Mersin, the closing of the Church of Adana, the persistent hostile attitudes which are noted in certain local newspapers.

Faced with this situation, the temptation is that of closing oneself in anonymity, to remain confused with others in fear, with opportunism, often – unfortunately – only through necessity of economic survival. It is almost normal in such circumstances to give in to discouragement and to resignation and I must confess that even I have had such temptations.

But what must one do? Above all be conscious that in all these happenings, there is a certain sense that must be discovered. God speaks to us not only through the Bible, but also through events and people.

For example, what is the Lord saying to us through the death of Don Andrea? He reminds us that to be a disciple of Jesus in this world is not easy, rather, could even be risky. Is it not true then that even today we find repeated what Jesus had predicted and then

personally experimented *“they will expel you from the synagogues, and indeed the hour is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy duty for God”* (Jn 16,2).

Again through the death of Don Andrea the Lord reminds us that “one cannot serve two masters”. There are situations in which one cannot please everyone and at the same time be servants of Christ (cf Gal 1,10). The sacrifice of this priest is for this reason an invitation to revive our identity as Christians.

If this identity from childhood is inherited, as adults it must be a choice and not as a closed act, punctual, but in the diverse circumstances of life. We are not called Christians only in some hours of the day, but always. To be and act as Christians means to compare ourselves with Christ. He is the mirror into which daily we must gaze. It is precisely in this comparison with Him that our faith and our hope must grow. Has not life taught us that perhaps faith and hope in someone grows with time and through frequent contact? We cannot trust nor have hope in one who is a stranger.

In the Turkish language the word faith and the word trust have the same roots and indicate abandonment to someone in the certainty that he is honest, he will not deceive us and he likes/loves us.

Our faith in the Lord Jesus is also trust in Him. If we trust in Him, then we can also hope in Him and remain afloat among the tempests of life. You will remember the episode of Jesus on the lake of Genesareth when he invites Peter to meet him walking on the waters (cf Mt 14,30). Peter gets off the boat decisively, starts walking on the water but then, slowly begins to sink because his trust in the One who called him begins to waver.

Dear brothers and sisters, this episode is a teaching for our life and reminds us that trust must be accompanied by perseverance

and it is not enough only at the beginning or in certain circumstances.

A French writer, Charles Peguy, compared faith, hope and charity to three sisters. The youngest of them is hope, but is also the one which, with enthusiasm, succeeds in pushing ahead the other two. I tell you this because I think that our faith in Christ is not complete if not moved by hope as by an impetuous wind. Let us look back. Is it not true that without hope we also lose our joy, we lose the courage to confess our faith and we remain fixed in the present and at times seems like a room without doors or windows? Christian hope raises our look beyond the present. St Paul reminds us of this when he writes: *“If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people”* (1Cor 15,19).

When the Apostle Paul invites us to witness to the hope that is in us (cf 1Pt 2,15), he speaks of the hope which matures in this world but which gives its fruit in the “Kingdom of Heaven”, as Jesus called Paradise. Did you notice how Peter does not say that we must witness our faith, but with the hope which we possess. The reason is simple: while faith could limit itself to express thoughts, remaining pure theory, hope is strictly bound to life. It is the thermometer of our faith.

Dear brothers and sisters, I began this letter in reminding you of some of the difficulties of our Church of Anatolia. Now, I would like to invite you to look up and overcome sadness and discouragement, since our Christian hope is stronger than any certitude because founded on Christ who died and rose for us. I would like to add that this hope needs to be nourished and feed as we live in our communities, because it is a virtue which grows with contact. It is in the Church and through the Church that we learn to hope. It is with our brothers and sisters – those already in heaven - but also those who live with us which helps us to hope.

Christ uses them, all of them, also those who with their bad behaviour do not serve to give us hope, but to test its solidity.

If, as I have said, hope is a virtue which communicates itself and which is shared, it is important that we are more present in our communities, in our meetings which this year will be organized, in our Eucharistic celebrations, even the weekly ones.

I must confess with a certain amount of sadness that I notice how few Christians there are to participate at Mass during the week. The question arises then: are we victims of a conventional Christianity, formalistic, which is pleased with the necessary minimum? Do we think that perhaps we could be saved alone and hence the community need not even exist? Certainly, this is not the thought of Jesus who wanted a community and has wanted to be sought and found in it *”for where two or three meet in My name, I shall be there with them” (Mt 18,20).*

Dear brothers and sisters, this year our Holy Father, Benedict XVI will come and visit us. You already know that he will meet the Patriarch Bartholomew, the Patriarch Mesrop and other religious leaders. And yet an important moment of his visit to Turkey will be the meeting with the Catholic community on the 1st of December.

After all these events which have occurred in the past months I can tell you that he will visit to animate, reinvigorate our hope. I expect from him, I am certain of this, that as successor of Peter, he will repeat the words of Peter directed to the first Christians of our land. *“Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts and **always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have” (1Pt 3,15).***

The Lord be with you and You be with Him.

I bless you.

+ Luigi, Bishop

