

**HOMILY BY HIS EXCELLENCY  
ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
HOLY MASS IN CELEBRATION OF THE MARTYRS OF UGANDA  
ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH  
LANDOVER HILLS, MD  
JUNE 18, 2023**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It gives me great pleasure to be with your community today, as we celebrate the martyrs of Uganda. I am grateful to your pastor, Bishop Evelio Menjivar, and to Fr. Ebuka Mbanude and Mr. Deogratias Kawunde for the invitation to be with you. Allow me to express to you the spiritual closeness and affection of the Holy Father. In joining you today, I am happily reminded of the years that I spent as Nuncio to Uganda, from 1999 to 2007, and the rich and vibrant Catholic faith that I found there. Drawing on today's readings, let us see how we are called to be missionary disciples, living and proclaiming that same Catholic faith, for which the martyrs gave their lives.

In the reading from the Book of Exodus, the Lord said to his people:

“If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6).

My brothers and sisters, this promise that God made to the house of Jacob has been fulfilled for Charles Lwanga and his 21 companions. Those young African men had a faith which was *more precious than gold tested by fire* (cf. *1 Peter* 1:7). Because of their faith, they did what the Lord commanded through Moses: they *hearkened to God's voice* and *kept his covenant*, under immense pressure from other voices, which were tempting them to infidelity. They were able to live their faith until death, because they tasted and saw a greater Kingdom than the one they served on earth. By the grace of God, they indeed became priests of his Kingdom – not by the sacrament of Holy Orders, but by their daily witness to human dignity, and by the offering of their bodies in purity and love.

The death of the Ugandan martyrs followed the pattern of Christ's death. Saint Paul says to the Romans: “Brothers and sisters: Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly” (*Rom* 5:6). It was also for “the ungodly” that Charles Lwanga and his companions died. They were so certain that Christ's blood had redeemed them from death, that they willingly offered their *own* blood in forgiveness of their persecutors. These young men, in the very midst of the torture that ended their lives, sang praise to God and prayed for the men who were killing them.

How can Christians love in such a heroic way? We can do so because we have acquired the heart of Jesus. Matthew tells us in today's Gospel: “At the sight of the crowds, *Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them* because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd” (*Mt* 9:36). This is the heart of Christ! This was the heart of the Ugandan martyrs toward their persecutors. And this is the

heart that we are called to have for the people of our day: a heart that is moved with pity for those who do not know Christ as their shepherd.

The response of Jesus to the pitiable condition of the crowds was to give his disciples the authority to drive out unclean spirits, cure illnesses, and announce the kingdom of heaven. This commission extends to us, the members of the Church, who are Jesus' disciples today. At the Mass for the Martyrs of Uganda that Pope Francis celebrated at Namugongo in 2015, the Holy Father said:

“If, like the martyrs, we daily fan into flame the gift of the Spirit who dwells in our hearts, then we will surely become the missionary disciples which Christ calls us to be. To our families and friends certainly, but also to those whom we do not know, especially those who might be unfriendly, even hostile, to us” (28 NOVEMBER 2015).

The way that we preach the Gospel to those who need a shepherd is expressed in today's Psalm 100: “Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song” (vv. 1-2). Joy is the best evangelizer, because it gives witness to something that every human heart desires: to know that he is loved and that his life has eternal meaning. This message is made explicit as the Psalm continues: “Know that the Lord is God; he made us, his we are” (v. 3). For people who are *troubled and abandoned*, this is the conviction that they need: that I belong to God who made me. And finally, as the Psalm continues: “The Lord is good: his kindness endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (v. 5).

My brothers and sisters: the Lord is indeed good! Our beloved martyrs give witness that God's kindness endures forever. Because of their witness, generations of Africans, and Americans, continue to find in Christ the fulfillment of all their desires. Let us be renewed in our faith and in our joy. And let us, like Jesus, be moved with compassion toward those who need a shepherd. May our joy in the Lord impel us to be missionary disciples, who announce the saving power of God's kingdom to all.