

It wasn't easy being a Christian in the first few centuries of the church. Under persecution, many gave their lives as witnesses to the faith. We know that almost all of the Apostles including Paul died for the faith. The letter to the Hebrews speaks to this: "You endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to abuse and affliction... You even joined in the sufferings of those in prison... You need endurance to do the will of God and receive what he has promised" (Hebrews 10:32-34).

Saint Januarius was martyred at the turn of the 4th century under the reign of Emperor Diocletian. As Bishop of Benevento, Januarius went to visit some Christians who were imprisoned. Because of that visit, he was arrested and condemned to death. He and his companions were thrown to the bears in the amphitheater. According to legend, the animals were not interested in the blood of martyrs. So, executioners beheaded them instead.

Since the first centuries of the church, the faithful have preserved the relics of saints and used them for devotional and intercessory prayer. Some of Januarius' blood was placed in a container and eventually brought to Naples, Italy. ¹ Today that sample of blood is hermetically sealed in a four-inch glass container. The faithful gather in Naples three times a year to see it liquefy, something for which there is no natural explanation. On September 19 (Saint Januarius's Day, commemorating his martyrdom), on December 16 (celebrating his patronage of Naples and its archdiocese), and on the Saturday before the first Sunday of May (commemorating the reunification of his relics), the dried blood liquefies.²

On March 21, the beginning of spring in 2015, Pope Francis traveled to Naples and addressed a crowd of religious and lay faithful outside the Cathedral. At the end of his impromptu speech he kissed the relic and as had last happened in 1848 in the presence of Pope Pius IX, the dried blood changed and began to liquefy. Pope Francis joked, "The Archbishop said that the blood has liquefied partially: so, the Saint loves us partially. Everyone needs a little more conversion so that he loves us more. Thank you very much, and please, do not forget to pray for me."³

It is not easy being a Christian today. Persecution today can come in the form of gossip delivered through social media. Pope Francis warned, "One who gossips is a terrorist dropping a bomb, destroying from the outside [and] destroying others instead" (Extemporaneous comments). It is normal for people to have different views and ideas. When we disagree with a person, we should speak to them directly to address the difference. And if we cannot resolve our differences, it takes courage to turn the other cheek and resist any impulse to attack others with words behind their back. You must not speak against another, because gossip hurts our relationships with one another. ⁴

Instead of tearing others down, we can build bridges. Rediscover the "beauty of walking with the people... I encourage you to go out to meet others, to open doors and reach out to families, the sick, young people, the elderly, there where they live, looking for them, being at their side, supporting them, in order to celebrate the liturgy of life with them" (Undelivered text).⁵

¹ franciscanmedia.org/saint-januarius/

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Januarius

³ vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco_20150321_napoli-pompei-incontro-duomo.html

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid