Fidelity to the Truth of Christ: A Reflection on Christian Martyrdom

Philip Whitmore

It was the custom at the Venerable English College in Rome during the most severe period of persecution of Catholics in England and Wales (roughly 1580–1680), that whenever news of the martyrdom of an alumnus reached the College, the community would gather around the famous 'Martyrs' Picture' in the College Church to sing a *Te Deum* in thanksgiving. That custom is continued each year on 1 December, which from 1934 onwards has been kept as the feast of the College Martyrs.[1]

Some might ask why the brutal execution of an alumnus would be considered cause for thanksgiving. Clearly there would have been mixed emotions on such an occasion. Yet the witness of a martyr has always been hailed, since the earliest days of the Church, as a particularly glorious and joyful gift, despite its obvious negative consequences. Tertullian famously asserted that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians[2] – a claim that has been echoed by the Church throughout her history. Indeed, the survival of the Catholic community in England and Wales throughout penal times has often

[1] See the diary entries for 14 November and 1 December 1934 in *The Venerabile* (1935): 169, 171. Accessible via the website of the Venerable English College, www.vecrome.org / College Life / The Venerabile.

[2] 'Sanguis martyrum semen christianorum,' Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 50, 13.

been linked to the vitality generated by the heroic witness of so many martyrs. Many local churches, moreover, including the church of Rome, glory in the martyrdom of their founders. So what is it about the Christian understanding of martyrdom that generates so much joy and thanksgiving, when one might have expected the reverse?

To outside observers, it can seem like a perverse glorification of suffering, as if pain were somehow desirable – a serious misunderstanding of the Christian approach to suffering which risks rendering the faith incomprehensible to many in our hedonistic culture. Or it can seem like a repudiation of this world (*contemptio mundi*) and an endorsement of the desire to escape from it into the next, an attitude that comes dangerously close to advocacy of suicide. Yet the Church has always been opposed to suicide, despite the fact that many in the ancient world saw it as an honourable choice in certain circumstances. In view of the current debate surrounding euthanasia and assisted suicide, it seems more important than ever to clarify the meaning of the Church's esteem for martyrdom and to distinguish it from the endorsement of suicide.

Moreover, there is a danger that the cult of the Catholic martyrs of the Reformation may be perceived as a triumphalist rejection of the ecumenical endeavour. Properly understood, it is nothing of the kind, but rather an incentive to deepen the terms of ecumenical discourse.

The theme of Christian martyrdom raises a great many questions and the present essay attempts to explore some of them and to open them up to further discussion.

Etymology

The word 'martyr' grew out of the Greek word for 'witness,' namely μάρτυς (*mártus*). St Augustine, in his Commentary on the First Letter of St John, has a helpful comment on the way the Greek word μάρτυς acquired the additional meaning of 'martyr,' while the Latin word for 'witness,' namely 'testis,' never acquired that meaning. Instead Latin developed the word 'martyr' as a Latinized form of the Greek word to refer to one whose witness took the form of laying down his or her life for Jesus. St Augustine says this:

> Some of us brothers who do not know Greek may not know which Greek term corresponds to our word 'witness'… It is a term familiar to all, and one

> that has taken on a specifically religious meaning; in fact, those whom we call *witnesses* in Latin are called *martyrs* in the Greek.[3]

So, when μάρτυς and its cognates are used in the New Testament, the meaning is almost always 'witness.' Indeed, that is how it is translated in the Revised Standard Version, apart from a single instance in the Book of Revelation (17:6 – 'I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus'). The Vulgate uses *martyrum* here, whereas other occurrences of the word μάρτυς are there rendered *testis* (e.g. Acts 1:8). We can conclude, then, that the new meaning of the word μάρτυς was acquired by the end of the New Testament period, but not before.

In other words, the Christian concept of martyrdom, with its clear etymological link to witness, is quite distinct from any Old Testament antecedents, such as the prophet Zechariah or the Maccabees (see below). The Christian concept of martyrdom emerged only towards the end of the New Testament period in the context of reflection on the fate of those followers of Christ who bore heroic witness to him, at the cost of their blood.

Old Testament

While Old Testament authors do not have the Christian concept, or indeed the vocabulary, of martyrdom, the Church has nevertheless designated certain Old Testament passages for use in the liturgy for the Common of Martyrs. It is helpful, therefore, to consider these passages for the light they shed on the Church's continuing reflection on martyrdom.

The earliest such reading recounts the killing of Zechariah (2 Chron 24:18-22), who had been inspired by the Lord to prophesy against the idolatry of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. For daring to speak the truth, he was stoned to death, and he called out as he died 'The Lord sees and he will avenge!' Jesus himself makes reference to this atrocity in Mt 23:35 and Lk 11:51, when he speaks of the recurring murder of prophets throughout the period of the Hebrew Scriptures 'from Abel to Zechariah.' Abel's murder, indeed, because of Gen 4:10, has traditionally been viewed as 'crying out to heaven for vengeance,'[4] a theme that is echoed in Zechariah's dying words.

[3] From Saint Augustine's Commentary on the First Letter of Saint John, 1 Jn 1:2, quoted in Servais Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, trans. Patrick M. Clark and Annie Hounsokou (Washington: CUA, 2016), 111 f.
[4] CCC 1867.

The sense that vengeance is due for blood unlawfully spilt has no place in the later, Christian understanding of martyrdom, characterized rather by Christ's merciful approach to his executioners: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:34) – and echoed by St Stephen's 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:60). There are plentiful examples of homicidal violence against the just in the Old Testament and they may be viewed as prefiguring the Passion of Christ, insofar as Jesus himself was a victim of injustice. There is an important distinction, though, between a martyr and a victim. Abel and Zechariah did what was right and pleasing to God and they died because, knowingly or unknowingly, they provoked hostility in others by their words and actions. The emphasis in the Biblical accounts of Genesis and 2 Chronicles is more on the gravity of the sin than on any positive consequences of these meritorious deaths. So it is more helpful to see Abel and Zechariah as victims of injustice than as martyrs. Indeed, this is what gives rise to the call for vengeance.[5]

Later Old Testament examples, particularly those from the Books of the Maccabees, come closer to the later, Christian notion of martyrdom.[6] Eleazar and the seven brothers choose to be put to death rather than yield to the pressure to conform to the practices of their Gentile overlords. Unlike Abel and Zechariah, they deliberately adopt a particular stance in full knowledge of the grisly consequences to which it will lead, such is their determination to remain faithful to the Law of Moses. While this may in part be because they are eager to set an example for others to follow, the crucial new element is that they are confident of a reward in the afterlife for their fidelity. No longer is the emphasis on victimhood – the focus has shifted. Yet it is clearly fidelity to the Mosaic Law that leads them to lay down their lives, not fidelity to the person of the Saviour they never knew.

In the Book of Wisdom, we see a further development, combining the idea of victimhood with reward in the next life. Whereas earlier Judaism had considered long life to be the natural reward of virtue, now it is anticipated that the virtuous man will die prematurely, because of the hostility that his virtue arouses among the wicked. Indeed, we read that the wicked 'lie in wait' for him, to 'test him with cruelty

[5] Cf. Abel Herzberg, "Did the Holocaust of the Jews count as Martyrdom," *Concilium* 163 (1983): 70-73.

[6] Indeed, Origen devotes much space to an account of their deaths in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.

and with torture' and 'to condemn him to a shameful death.'[7] But an immortal and blessed afterlife awaits the virtuous, while the wicked are duly punished.[8]

New Testament

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, a wholly new dimension is added: martyrdom is now seen as a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ himself. This is illustrated most clearly in the scene of the martyrs gathered around the throne of the Lamb in Rev 7:9-17. Here we read that those who have been through the great persecution have 'washed their robes white in the blood of the lamb.'[9] We also read here that the martyrs carry palms, traditionally a sign of victory, hence the use of the palm to indicate the martyr in Christian iconography. The sacrifice made by these martyrs is interpreted as a participation in Christ's supreme 'love to the end,' and their victory is seen as a participation in Christ's victory over death. It is the sacrifice of the Lamb and his Easter victory that gives to Christian martyrdom its particular identity.[10] Indeed this gathering of the *martyrum exercitus* around the slain lamb indicates their participation in the expiatory significance of the sacrifice on Calvary, the perfect fulfilment of the Temple sacrifices.

For a deeper understanding of the expiatory significance of Christ's death, the association made by New Testament writers between the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah and the Passion of Christ is particularly eloquent.[11] Like the Suffering Servant, and like so many innocent victims in the Old Testament, Christ suffers a cruel death. What is new in the case of the Suffering Servant and in the case of Our Lord himself is the redemptive value of these innocent sufferings for others. The Letter to the Hebrews makes clear that Christ's sacrifice perfects once and for all the sacrifices for sin, formerly made in the Temple, rendering them obsolete.[12]

---

[7] Wis 2:12, 19-20.

[8] Wis 3:1-12.

[9] As Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out, this seemingly paradoxical statement indicates that Jesus' 'love to the end' is what cleanses us. Cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part Two, "Holy Week" (London and San Francisco: CTS and Saint Ignatius, 2011), 57.

[10] Even so, it is noteworthy that the word 'martyr' does not appear in Rev 7, but only in Rev 17. The concept, as might be expected, predates the etymological shift.

[11] Cf. CCC 601.

[12] Heb 9:12, 25-28. See also, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part 2, 38 ff.

As a participation in the death of Christ, the death of the Christian martyr contributes to the salvation of the world and the forgiveness of sins. Of course, the death of Christ brought this about once and for all. The death of the Christian martyr adds nothing to the salvific value of Calvary, just as the celebration of the Eucharist adds nothing to it – but the salvation won by Christ on Calvary is made present and effective through the Eucharist as indeed it is through the death of the Christian martyr.[13] Here we begin to grasp the eucharistic significance of martyrdom in the Christian era.

It is in this context that we can best understand the element of mystical union with Christ that is so often associated with Christian martyrdom. St Stephen in Acts 7:55-56 is granted a vision of heaven immediately before his martyrdom. And many of the early Acts and Passions of the martyrs testify to similar mystical experiences, such that the martyrs are indifferent to their physical sufferings, being wholly rapt in their vision of the Lord.[14]

So much for the contribution made by New Testament writers after Calvary. But what of the deaths that took place before? There are two examples in the Gospels that the Church's Tradition regards as martyrdoms, even though they occur before the death of Christ, namely the slaughter of the Holy Innocents (Mt 2:16-18) and the execution of John the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29 et passim). Indeed, the case of the Holy Innocents is discussed by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, where, following St Augustine, he considers it an example of the grace of martyrdom bestowed upon these infants rather than something chosen by the free will.[15] One might call it 'involuntary martyrdom.' In the case of St John the Baptist, his martyrdom is considered martyrdom for truth, since he was courageous enough to speak the truth to power, even at great risk to his personal safety. And since Christ himself is the truth (cf. Jn 14:6), then dying for the truth means dying for Christ.[16] Both these deaths are celebrated as martyrdoms in the Church's liturgy, since they both took place in the New Testament, although neither is an explicit case of martyrdom in Christ.

[13] As Servais Pinckaers has observed, 'The martyrdom of Christians perpetuates the Passion [in its own mode] just as much as the Eucharist does sacramentally.' Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, 7.
[14] Cf. Paolo Prosperi, "The Witness of the Martyrs in the Early Church," *Communio* (2014): 16.
[15] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae, q. 124, art. 1, Reply to Obj. 1.
[16] Cf. Collect and Preface from *The Roman Missal* for 29 August.

Martyrdoms explicitly undergone through witness to Christ come in the Acts of the Apostles, notably those of St Stephen and St James. The Church's tradition adds many more, notably St Peter and St Paul, but it is only in the case of Stephen and James that the narrative is supplied in the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, the Gospels also contain rich material that contributes to our understanding of martyrdom and its significance in Christian thinking. One of the Gospel passages used in the liturgy for the Common of Martyrs is Matthew 10:17-22, in which Jesus prophesies the persecution of his disciples. They are called upon to bear witness to him before governors and kings. Almost certainly, Matthew's redaction of this passage reflects a situation of persecution for his readers, helping them to make sense of their sufferings. An important element here comes through Jesus' prophecy of indwelling, such that they need not worry what to say – 'the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you' (v. 20). It is the Spirit who prompts the heroic witness of the disciples, which is not to be ascribed to any merit of their own. It is in this sense that martyrdom came to be seen as a gratuitous gift from God. The primacy of witness also emerges strongly from this passage. Martyrdom is a particular consequence of witness, and a guarantee of its authenticity.[17]

One of the most beautiful and oft-quoted images of the fruitfulness of a holy death comes in John 12:24: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' If the death of a Christian martyr is endured in union with Christ, then it has the capacity to bear fruit for the salvation of the world, even though without that element, it would seem futile.

So the Christian martyr is not simply a victim of injustice, but a witness to Christ, prompted by the indwelling Spirit to offer heroic testimony, benefiting others not just by example but by fruitful suffering, united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.

St Paul, in his Letter to the Colossians (1:24), has this to say: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.' Here we find the clearest indication yet of the redemptive value of Christian suffering as a participation in Christ's own redemptive suffering, for the good of the whole Church.

[17] Gal 2:20 – 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' – provides further background for the participation of the martyr in Christ's redemptive suffering.

And yet this passage in Colossians is hard to interpret, as it seems to imply that Christ's sufferings are in need of 'completion.' The idea that anything could be lacking or in need of completion in Christ's own sufferings seems, on first sight, to contradict the testimony of the Letter to the Hebrews, to the effect that Christ's redemptive death was already complete, once and for all. On this question, St Alphonsus has an interesting comment:

> Can it be that Christ's passion alone was insufficient to save us? It left nothing more to be done, it was entirely sufficient to save all men. However, for the merits of the Passion to be applied to us, according to St Thomas, we need to cooperate by patiently bearing the trials God sends us, so as to become like our head, Christ.[18]

St John Paul II reflects further in *Salvifici Doloris*, 24:

> Christ has accomplished the world's Redemption through his own suffering. For, at the same time, this Redemption, even though it was completely achieved by Christ's suffering, lives on and in its own special way develops in the history of man. It lives and develops as the body of Christ, the Church, and in this dimension every human suffering, by reason of the loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ. It completes that suffering just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ. The mystery of the Church – that body which completes in itself also Christ's crucified and risen body – indicates at the same time the space or context in which human sufferings complete the sufferings of Christ. Only within this radius and dimension of the Church, as the Body of Christ, which continually develops in space and time, can one think and speak of 'what is lacking' in the sufferings of Christ.

Both these comments, from St Alphonsus and St John Paul II, seek to explain the Pauline dictum in the context of the Church, Christ's mystical body, which continually makes present and effective the once-and-for-all sacrifice on Calvary, both through the celebration of the Eucharist and through the witness of Christian martyrs.

Martyrdom in the pre-Constantinian Church

The reality of persecution was part of the lived experience of the Church from the outset, as seen first of all in the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) and James (Acts 12). Perforce, therefore, the Church was driven to reflect on the significance of martyrdom. The Church's cult of the

[18] St Alphonsus, *Reflections on the Passion*, 10. Quoted in *The Navarre Bible,* Commentary on Col 1:24. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIIa, q. 49, art. 3.

saints had its origins in the cult of martyrs, who were venerated for their heroic witness. The Acts and the Passions of martyrs came to be read out at Christian gatherings from an early stage. The relics of martyrs were considered to be a source of special graces[19] and pilgrimages to their tombs became a feature of Christian life. It has been noted that the Acts and Passions of martyrs 'do not describe the *life* of the saints but rather their death, to the exclusion of any detail concerning their life.'[20] Such was the fascination of the early Christians with the expiatory, even eucharistic quality of a holy death in union with the Passion of Christ that the life of the martyr prior to that decisive moment seemed of little account. The grace of martyrdom was seen as a gift from above at the moment of trial, rather than a fruit of a particularly virtuous life.

The account of the martyrdom of St Justin and his companions, around the year 165, can serve in many ways as a classic example of the narrative. Justin is asked to sacrifice to the Roman gods and is made aware of the fatal consequences of non-compliance. He proudly asserts that he is a Christian and declines to do as he is bidden, thereby voluntarily accepting the violent death that follows.

> The prefect then said to Justin: 'Now listen to me. You are said to be a man of learning and you think you know which teachings are true. If you are flogged and executed, do you believe that you will go to heaven?' Justin replied: 'I hope to receive God's gifts if I bear these sufferings. For I know that all who have lived good lives can look for the divine grace that is stored up for them until the end of the whole world.'
>
> The prefect said: 'So you imagine that you are going to heaven and will receive some appropriate reward?' To this Justin replied: 'It is not a case of imagining. I know; I am certain.'
>
> Rusticus said: 'Let us come to the essential point, to what you must do. You must all sacrifice to the gods together.' And Justin said: 'No one in his right mind is going to turn away from the worship of the true God to worship false gods.'
>
> The prefect insisted: 'Unless you do as you are told, you will be tortured without mercy.' Justin said: 'We have prayed that we may suffer for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and in this way be saved. This will give us confidence and assure our salvation when we come to the judgement seat of Our Lord and Saviour, who presides over a universal court more formidable than yours.'

[19] Prosperi, "The Witness," 11.
[20] Ibid., 13.

> And all the other martyrs said the same; 'Do what you like to us. We are Christians and we do not sacrifice to idols.'
>
> The prefect then passed sentence: 'These men have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to obey the Emperor's commands. Let them be taken away and flogged, and then put to death in accordance with the law.' The holy martyrs went out to the usual place of execution glorifying God. There they were beheaded and so won their martyr's crown professing their faith in the Saviour.[21]

Refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods was the usual pretext for martyrdom in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire. Interrogations such as that quoted above correspond clearly to what Jesus describes in Mt 10:17-22, where the disciple is given the opportunity to bear witness to him. It is not they who speak, but the Holy Spirit speaks in them.

Of particular interest is Justin's observation 'we have prayed that we may suffer for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ and in this way be saved.' The desire for martyrdom is a theme that emerges particularly strongly in the case of an earlier second century martyr, St Ignatius of Antioch.

Ignatius was taken as a prisoner to Rome, where he was fed to the lions for his Christian faith, probably around the year 107. His Letter to the Romans explores in particular detail his desire that the Christians of Rome not intervene out of a misguided concern for his welfare, in such a way as to prevent his martyrdom. He genuinely desires to suffer, in union with Christ.

Paolo Prosperi argues that Ignatius' desire for death is a consequence of his firmly incarnational Christology and its strongly eucharistic overtones.[22] Few writers of that period argued so vehemently against the Docetist view that Christ's sufferings were merely apparent – Ignatius insisted that both the death and resurrection of Christ involved flesh and blood. In consequence, his own suffering and death has to involve his flesh and blood if it is to be truly a participation in Christ's passion. Hence the lurid terms in which he speaks of his impending death:

> I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my sepulchre and may leave no part of my body behind … Supplicate the Lord for me, that through these instruments I may be found as a sacrifice to God.[23]

[21] *Acts of the Martyrdom of Saint Justin and his companions*, from the Office of Readings on 1 June.
[22] Prosperi, "The Witness," 17ff.
[23] St Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.

As well as being thoroughly incarnational, Ignatius' theology of martyrdom is also eucharistic. In Prosperi's words, 'he is convinced that the mysterious/sacramental union of the disciple with the Lord is so real that the believer who shares in the body and blood of Christ can truly be given to become bread through an analogous sacrificial suffering.'[24] In his union with Christ's Passion, Ignatius hopes to play his part in the salvation and the spiritual nourishment of his fellow Christians, while at the same time bringing to perfection the union with Christ that he has already experienced through his participation in the Eucharist.

Ignatius also helps us to grasp how martyrdom serves as a participation in Christ's cosmic victory over the powers of darkness, even though most of his references to the devil, it must be said, are in the context of the heresies that the devil inspires in the world, which Christ has overcome. Yet he often speaks of his own impending martyrdom as a confounding of the heresy of Docetism. And he speaks of the Eucharist as a victory over Satan:

> Do your best, then, to meet more often to give thanks and glory to God. When you meet frequently, the powers of Satan are confounded, and in the face of your corporate faith his maleficence crumbles.[25]

In the course of the second century, the theme of desire for martyrdom is developed, with differing emphases, by two great Christian teachers in Alexandria, namely Clement and Origen.

Clement (c.150 – c.215) offers an alternative to the prevailing asceticism of the second century. While he expresses great esteem for martyrdom, understood as the perfect form of witness to Christ, he shows at least equal esteem for the constant daily witness of those faithful Christians who are not called to shed their blood. 'If the confession to God is martyrdom, each soul which has lived purely in the knowledge of God, which has obeyed the commandments, is a witness both by life and word, in whatever way it may be released from the body – shedding faith as blood along its whole life till its departure.'[26] He is of course writing in Greek, where the terms for 'martyrdom' and 'witness' are indistinguishable. This may help to explain his seeming anticipation of the post-Constantinian development whereby sainthood is ascribed to confessors as well as martyrs (see below).

[24] Prosperi, "The Witness," 23.
[25] St Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 13.
[26] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, iv, 4.

Clement values martyrdom in much the same way that ancient Greek writers valued death in war, not that they recommended it, but that it offered a way of dying heroically, without the innumerable temptations brought on by enfeeblement and sickness.[27] He did not at all condone the practice of seeking martyrdom: 'Seeking out martyrdom is worse than committing suicide, since this not only brings about one's own death but makes one's judge a murderer.'[28]

In this, Clement differed from his pupil Origen (c.185 – c.253), who desired martyrdom throughout his life. When Origen was 17 years old, his father Leonides was martyred and at that time the young Origen encouraged his father to persist in his faithful witness, without troubling himself about his wife and children. Much later, Origen himself was arrested and tortured during the persecution of Decius, but he was never executed. While some would see Origen as a martyr, he has never been formally recognized as such.[29]

In his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* (235), Origen makes clear his own view of martyrdom as the highest form of Christian perfection.[30] He sees martyrdom as contributing to the cleansing and purifying of the Church, through its participation in the sacrifice of Christ.[31] And more explicitly than Ignatius, he develops a theology of martyrdom as a contribution to the cosmic battle against evil:

> For the martyrs in Christ disarm the principalities and powers with him, and they share his triumph as fellows of his sufferings, becoming in this way also fellows of the courageous deeds wrought in his sufferings.[32]

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen* (Atlanta and London: SCM, 1983), 63. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, iv, 10.

[29] In his preface to the *Classics of Western Spirituality* edition of Origen's selected works, Hans Urs von Balthasar says this: 'We must remember that a mind as fastidious as Newman's praised him highly and to one's amazement note that he is represented in the New Roman Breviary with some marvelous lessons. I know members of religious orders who are praying for the canonization of this martyr and spiritual father of so many saints,' p. xii.

[30] 'Since a saint is generous and wishes to respond to the benefits that have overtaken him from God, he searches out what he can do for the Lord in return for everything he has obtained from Him. And he finds that nothing else can be given to God from a person of high purpose that will so balance His benefits as perfection in martyrdom.' *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, xxviii.

[31] Ibid., xxx.

[32] Ibid., xlii.

Martyrdom after Constantine

Prior to Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Empire, martyrdom was the only recognized form of sainthood. Paradoxically, the only recognized way of living in perfect union with Christ involved dying with him. After Constantine, when Christians were no longer martyred by the authorities of the Roman Empire, monasticism arose quite explicitly as a new form of martyrdom, a new form of spiritual combat, a new form of *imitatio Christi*. As the cities were now filled with Christians living and practising their faith, the demons retreated to the desert – and it was there that St Anthony of Egypt went in order to do combat with them.[33] Veneration for these holy men and women in the desert developed alongside veneration for the martyrs of an earlier era, and the canon of saints began to include confessors as well as martyrs. Nevertheless, Christians continued to be martyred outside the confines of the Roman Empire – which had not long to survive in the west in any event.

Once the concept of sainthood had been broadened to include confessors, hagiography naturally shifted its focus from the death of the saint to his or her life. In place of the Acts and Passions of martyrs, we now find the Lives of the Saints (*Vitae*). If the saint happened also to be a martyr, the hagiographer would now chart the whole of his or her life, not merely its glorious end. So, for example, the Life of St Boniface consists of 9 chapters, and the account of his martyrdom comes halfway through chapter 8.[34]

So it was no longer the case that the focus of veneration of martyrs was purely on their deaths. Martyrdom came to be interpreted as the crowning moment of a holy life. It is likely that St Boniface, for example, would have been venerated as a saint even if he had not suffered martyrdom. Nevertheless, the heroic witness of those who shed their blood for Christ earned them a special place in the canon of saints. Pilgrimages to their tombs, miracles associated with their intercession and particularly with their relics, continued to abound.

In England, one of the great martyr saints, whose shrine at Canterbury became a famous centre of pilgrimage, was St Thomas Becket, murdered in 1170, probably at the instigation of King Henry II. There is no question of St Thomas being executed simply for professing his faith in Christ, as many martyrs a thousand years earlier

[33] Prosperi, "The Witness," 30.
[34] Chapter 9 is a brief epilogue, recounting a posthumous miracle.

had been. He was, after all, the principal bishop in a Christian country, and the king had been largely responsible for his appointment to that see. Whatever one's interpretation of the circumstances leading to his death, it was clear that fidelity to his duties as a pastor brought him into conflict with the king and it was this that precipitated his death. His swift canonization, less than three years after his death, may have owed much to the political context of struggles between secular and ecclesiastical authorities in medieval Europe, but whatever the political background he remains a saint, proposed by the Church for veneration as a martyr. After all, the early Christian martyrs and even Our Lord himself owed their deaths to political circumstances too.

Be that as it may, the martyrdom of a Christian at the hands of other Christians is a new development vis-à-vis the martyrdoms of the early Church. It is no longer simply for witnessing to Christ that the martyr is put to death. Care is needed now to establish the motive for the killing. If it is judged that the Christian concerned lost his or her life through faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel and its demands, this points to *odium fidei* as the motive for the killing and the Church has no difficulty in recognizing the death as a martyrdom.

There have been examples of female martyrs killed because they resisted the approaches of a would-be seducer. St Maria Goretti lost her life because she refused to lose her virginity. In her case, there can be little doubt that her steadfastness in resisting sin was the cause of her murder. Her forgiveness of her murderer and the miracle of his subsequent conversion helped the Church to recognize her sanctity. She is venerated as a virgin martyr. St Augustine cites the example of some holy women who threw themselves into a river in order to protect themselves from rape, and he adds that 'their martyrdom is honoured in the Church with most solemn veneration.'[35] In his view, such action would not be defensible in itself. He argues strongly that suicide is prohibited by the fifth commandment and he takes the view that 'bodily chastity is not lost, even when the body has been ravished, while the mind's chastity endures.'[36] In other words, so as long as the victim does not consent to violation, there is no sin in enduring violation. Hence it could not be right to commit the actual sin of self-murder in order to avoid being the occasion of a possible sin committed by another.[37]

[35] *De Civitate Dei*, i 26.
[36] Ibid., i 18. Perhaps this is a rather male perspective on the issue!
[37] Clement of Alexandria is likely to have shared this view since, as we have seen (cf.

Nevertheless, given that the Church honours these holy women for their action, Augustine concludes that they must have received some special instruction directly from God. He points out, for example, that Abraham's intention to sacrifice Isaac would have been immoral, had it not been directly ordered by God. And he concludes that the action of the holy women who took such a radical step in order to avoid violation may well have been so ordered.[38] St Thomas shares Augustine's reasoning here; indeed he quotes St Augustine as his principal authority for outlawing suicide.[39]

Tragically, a significant subset of martyrdoms of Christians at the hands of other Christians came with the Reformation. The English Catholic martyrs lost their lives because of their fidelity to the precepts of the Catholic Church, expressed in their refusal to conform to laws that required them to repudiate those precepts. In this sense, their situation resembled that of the early Roman martyrs: they were executed by the agents of the State after a judicial process in which they publicly proclaimed their faith, fully aware of the inevitable consequences. Outwardly, though, the fate of conspirators against the regime, such as Guy Fawkes, looked rather similar. Hence the need, in processing the cause for beatification and canonization, to ensure that the motive for execution really was their fidelity to the Catholic faith and not conspiracy against the regime, even though both were classed as treason by the authorities.

The question of motive becomes particularly complex in the case of St Maximilian Kolbe. Notably, when he was beatified by St Paul VI in 1971, it was as a confessor, not a martyr. However, at his canonization in 1982, St John Paul II declared him a martyr. It was not simply the fact that he offered his life in exchange for that of another prisoner – after all such an act of heroic charity could be performed by those with no Christian faith[40] – but the totality of the circumstances that led him to be a prisoner in Auschwitz in the first place. It was clearly *odium fidei* on the part of the Nazi occupiers that led to the imprisonment of this

n.28 above), he believed that seeking out martyrdom was worse than suicide.

[38] Interestingly, St Ambrose does not share Augustine's view here. He praises the heroism of St Pelagia, who committed suicide in order to escape outrage. Cf. Ep. 37 and *De Virginitate*, 3:7.

[39] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae, q. 64 art. 5, especially the *Sed contra* and the Reply to Objections 3 and 4.

[40] The fictional character, Sydney Carton, in Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, makes a similar sacrifice, but without a clear Christian motivation.

priest and in that context, his offer to give his life in place of another could only be an exercise of the charity that his faith inspired.

Particularly problematic are the tragic cases of Christians put to death by Catholic authorities on charges of heresy. St Joan of Arc was exonerated 25 years after her death when the case against her was re-examined. So the Church accepted that she had been wrongly convicted. Yet it is noteworthy that she is officially venerated as a mystic and a virgin, not as a martyr, whatever the popular view may be. It would be hard to argue that her executioners were motivated by *odium fidei*.

Savonarola is another victim of the judicial process that found him guilty of heresy. Yet there have been moves towards possible rehabilitation and even beatification, with some members of the Dominican order eager to promote his cause. He is said to have argued, moments before his death, that the Bishop of Vasona was entitled to exclude him from the Church Militant, but not from the Church Triumphant – a distinction that recognizes the fallibility of the judicial process.[41] Even so, it would be hard to interpret fallibility as *odium fidei* – it would be more a case of a misguided zeal for the faith than hatred of it.

That it was ever felt necessary to execute heretics, especially in such a brutal way, constitutes what Eamon Duffy has called a 'horrifying moral blot on any regime purporting to be Christian.'[42] That said, whatever the merits of the individual thus executed, it cannot reasonably be argued that the executioners were motivated by *odium fidei*. They may have been mistaken, they may have been politically motivated, they may have been unduly zealous for the preservation of the faith, but it makes no sense to claim the victims as martyrs in the sense under investigation here. In the looser sense, in which anyone who dies for adherence to a particular cause is often hailed as a martyr for that cause, it may be perfectly reasonable to do so, but not in the sense that the victim is raised to the altars of the Church and proposed for public veneration.

So in considering the case of John Hus, Thomas Cranmer, or indeed any of the 'Protestant Martyrs' from the reign of Mary Tudor, we face

[41] Cf. Paul Murray, "I have Tears and Hope: Martyrdom in the Twentieth Century," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (2000): 493.
[42] Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 7.

a delicate dilemma. While their own Christian communities may well consider them to be 'martyrs,' it makes no sense for the Catholic Church to do so. Their deaths may be deeply regretted, much as one would regret the deaths of soldiers and civilians from the opposing side in a war, but proposing them for veneration and seeking their intercession would not make sense. As other Christian communities frequently adopt an inclusive approach in their remembrance of the 'martyrs of the Reformation,' it can appear ungenerous of the Catholic Church not to do the same. Yet it is precisely because of the Catholic understanding of martyrdom and sainthood, not always shared by members of other Christian communities, that this step cannot be taken.

It is helpful, in this context, to recall the observation of St Paul VI, made on 25 October 1970 during the canonization of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales.

> May the blood of these Martyrs be able to heal the great wound inflicted upon God's Church by reason of the separation of the Anglican Church from the Catholic Church. Is it not one – these Martyrs say to us – the Church founded by Christ?[43]

We have grown so accustomed to living amid a plurality of Christian confessions that we are perhaps not as disturbed as we should be by the lack of unity among Christians, even while we continue to proclaim the Church as 'one, holy, Catholic and apostolic.' The Reformation martyrs we venerate can truly be said to have died for the unity of the Church. In that sense, they inspire us to continue to work towards that unity. That is the best way we can honour them.

As a brief *excursus*, it is helpful at this point to draw attention to a further key insight offered by St John Paul II, concerning the significance of the martyrdom of non-Catholic Christians. In *Ut Unum Sint*, par. 84, he says this:

[43] St Paul VI, Homily at the Canonisation of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, 25 October 1970. The same homily includes the oft-quoted and often misunderstood comment that: 'There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church – this humble "Servant of the Servants of God" – is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ.' Here, Paul VI expresses hope for a future in which the Anglican Church may truly be said to be a 'sister church' of the Roman Catholic Church, in the sense clarified by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Note on the Expression "Sister Churches"* of 30 June 2000. The restoration of full visible communion is and remains the goal of the ecumenical endeavour.

> I have already remarked, and with deep joy, how an imperfect but real communion is preserved and is growing at many levels of ecclesial life. I now add that this communion is already perfect in what we all consider the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (cf. *Eph* 2:13).

In other words, the identification with Christ that comes with Christian martyrdom is sufficient to establish full communion in the case of those non-Catholic Christians who shed their blood for Christ. The eucharistic significance of martyrdom, making Calvary present and effective for the redemption of the world, could hardly be more clearly expressed. This insight into the value of the witness of non-Catholic Christians whose execution is genuinely motivated by *odium fidei* is a truly significant statement whose implications for ecumenical *rapprochement* have yet to be fully explored.[44]

A final consideration, in the context of Reformation martyrs, concerns those who died in prison. In the early church, where so much emphasis was placed on a heroic death as a form of witness to Christ, death in captivity would not have been considered martyrdom. Ignatius of Antioch would have been mortified at the prospect of death in captivity, which for him would have meant he was denied the martyr's crown. Origen, similarly, was quite clear that martyrdom had to involve death for Christ – which ironically means that he himself did not qualify.

An interesting case to consider, in this context, is that of Saints Pontian and Hippolytus, who were sent to work in the mines in Sardinia, where they died, during the persecution of the Emperor Maximin around the year 235. It seems likely that they died through the hardship they endured there, but hagiographical tradition has declared them martyrs and has led to claims that they were executed, despite the paucity of historical evidence for such a claim.

[44] Although the issue is not specifically addressed in *Ut Unum Sint*, it seems clear that the non-Catholic martyrs of whom Pope John Paul II is speaking here are those martyred by non-Christians for reasons of *odium fidei*, rather than those executed for heresy by Catholic authorities. Hence it was possible for Pope Paul VI, in his homily for the canonization of the Ugandan Martyrs (18 October 1964) to add, 'Nor should we forget those others, of the Anglican communion, who died for the sake of Christ.' While they could not be specifically included among the 22 Catholic martyrs canonized on that occasion, this statement, reinforced by the comment made some thirty years later by Pope John Paul II, effectively assigns the Anglicans who died alongside Charles Lwanga to the ranks of the martyrs. See also Pope John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, par. 37.

Later generations, of course, were more comfortable with ascribing sainthood, even martyrdom, to Christians who died in their beds. St Bernard speaks of the martyrdom of the Virgin Mary,[45] clearly establishing the principle that violent death is not essential to martyrdom. And at the time of the Reformation, St Philip Howard, for example, was included among the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, even though he died in prison.

Modern forms of martyrdom

It is rare in the modern world for martyrs to be executed after a judicial process, as were those of the Roman Empire and the Reformation martyrs, so it is rare for them to have the opportunity of publicly 'witnessing' to Christ in the way that those martyrs did. As Paul Murray has written:

> martyrdom, in the twentieth century, instead of being something manifestly personal and public, has instead become something anonymous and hidden… What the martyrs are persecuted for today is not so much for their public declaration of faith, but rather for the practical witness they give to that faith by identifying with the poor and the needy in their struggle for human rights and by becoming in Romero's words, 'the voice of those who have no voice,' choosing to stand alongside the victims of injustice and abuse, alongside men and women, that is, whose basic human dignity has been denied for years.[46]

We are returning, in other words, to a form of 'involuntary martyrdom.' In some respects, it resembles the case of the virtuous victim of the Book of Wisdom, although in hailing these brave men and women as Christian martyrs, we are asserting the further element of witness to Christ, witness made through holy lives and through perseverance in living according to Christ's precepts, even when it is manifestly dangerous to do so. In this sense, St Oscar Romero, who had received death threats but chose to continue in his ministry nonetheless, knew that he was putting himself in danger. Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran and Fr Ragheed Ganni of Iraq did likewise.

In the case of Fr Jacques Hamel, killed by terrorists while celebrating Mass in a parish church near Rouen in 2016, there was no sense that he was doing anything particularly dangerous. He was simply celebrating Mass one morning when the terrorists arrived and murdered him.

[45] St Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo in dom. infra oct. Assumptionis,* 14-15: Opera omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 5 [1968], 273-274, quoted in the Office of Readings for 15 September.
[46] Murray, "I have Tears and Hope," 488-489.

Clearly this was involuntary martyrdom. His witness was that of a faithful priest, like so many others, but he was singled out by killers whose motivation was clearly *odium fidei*.

Suicide or martyr?

To conclude, some thoughts on the question of suicide, which in the ancient world was considered by many to be an honourable choice in particular circumstances. Yet Christian martyrdom is a very different phenomenon from the Stoic's choice of suicide. Prosperi contrasts 'the imperturbable readiness of the wise one to lay down his life for a just cause'[47] with the eagerness of the Christians, especially St Ignatius of Antioch, to embrace the opportunity to witness to Christ in an act of self-giving love. 'Christians could desire, and not just courageously endure, their suffering and death – as the stoics did – because they considered these events a gift and a privilege.'[48] Indeed the *apatheia* of the Stoics is the exact opposite of the Christian *pathos* at the prospect of sharing in Christ's Passion.

That said, there is clearly a degree of overlap, inasmuch as both the Stoic suicide and the Christian martyr recognise the inevitability of a fatal conclusion to the position they adopt, which they refuse to renounce, even when aware of the consequences. Following St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas argues against suicide,[49] largely on the basis of natural law. Quoting Aristotle to the effect that death is the greatest evil, he concludes that death can never be rightly chosen as a solution to what are in effect lesser evils. Nevertheless, he commends the martyr[50] while indicating clearly that he is not speaking of those who die at their own hand. The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents what is essentially the Thomistic doctrine, while adding some pastoral considerations.[51]

Interestingly, both Augustine and Thomas consider the case of Samson. Thomas quotes Augustine, to the effect that, 'when Samson destroyed himself, with his enemies, by the demolition of the building, this can only be excused on the ground that the Spirit, which performed miracles through him, secretly ordered him to do so.'[52]

[47] Prosperi, "The Witness," 20.
[48] Ibid., 24.
[49] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae, q. 64, art. 5.
[50] Ibid., IIa IIae, q. 124.
[51] CCC 2280ff.
[52] *De Civitate Dei* i, 21. Quoted in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae, q. 64, art. 5, Reply to Obj. 4. This is a similar argument, of course, to Augustine's defence of the

Modern commentators would perhaps be more comfortable with an argument based on the idea of moral development in the Old Testament, comparable to the position taken in the Catechism with regard to polygamy (CCC 1610). In this sense, it could be argued that what Samson did, in a context where inflicting maximum damage to the enemies of God's chosen people was considered laudable, would not be laudable in a later context, when the natural good of life – one's own and that of others – was more clearly understood.

It remains for Chesterton to express, with characteristic pithiness, the essential difference between the suicide and the martyr.

> A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything. One wants something to begin, the other wants everything to end. In other words, the martyr is noble, exactly because he confesses this ultimate link with life; he sets his heart outside himself: he dies that something may live.[53]

In other words, the martyr is making a choice for life, even though that choice may lead to the end of his or her earthly life.

We have seen that Christian martyrdom comes in many forms. The element of witness to Christ may be explicit or implicit, death may come in consequence of choices made by the martyr, or it may be involuntary, the executioners may be Christian or non-Christian, although the motive needs to be *odium fidei* in one form or another, and the martyr may or may not live long enough to be put to death. Whatever form it takes, though, the martyr participates in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world. *Te Deum laudamus*!

---

holy women who took their own lives to preserve their chastity.

[53] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), 117.