MARTYRDOM:

LOVE'S HIGHEST MARK
AND THE MOST PERFECT
CONFORMATION TO CHRIST

T HE WORD 'martyr' originally meant 'witness' (*martus*). In christian theology, by the end of the second century, it was already being used to signify one who had given witness to Christ and his teaching by the sacrifice of his life.

The term is often employed in the New Testament in the ordinary sense of testimony (Mk 14, 63; Acts 6, 13 etc); but it also has its own specific meaning; the apostles can witness, by their own personal experience, to the life and death of Jesus, and especially to his resurrection (Acts 1, 22; 1, 8; 2, 32; 10, 39. 41; 26, 16; 1 Cor 14, 15 etc). The apostles are therefore authorized witnesses and the term is used in a quasi-legal sense — of Christ's mission and resurrection, without the implication that they have also given witness to Christ by sacrificing their lives. Other texts do use the term in a way approximating to this latter sense, for example in Mark's Gospel: 'They will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony (*martyrion*) before them' (Mk 13, 9). 'Martyr' comes to be used in other texts to describe those who effectively witnessed to Christ with the sacrifice of their lives. In Paul's prayer to the lord, for example, we read: 'when the blood of Stephen your witness (*martyros*) was shed' (Acts 2, 20), and in the Apocalypse, Antipas is called 'my witness (*martus*), my faithful one, who was killed among you' (2, 13). In these and similar texts, however, it is not certain whether the term *martus* is specifically employed to indicate that the witnesses in question have shed their blood for Christ, or in the more general sense (cf Apoc 11, 3. 7; 17, 6 etc).

Faced with this uncertainty with regard to the New Testament itself, some scholars have tried to establish a close connection between the idea of witness and that of martyrs in the greek

philosophy of the Stoics, or in certain aspects of thought revealed in the Old as well as the New Testament. This research has not produced any definite results; but certain important elements have emerged. First of all, 'martyr' and its derivatives do not refer simply to witness by word but also by deed: there is the famous case of the stoic philosopher Epictetus, exiled for his moral beliefs by the Roman Emperor Domitian. More significantly, the phrase 'God's witness' (*martus tou Theou*) was employed in hebraic theology to designate the prophets, many of whom gave witness as much by the example of their lives as well as by their prophesying, and even by suffering and death. With regard to the New Testament, the following points are worthy of note:

> Martyrs were afforded the privilege of testifying to their faith in the trials which often preceded their condemnation to death.
> The witness of the martyrs was far from being a human phenomenon only; it was the attestation of the Holy Spirit, and prized as such (Mt 10, 19-20).
> From the psychological point of view, the martyr's testimony is of particular efficacy, in that its profession was confirmed by quality of life, and especially by death.

Two other factors are to be reckoned with in our attempts to account for the fact that the word *martus* came to acquire the exclusive meaning 'martyr' so quickly in the Church's history. The first is that from the days of its infancy, the Church's faithful lived in such daily expectation of martyrdom, that it was almost immediately accepted that to witness publicly to Christ and his teaching was to expose oneself to death for his sake. Secondly, the Docetic heresy was essentially the assertion that Christ's own suffering and death was a mere semblance; so that the witness to the incarnate Word given by the martyrs was an especially powerful weapon against this early heresy.

One might say, then, that the term had definitely acquired its modern sense by the middle of the second century: the Letter of Clement of Rome, the Acts of the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the *Adversus Haereses* of St Irenaeus, the writings of Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as those of Tertullian and Lactantius in the West, all served to precise its meaning. In fact, by the fourth century we have the commonly accepted distinction between those who had suffered for their faith (*confessores fidei*), and those who had died for it — the martyrs.

The meaning of martyrdom

Leaving aside the history of the word, we have no difficulties about its meaning: death endured by a Christian for his faith, whether this concerns the whole of revealed truth, a part of it, or a specific dogma. One can and must also speak of martyrdom when the Christian is put to death for refusing to break one of the commandments, for example with regard to justice or chastity. Nor is it necessary that the one who condemns to death should do so formally and directly out of hatred for God or the person of Christ, his doctrine or his Church. He may be acting for ideological or other reasons. The point is that he wishes to force the Christian to commit what the latter considers to be sinful acts. When, then, we speak of *odium fidei* — hatred of the faith — on the part of those who put the Christian to death — we mean a hostile attitude towards Christianity which is seen as an obstacle to the persecutor's purpose.

All the above elements are clearly seen in the accounts of the early martyrs: for example in the proconsular Acts of the Scillitan martyrs which contain the juridical process of their trial, dated 17 July, A.D. 180. The indictment formulated by the proconsul Saturninus concerns the refusal of the Christians to 'live according to roman custom': that is, to venerate the Roman Emperor in a way which would be in direct opposition to the Christians' faith in one God. So they were ordered to abandon their faith; and on their refusal so to do, they were condemned to death by beheading:

> Then the pro-Consul Saturninus took his tablet and read out the sentence: 'Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the others have confessed to living according to the Christian custom, and in spite of our pleading with them to mend their ways and live according to the custom of the Romans, they obstinately clung to their decision. Therefore we condemn them to death by the sword'. . . . Straightway, then, they were led out to the place of martyrdom, where they knelt and prayed together. Then each one was beheaded.

It is not always as easy as this to distinguish out all the elements of a martyrdom. This is especially true in our times, when those who are unwilling to yield to the unlawful demands of dictators are not persecuted precisely as Christians, but accused of criminal activity, branded as traitors or of violating 'law and order'. Again, many are not even allowed the due process of law, but are simply made to 'disappear'. It also happens in many cases that they are not put to death directly, but condemned to live and work in conditions similar

to those described in the ancient martyrologies as *damnati ad metalla* — the 'concentration' or 'forced labour' camps, where death will be the outcome for the majority.

There is another form of torture in today's world: that of destroying the personality of the victim, without actually putting him to death. It also becomes increasingly difficult to offer a judgment about martyrdom when a Christian is never offered the choice between apostasy and death, but is summarily executed because he or she has manifested such a strong and living faith that the persecutors despair of obtaining any renunciation. These various forms of martyrdom, which so often defy official recognition, present special difficulties. How, for example, are we to decide whether an habitual determination to live out one's christian faith under the daily threat of death — certainly the equivalent of an efficacious desire for martyrdom — is in actual fact the equivalent of an explicit choice between apostasy and death, as was the case with the Scillitan Martyrs?

This brings us to another point: how common a phenomenon martyrdom is in the whole history of the Church. In its chapter on the universal call to holiness in the Church (*Lumen Gentium,* V), the Council notes that 'from the beginning there are some Christians who have been called, and always will be, to give this sovereign witness of love to all people, and especially to their persecutors' (42). One might work this out by historical probability; but the Council bases its observation on the theological truth that martyrdom is integral to the very life of the Church.

The theology of martyrdom

Martyrdom has its roots and reality in Christ's own death and its significance. He is in fact the prototype of the martyrs:

> For the divine nature was his from the beginning; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, taking upon himself the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted death — even death on a cross (Phil 1, 6-8).

Christ is the suffering Servant of Yahweh proclaimed by Isaiah, who must suffer and die to bring the multitudes into rightfulness (Isai 53, 11), who is come to give his life as a ransom for humanity (Mt 20, 28). The salvation of the world has to be reckoned in terms of the

suffering and death of the Father's witness (Mt 16, 21; 26, 45. 56; Lk 17, 25; 22, 37; 24, 7. 26. 44), since without the shedding of blood there can be no pardon (Heb 9, 22). The Lord came among his own people, and his own rejected him (Jn 1, 11); and yet he loved them to the end (Jn 13, 1). He was betrayed, condemned to death and crucified (Jn 18, 2; 19, 7ff); and thus he brought to completion his sacrifice of love, in order that we may have life (Jn 19, 30; 10, 10).

In fact, the sacrificial death of Christ is the central theme of the entire New Testament. Each author has his own approach to it, suited to his personality and purpose. Whenever the person, life and mission of Christ is mentioned, there is always a reference, explicit or tacit, to his death. It is the same whenever fundamental issues are treated, like the salvific will of God or salvation history, Incarnation and redemption, the founding of the Church, its nature and mission, the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist; and, of course, suffering, death, resurrection and other revealed truths connected with the 'Last Things', the eschatological nature of our existence. It is precisely because the redemptive death of Christ crucified is of such fundamental importance that there have been, and always will be, martyrs in the Church.

Indeed, Christ repeatedly encouraged the faithful to take up their cross and follow him on the royal road of his passion:

> He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt 10, 38-39). Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there shall my servant be also (Jn 12, 24-26).

These and similar words of the Lord clearly reveal the necessity of sacrifice and self-renunciation in the lives of all Christ's faithful; all are initiated into the christian life through their baptism into the death of Jesus (Rom 6, 3ff). This insertion into Christ demands that all Christians, in virtue of their baptism, must always be ready to die for Christ, and that to be associated with him in this gift of himself is the most generous way of following him.

In fact, 'since Jesus, God's Son, has shown his love by surrendering his life for us, no one has greater love than the one who gives his life for Jesus and for his brothers' (cf 1 Jn 3, 16; Jn 15, 13 — *Lumen*

Gentium, 42). The same document goes to the theological heart of the matter when it says that 'martyrdom makes the disciple like his master, who so generously accepted death for the world's salvation; in the shedding of his blood the disciple is fashioned after the pattern of Jesus. This is why the Church holds martyrdom in such esteem as the most precious gift and the highest mark of his love'. The gift itself and the call to it could never be the result of a merely human endeavour or determination. It has to be the response to God's own beckoning, his invitation to stand as witness to his love, which itself confers the capacity to live at love's prompting. Through the union which Christ has gratuitously established with humankind, making us all sharers in his life and thereby in his love, as members of his body, the Church, according to the measure of his grace which he freely bestows upon each one of us for his own purposes, he continues to live in those whom he has chosen, and who, in their turn, freely respond to him by responding to the leading of his Spirit. In certain cases, the proffer which he makes is one of participation in his redemptive activity by submission to the highest demands of love. Thus is made manifest a form of union by which Christ, through his Spirit, speaks and acts in these his witnesses *par excellence:*

> When they hand you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak, or what you are to say. What you are to say will be given you in that moment. It will not be you who will speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking in you (Mt 10, 19-20).

Indeed, it is because of this union between Christ and his members that the Church will never be free of persecution: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you. . . . Rejoice and be filled with gladness. They persecuted the prophets who were your predecessors' (Mt 5, 11-12). For 'the disciple never outshines his master. . . . It is enough for him to be like his teacher' (Mt 10, 24-25). 'If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you' (Jn 15, 20). Christ lives on in his Church.

It is the Lord's grace, then, which is the source of martyrdom: the power which finds its full scope in human weakness (2 Cor 12, 9), and generates the courage and superhuman endurance of so many martyrs. Such was the understanding among the first generations of Christians, as the Acts of the Martyrs insist. It was also prescribed that no one should seek out martyrdom or rush into it rashly, but rather leave any initiative to the Lord, who alone could provide the strength necessary to face such a trial. We might add that the

Fathers describe the sufferings of the martyrs as episodes in the struggle between Christ and the forces of evil. Augustine, for example, invites us to contemplate with wonder the battles waged by the Lord in the person of his loyal soldiers (*Sermo* 313, 2, 2). This is not to say that the divine gift of martyrdom leaves the personality of the martyr inert, or that grace overlays the precious gift of human freedom. On the contrary, on the principle that grace does not destroy natural qualities but enhances them, the spontaneity of human love and liberty is seen at its best in such situations. By this gift, God enables the human person to achieve in this sovereign act of faith, hope and love the totality of his potential, as he surrenders himself completely and irrevocably into the hands of his Creator and Lord — as did Christ in the supreme moment of his earthly life — 'Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit' (Lk 23, 46; cf Acts 7, 59).

The grandeur attaching to this unreserved gift of self shines out more radiantly when we reflect that the martyr freely stares death in the face — the ultimate terror and tragedy of human experience: and this when he could by a single word or gesture so easily escape the pain and violence involved in martyrdom. Rather he accepts his death with a heart full of love and of joy, simply because it is a sure and certain way of uniting himself with the sacrificial love of Christ crucified. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes this point when he reminds his readers — who are contemplating the noble endurance of Jesus — that 'in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood' (Heb 12, 4). And the Lord himself underlines the heroism and noble generosity inherent in martyrdom in his reference to his own death: 'There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15, 13). Martyrdom, as the pre-eminent act of love, is the way *par excellence* to holiness. It is the perfect mirroring of Christ's single-minded sacrificial gift of his life; so that the human person can find no better way of being consecrated to and made one with the Incarnate Word, of being transformed into the image of his Master.

Small wonder then that the Church, even before her theologians had begun to explore its profundities, was already aware of the inestimable value of martyrdom and its effects in the order of justification and sanctification. From the very first, the common belief was that catechumens who endured martyrdom before they came to be baptized, were to all intents and purposes made Christ's own in the shedding of their blood. Even before any theology of divine

judgment had been developed, it was spontaneously recognized that the martyr, released from any dolorous consequences of personal sin, was immediately blessed with the vision of the Holy Trinity. It was certainly the common belief that none were closer to God, or more intimate partakers of the glory of Christ risen, than those who had died for him, with him and in him.

Scholastic and modern theologians have extended the Church's understanding of martyrdom, especially by their reflections on the infused virtues, theological and cardinal. It presupposes not merely an intellectual acceptance of God's existence and self-revelation, but a profound and vital faith implying a relationship involving the whole of human existence, by means of which the martyr abandons all that is dear to him, placing all his hopes on God. This attitude and disposition is clearly impossible unless it is one sustained and inspired by an intense love of God for his own sake: an act of the truest charity, embracing not only God himself, but touching all that a man can call his own — including his membership of the Church and of the whole human family.

Similarly with the cardinal virtues: the dramatic choice to be made between God and the martyr's life in the flesh is one which calls for a wisdom extending itself to a proper appreciation of all human values. It is also a choice which hands over to God that which is his in justice. It represents a victory of the spirit over the weakness of the flesh — the ultimate in temperance. Finally, it manifests heroic courage in opposing itself to the deepest human instincts to preserve one's life at all costs.

It is in martyrdom that a person experiences and accepts his basic impotence and his essential dependence on divine grace: he acts in full conformity with God's will, allowing himself to be deprived of everything he possesses in the here and now. He shares, that is, in the ultimate poverty and obedience of Christ crucified. The martyr's love is also a chaste love. In the total gift of himself he loves his Lord with a pure and undivided heart — 'the one thing necessary'. Here we begin to penetrate the mystery of divine love, the hidden beauty of the martyr's fortitude. It belonged to the early Christians' intuition that they saw a close bond between the charity typical of the martyr and the state of virginity. When the first persecutions came to an end, consecrated virginity was held out as an ideal approximating to the charity of martyrdom.

The theology of the Mystical Body expounds the social and ecclesial aspects of martyrdom. Since every human act of value

builds up the whole Body, how much more this supreme act of love. So martyrdom is understood as a privilege, by means of which Christ lives out again his redemptive passion and death on behalf of his body, the Church. The sufferings of the martyr are truly those of Christ, in the sense that, though he suffered only once in his individual human nature, all human beings who are incorporated into the human nature of the Incarnate Word live by his life. It is in this way that the martyrs, above and beyond the rest of Christ's faithful, complete in their own flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Col 1, 24). They thus share in a pre-eminent way in the salutary work of his redemption. This is not to say, of course, that such sufferings add to the merits won by Christ; but given that the martyr is so intimately conformed to Christ's passion and death, they contribute to the growth in holiness of God's people, as the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* indicates:

> Though our Saviour, through his hard pains and most dreadful death, has won for his Church an inexhaustible treasure of graces, these are communicated to us according to the dispositions of God's Providence; and their abundance has been made to depend in no small measure on our own good works. It is in this way that man receives of God's plenitude (AAS, 35 [1943], p 245).

The history of the infant Church and missionary activity confirms the remarkable apostolic fecundity of martyrdom. As Tertullian wrote: 'The oftener we are sown as seed from your hands, the more abundant a harvest we yield; the seed is the blood of Christians' (*Apologeticus*, 50).

Another vital role of martyrdom in the Church is its sign-value. The fact that a person is ready to sacrifice his life for his faith underlines how strongly he holds his convictions. When so many thousands of all ages and conditions have shown their spontaneous readiness to face death with such courage for conscience's sake, there is manifested not only the holiness of their religious community, but the intrinsic value of that religion, and indeed its credibility. Equally it is an authentic eschatological sign, pointing to the truth that the followers of Christ crucified and glorified have here no lasting city, but do and should seek one which is to come (Heb 13, 14). Indeed martyrdom is a manifestation to all humankind of the victorious power of Christ who has conquered death, and the sovereign strength of his Spirit which animates and sustains his Mystical Body, the Church, in her struggle against the powers of darkness.

The cult of the Martyrs

The pre-eminent holiness of the martyrs was fully realized by the first Christians. During the first persecutions, the recognition of their close union with Christ led the faithful, themselves living under penal conditions, to turn to them as models and to win from God a measure of their own constancy in a steadfast confession of faith. The certainty of eternal life in Christ gained by the martyrs through their admirable endurance in suffering; to be known as holy and perfect in giving that great proof of their love — the gift of their lives for Christ; their recognition as Christ's friends, and friends too of their neighbours on earth; the belief in the power of their intercession as the very heart and soul of the cult of the saints as this originated and developed in the primitive Church: these are principles which explain to us the celebrations at the tombs of the martyrs, held, not as the pagans did on the day of the dead person's temporal birth, but on the anniversary of their martyrdom, the day of their entry into heavenly glory. These remembrances carried with them the atmosphere of feasting rather than mourning, and were soon introduced into the Eucharistic sacrifice and other prayers and invocations. In a word they became the manifestations of public as well as private honours paid to the martyrs, accepted and incorporated into the Church's praise and glorification of Christ and of God.

It was only through a slow and drawn-out process that this cult was extended to the so-called 'confessors of the faith': that is, to those who had undergone physical torment for Christ, but not to the point of death; then to those who lived and died as consecrated virgins; and finally to others who were outstanding for the virtuous quality of their lives. It is surely significant that, in the history of the Church, honours originally reserved for the martyrs should be extended in the first place to virgins: and this in virtue of an explicitly theological reason, according to which it was argued that the virginal state of life approximated to the perfection of martyrdom. As *Lumen Gentium* has declared, the Church considers martyrdom as the sovereign grace and the supreme model of christian holiness.

Martyrdom outside the Catholic Church

In the course of human history a considerable number of people have given their lives for their religious convictions in circumstances similar to those in which our martyrs died, but without belonging to

the Catholic Church. Clearly the sacrifice of people such as these is worthy of every mark of reverence. The question is whether they can be considered as true martyrs. First, we recall that martyrdom is above all else a gift of God made possible only by his grace. On this principle we can distinguish various cases. If, for example, the person should die for a belief which is directly contrary to the teaching of divine revelation, one cannot presume that he was moved by the Holy Spirit; and hence one would hardly call such a death martyrdom in the strict sense. The same should be said of non-catholic Christians who went to their deaths in defence of a doctrine or practice explicitly condemned by the Church.

There are, however, other cases in which non-catholic Christians have witnessed by their deaths to true faith in Christ. Though in the early centuries, the Montanists, for example, especially under the influence of Augustine and Cyprian were generally denied the title of martyr, a less crude application of the principle 'no salvation outside the Church' permits of a more balanced judgment. The matter was considered in the eighteenth century by Prospero Lambertini (later Benedict XIV) in his classic treatise on Beatification and Canonization. His solution was that such a person was a martyr in the sight of God but not of the Church — *coram Deo, sed non coram Ecclesia*. In our day the official Magisterium has specified that such people can be considered as true martyrs. Pius XII gave explicit expression to this in regard to martyrs of the eastern Churches; and Vatican II, in its decree on Ecumenism, made the following declaration:

> Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly christian endowments of our common heritage which are to be found amongst our separated brethren. It is right and just to recognize the riches of Christ and the works of virtue in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. God is wonderful in all his works (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4).

Today many Catholics would like to see the Church introducing the process for the beatification and canonization of such martyrs. This is as yet not within the realm of the possible, and the vast majority of other Christians would hardly welcome such an initiative.

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