



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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MARTYRDOM

We know that some of the early Christians met their death not in bed but at the hands of their persecutors. Tradition has it that all of the Apostles except John were martyred. Acts tells us of the stoning of Stephen and the execution of James. While many (though not all) of the later accounts of the Christian martyrdoms contain obviously legendary material, we still have the basic facts of a number of Christians preferring to die rather than deny Jesus. From its earliest days the Church held martyrs in great esteem, as those who had given their lives for the faith. We still honor martyrs, observing their feasts in the church calendar. We acknowledge that the "supreme sacrifice" is surely a great thing, whether on behalf of country or the faith.

We know all this intellectually, but all too often we have not drawn any connection between our acceptance of Christian martyrdom as something virtuous (indeed, glorious) and the way we pursue our Christian lives. The early martyrs seem so remote. Their world seems somehow different from ours. In one way it was: being a Christian back then carried with it the recognition that society was dead set against the faith. Thus to be a Christian meant being ready to face persecution.

In another way, their world was no different from ours, although we may think it was. We have a sense that things were much clearer then, without all the ambiguities we so often face in our own day. This is actually wrong: the early Christians had the same sorts of ambiguities we face today. For example, in one of the persecutions, citizens were required to have a paper certifying that they had sacrificed incense to the emperor. While the sacrifice was clearly apostasy, what about buying the certificate from a corrupt (or sympathetic) official without actually sacrificing? Is that apostasy or just doing what is necessary to get on with the work of the Church? (The Church condemned the practice, but treated it less severely than actual sacrifice.)

In any event, it is useful for us to compare our Christian spirit with that of the martyrs. This can help us gauge the health of our love and commitment. We believe that we have the same Christianity as they did. Have we the same robust faith? In all likelihood we will not end our lives as martyrs, although we can never be sure of this. But we can (and should) live our lives in preparation for such an occasion. And this means living as our Christian forbears who died for their Lord.

The martyrs were willing to die rather than compromise their faith. Their basic motivation was their love for God. They knew that Christ was their Saviour, that He had given Himself for them. Two things followed. First, they could not accuse God of expecting too much of them by asking them to die for the faith. He had already done so Himself. Second, there was no reason to fear death, since Christ had shown that it leads to eternal life.

The joyful acceptance of martyrdom depends on this belief. As we ask ourselves if we would be willing to die for Christ, the first question is whether (and to what extent) we believe in the resurrection. Sometimes we think of Christianity mainly in terms of the here and now rather than the hereafter. We concentrate on what it does for us now -- and it does much in helping us to be good people and to understand and cope with life here on earth. But if we do not also concentrate on our goal in Christian life -- eternal life in the full Presence of God -- then we misunderstand what it is all about. The immediate benefits of the faith are only a prelude and preparation for the real thing, which is ours only in the next life. Similarly, if we deal only with the immediate, we fail to understand or prepare for death. We will be at best reluctant martyrs, since our faith is based on the here and now and not on our faith in God's promise of that which is to come.

The martyrs had no doubt of God's love for them. They knew that they were sinners saved by His power. They knew they did not save themselves -- even dying for the faith was not powerful enough for that. They trusted Him utterly, even to the extent of dying. Having commended themselves into His hands daily while they lived, they could do so at the hour of death as well. As they lived so they died. The only way to account for their willingness to die and their joy at the hour of death is their trust in a salvation that is not of their own making. Unless he is a fool or an idiot, no one is so sure of his own goodness at the time of death. So their witness tells us of a salvation from God and not man made.

We know this in principle but we do not always practice it. We too often live as if we produced our own salvation by the sweat of our brow. This is not good preparation for martyrdom, since death will confront us with the question, "Have I done enough to be saved?"

Inevitably we will be aware of failures. If we have depended on self, doubts will plague us, and there will be no answer. The only answer for us is to learn to accept our salvation from God all along, recognizing that we can never earn our way into heaven. Then we can relax and give ourselves to the work He has set before us. Relaxing in Him in life will teach us how to relax in Him at the hour of death.

The martyrs died rather than renounce Christ because to renounce Christ would be to sacrifice their very identity. Their Christianity was so integral to their being, to who they were, that to renounce it was to destroy their integrity. To deny Christ was to deny themselves. This is the way all Christians should be. Our Christianity should be wound through our being so as to be inseparable from it. It should be impossible for us to think of ourselves as nonchristians.

Then the choice involved in martyrdom will be a choice between death and personal integrity -- which means we die one way or the other. The choice will be clear: we cannot really decide against Christ, for the cost will be even greater than physical death -- thus sacrificing our identity leaves us alive but without the essence of who we are.

We are apt to think of martyrs as special Christians, unlike ourselves. In a sense, they are special: they manifest the victory of Christian faith. But their distinction comes only after the fact. Before their martyrdom they were perfectly ordinary Christians, no different from us. Some were laymen, some clergy. They came from various walks of life and social classes, women as well as men. They had their special opportunities to witness to the faith, but all Christians (even ourselves) have the same responsibility to witness in our particular opportunities.

At root, it is a question of how important Jesus is to us. Would we be willing to encourage a person to become a Christian if it would cost him his life on earth? This is the situation in some Moslem countries today: it is a capital offense for a Moslem to become a Christian. Are we so convinced of the eternal benefits of Christianity that we would think him better off as a dead Christian than a live Moslem?

While that is something to speculate about, there are other situations which are more immediate for us. We are apt to find ourselves in social situations with nonchristians where the faith is slighted if not actually attacked. How do we respond? Do we keep silent, implying some agreement, in order to avoid social embarrassment? It is hard to speak up in such situations, but it is equally hard to remain faithful in silence.

Similarly, we may find ourselves with a friend who is asking the sort of questions for which the Christian faith is the answer. How ready are we to bear witness to the faith that is in us? There is risk involved in bringing up religion in a relationship which has hitherto been based on other things. But if Christ is as important to us as we profess Him to be, we can hardly keep quiet. The martyrs certainly bore some inconvenience and embarrassment for their profession, but they remained steadfast.

Perhaps martyrdom has its most important place in our lives not in speculating about what we would do if ..., but rather in the little spiritual martyrdoms with which we are all faced in our daily lives. When the sacrifice of the will is required by our Christian practice, it is a little martyrdom. It requires that we place Christ first, before self. Perhaps it is a matter of altering our habits to conform to the needs of the rest of the family -- not leaving dirty dishes in the sink, or getting up earlier in the morning to help things run more smoothly. Perhaps it means bearing with a difficult situation at work with cheerfulness -- this can be a powerful witness to the faith. Perhaps it means the discipline of turning down an invitation to play golf to be at Sunday worship.

These little martyrdoms Saint Paul terms the crucifixion of the old man. Every time the faith demands that we do something which in our selfishness we do not want to do, we have the opportunity to practice for martyrdom. We should have at least a certain peace if not joy about thus sharing the Cross. We ought not, however, be so proud of our virtue that we inflict it upon those around us -- "being a martyr" in contemporary parlance. This is the very opposite of true Christianity, since it places all confidence in our deeds and not in God's power to save us sinners.

Martyrdom depends on our wholehearted love for God. We die to self in little ways every day in our Christian lives. This is not always pleasant or easy, but it is the way of the Cross. The way of the Cross is the way to the resurrection. The witness of the Christian martyrs tells us of the power of grace at work in Christian lives. They inspire us with examples of successful Christian lives. They also give us a standard to use in reflecting on our own Christian lives. When we are tempted to think that it is all too hard, we need to recall again the Cross. Jesus died first for us. Our little deaths are nothing compared to the glory that is promised us. They tell us that we are on the right track, the way of the Cross.

