

THE WITNESS OF THE MARTYRS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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“[T]he martyr becomes truly a living image of the trinitarian truth revealed in and through the love of the Cross.”



It has been almost sixty years since the publication of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s book *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*, translated into English under the title *The Moment of Christian Witness*.¹ The main argument of the book could be synthesized in the following way: martyrdom, as a loving response of faith to Christ’s love unto death “for me” (Gal 2:20), is the decisive moment and measuring “canon” of Christian witness, more than (although inseparable from) “love of neighbor” *simply*.² Independent from the occa-

1. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1994); original edition in German: *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966).

2. “[P]ersecution constitutes the normal condition of the Church in her relation to the world, and martyrdom is the normal condition of the professed Christian. . . . [M]artyrdom reveals that such a faith, founded on the Crucifixion of Christ and imparted by grace to his followers, is already real and existent. . . . The death of Christ is for us the opening up of the glory of divine love, and to understand our position as believers [re: the ‘cross’] in the light

sional *casus belli* of the work—providing a response to Rahner’s theory of “anonymous Christianity”—the central question on which Balthasar reflects in *Cordula* is no less pertinent today than fifty years ago. If we ask, “What is Christian witness?” we could say something like, “The main object of Christian witness is the revelation of God’s love in Christ. Therefore the two privileged ways of bearing witness to Christ in the world are the preaching of the good news, and active love (*agape*) of neighbor, with all it includes.” This answer, which says of course nothing substantially new, finds further magisterial support today³ in the emphasis of the strong inherent connection between revealed truth and the mystery of the divine tri-personal communion of Love, in which through Christ the believer comes to share. This does not entail in principle any denial of the importance of dogmatic “truths.” And yet it does entail the affirmation that love, or *agape*, is what stands at the beginning (Jesus Christ) and at the end (the trinitarian Mystery) of the Christian understanding of truth. If it is true that *Deus caritas est*,⁴ then to bear witness to God’s truth should mean ultimately nothing else than this: to love our fellow man as (*kathos*: cf. Jn 13:34; 15:12) God loved us in and through Christ.⁵

of this death means to interpret our position as arising not from a marginal or *borderline* situation, but from the absolute center of reality” (*ibid.*, 21, 23, 27–28, emphasis added).

3. Emblematic in this respect is the encyclical *Lumen fidei* (cf. especially 8–22, 47–49). Cf. also Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*.

4. “He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. . . . No man has ever seen God: if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn 4:7–16). With his typical circular way of reasoning, John puts here in evidence the reciprocal causality between one’s knowledge of God’s love and one’s assimilation to/participation in this love (cf. also Jn 17:20–26): only *those who love as Christ did can say they “know God”* (1 Jn 2:3–6; 1 Jn 4:7–8, etc.) and are “in the light” (1 Jn 2:10), because *agape* and the glory of God revealed through Christ (Jn 1:18) are ultimately the same thing (Jn 17:21–23, 26). *Agape* is in this way the “ultimate truth” in a double sense: First, because it says what Christ manifests about God: the mystery of his love for us and the even deeper mystery of the life of trinitarian love that God is in himself and in which the first is rooted. Second, *agape* is ultimate also and consequently as the very content of the divine life that through the grace of adoption believers are given to share. On the Johannine theology of *agape*, cf. André Feuillet, *Le mystère de l’amour divin dans la théologie johannique* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972).

5. Cf. Gal 5:14; Rm 13:8–10; 1 Jn 4:20.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. *By this all men will know* that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35, emphasis mine).

The identification of the fundamental witness of the Christian with active *agape* for one’s brother⁶ could not be better captured than in these last words of Jesus. It remains however open to the question: To what does the Johannine “as” (*kathos*) exactly point? How does Jesus love us? A second related question: If it is true that the disciple’s love for his brother coincides with the expression of his love for his Master (Jn 14:15, 21, 23), is it not also true that the two things are explicitly put by Jesus in a precise hierarchy? Christ says to Peter: “Peter, Son of John, do you love me? . . . Tend my sheep” (cf. also Jn 21:17–18). We return in this way to the central question of *Cordula*: How are we to conceive the relation between the believer’s zeal for Christ and the love for his neighbor?

In the context of today’s increasingly liberal and pluralistic culture, and also in light of the dramatic increase of the persecution of Christians in the world, this question could be perhaps re-framed in the following terms: How are the love of the truth (love for Christ) and the truth of love (*kata Christon*, according to Christ) related to each other?⁷

In the following pages, we will try to address this question in light of the witness of the early (pre-Constantinian) Church.

6. Interestingly, in the Johannine writings the commanded love seems to be addressed exclusively to those who share in the same faith (cf. Jn 13:13–17, 34–35; 15:9–17; 1 Jn 4:7–16, 19–21). The reason for this does not lie in a supposed Johannine “sectarianism,” as evident in the above quoted passage, but rather in the Johannine conception of the inner “trinitarian” structure of the *diffusion of agape itself*: only through abiding in a dynamic unity of radical love *for each other* do the disciples bear witness to the world (cf. Jn 15:12–16) in a participatory analogy with the fruitful display of Jesus’ and the Father’s reciprocal glorification in the Paschal Mystery (Jn 17:1–3, 21–23).

7. Cf. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, “Discorso in occasione dell’inaugurazione dell’anno Accademico 2013–2014 della Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Settentrionale,” *Il Foglio* (18 February 2014): “Logos and *Agape*, which are inseparable principles of orientation for the human being in the world, are often today opposed to each other, and a misunderstood idea of love is used in order to confuse, if not even to set aside, truth” (translation mine).

1. THE CULT OF THE MARTYRS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The veneration of the martyrs in the early Church had an importance comparable only to the memory (and thereby the relics) of the Apostles.⁸ We know with certainty, for example, that in the fourth century, the Acts and Passions of Martyrs were regularly read during the liturgical service, at least in Northern Africa, together with the sacred Scriptures. With the end of the persecutions, the cult of the martyrs spread rapidly wherever tombs of martyrs were preserved. Pilgrimages became common, and buildings consecrated to their cult—the *martyria*—were erected over the tombs.⁹ According to St. Basil, certainly the most authoritative figure of the Church in his time, the relics of the martyrs convey special graces: “The one who touches the bones of the martyrs participates in the grace therein contained.”¹⁰ The martyrs enjoy a special power of intercession,¹¹ and for this reason their names are often remembered in the liturgy immediately after the names of the Apostles. The martyrdom of Polycarp¹² attests to how the cult of the martyrs had already become a practice common among the communities of the second century:

The centurion then . . . placed the body in the midst of the fire, and [the fire] consumed it. Accordingly, we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than

8. For martyrdom in the book of Revelation, cf. in particular, Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse. Ermeneutica, esegesi, teologia* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1988), 363–67. On the cult of the martyrs in the early Church, cf. Willie Rordorf, “Aux origines des cultes des martyrs,” *Irenikon* 45 (1972): 315–31; Marcel Viller, et al., *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1932–1995), v. 10, col. 723–26. The extraordinary enthusiasm surrounding the cult of the martyrs at the end of the fourth century is indirectly confirmed by the apologetic defense of this cult by both Jerome (*Ep.* 109, *Contra Vigilantium*) and Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 10) against those who considered it to be a form of crypto-paganism.

9. Cf. André Grabar, *Martyrium: recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, vols. 1–2 (Paris: Collège de France, 1943–1946).

10. Basil of Cesarea, *Sermon on Psalm 115:4*, PG 30, 112; cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Against Julian*, 1; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Martyrs*, PG 50, 664d.

11. Basil of Cesarea, *Speech in Honor of St. Mama*, PG 31, 589.

12. The date of Polycarp's martyrdom is controversial. According to recent studies it took place between 155 and 165 AD.

gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course (*ton proethlekoton*), and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps.¹³

Instead of gathering on the day of the deceased's birth, as was common among the pagans, the community of Smyrna gathers at the tomb of its "hero" on the anniversary of his true *dies natalis*, the day of his martyrdom, "with joy and rejoicing." The comparison with the analogous pagan practice of anniversary commemoration is significant. First, the memory of the martyr is the memory of the day of his death rather than of his birth; death itself is what is celebrated here in a spirit of joy. Second, the community does not commemorate "with joy" the martyr's death only because it is understood as his birth to eternal life; rather the rejoicing is due also to the glorious character of the death itself: it is worthy to be remembered "in memory of those who have already finished their course (*ton proethlekoton*), and for the exercising (*askesin*) and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps." This athletic vocabulary is a sign to the reader familiar with Hellenic culture: as pagans recalled at the tombs of their illustrious men their memorable actions (*res gesta*), so do Christians remember the victories of their martyrs.¹⁴ The martyr is the "athlete/hero" of the Church, in comparison with, but also in contrast to, the Greco-Roman icons of heroic virtue. Before

13. The critical Greek/Latin text from which we translated the quotations present in this paper are taken from *Atti e Passioni dei Martiri*, ed. A. A. R. Bastiaensen (Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla-A. Mondadori, 1987) (=Bastiaensen). Several English translations are also taken from the New Advent website, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/index.html> (=New Advent). Here, New Advent, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," 18.

14. One could object here that the pagan literature of the time also celebrates the "teleutai," the glorious deaths of philosophers and heroes. Without the need of going back to Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, one can refer to Plinius (Epistle VIII 12, 4–5), Valerius Maximus (*Factorum et dictorum mirabilium libri novem*, 1st-cent. AD), Diogenes Laertius, who in the first half of the third century wrote the *Pammetros*, a collection of "deaths" of famous people. The analogy is of course significant. The point we make here, though, is that for Christians, the way in which the martyr dies becomes *the sole reason* for celebrating him.

facing any question about the precise definition of this contrast between Christian and pagan, it is important to state this fact: the Christian ideal in the early centuries is the martyr and none other. As Christine Mohrmann insightfully observes, the beginning of Christian hagiography is not by chance entirely coincident with that mysterious literary phenomenon that goes under the title of the Acts and Passions of the Martyrs: “The so-called hagiographic literature begins with documents that do not describe the *life* of the saints but rather their death, to the exclusion of any detail concerning their life.”¹⁵ One has to wait until the *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius in the Constantinian era,¹⁶ to find a biography of a non-martyred saint.¹⁷ This is highly significant: Antony is the father of monasticism, a phenomenon, in its turn, comprehensible only in light of the diffuse desire of keeping the spirit of martyrdom alive after the end of the persecutions.¹⁸

Many scholars have tried in vain to explain the origin of these jewels of Christian primitive literature as simply analogous to or imitations of pagan models of athlete-hero stories.¹⁹ This

15. Cf. Christine Mohrmann, introduction to *Vita di Antonio [Life of Antony]* by Athanasius, 4th ed. (Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla–A. Mondadori, 1987), viii (=Mohrmann). All translations from this text are mine.

16. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

17. *Ibid.*, viii, xxvii. Cf. Edward E. Malone, *The Monk as Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

18. Mohrmann, x: “The hagiography of the first four, five centuries of Christian history is focused on martyrdom and monasticism. The biographies of bishops, which seem to constitute a different category, are during this time always somehow related with martyrdom or with the monastic ideal, which in a certain sense takes the place of martyrdom.”

19. Under the influence of the *Religionsgeschichtliche* school, some scholars (Bauer, Reitzinsein, Geffcken, Aly, Holl, Musurillo, and others) have tried to explain the genesis of the Christian Acts and Passions of the Martyrs as imitations of analogous acts of pagan “martyrs,” or more generally, of the *teleutai*, the celebrated narratives of the death of famous people. This view has been mostly abandoned today. A fruitful approach seems to be that of those who try to illuminate our phenomenon in the broader context of the dialogical relation of emulation (analogy and contrast) of the Church vis-à-vis the Greco-Roman culture: the martyr is the fulfillment of the Roman/Hellenic ideal of the “virtuous,” who shows the heroic quality of his magnanimity when facing death, but his heroism bears an irreducibly different meaning and character. Cf. Tertullian, *Ad Martyres*, 4:6–9; *Apologeticum*, 50:4–9; *Ad nationes*, 1–18; Cf. Mohrmann, xiii–xvii. A different and more complex discussion

explanation is not sufficient: the Acts and Passions of the Martyrs constitute a literary genre of its own, tied up with the paradoxical newness of the celebrated hero.

2. "CHRISTUS IN MARTYRE EST"²⁰

If one had time to read, one after the other, all the Acts and Passions of the Martyrs that modern scholarship considers authentic,²¹ one would easily see that these documents are not simply historical chronicles: they reflect the admiration and veneration that the ancient Christian communities had for their martyrs.²² In this sense, these documents are all the more precious for our inquiry, because they give us a lively sense of the *meaning* of martyrdom, in the perception of the early Church. In other words, these documents help us to sketch a sort of theology of martyrdom, precisely because they do not just narrate naked facts, but let us see who the martyrs were in the eyes of those who received their witness. With the help of these documents, we can try to answer the following questions: What about the martyr did the first generations of Christians consider worthy of being celebrated? How did the community understand, and thereby portray, not only that individual martyr, but martyrdom as a whole?

would be required to define the relation of these texts to the Old Testament (Bastiaensen, x-xii).

20. Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 22.

21. The authentic documents available to us are relatively few (not more than twenty between the Acts and the Passions). We recall here the most important ones (critical edition in Bastiaensen): *Martyrium Polycarpi*; *Martyrium Carpi, Papyli et Agathonicae*; *Acta Iustini*; *Martyrium Lugdunensium*; *Acta Martyrium Scillitanorum*; *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; *Martyrium Pionii*; *Acta Cypriani*; *Acta Maximiliani*; *Acta Phileae*; and *Testamentum XL Martyrium*. The main difference between the late, post-Constantinian Pseudo-Acts and Passions and the authentic ones, besides the overabundance of legendary details, is an over-emphatic "triumphalism" that is missing in the more ancient documents. Cf. A. J. Vermeulen, *The Semantic Development of Gloria in Early-Christian Latin* (Nijmegen: Dekker and van de Vegt, 1956), 53.

22. This judgment needs to be carefully nuanced: the Acts especially preserve a sobriety of language that in many cases seems to faithfully reflect the register of the original documents.

The first remarkable characteristic of most of these reports is the almost constant lack of any reference to the martyrs' actual life.²³ Whether the martyr was a slave or a noble person, a famous philosopher or a simple carpenter, is usually not important. What is important is only his witness before the Roman magistrate and his courage in facing torture and persecution. This is in direct contrast to the stereotype of the glorious deaths of pagan literature, where the death of the hero is presented as an admirable proof of his virtue—the martyr, in most cases, would be unremarkable if it were not for the event of his glorious death.²⁴ In other words, the martyr becomes a hero *at the very moment* of his suffering and death, a witness he would never be able to give without the active presence of Christ in him. The martyr's death is actually the *sine qua non* of his entire heroic action:

But they reached such a pitch of magnanimity that not one of them let a sigh or groan escape them; thus proving to us all that those holy martyrs of Christ, at the very time when they suffered such torments, were absent from the body, or rather that the Lord then stood by them and communed with them. And, looking to the grace of Christ, they despised all the torments of this world attaining eternal Life in one single hour (*dia mias horas*).²⁵

Emblematic in this respect is also the famous dialogue of Felicity with one of the *cataractarii* (guardians), after she gave birth in prison, a few days before the “day of victory”:

Immediately after their prayer her pains came upon her, and when, with the difficulty natural to an eight months' delivery, in the labor of birth she was sorrowing, one of the *cataractarii* said to her: “You, who are in such suffering now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts, which you despised when you refused to sacrifice?” And she replied: “Now it is I that suffer what I suffer; but then there

23. Exceptions are made for the cases of such bishops as Polycarp and Cyprian (cf. Bastiaensen, “Martyrium Polycarpi” and “Acta Cypriani”).

24. Mohrmann, xii: “In the ancient documents, the martyr emerges out of anonymity. His name is remembered, but nothing is mentioned of his/her previous life.” Also noteworthy in this sense is the abundance here of female characters in contrast with the pagan *teleutai*.

25. New Advent, “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” 2.

will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I am also about to suffer for him.” Thus she brought forth a little girl, which a certain sister brought up as her daughter.²⁶

Both of these texts touch upon a second aspect that immediately draws us to the heart of the theology of martyrdom emerging from our documents: The martyrs share in the Passion of Christ—they become one with the mystery of his glorious suffering and death. This is not just in the sense that they follow his example; rather, they are mystically united to him to the point that “he suffers for and in them”; “he stands by them,” allowing them thereby to win the trial. Thus we can see that long before the encounter of the Church with neoplatonism, Christian mysticism was independently born: it is the mysticism of the union of the martyr with Christ’s Passion (and Resurrection, as we will see better below).²⁷ The name of the literary genre²⁸ is itself significant: *Passio* (*pathos*). To Christian ears, the word in both Greek and Latin had in fact an immediate christological resonance. It is not surprising, then, that the most celebrated martyrdom of the second century, that of the bishop Polycarp, so closely reflects the unfolding of Jesus’ Passion.²⁹ When the threat draws near, Polycarp at first hides in a country house (*agridion*), where during prayer he receives a prophetic vision of his imminent martyrdom.³⁰ A servant of his betrays him as Judas did Jesus,³¹ and as a result, the Irenarch (whose name was Herod) hastens to arrest Polycarp. When the guards and soldiers arrive, Polycarp surrenders to them saying: “The will of God be done.”³² The trial follows, in which Polycarp endures in his con-

26. Bastiaensen, “Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis,” 15:5–7.

27. Cf. Charles André Bernard, *Il Dio dei mistici*, vol. 2: *La conformazione a Cristo* (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2000), 11–26.

28. The Acts are usually presented as the official memorandum of the trials (cf. for example, Bastiaensen, “Acta Martyrium Scillitanorum” and “Acta Iustini”). The Passions are rather reports of (Christian) eyewitnesses (cf. “Martyrium Polycarpi” and “Martyrium Lugdunensium”).

29. Cf. Bastiaensen, “Martyrium Polycarpi,” 5:1.

30. *Ibid.*, 5:2.

31. *Ibid.*, 6:2.

32. *Ibid.*, 7:1. Cf. Mt 26:42.

fession of faith and refuses to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Before the executioners set fire to him, Polycarp raises his eyes to the sky and utters his famous prayer of thanksgiving for the “cup of martyrdom.”³³ The fire does not consume his body, so Polycarp must be finally pierced through with a dagger.³⁴ The quantity of blood coming out of his side is such that the fire is extinguished. It seems clear that for the redactor, the re-presentation of Jesus’ Passion in the drama of Polycarp’s passion and martyrdom is evidently the real guiding light of the narrative.

Significantly, the idea that the martyr reiterates Christ’s Passion and participates in it is not exclusive to the Acts and Passions of the Martyrs. It is present also in the writings of the apologist Tertullian³⁵ and pervades the work of the most refined and Hellenized theologian of pre-Constantinian Christianity, Origen, who is also, after Ignatius of Antioch,³⁶ the most prestigious example of *lubido martyrii* in the early Church. This fact is significant because it shows that the ideal of martyrdom cannot be considered as a deviation due to the fanaticism of the *hoi polloi*. The most impressive witness in this regard, however, is also the most ancient one: the letters of Ignatius,³⁷ bishop of Antioch, and

33. Bastiaensen, “Martyrium Polycarpi.” See section 5 below: *Deo Gratias*.

34. Cf. Jn 19:34.

35. Cf. especially Tertullian, *Ad Martyres*; *Ad Nationes* 1:18; *Apologeticum*, 50:4–9.

36. Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.*, VI, 2, 4–6. There is no reason to doubt the substantial reliability of Eusebius on this point, since in his works Origen himself speaks clearly enough of his desire to become a martyr, cf. especially *Dialogus ad Heraclidem*, 24. On Origen’s thought on martyrdom, cf. *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) (=Greer); *Contra Celsum*, I, 24; II, 47; VIII, 44; *Comm. ad Iohannem*, VI, 53–54; *Comm. Mt 12*, 25. On martyrdom in Origen, cf. Henry Crouzel, *Origene* (Rome: Borla, 198), 190–91. As is well known, Origen’s father, Leonide, died a martyr in Alexandria, and Origen longed all his life for the chance to follow in his father’s steps (cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.*, VI, 2, 4ff.), which he partially did, during the persecutions of Decius (248–250 AD) when he endured tortures and prison, although he was not martyred. On this historical *vexata quaestio*, cf. Crouzel, *Origene*, 61–65.

37. His birth is today thought to have been between 35–50 AD. The date of his death is a much-debated object of discussion among scholars. Some put it during the persecutions of Domitian (96–98 AD), while others prefer a later date (117 AD). The critical edition of Ignatius’s works cited here is

in particular his famous letter to the Romans.³⁸ It is on the authority and under the impulse of these letters, full with as much passionate zeal as with theological density, that the theology of martyrdom most likely took shape.

I write to all the churches, and I bid all men know, that of my own free will I die for God, unless ye should hinder me. I exhort you, be ye not an unseasonable kindness to me. Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ]. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my sepulcher (*taphos*) and may leave no part of my body behind (*methen ton tou somatou emou*), so that I may not, when I am fallen asleep, be burdensome to any one. Then shall I be truly (*alethos*) a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world (*o kosmos*) shall not so much as see my body (*to soma*). Supplicate the Lord for me, that through these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God. . . .

May I have joy of the beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that I may find them promptly; nay I will entice them that they may devour me promptly, not as they have done to some, refusing to touch them through fear. Yea though of themselves they should not be willing while I am ready, I myself will force them to it. Bear with me. I know what is expedient for me. Now am I beginning to be a disciple. May nought of things visible and things invisible envy me; that I may attain unto Jesus Christ. Come fire and cross and grapplings with wild beasts [cuttings and manglings], wrenching of bones, hacking of limbs, crushings of my whole body, come cruel tortures of the devil to assail me. Only be it mine to attain unto Jesus Christ (*Iesou Christou epitycho*).³⁹

Admittedly, such words cannot but sound disorienting and a bit disturbing to the ears of the modern, even the devout

the one prepared for *Sources Chrétiennes* by P. T. Camelot, *Ignace d'Antioche, Polycarpe de Smyrne: Lettres. Martyre de Polycarpe* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958) (=Camelot).

38. Camelot, 124–39.

39. "Ignatius to the Romans" in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (London: MacMillan & Co, 1891), <http://www.earlychristian-writings.com/text/ignatius-romans-lightfoot.html>, 4:1; 5:2–5:3.

Christian, reader. Do we not face here the first radical witness of that kind of Christianity understood as *contemptio mundi* that the Second Vatican Council tried to correct?

Leaving the answer to this last question to others, we will now attempt to unravel the meaning of these disturbing accounts from within their own context—a context that can help illuminate the deepest meaning of the cult and even the mysticism of martyrdom that, starting with Ignatius, spreads and flourishes throughout the first centuries of Christianity.

3. CONTEMPTIO MUNDI OR PARTICIPATION IN ITS REDEMPTION?

The accusation that Christians are “anti-human” and “otherworldly” was indeed not an invention of Nietzsche. It is, on the contrary, as ancient as Christianity itself. According to the Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 AD), during the famous persecution unleashed by Nero in 64 AD, “an immense multitude [of Christians] was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind (*odio humani generis*).”⁴⁰ A meditation by Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and stoic philosopher of the second century, is, in this respect, the most interesting witness:

What a soul, that which is ready, if at any moment it must be separated from the body, and ready either to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist; but so that this readiness comes from a man’s own judgment, not from sheer and obstinate opposition (*psilen parataxin*) as with Christians; considerately and with dignity, as to persuade another, without any theatrical, pathetic exclamations (*atragodos*).⁴¹

40. Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 44. This is the end of the text: “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs, and perished; or were nailed to crosses; or were doomed to the flames and burnt to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed.”

41. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditationes*, XI, 3.

This text is valuable, whether or not the emperor's account is historically accurate, because it helps us to delve deeper into the question of the relationship between the Christian celebration of the martyr's intrepid witness and the pagan celebration of the hero, and in particular the stoic praise of the imperturbable readiness of the wise one to lay down his life for a just cause. Reading the above-quoted ardent words of Ignatius in light of the *j'accuse* of Marcus Aurelius, one cannot help but be tempted to agree with the stoic emperor: there seems to be something undeniably emphatic (*tragodos*) in the vibrant passion of Ignatius's words—something we would seek in vain for in a biography of Cato or Seneca. In Marcus Aurelius's words, the emphasis is significantly put on the perfect interior freedom and imperturbability (*a-patheia*) of the wise facing death rather than, and even in opposition, to the *pathos* or desire to die that distinguishes the Christians. Admittedly, anyone familiar with the Acts and Passions of the Martyrs knows that a certain otherworldly spirit is not exceptional. The Passions especially are filled with it: this world is full of evil; it lies under the power of the prince of lies, and the martyr is therefore happy to enter the true life, life eternal. From this point of view, Ignatius's letters are nothing but the archetype of a *topos* that became standard in early Christian literature on martyrdom.

Nevertheless, if one weighs the issue at stake more carefully, at least three considerations need to be made.

First, the (so-called) otherworldly element of this literature, no less than the analogous *leitmotiv* of *fuga mundi* that permeates the monastic literature that flourishes in and after the fourth century,⁴² is not a peculiarly Christian phenomenon. The opposite is true: it is rather the effect of the influence of the "spirit of the time," an effect all the more comprehensible given the often hostile atmosphere surrounding the Christian communities. It is difficult and probably misleading to try to explain this well-known character of the intellectual and spiritual climate of late antiquity with any single *causa prima*: "there was (in pagan late antiquity) a spreading spiritual climate that can only be described with an English word: *otherworldliness*. It is more a

42. Cf. Mohrmann, xxiv. Emblematic in this sense is Origen's exhortation to martyrdom (cf. Greer, iii–iv).

general spiritual attitude than a character of this-or-that specific philosophical system,"⁴³ although it is conversely true that this fundamental orientation affects many of these systems in different ways, even those most removed from each other.⁴⁴ One thing however is clear: the spirit of *contemptio mundi* is something that (especially sectarian) Christians borrowed from and had in common with the most influential religious and intellectual movements of the first centuries of the Christian era and is *not* something that set Christians in opposition to the pagans. The martyrs' obstinacy and aspiration to be freed from the lies of the world below in order to enter the realm of authentic life is therefore not peculiar; what is new and somehow irreducible lies somewhere else.

A closer look at the whole of Ignatius's theology can, from this point of view, be clarifying. It may seem paradoxical, given what we have just read from him above, but Ignatius, in the history of the post-apostolic ecclesiastic theology, is the first champion of the reality of Jesus' flesh and of its pivotal soteriological significance. In fact, no one in the early Church insisted more than Ignatius on the reality of the Passion of Jesus who was "truly (*alethos*) nailed up in the flesh for our sake under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch; we in fact are fruit of his divinely blessed Passion (*theomakaristou pathou*)":⁴⁵

For He suffered all these things for our sakes [that we might be saved]; and he suffered truly (*alethos epathen*), as also he raised himself truly; not as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in semblance (*to dokein auton peponthenai*), being themselves mere semblance. And in the way they

43. Mohrmann, xxv–xxvi.

44. The *fuga mundi* of Plotinus's philosophical pan-entheistic mysticism (cf. *Enneads*, VI, 9, 9), for example, has apparently nothing to do with the dualistic and "mythological" mysticism of the Gnostics, who despise the material world as the realm of evil. Plotinus himself firmly and almost violently criticizes the Gnostics (Cf. *Enneads*, II, 9); and yet, the idea of the necessity of "transcending" this world of appearances as a condition for entering the realm of real being and life, although taking profoundly different directions, is strongly present in both.

45. Cf. Camelot, 7–55; on Ignatius's Christology, cf. 24–34; on Ignatius's mysticism of union/imitation of Christ, cf. especially 34–41. Cf. also Bernard, *Il Dio dei mistici*, 20.

think, so shall it happen to them: to be without body (*asomatois*) and demon-like (*demonikois*).⁴⁶

What is remarkable in this text is the profound correspondence between Ignatius's emphasis on the reality of Jesus' suffering and Resurrection in his very body, and his anthropology, in which the body is considered no less constitutive of the integrity of the human being than the spirit. Ignatius ironically stigmatizes his adversaries—evidently some unknown proposers of a docetic Christology⁴⁷—as “demon-like,” precisely because they despise their own body as if it had no real existence.

Now, it is only in light of such a radically incarnational Christology and soteriology that one can make sense of the very shocking expressions we quoted above, in which Ignatius expresses his desire that the beasts “may leave no part of my body behind,” so that “the world (*o kosmos*) shall not see so much as see my body” (*Ad Rom.* 4, 2). Ignatius himself explains the motivation of this desire: “Then I shall be truly (*alethinos*) a disciple of Jesus Christ.” The adverb “truly” should be clear to us at this point: *true* discipleship is a matter of flesh and blood, and not only of intellect and interior worship; in the same way Jesus Christ freed us from the lies of the *kosmos*, not just through an intellectual illumination, but through his *true* passion in the flesh. We understand it in this way: paradoxically, Ignatius's desire to suffer in his flesh and to be completely “eaten up” by the beasts, unto the point that “nothing remained left of his body,” is not motivated by a desire of being freed from the tomb of the body—the insistence on Jesus' true Resurrection, no less than on his true Passion, is enough to make clear that this is far from the case. Rather this desire comes out of Ignatius's yearning to share in the fruitfulness of Jesus' Passion for us, that is, in Christ's transformation of his flesh and blood into a gift for the life of the world. As it has been insightfully noted,⁴⁸ Ignatius's passionate spirituality of martyrdom is ultimately comprehensible only in light of his anti-

46. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Smyrn.* 1, 2.

47. On Docetism and Ignatius's answer to it, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64–91.

48. Cf. Bernard, *Il Dio dei mistici*, 19–26.

docetic Christology on the one hand, and its strongly eucharistic overtones on the other:

I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ]. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my sepulcher (*taphos*) and may leave no part of my body behind. . . . Supplicate the Lord for me, that through these instruments (*dia touton organon*) I may be found as a sacrifice (*thysia*) to God.⁴⁹

The final strong expression reveals the liturgical dimension of Ignatius's mysticism of martyrdom. The martyr's suffering and death are mystically mingled with the fruitful Passion of the Lord:⁵⁰ "I am your expiatory victim (*peripsema*) and I am offering myself as a sacrifice for you."⁵¹ Ignatius knows well enough that Jesus Christ is the One Redeemer. Nevertheless, as Paul himself before him (Col 1:24), he is convinced that the mysterious/sacramental union of the disciple with the Lord is so real⁵² that the believer who shares in the body and blood of Christ can truly be given to become bread through an analogous sacrificial suffering. We can at this point conclude: Ignatius's desire to physically disappear is not moved by *odio generis humani* and alienation from the world—if by "world" we mean this creation for the sake of which the Lord suffered—but rather by the desire of responding in gratitude to Christ's love and, becoming with him, a sacrifice (*thysia*) that feeds the new world: the Church.⁵³ This is the first difference between the stoic, who simply remains impassible before death, and the martyr, who in his zeal goes so far as to long for it. The two have in common the courage and interior freedom to endure to the end; but for the latter, suffering and death are not just the place where one's superiority over the

49. "Ignatius to the Romans," 4:1–4:2.

50. Cf. Ignatius [Camelot], *Ad Smyrn.* IV, 2.

51. Ignatius [Camelot], *Ad Ephes.* VIII, I (we agree here with Camelot's translation).

52. Cf. Bernard, *Il Dio dei mistici*, 22–23.

53. This idea, although never so audaciously expressed, will find its liturgical, common form in the special "power of intercession" attributed to the martyrs.

world is proved; they are rather the unique *kairos* of the believer's response of love to that Love unto the end (Jn 13:1) that is greater (Jn 15:13), more glorious, and more fruitful than anything else:

The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.
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. (Jn 12:23–24)

Apart from the context of the Johannine theology of the eucharistic fruitfulness of the Cross, Ignatius's impatient desire to be entirely "consumed" by the beasts remains totally unintelligible. But with the light of John's gospel, his desire becomes intelligible without losing any of its shocking audacity: 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:⁵⁴

It is good for me to die for Jesus Christ rather than to reign
over the farthest bounds of the earth. Him I seek, who died
on our behalf; him I desire, who rose again [for our sake].
. . . Permit me to be an imitator of the Passion of my God.
If any man hath him within himself, let him understand
what I desire, and let him have fellow-feeling with me, for
he knows the things which straighten me.⁵⁵

4. OBSTINATE OPPOSITION: THE MARTYR AS *MILES CHRISTI*

We must now add a second observation: Martyrdom is not merely an expression of *contemptio mundi*, because it is also an act of opposition and active battle against the powers who keep the world captive: ultimately against the prince of this world, the devil.⁵⁶ Through the laying down of his life for Christ's sake, the martyr is associated with the act by which Christ overpowers

54. This does not mean that one must necessarily deny the presence of excesses and irregularities, which the Church herself criticizes.

55. "Ignatius to the Romans," 6:1–6:3.

56. For the importance of this idea in early Christianity, especially Latin, cf. Jean Daniélou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity: A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*, vol. 3, trans. David Smith and John A. Baker (London: Westminster Press, 1977), 405–29.

the prince of this world and wins the world for God (Jn 12:32; Col 2:14). As scholars often note, the epic or military dimension of the martyr's witness, regularly presented in terms of a victory over the "tempter," is perhaps the most important *topos* in the early literature on martyrdom:

For, having through patience (*dia hypomones*) overcome the wicked prince (*adikon archonta*), and thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous [in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world. . . .

The day before that on which we were to fight, I saw in a vision that Pomponius the deacon came hither to the gate of the prison, and knocked vehemently. I went out to him, and opened the gate for him; and he was clothed in a richly ornamented white robe, and he had on manifold *calliculae*. And he said to me, "Perpetua, we are waiting for you; come!" And he held his hand to me, and we began to go through rough and winding places. Scarcely at length had we arrived breathless at the amphitheater, when he led me into the middle of the arena, and said to me, "Do not fear, I am here with you, and I am laboring with you;" and he departed. And I gazed upon an immense assembly in astonishment. And because I knew that I was given to the wild beasts, I marveled that the wild beasts were not let loose upon me. Then there came forth against me a certain Egyptian, horrible in appearance, with his backers, to fight with me. . . . And there came to me, as my helpers and encouragers, handsome youths; and I was stripped, and became a man. Then my helpers began to rub me with oil, as is the custom for contest; and I beheld that Egyptian on the other hand rolling in the dust. And a certain man came forth, of wondrous height, so that he even over-topped the top of the amphitheater; and he wore a loose tunic and a purple robe between two bands over the middle of the breast; and he had on *calliculae* of varied form, made of gold and silver; and he carried a rod, as if he were a trainer of gladiators, and a green branch upon which were apples of gold. And he called for silence, and said, "This Egyptian, if he should overcome this woman, shall kill her with the sword; and if she shall conquer him, she shall receive this branch." Then he departed. And we drew near to one another, and began to deal out blows. He sought to lay hold

of my feet, while I struck at his face with my heels; and I was lifted up in the air, and began thus to thrust at him as if spurning the earth. But when I saw that there was some delay I joined my hands so as to twine my fingers with one another; and I took hold upon his head, and he fell on his face, and I trod upon his head. And the people began to shout, and my backers to exult. And I drew near to the trainer and took the branch; and he kissed me, and said to me, "Daughter, peace be with you," and I began to go gloriously to the Gate of Life. Then I awoke, and perceived that I was not to fight with beasts, but against the devil.⁵⁷

It is sometimes argued that such an understanding of the meaning of martyrdom in terms of *pugna demonum* is born from a fashionable obsession of the time. To us it seems more likely, however, that this is a very natural consequence of the central idea of the association of the martyr with the redemptive work of Jesus' Passion on the Cross. Though this language may seem mythological, the short passage quoted above shows, in fact, the redactor's profound appropriation of the doctrine of redemption we find expressed in the Pauline soteriology (Col 2:14–15; cf. 2 Cor 2:14) and even more radically in the ironical Johannine theology of the Cross,⁵⁸ according to which it is at the hour of his being exalted on the Cross that Jesus dethrones the ruler of this world:

"Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die. (Jn 12:32)

According to the perspective of the fourth gospel, it is precisely through the "unleashing" of his obedient "love to the end" (13:1) that the Son conquers from within the kingdom of the prince of the world. Since the very essence of eternal life (*aiōnios Zoe*) is for John nothing else than the *agape* circulating

57. Bastiaensen, "Martyrium Polycarpi," 19:2, and "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis," 10:1–15.

58. Already present in the fourth gospel, the paradoxical symbolism of the victorious meekness of the standing and slain Lamb is radicalized in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:6, 12; cf. 19:11–21). The steadfast believer shares in his victory (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

between the Father and the Son, Jesus' obedient "giving up his Spirit" on the Cross (cf. Jn 19:30) becomes in John's eyes the act of power that brings the breath of life into the sphere of death, conquering it from within. The paradoxical idea of the "Martyrium Polycarpi"—that the martyr overpowers the devil through his very patience (*hypomone*)—is in this sense not new: it is rather rooted in the Pauline and especially Johannine theology of the Cross as cosmic victorious confrontation. At the end of the patristic era, Maximus the Confessor brought this soteriological *topos* to its most beautiful expression:

That vindictive wretch (*o Alastor* [the devil]) stirred up the wicked Pharisees and scribes to their various plots against him in order to bring him to hate the schemers. He thought that he would not be able to bear under their plots; and so he would be attaining his purpose by making him transgressor of the commandment of love; but the Lord, since he was God, knew his intimate designs; nor did he hate the Pharisees that were egging him on—how could he, being good by nature? On the contrary, through his love for them (*dia tes agapes eis autous*) he fought back against the instigator (*ton energounta emuneto*). . . . Blasphemed, he was long-suffering; suffering, he patiently endured; he showed them every act of love (*erga tes agapes*). Thus against the instigator he fought back by his loving kindness towards those who egged him on (*te philanthropia eis tous energoumenous*)—O paradoxical war! (*O paradoxou polemou*) Instead of hate he sets forth love, by goodness he casts out the father of evil (*agathoteti ballon tes kakias ton patera*). It is for this reason that he endured such evils from them; or rather, to speak more truly, because of them (*di'autous*) he fought (*egonizeto*) unto death for the fulfillment of the commandment of love (*hyper tes entoles tes agapes*). And, after having secured perfect victory (*teleian niken*) over the devil, he crowned himself with Resurrection.⁵⁹

Before hastening to classify such an epic theology of the Cross as mythological, one should first of all acknowledge the great importance that this imagery receives in the expression of the most ancient theology of redemption in the Church. Well before Maximus, it was attested to in the most ancient texts of

59. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life: The Four Centuries of Charity*, trans. Polycarp Sherwood (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955), 110.

the liturgy,⁶⁰ and already had important champions in the second century,⁶¹ and perhaps its greatest in the third: Origen of Alexandria. The Alexandrian not only dedicates some of his most inspired pages to the contemplation of the Passion of the Lord as a dethroning battle against sin and the powers of darkness,⁶² but he also makes an explicit connection between this theology and the glory of martyrdom:

For the martyrs in Christ disarm the principalities and powers of this world 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 (cf. Col 2:15).⁶³

All of this invites us to reflect more thoroughly on the meaning of a word that we encountered multiple times in Ignatius and that has quite a remarkable importance for our discussion: the word “world” (*kosmos*; Latin: *mundus*). Interestingly enough, the word *kosmos* in the writings of the early Church⁶⁴ seems to reflect the same semantic ambiguity it has in the gospel of John, where it

60. On the importance of this *leitmotiv* in the liturgy of the Church, starting in the most primitive times, cf. Cipriano Vagaggini, *Il senso teologico della Liturgia* (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 1999), 346–424.

61. On *Christus Victor's* soteriology in the patristic age in general and in Irenaeus in particular, cf. Bernard Sesboue, *Gesu Cristo l'unico mediatore. Saggio sulla redenzione e la salvezza*, vol. 1 (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 1990), 161–96. On the importance of the topic in early Jewish Christianity, cf. Jean Daniélou, “The Theology of Redemption,” chap. 8 in *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker (London: Westminster Press, 1977). Among the Asiatic authors of the second century, the closest to both the Johannine and Deutero-pauline environment, cf. Melito of Sardis, *In Pascha*, 68, 102; and especially the Anonymous Quartodeciman (Pseudo-Hippolytus), *In Pascha*, 98–116 (Raniero Cantalamessa, *I più antichi testi pasquali della Chiesa. Le omelie di Melitone di Sardis e dell'Anonimo Quartodecimano e altri testi del II secolo* [Rome: Edizioni liturgiche, 1972]).

62. See: Origen, *In Jos. Hom.*, VIII, 3; *In Lev. Hom.*, XI, 5; *In Num. Hom.*, XVI, 3; XVII, 6; XVIII, 4; *Comm. Mt.* XII, 18; XIII, 9; XVI, 8; *Comm. Joh.* I, 26; VI, 55; *Comm. Cant.* III. For the importance of this theme in Origen, see Jean Daniélou, *Origen* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 264–71; for Origen's demonology, see Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (London: Westminster Press, 1973), 507–15.

63. Greer, xli.

64. Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 771–72.

indicates both the world as creation of God and thereby good and the object of his unconditional love (Jn 3:16); but also, by metonymy, the world as a system of what we could call “structures of evil”: the world as a kingdom ultimately ruled by the dark spirit of the prince of lies.⁶⁵ It is against the world understood in this second sense that the Christians of the second and third centuries show their “obstinate opposition” (Marcus Aurelius).⁶⁶

There is an enduring, irreducible presence of anti-divine powers at work in this world, and nothing is so efficacious against these powers as the witness of the martyr’s love to the end. As embarrassing as it may seem today, this conviction has belonged to the wisdom of the Church from the very beginning. This means that the epic and military imagery associated with martyrdom (as in the Passion of Christ) has nothing to do with a sectarian hostility against the world as such (in the first sense). It is rather born out of the need to express the fact that the fight between Christ and the powers of darkness continues all through history, and the martyr’s witness is in this sense the most vivid sign of the (already secured)

65. On the ambiguity of the Johannine concept of world/cosmos, cf. Mateos-Barreto, *Dizionario Teologico del Vangelo di Giovanni* (Rome: Cittadella Editore, 2003), 205–07; Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 508–09; F. Marie Braun, “Le Monde bon et mauvais de l’Evangile johannique,” *La vie Spirituelle* 88 (1953): 580–98, and vol. 89 (1953): 15–29. The term “*o kosmos*” has different nuances of meaning in the Gospel, even opposite to each other. It can indicate: a) the physical universe simply, the earth as the place where men are given to live their existence (Jn 11:9; 17:5, 24; 21:25); by synecdoche it can indicate b) the whole of humanity (Jn 12:19; 14:27), especially as living in *this* world as opposed to the heavenly one and thereby longing for *aionios Zoe* (Jn 1:9, 10, 29; 3:16, 17, 19, 29; 4:42; 6:14, 33, 51; 7:4; 8:12; 9:5; 10:36; 11:27; 12:46, 47; 16:21–28; 17:18, 21, 23; 18:20, 37); finally, in a negative sense, the world is c) humanity as a social-religious order/structure (cosmos in Greek=“order”) of power based on a lie, closed to God’s truth (7:7; 8:23, 26; 9:39; 12:25, 31; 13:1; 14:15–31; 15:18, 19; 16:8, 11, 20, 33; 17:6, 9, 11; 17:13) and ruled by the prince/ruler (*Archon*) of this world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and father of lies (8:44). In many of these occurrences, the negative meaning c) is ambiguously intertwined with b), as for example in our case: hating one’s life “in this world” can mean both: being ready to give up one’s material life and also, in a spiritual sense, being willing to “die to” the life according to the logic of this world.

66. Cf. Eph 6:11–12: “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

victory of the former over the latter. One can dislike such a dark theology of history, but again, one cannot say that such a spiritual attitude reflects a lack of interest in the salvation of the world. The opposite is true: before the monks of the desert, who in this sense were nothing but the martyrs' natural successors,⁶⁷ the martyrs conceived themselves as those who were given to challenge the prince of this world in the very innermost of his stronghold, so to speak: the sphere of suffering and death; the sphere where God seems to be absent; the sphere where faith, hope, and love seem to be impossible. There the martyr brings his witness to the faithful reliability of God's love, and he is thereby God's most credible witness. From this point of view, it can be helpful to take a look at the analogous symbolical significance of the great anchorites' withdrawal to the desert. Contrary to what a modern might imagine, Antony does not retire to the desert to escape the corrupt city. The desert is rather the place where the demons have found refuge after the increasing spread of the Gospel in the cities.⁶⁸ The hermit goes therefore into the wilderness out of his desire to challenge the enemies in that very sphere of solitude where Christ himself fought the devil and won.⁶⁹ One could translate this into more contemporary language, saying that the ancient hermit, rather than going out of the world, penetrates its very depths, into the "dark tomb"⁷⁰

67. Cf. Mohrmann, viii.

68. Cf. *ibid.*, xxvii, lxxxi. As is obvious, the association of the desert with the dwelling place of the devil and demons in general is first explained in Scripture itself. On the ambiguity of the symbol of the desert in the Bible, cf. Marc Girard, *Les symboles dans la bible*, vol. 1: *La notion de symbole et les choses symboliques* (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 731–37.

69. Cf. Mt 4:11; Mk 1:12; Lk 4:1, 13. The Gospel of John, as is well known, contains neither temptations in the desert nor exorcisms performed by Jesus during his public ministry: the fourth evangelist rather condenses the confrontation between Jesus and the ruler of this world to the hour of the Cross: "I will not speak to you much longer, for the ruler of the world is approaching (*erchetai*); he has no power over me (*en emoi uok echei ouden*); but rise, let us go out of here, so that the world may know that I love the Father and that I do as he commanded me" (Jn 14:30–31; cf. 12:32). In this sense it is perhaps not inappropriate to think that the allusion to the wilderness (*eremos*) where Moses "lifted up" the serpent, contains a veiled symbolic re-reading of the Cross as the desert (*eremos*), where Jesus finally faces the devil: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14–15).

70. Cf. Mohrmann, 8–13.

where the enemy of God still exercises his power, in order to break open its doors from within, with the weapons of Christ's grace (cf. Heb 2:14).

It becomes clear why Origen can say that the martyr often becomes the very liberator of his material persecutors and executioners, and why he can also claim, not without a touch of irony, that when the demons suffer defeat by the martyrs, they are tempted to put an end to those persecutions they themselves provoked. The following passage of *Contra Celsus* is the perfect counterpoint to the above-quoted text of Maximus on Christ's paradoxical war:

It is not, then, because Christians cast insults upon demons that they incur their revenge, but because they drive them away out of the images, and from the bodies and souls of men. And here, although Celsus perceives it not, he has on this subject spoken something like the truth; for it is true that the souls of those who condemn Christians, and betray them, and rejoice in persecuting them, are filled with wicked demons.

But when the souls of those who die for the Christian faith depart from the body with great glory, they destroy the power of the demons, and frustrate their designs against men. Wherefore I imagine, that as the demons have learned from experience that they are defeated and overpowered by the martyrs for the truth, they are afraid to have recourse again to violence. And thus, until they forget the defeats they have sustained, it is probable that the world will be at peace with the Christians. (*Contra Celsus*, VIII, 43–44)

In this case too the idea is somehow already biblical. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, seems to discretely insinuate something similar when he states that when Stephen was stoned, “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58).

5. DEO GRATIAS

We arrive now at our third and final observation: the intensity of Ignatius's *lubido martyrii*—an intensity not restricted to Ignatius alone, as Marcus Aurelius indirectly confirms for us—never led the hierarchy of the Church to revise the severe prohibition

against seeking martyrdom:

Now one named Quintus, a Phrygian, who was but lately come from Phrygia, when he saw the wild beasts, became afraid. This was the man who forced himself and some others to come forward voluntarily (*ekountas*) [for trial]. Him the proconsul, after many entreaties, persuaded to swear and to offer sacrifice. Wherefore, brethren, we do not commend those who give themselves up [to suffering]: seeing the Gospel does not teach us so to do.⁷¹

This interesting passage of the “Martyrium Polycarpi” allows us to shed light on a final crucial element of the ancient theology of martyrdom already alluded to above: martyrdom is the greatest gift a Christian can receive from the Lord,⁷² but this also means that no one can make himself a martyr. As gift, martyrdom can only be received. It can be neither the result of one’s initiative nor of one’s autonomous performance. The loving witness of the martyr is his only as an obedient, receptive response to the call of the Lord, who gives the martyr a strength he would never have by himself. This brings us to focus our attention on perhaps the most characteristic and moving formula we encounter in the acts of the trials: *Deo gratias* (*charis Theo*). This formula had most likely become a sort of liturgical answer of the Christian to the judge’s sentence:

Saturninus the proconsul read out the decree from the tablet: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the rest having confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, since after the opportunity offered them of returning to the custom of the Romans, they have obstinately persisted, it is determined that they be put to the sword.

Speratus said: We give thanks to God.

Nartzalus said: Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God.

Saturninus the proconsul ordered it to be declared by the herald: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, and Secunda, I have ordered to be executed.

They all said: Thanks be to God.⁷³

71. New Advent, “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” 4.

72. Cf. on this the hyperbolic expressions of Cyprian in *Epistola*, 76, 1, 1ff.

73. Bastiaensen, “Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum,” 14–17.

This formula somehow captures the deepest core of the paradox of martyrdom and of the witness that the martyr therein bears before the world: To whom does the martyr give thanks and for what?

He gives thanks to God for the gift of being able to respond with the same radical love with which he has been loved by his God. In this way the martyr truly becomes a living image of the trinitarian truth revealed in and through the love of the Cross: Love as of the only begotten Son of the Father (Jn 1:14). Because he is the Son, rooted in the love of the Father, he can “hasten” (cf. Jn 13:27) to go to the Cross (Jn 3:16) in order to bear witness to the truth of the Love through which he himself is loved: “As the Father loved me, so have I loved you”; “Love one another, as I have loved you”:

Since a saint is generous and wishes to respond to the benefits from God that have overtaken him, 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.⁷⁴

Here it becomes necessary to quote the famous prayer uttered by the bishop Polycarp before his imminent martyrdom, a prayer that we have no serious reason for considering just a literary invention of the redactor, as Christine Mohrmann observed:⁷⁵

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you have counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be

74. Greer, xxiv.

75. Mohrmann, xix.

accepted this day before you as a fat and acceptable sacrifice (*thysia*), according as you, the ever-truthful God, have foreordained, have revealed beforehand to me, and now have fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, with whom, to you, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.”⁷⁶

There is no need to enter into a detailed analysis of this text; any reader familiar with Jesus’ priestly prayer (Jn 17) cannot help but perceive here the echo of the same dazzling paradox that radiates from the words of the Lord: an act of thanksgiving and praise for the imminent sacrifice the Son is given to perform through his very suffering and death as an answer to the eternal love of the Father for him—sacrifice through which the Son will somehow make visible to the disciples who God is and who they are called to be as his disciples: the “Truth”:

They are not from the world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου) as I am not from the world. Sanctify them in the truth (ἀγιάσον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ); your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself (ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐγὼ ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν) that they also may be consecrated in truth. (Jn 17:16–19)

6. CONCLUSION: THE MARTYR AS VISIBLE WITNESS OF THE “TRUTH”

We arrive in this way at the last point of the argument: How can one thank God for the gift of being tortured and slaughtered? One can perhaps do this in a moment of mystical enthusiasm, but can one do this when the moment of truth arrives? Again: is not such an understanding of martyrdom arguably docetic? Jesus himself, after all, asked the Father to remove the chalice, if possible, and “a disciple is not above his teacher” (Mt 10:24). This objection was notoriously taken up by Origen, who in his answer gives proof of his exegetical genius: Jesus asked the Father to remove *this* chalice, Origen argues, because he desired

76. New Advent, “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” 14.

to suffer infinitely more for us than the Father asked him.⁷⁷ On the one hand, this exegesis is certainly unfair and risks obscuring the psychological part of Jesus' vicarious suffering, which is rightly given greater importance by contemporary Christology. However, it helps, on the other hand, to capture the other side of the wondrous paradox of Jesus' Passover, a side that all the gospels in different ways try to render: the splendor—utterly perceivable even in the most extreme moments—of Jesus' freedom, of the voluntariness of his suffering and death, a voluntariness made possible by his “*having seen*” the eternal love of the Father, where “he came from”:

But it is likely, because of the verse “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39) that someone who does not accurately understand the intent of Scripture will suppose that the Savior proved a coward at the time of the Passion. . . . And if he proved a coward, someone might say, who will ever prove to be noble? . . . But the Savior feared no one because of the light and salvation given from the Father, and was afraid of no one because of the protection with which God shielded him. And his heart was not at all fearful when the entire host of Satan encamped against him. His heart, filled with sacred teachings, hoped in God when war rose up against him. Therefore, it would be contradictory if it was from cowardice that he said, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,” and yet said with courage, “Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear” (Ps 27:3). Perhaps, then, something in the passage has escaped our notice, and you will find it out by noting how the cup is mentioned in the three gospels . . . : “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39; cf. Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42). . . . Therefore, since every martyrdom completed by death for whatever motive is called a “cup,” see whether you cannot say that when he says “let *this* cup pass from me,” he does not refuse martyrdom in general, but only one kind. . . . Consider carefully whether it is not possible that the Savior saw, so to speak, what the different kinds of cups were and what would happen because of each of them, and that when he had considered their differences by some vast depth of wisdom, he refused one kind of martyr's death, while in secret he asked for another kind that was probably harder, so that some more

77. Cf. Greer, xxix.

general benefit that would overtake a greater number might be accomplished through that other cup. But this was not at all the Father's will, which was wiser than the Son's will, since he was ordering events by a way and in an order beyond what the Savior saw.⁷⁸

The four gospels are unanimous in bearing witness to a sort of glory that was able to break open the hearts of the most unlikely people even in the midst of the very hour of darkness: the centurion (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:38), the good thief (Lk 23:39–43), and last but not least, Joseph and Nicodemus in the gospel of John, who conquer their fear and publicly show their devotion at the very moment of Jesus' apparent defeat:

After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. (Jn 19:38–40)

There is something about the way Jesus dies (Mk 15:38) that witnesses more powerfully than anything else that he truly was the "Son of God." What is this something?

In order to answer, let us go back again to the martyrs. Undeniably, the final and most impressive character of the martyr's witness, as both the Acts and Passions consistently describe it, is the spirit of gladness of the martyr, not only when his suffering is imminent but even *within* it. No matter how reliable the modern reader considers these documents, this is the enigma before which the reports unanimously place us. No one will deny that the hand of the redactor seems to have, on occasion, a certain role in the way the facts are presented, especially when miracles of too-spectacular proportions accompany the narrative of the event. However, one can also wonder whether such a unanimous insistence, not just on the courage of the martyr, but also on his glad, luminous face, can be ascribed merely to apologetic idealization:

78. Ibid.

At this the people, exasperated, demanded that they should be tormented with scourges as they passed along the rank of the *venatores*. And they indeed rejoiced that they should have incurred any one of their Lord's passions. . . .

While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his herald to proclaim in the midst of the stadium thrice, "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian."⁷⁹

In order to make sense of these texts, we need to recall an important fact to which we alluded above: the martyr, for the ancient Church, is a visionary, a mystic. And this means that at the very moment in which he is given to share in Christ's Passion, he is also given to share in his Resurrection. Like Stephen the proto-martyr before her (Acts 6:15), Perpetua has visions during her time spent in prison, and at the moment of her agony is even "raptured in spirit" and has an "*ekstasis*."⁸⁰ The great art historian André Grabar brings attention to the fact that paleo-Christian iconography regularly represents the martyr as the *epoptes*, the one who has a direct vision of God:

The martyr is represented as the *epoptes* of God. . . . Already at the moment before his violent death he has enjoyed the vision of God and now he is in heaven, permanently immersed in the contemplation of God. . . . According to the Acts of the Apostles (6:15), Stephen, the proto-martyr, had the "face of an angel" when he started his inspired speech. . . . In this way, as the Passion of Christ is a manifestation of the divine glory, and therefore an epiphany, so also the end of the life of the martyr is

79. Bastiaensen, "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis," 18:9 and New Advent, "Martyrdom of Polycarp," 12.

80. Bastiaensen, "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis," 20:8. The paradox of the ecstatic state of the martyr during torments is a well attested *topos*: "Alexander did not let a sigh escape his mouth but he was absorbed in conversation with the Lord"; Blandina "did not feel anything of what was happening to her body, because of her hope, faith, and her conversation with Christ" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* V, 1, 56).

a manifestation of the effects of the descent of the Holy Spirit over him.⁸¹

These insightful observations by one of the greatest scholars of ancient Christian art give us the final answer. This is the martyr's secret and at the same time, we could say, the very content of his witness: the martyr is given to see God in the very moment in which he is asked to lay down his life for him, as if there were something like a mysterious correspondence between the two things. This vision allows the martyr to transform his terrible suffering and death into the most luminous and glorious image of God, who is Absolute Love. Through the simple mystery of his luminous face, the martyr brings, as it were, a most reliable witness to what he has seen: the eternal love of God, stronger than death and evil—even more: a love that is able to transform the suffering of the one who knows it into the most perfect image of its light. This is the witness of the martyr: his luminous face, transformed into a mirror of the light of God's love, shines in the very depths of the darkness in which he is immersed, and conquers it from within.

We can at this point conclude by asking: Why is the martyr the supreme and paradigmatic witness of the truth of God's love?

First, because through his firm confession the martyr affirms before the world that the love that gives true life, the life that every man seeks, is not a generic philanthropic love—rather, it is the love that comes from above, from the triune God through Jesus Christ. The call to martyrdom coincides, in this sense, with the task of keeping alive a claim that is often uncomfortable, if not unacceptable, for modern humanism: true love of one's neighbor is from above, is filial; *otherwise it is a love that lacks something essential, even when moved by the most sincere good will*. If my love does not bear witness to the infinite love of Another, it always gives too little: the martyr is ready to die, as his Master already has, to bear witness to this truth. This is, however, only the negative side of the coin:

For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world,
to bear witness (*martyria*) to the truth.

81. Grabar, *Martyrium*, 42 and 74.

This is the famous, enigmatic answer of the Johannine Jesus to Pontius Pilate's question of whether Jesus is a king or not (Jn 19:36–37). "What is the Truth?" Pilate asks in reply, giving voice to a question that any reader of the gospel cannot but spontaneously ask, as he arrives at this turning point of the dialogue between Jesus and the Roman magistrate. But Jesus does not reply. Better: he replies with silence. His silence, the silence of the Paschal Lamb, who alone can love to the end because he relies on the love of the Father, is his true answer. His silence is the word that reveals the Truth of "where he is from":

"Where are you from (Πόθεν εἶ σὺ)?" But Jesus gave no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." (Jn 19:9–11)

The same is true of the martyr: the martyr brings the sovereign freedom of self-giving love where love is impossible to man alone. And he can do this because he "comes from" the love of Christ through which he has been reborn. To go back to the symbolism of the monks of the desert, the martyr makes the Son's gratitude (*Deo gratias!*) to the Father shine in that wasteland where no gratitude, trust, or filial love seem possible; he brings brotherly love (forgiveness: cf. Lk 23:34; Acts 7:60) inside that "dark tomb" (*Life of Antony*) where it seems impossible to endure in love. This Christ-like love is the love that truly makes the difference—the love beyond which there is nothing; the love whose light shines nowhere as bright as within the very darkness that tries to overcome it (Jn 1:5). □

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