

Martyrdom

Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ~ Acts 21:13

JESUS CALLS ALL OF US to a life of faith, faith in him and in his words and promises. For most of us, that means keeping the commandments, receiving the sacraments, going to Mass on Sunday, and trying to live a life of charity and holiness. But there are times of tribulation when our faith is challenged, and when we must exert greater efforts to hold onto our beliefs and contend with forces that disrupt, hinder, or even forbid the practice of our faith. There have been many instances in the history of the Church when believers have been subjected to persecutions that, all too often, ended in death for Christ's faithful people. Jesus foretold these times: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20). Heaven is filled with those who were persecuted for the sake of their faith: those valiant souls whom the Church calls martyrs because they surrendered their lives to testify to the Lord. Martyrs perform a supreme act of the virtue of fortitude.

One of the most astounding accounts of martyrdom is recorded in the Second book of Maccabees, wherein a Jewish mother, before her own martyrdom by the pagan ruler of Judea, sees and encourages her seven sons to remain faithful to the law of God: "It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, 'What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers.' The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and



Martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria in the early 4th century

cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly.... The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers.... The youngest brother being still alive, ... leaning close to him, she spoke in their native tongue as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: 'My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you.... Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers.' ... [T]he young man said, ... 'I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers' ... The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, the mother died, after her sons" (2 Mc 7:1-5, 20-21, 24, 27, 29, 37, 39-41). This account is the precursor and model of Christian martyrdom.

Martyrs offer to God and to us an act of courageous witness (the word "martyr" is taken from the Greek word for "witness") to the truths of the faith, even unto death. The heroism of martyrs is almost beyond human understanding. St. Stephen, the Church's first martyr, was stoned to death in Jerusalem while asking God to forgive his tormentors (see Acts 7:54-60). Imagine the heroic sacrifice of St.

Ignatius of Antioch who, awaiting death, declared: "Let me become the food of the beasts, through whom it will be given

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me to reach God”¹ (CCC 2473). St. Lawrence was fried to death on a grid-iron, telling his torturers to turn him over, for he was done on one side. St. Perpetua, a young nursing mother, and a slave who was with her, St. Felicity, weeks from childbirth, were imprisoned. Perpetua’s son was miraculously weaned and Felicity’s daughter was adopted at birth by a Christian woman; both women were then martyred in the amphitheater.

The Church has kept records of its martyrs; they are its archives of heroism for faith, written in blood. Tradition reports that ten of the original eleven apostles died for the faith. Those who succeeded St. Peter, who was crucified in Rome, were objects of special persecution: of the 260-plus popes to the present, many were imprisoned, tortured, and martyred. Nearly every one of the three dozen popes from St. Peter to 313 AD was martyred.

In almost every century, the Catholic Church has been singled out for destruction and death. The Roman Empire filled the cavities in the catacombs with saintly martyrs. Martyrdom marked the beginning of the Catholic faith for many nations, and there has been virtually no torture not inflicted on those willing to die rather than refuse to acknowledge their faith in God and Jesus Christ. Catholics who refused to accept an English ruler in place of the pope as head of Christ’s Church were hanged, drawn, and quartered. In 1597, twenty-six believers were crucified in Nagasaki, Japan, the beginning of a persecution that cost over six thousand lives and drove the Church underground until the mid-1800s. The guillotines of the French Revolution claimed the lives of hundreds of bishops, priests, and religious. Since 1840, more than 100 souls have been martyred in Korea. In Uganda, St. Charles Lwanga and his companions died at the hands of a king who could not tolerate Christian condemnation of his immoral life. Mexico’s ferocious anti-clerical persecutions resulted in numerous martyrdoms of

“The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.”

priests and religious early in the 20th century; one of the most striking of these was Fr. Miguel Pro, standing before a firing squad with arms outstretched, proclaiming: “Long live Christ the King!” Martyrs to the Nazi and Soviet Communist regimes in the 20th century are almost too numerous to count. Today in China, many millions of Catholics are hounded by the government, and practice their faith at the risk of their lives.

The Church has long declared that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians”² (CCC 852). Persecution, hatred, and distortion of its doctrines are inevitable responses to Catholicism, which, like its head, is a “sign of contradiction”³ (CCC 575) to the world. One might almost think that these are marks of the Church, for Scripture says, *“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered”* (Rom 8:36, citing Ps 44:22). Yet martyrs say, with the prophet: *“The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him”* (Lam 3:24).

The Catholic Church continues to grow in membership despite the ceaseless efforts of Satan and his minions to corrupt its teachings, harass its members, and murder its faithful, both lay and clerical. Yet the Church and its people remain Christ’s champions, the light of the world (see Mt 5:15), upholding the truth that alone can

save the mass of humanity which resists throwing off the yoke of moral corruption and sin.

Those who seek salvation and, for love of Christ, become members of his Body, the Catholic Church, look to St. Paul, once a persecutor of Christ’s people, who laid down his life as a martyr, proclaiming in triumph: *“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom 8:38-39).

(CCC 575, 852, 2473-2474)



Blessed Miguel Pro kneeling in prayer immediately before his execution

¹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ad. Rom. 4, 1 from Sources Chrétiennes 10, 110 (Paris: 1942)

² Tertullian, Apol. 50, 13 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 1, 603 (Paris: 1841-1855)

³ Luke 2:34