

**WITNESS
&
MARTYRDOM**

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WITNESS & MARTYRDOM

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“According to Christ’s teaching, the state of persecution is the normal state for the Church in the world, and martyrdom for Christians is their normal situation. Not in the sense that the Church ought to be continuously and everywhere persecuted; but if the Church is persecuted for some time and in certain places, she should immediately remember that she is sharing a grace, a blessing which Christ promised her: “I told you these things so that, when their hour will come, you may remember that I told you”. These words cannot be overcome by any evolution of the world. And not in the sense that every single Christian ought to undergo a bloody martyrdom, but in the sense that he/she ought to consider the case that presents itself as the external manifestation of an inner reality which he/she is already living. Martyrdom is the horizon of Christian life in a different way from how it was for the Jewish faith. In the latter in fact it was the

extreme human possibility, for the single faithful, of witnessing one's faith in God; what stands out is the bravery for the sake of one's faith: they are heroes who are introduced to the whole people, especially to the youth. Such a heroic character is missing in the New Testament because it is not us, human beings, who first aim at the extreme target, but we come from there where Jesus Christ first and definitely dwelt." (Hans Urs von Balthasar)

Introduction

In the NT Greek the term is **martyr** :

witness, to witness, to testify, to attest the reality of an event or a statement by giving to the affirmation of it all the evidence and with solemnity which the circumstances require.

Strictly speaking: witness is one who has observed an event and can give an account of it by way of proof; more broadly: a witness to the truth: a person who knows something to be true, who proclaims the truth, who stands for his/her convictions.

It is a term born in the context of a trial or in a legal action setting.

The witness of a man is serious; false witness is a grave sin; it is condemned (Cf. The 8th commandment). God is the guarantor of the witness. The witness in the court of law swears by God to tell the truth ...

In more general sense, one can attest the reality of something in different ways: by word or actions, by the behavior or even by silence.... In the religious field in particular, the supreme form of witness to God's truth is to give one's life, to accept the loss of it, violently, to be martyrs.

I. *The witness of God (in the OT)*

Beyond the witness of men there is the witness of God which no one can contradict. He is the guarantor of all our human contracts (like those concerning marriage or property ...), the avenger against false witness.

God is especially the guarantor of the Covenant (divine contract) by giving the commandments: they are preceded by God's *solemn witness*: "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (*Exodus* 20:1); Cf. all the chapters 19-20 and *Deuteronomy* 5:1-22.

The commitment of Israel to God is attested by object/signs which bear witness against the people in case of infidelity: *The tablets of witness*,

in which the commandments were carved, *the ark of witness* where the tablets were kept and the *tent of witness* in which the ark was housed....

Even heaven and earth can be called as witnesses: Cf. *Deuteronomy* 30:19 (the whole passage: 15-20):

“See. Today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster. If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God that I enjoin on you today, if you love Yahweh your God and follow his ways, if you keep his commandments, his laws, his customs, you will live and increase, and Yahweh your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to make your own. But if your heart strays, if you refuse to listen, if you let yourself be drawn into worshipping other gods and serving them, I tell you today, you will most certainly perish; you will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Chose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, clinging to him; for in this your life consists, and on this depends your long staying in the land which Yahweh swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob he would give them”.

God gives the task or mission to be witnesses to the Prophets: it is more often an accusing witness against the unfaithfulness of the people (Cf. *Amos*); but also they are witnesses of Yahweh’s love for the people of Israel: it is in the Prophets (*Hosea, Isaiah, etc....*) that we find the most beautiful and extraordinary expressions of love: e.g. *Isaiah* 43:1-7.

II. *The witness of Jesus according to John’s Gospel*

The concept of WITNESS is very much developed in the NT, especially in the writings of the evangelist John, in Acts and in St. Paul.

Jesus is the **faithful witness** (*Revelation* 1:5) who has come into the world to bear witness to the truth (*John* 18:37): and the truth is the salvific will of God.

1. JESUS’ SUPREME WITNESS: This is the affirmation that Jesus gives in front of Pontius Pilate: it is the **supreme witness**. In the Gospel of John, the episode of Jesus in front of Pontius Pilate is developed very much and with a dramatic flair. The scenes are somehow divided by the movements of the procurator who goes out to see the crowds and comes in again to continue the interrogation of Jesus.

There are two moments of great dramatic importance:

- the 2nd scene where Jesus proclaims himself king and yet his kinship is of an unusual character.

“So, you are a king then?” said Pilate. “It is you who said it” answered Jesus. **“Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth** and those who are on the side of the truth listen to my voice” (*John 18:37*).

- **the last (7th) scene** where Jesus is brought out in front of the crowd, seated on the seat of judgment and introduced to the people as their king. It was the sixth hour when the paschal lamb was sacrificed. The solemnity of the scene is marked by the accuracy of the indications of time and place:

Pilate had Jesus brought out, and seated him in the chair of judgment at a place called the Pavement, in Hebrew Gabbatha. It was the Day of Preparation, about the sixth hour. ‘Here is your king’ said Pilate to the Jews. ‘Away with him, away with him, crucify him’.” (*John, 19:13-15, New Jerusalem Bible*). “

John means to tell us that precisely at this time the great mystery is been accomplished, THE TRUTH, behind the signs being performed in the temple, is being realized. Jesus is king, he is seated on the seat of judgment. He is judging humanity. We are in the presence of the judicial and royal power that belong to Christ as Son of Man: and this is the glory of Christ in the humiliation of his passion and death. Jesus manifests, witnesses the love of the Father in so unheard a way (paradox) as to become, by force of his love, King and Messiah and therefore source of salvation for humanity, whether he is accepted or rejected.

We have here the messianic enthronement of Jesus in the moment in which he accomplishes his fundamental mission of manifesting to men, by the complete and utter donation of himself, the love of the Father. John, presenting in his gospel the dramatic trial between Light and Darkness with the victory of Light, shows us that the climax where darkness seems to triumph, the darkest hour of humanity, is in this moment and not later, already in this very moment when humanity endeavors to crush him, Christ really reigns and triumphs. The scene before Pilate is a sign where the historian reads death, but the believer reads there the fulfillment of the true mission of Jesus, his triumph: the TRUTH (*De La Potterie*).

St. Paul takes up the topic of **Jesus’ great testimony** in two beautiful passages of the first letter to Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:6 “God wants everyone to be saved and reach the full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God and one Mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself as a ransom for them all. **He is the evidence of this**, sent at the appointed time, and I have been named a herald and apostle of it and – I’m telling the truth and no lie – a teacher of the faith and truth to the pagans”.

1 Timothy 6:13 “Fight the good fight of the faith and win for yourself the eternal life to which you were called when you made your profession and spoke up for the truth in front of many witnesses. Now, before God, the source of all life and **before Jesus Christ, who spoke up as a witness for the truth in front of Pontius Pilate**, I put to you the duty of doing all that you have been told...”

Jesus’ witness or testimony elicit the one of the Christian leaders, the Apostles. This passage (*1 Timothy 6:11-16*) is reach of spiritual consequences.

2. CONTENT AND VALIDATION OF JESUS’ WITNESS, according to John’s Gospel:

- Jesus bears witness to what he has seen and heard in the presence of the Father;

- Jesus bears witness about himself: the famous **self-definitions**: Cf. 8,12 “I am the Light of the world ...”, etc...

- Jesus’ witness is valid because it is based on the evidence of other witnesses: John the Baptist (*Ecce Agnus Dei*); the works accomplished by Jesus at the Father’s command; The Scriptures (*Moses, Abraham*); The final witness is the Spirit: in Him Christ is victorious over death and fills the whole world. The Spirit which is given to us gives witness to Jesus (“When the Advocate comes... he will be my witness. And you too will be witnesses because you have been with me from the outset” *John 15:26*).

The testimony of the Father is Jesus’ resurrection:

“We accept the testimony of human witnesses, but God’s testimony is much greater, and this is God’s testimony, given as evidence for his Son. Everybody who believes in the Son of God has his testimony inside him; and anyone who will not believe God is making God out to be a liar, because he has not trusted the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son; anyone who has the Son has life, anyone who does not have the Son does not have life” (*1 John, 5:9-12*)

III. ***“YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES”***

The witness of the NT must take a concrete form: the preaching of the Gospel: *Matthew* 24:14 “This Good News of the kingdom will be proclaimed to the whole world as a witness to all nations and then the end will come”.

The great commission : *Matthew* 28:19-20 “Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I give you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time”.

“There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed” (EN n.32).

1. ***The witness of the Apostles***

The Apostles are first of all witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection and then of the whole life of Jesus (Acts 1:21-22 Matthias’s qualifications). They are *first hand witnesses* who have seen and heard (*eye witnesses*), but inspired by the Spirit (“When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth” (John 16:13).

The witness belongs to the mystery which the event conceals: the mystery of the Word of Life come in the flesh. The apostles are witnesses who possess in themselves the testimony of Jesus. Faith is born in the acceptance of their witness.

The *kerigma*:

“Now, I and those with me, can witness to everything he did throughout the countryside of Judea and in Jerusalem itself: and also to the fact that they killed him by hanging him on a tree yet three days afterwards God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people, but only by certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand. Now we are those witnesses, we have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead-and has ordered us to proclaim this to his people and to tell them that God has appointed him to judge everyone, alive or dead. It is to him that all the prophets bear witness: that all who believe in Jesus will have their sins forgiven through his name” (*Acts*, 10:39-43).

“We saw it and we are giving our testimony” (*1 John* 1:1-4; cf. *John* 19:35; 21:24...). The evangelist John insists very much on the experience of the

senses: “We have heard, we have seen we have watched, we have touched...”.

The witness of the resurrection is very strong in St. Paul also:

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself cannot have been raised, and if Christ has not been raised than our preaching is useless and your believing it is useless; indeed we shown up as witnesses who have committed perjury before God, because we swore in evidence before God that he had raised Christ to life. For, if the dead are not raised, and if Christ had not been raised, you are still in your sins...” (1 *Corinthians*. 15:13-17).

The apostles’ witness is threefold:

1. *The witness of the word*: they started their ministry in an atmosphere of contradiction; they had to rehabilitate Jesus in front of the Jewish public opinion. The law wanted the witness of more than one person, so it is that, when Peter speaks, he always says WE.

They are ministers of the Word. They speak with the power of the Holy Spirit. They speak with boldness, bringing their own testimony and that of the Holy Scriptures as Jesus had taught them.

2. *The witness of signs and wonders*, also with the power of the Spirit.

3. *The witness of suffering and death*: the death: the suffering of Jesus they saw as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies and their own suffering as the fulfillment of the Beatitudes: “And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin glad to have had the honor of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41).

It was the Holy Spirit who had turned timid men into heroes who were able to tread in the footprints of the Servant of Yahweh. The apostles are the witnesses par excellence because of the direct experience **the Crucified and Risen Christ. This is the charism of apostolate proper, that cannot be passed on.**

2. *The witness of all the other Christians*

Their witness is based, not on a direct, historical experience of the crucified and risen Lord, but on the faith in the word of the Apostles (the Church) and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The experience of Pentecost repeats itself e.g. after Peter and John's release from Sanhedrin (*Acts* 4:31); at Cornelius' conversion (*Acts* 10:44), etc... and in different forms in every genuine adhesion of faith.

It is the base of the witness of the followers of Jesus; it is the gift of the Holy Spirit for the individual and the community. God's witness finds a response only in the heart of the believer; only for the believer can it become a source of life.

This gift of the Spirit is manifested in:

- JOY: as a consequence of the acceptance of the message of the Apostles and faith in the resurrection of Christ, as the Apostles themselves experienced at Easter; as consolation for the presence of the risen Christ with his Spirit already in this life and as foretaste of our own resurrection and victory at the second coming of the Lord;
- LOVE: energetic, brotherly love like that of the early Christians: "The community of those who believed were of one heart, and one soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything that they owned was held in common" (*Acts* 4:32).

These traits are a counter – witness against the sadness and selfishness of a Godless society. The famous French priest, **Abbe' Pierre, the apostle of the rag-pickers**, testifies to the fact that in the brotherhood of Emmaus the order of the theological virtues is inverted. On their arrival, the *clochards* (homeless) are given every kind of loving service. By degrees, under the rays of a heartfelt love, the ice of the embitterment and cynicism melts. Hope is back gradually in the hearts of these deprived ones... Finally, faith in Christ is kindled in them.

- PERSECUTION: often the witness is not accepted and persecution follows which is the occasion for a more widespread witness: since the beginning, persecution was the occasion for reaching out to other places, a pattern which has repeated itself throughout the history of the Church up to the present time.

Persecution is also the occasion of exercising other gifts of the Spirit: boldness, courage, perseverance, endurance. With the long persecution, the term *martyr* becomes synonym of witness of blood.

Martyrdom is the total, absolute witness: a witness to the faith consecrated by the testimony of blood.

3. *The witness of Martyrdom: preliminary remarks*

Chronologically, martyrdom was the first form of witness to be experienced by the early Church. In the early Church, the Church of the age of persecution, the Eucharist was celebrated on the body of the Martyrs; later, on their relics.

It is as if people learned first to die for Christ and then to live for Him (Even in Africa, e.g. in Uganda: the Uganda Martyrs,... Nyadru... In Congo-Zaire: Anwarite... In the Philippines: Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod...). The witness of holiness follows.

In the early teaching of the Fathers, Christ is present in the martyr (*Christus in martyre est* – Tertullian): after all Christ is the first to extend his witness to the shedding of blood. “*Et nos martyrum fructus sumus*”: there is a fruitfulness, fecundity for the community in martyrdom.

Even in Comboni, the tension to total witness which is martyrdom echoes the theology and spirituality of the cross. The model is the Pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd. “If I had a thousand lives, I’d like to give them all for the salvation of Africa”.

The theme of martyrdom is very much present in the NT, especially in the **book of Revelation**. Martyrdom is witness consecrated by the testimony of blood. It develops in front of opposition and persecution:

- Babylon gluts on the blood of the martyrs: “Babylon the Great, the mother of all the prostitutes and all the filthy practices on the earth. I saw that she was drunk, drunk with the blood of the saints, and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus...” (*Revelation* 16:5-6).

The apparent defeat of the martyrs is in reality a victory: Cf. *Revelation* 12:10-12 (After the defeat of the Dragon)

“Victory and power and empire for ever have been won by our God, and all authority for his Christ, now that the persecutor, who accused our brothers day and night before our God, has been brought down. They have triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the witness of their martyrdom, because, even in the face of death, they would not cling to life. Let the heaven rejoice and all that live there...”.

The topic of Martyrdom is treated separately in a reflection where its theology and spirituality are given a proper development.

4. Present day relevance of witness

1. “Today, more than ever, and as in the first centuries of her existence, the Church chiefly needs **witnesses** who, by their whole way of life, make the true countenance of Christ shine out before a world which has grown pagan” (Pius XII, 1947).

2. “Modern man listens more willingly to **witnesses** than to teachers and if it does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (Paul VI, EN n. 41, 1975).

3. “The modern apostle too is called to bear **witness** to the Risen Christ to a world which has grown pagan”.

“We too are for the gift of the Spirit without which we can achieve nothing: when we humbly implore it from God, he will open to us the immeasurable depth of Holy Scriptures and will equip us with superhuman power”. (John Paul II).

In RM, 1990, chapter 5: *Paths of Mission*, the first path of evangelization in **witness**. The Pope distinguishes 5 forms of witness:

- *the witness of holiness*: the very life;
- *charity* towards the poor, the weak and the suffering;
- *commitment to peace*, justice, human rights and human promotion;
- *prophetic stand* in the face of injustice, oppression and corruption;
- *The witness of humility*: a humility which allows us to make a personal and community examination of conscience in order to correct in our behavior whatever is contrary to the Gospel and disfigure the face of Christ. The capacity of putting ourselves in question, of on-going formation.

THEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

Introduction:

On May 7, 2000, in Rome, there was the commemoration of the Martyrs of the XXth Century. It took place in the Coliseum, a place very meaningful for every Christian because it reminds us of the first Christians who were dragged into the Coliseum to be given as prey to the wild animals, or to be tortured and killed in every possible cruel way.

It was a gesture which was naturally meant to draw a parallel between the first Christian community and the Church of the XX Century and to suggest that even for the era which is coming to an end the Church can be considered the “Church of Martyrs”, as the Pope wrote:

The Church of the first millennium was born of the blood of the Martyrs: ‘*Sanguis martyrum – semen christianorum*’ ... The historical events linked to the figure of Constantine the Great could never have ensured the development of the Church as it occurred during the first millennium if it had not been for *the seed sown by the Martyrs and the heritage of sanctity which marked the first millennium.*

At the end of the second millennium, *the Church has once again become a Church of Martyrs.* The persecution of believers – priests, religious and laity – has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world. The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants, as Pope Paul VI pointed out in his Homily for the Canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda. *This witness must not be forgotten.*” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 1994, n. 37*).

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF MARTYRDOM IN OUR MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE AND FORMATION

The experience of Martyrdom, with or without the shedding of blood, is indicated in our chapter documents as a good, positive sign, present in the experience of the Congregation, especially during the last years and which brings to maturity our missionary vocation as the conscience of a radical commitment to be kept until death. (where this “until death” may mean both the final perseverance or martyrdom).

It is a sign which marks our peculiarity as belonging to an Institute which appears to have been entrusted with the most difficult missions, and those in the most dangerous places, and puts us, COMBONI MISSIONARIES, in line with today’s Church which is “the Church of Martyrs”. Only in the missionary field, without considering other areas or situations, according to Card. Tomko of Propaganda Fide, every week there

is a missionary who is killed... It is an average of one person per week who is killed in the field of missions.

Martyrdom is also an essential component of the charismatic experience of our Founder. It goes together with the dimension of his “engagement or marriage” to Africa; it is rooted in Comboni’s charismatic experience that has brought the Founder to conceive and produce the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa and especially it refers to the sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd with the Pierced Heart, whom Comboni contemplated as the model of the missionary. The center of this aspect of the Comboni’s spirituality is his love for the Cross and participation and sharing in the Pascal Mystery.

The idea of martyrdom is also co-extensive with the common vision of the Vows as a continuation of martyrdom: in the tradition of the primitive Church, Monasticism (the first form of Religious Life) is seen as a radical witness of faithfulness to Christ like martyrdom was.

II. MARTYRDOM AS THE NATURAL HORIZON OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

We will try to penetrate a bit deeper into the theological depth of the idea of martyrdom and its connection with our condition of followers of Jesus and missionaries. In this we are helped by the teaching of a great theologian of this century, Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

A christian is one who commits his life for the brethren since he himself owns his life to the his Crucified Lord.

The disposition to martyrdom, as radical witness of a love which goes beyond death, is proper of the christian as a new creature, full of the fruits of the Spirit.

“Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand. Let your thought be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. But when Christ is revealed - and he is our life - you too will be revealed with all your glory with him” (Col. 3: 1-4).

“You are God’s chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and

patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your heart, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful”. (Col. 3: 12-15).

“What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22).

“Try, then to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God” (Ephes. 5:2).

“Thanks be to God who, wherever he goes, makes us in Christ, partners of his triumph, and through us is spreading the knowledge of himself, like a sweet smell everywhere. We are Christ’s incense to God for those who are saved and for those who are not; for the last the smell of death that leads to death; for the first the sweet smell of life that leads to life” (1 Cor. 2:14-15).

Cfr. also Phil. 4:4-7: “I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness. Let your tolerance be evident to everyone: the Lord is very near. There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus”.

The mandate of the Christian is to testify, even with death if necessary, **that love is superior to death, is life eternal**. The faithful lives always according to death and resurrection because the whole christian existence is the attempt, the effort to answer in faith and thanksgiving to Jesus who loved us and offered himself for us (Cfr, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake” (Gal. 2:19-20).

St. Ignatius of Loyola, at the end of his Spiritual Exercises, teaches us to offer our life to God and the brethren daily in answer to Jesus, the Crucified love: “*Suscipe Domine... Take, Lord and receive...* ”.

This is the conclusion that we get from the Bible: Cfr. The missionary discourse (Matthew, Ch. 10): Jesus declares that the value of his historic cross (i.e the cross that he bore and on which he died in a definite time in history) goes in reality beyond and above the puntual, historical time; it is, as it were, the permanent LIFE-FORM for all those who want to follow him.

The one who likes Jesus, chooses the Cross as the “**place**” where dying is not a possibility but an absolute certainty. This is what we must conclude from the biblical data; Martyrdom is the natural horizon of Christian Life.

We can reflect on the difference between the martyrdom of the Maccabees brothers and their mother in the Old Testament and that of Christ’s followers in the New Testament.. For the Maccabees, their death is the last human possibility of manifesting their faith in Yahweh. For the Christian, instead, it is **the condition of the new life that flows from Christ.**

“The love of Christ overwhelms us when we reflect that if one man has died for all, then all men should be dead (are dead); and the reason he died for all was so that living men should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life for them” (1 Cor. 5:14-15).

Christ’s death for us is shown as “*a priori*” of Christian behavior: this is completely shaped by it. In the letter to the Romans, this objective “*a priori*” extends from Christ’s action to the Christian Baptism which objectively puts the Form of Christ’s death and burial as prior to any subjective faith, and soon presents the essential behavior of the Christian as determined and characterized by the same “*a priori*” and the expects it to be completely shaped by it.

“You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death; in other words, when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too may live a new life.

If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection. We must realize that our former selves have been crucified with him to destroy this sinful body and to free us from the slavery of sin. When a man dies, of course, he has finished with sin.

But we believe that having died with Christ we shall return to life with him: Christ, as we know, having been raised from the dead will never die again. Death has no power over him anymore. When he died, he died once and for all, to sin, so his life now is life with God; and in that way, you too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:3-11).

“I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake” (Gal. 2:19-20).

Faith (and life of faith) means therefore to thank with the whole of our life for the fact of being in debt for the whole or our existence because he gave his whole existence for my sake, this thanksgiving cannot be expressed but with the whole of my existence.

This is the logic of Christianity: we cannot say thanks to God in an adequate way but with our own complete existence.

The truth which constitute the measure of faith is the death of God for love of the world, for humankind and for each member of it, in the night of Jesus' cross.

All the fountains of grace spring from this night: Faith, Hope and Charity.

All that I am, **if I am more than a perishable and hopeless being whose illusions are destroyed by death**, I am because of that death which opens to me the access to God.

I blossom on the tomb of the God who died for me, put down my roots in the soil which is his flesh and blood.

Life of faith means therefore existence in death out of love: an anticipation of the offering of my life in every single situation of my Christian existence.

Christian Faith is an anticipation of the offering of my life to Christ.

An anticipation of one's death as answer to Christ's death.

It is the way of making sure in a serious way of our faith.

INTRA TUA VULNERA ABSCONDE ME (hide me in your wounds): we used to pray in an ancient formula. But in which **place** would we be more exposed? In which other place would we be sure of receiving more blows?. And yet that is the safest place, there would be totally safe because it is the final place: the complete openness to death out of love.

For the world, there is no other symbol or prototype than this and it was set by God.

III. MARY'S BLOODLESS MARTYRDOM AND US

The Blessed Virgin Mary went through the terrible duty of love: she was called to agree with death. The bloodless martyrdom of Mary generates the Church. (Von Balthasar speak of the "serious case": something which

you cannot do away with without destroying the very essence of Christianity).

It is the fecundity (fruitfulness) of the sorrowful Mother (*Mater Dolorosa*). The birth cry coincides with the unspoken death cry in the heart of the mother at the son's death.

It is the consequence of Mary's "yes" at Nazareth, unconditional ("according to your word"): Mary's "yes" is the acceptance and the condition of Jesus' "yes" to the Father, by which all the promises are fulfilled and the Word became flesh, a flesh offered, given up and immolated, sacrificed.

This "YES" is the source and origin of all prayers. Prayer has its measure in this "YES".

"The martyrdom of the Virgin Mary, implicit in Simeon's prophecy, is put before us in the story of the Lord's passion. The venerable old man, Simeon, said of the infant Jesus: 'This child is set for a sign that will be contradicted'; and to Mary: 'A sword will pierce your soul'.

Blessed Mother, a sword did pierce your soul. For no sword could penetrate your Son's flesh without piercing your soul. After your own son Jesus gave up his life – he was yours in a special sense through he belongs to all – the cruel lance, which opened his side and would not spare him in death though it could do him no injury, could not touch his soul. His soul was no longer there, but yours could not be set free, and it was pierced by a sword of sorrow. We rightly speak of you as more than a martyr, for the anguish of mind you suffered exceeded all bodily pain.

'Mother, behold your son.' These words were more painful than a sword thrust for they pierced your soul and touched the quick where soul is divided from spirit. What an exchange! John was given to you in place of Jesus, a disciple in place of the Master, a son of Zebedee in place of the Son of God, a mere man in place of the true God. These words must have pierced your loving soul, since just to recall them breaks our hearts, hard and stony though they be.

Do not marvel, brethren, that Mary is said to have endured martyrdom in her soul. Only he will marvel who forget what Paul said of the Gentiles, that among their worst vices was that they were without compassion. Not so with Mary! May it never be so with those who venerate her.

Someone may say: 'Did she not know in advance that her Son would die? Without a doubt. 'Did she not have sure hope of his immediate resurrection?' Full confidence indeed. 'Did she then grieve when he was crucified?' Intensely. Who are you, brother, and what kind of judgment is

yours that you marvel at the grief of Mary any more than that the Son of Mary should suffer? Could he die bodily and she not share his death in her heart? Charity it was that moved him to suffer death, charity greater than that of any man before or since: charity too moved Mary, the like of which no mother has ever known” (*St. Bernard; from the office of our Lady of Sorrows, 15 September*).

Like for Mary, the participation in the mystery of Christ’s death is the vocation of every Christian and we can see it especially in the lives of the Saints who have embodied in themselves the example of Christ in a more evident and exemplary way: e.g.

-**Peter** tried to impose his view on Jesus and as a consequence he denied him, but then he repented and cried miserably and learned to allow the will of Another to be accomplished in him. He came to the same “place” where Mary was (*Stabat Mater Dolorosa, iuxta crucem lacrimosa*), and his staying with Jesus on the cross would imply to die literally on the cross like Jesus. Only the tradition wants him to have died crucified like his Master, but upside down, by his own request, out of humility.

As the confession of Peter was not from “flesh and blood but from the Father” (Mat. 16:21-23), in the same way his martyrdom would require that he surrenders to a will higher than his own:

“I tell you most solemnly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.’ In these words he indicated the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God. After this he said:’ Follow me”. (John, 21:18-19).

St. Caterine of Siena had a great devotion to the Blood of Christ: she had a special awareness of the continuous flowing of the blood of the Cross which produces in the Church a continuous sanctification... It is a continuous being present of the Bride to the bridegroom’s death.

-What is true of the Saints is also true of **every Christian**, especially of every messenger of God’s love, every missionary, like St. Paul:

“My children, I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).

The fruitfulness of our journey of imitation of Christ as well as every apostolate have to conform to the pattern of Jesus’ passion out of love.

IV. THE EUCHARIST AND MARTYRDOM

In the mystery of the Eucharist, the birth moment of the Church (which coincides with Christ's death) is rendered present. The Church celebrates its birth not so much as something which happened in the past, but as something that is happening always, every time, in the consecration, sacrifice and communion and this in the event of the Lord's death:

“Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death...” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Conclusion:

A faith existence is a life steeped in the mystery of Jesus' death out of love; that is: being in the truth (the truth is the fact that God has saved us by means of his death out of love, by means of the historical fact of the Incarnation). Faith is the anticipation of the offering of our life in Christ even to the supreme sacrifice of the shedding of blood. This is why:

Martyrdom is the horizon of the Christian life.

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