

## The Profile of the Early Christian Martyrs

*Excerpt provided by Joe Tremblay*

### **Preface:**

The following excerpt is an eloquent and insightful account of the humanity and the heroism of the early Christian martyrs. Taken from Henri Daniel-Rops' book, *The Church of the Apostles and Martyrs* (1948):



### **Beyond Their Humanity:**

"As [the early Christian martyrs] faced death, all, from the most famous to the most humble, gave proof of the steadfastness of spirit and a tranquility which frequently aroused the admiration even of those who did not share their faith. We have here a unique collection of witness, given by man to man, demonstrating all that is best and purest in him.

These victims possessed no greater strength than ours with which to face the horrible deaths which they knew awaited them; there was no hypnotic ecstasy blinding them to their reality of their fate. On the contrary, one of the most touching features of their suffering is the simple candor with which the Christians themselves spoke of it. We know that they talked about the subject among themselves in the prisons where they lay awaiting the final moment; they wondered if the executioner's sword hurt a great deal, if one needed to suffer much to die; they discussed the tortures which they realized would be inflicted upon them. But they overcame the horror of these terrible pictures, which their imaginations so easily conjured up. Very, very few of them wavered at the last moment. Encouraging one another, exchanging the kiss of peace, even more united in the moment of sacrifice than in their everyday lives, where it was only human that discords and dissensions should have existed, they went steadfastly to execution, bearing in their hearts that peace which Christ had promised them.

But it is just as important to remember the meaning which the early Christians gave to these deeds of heroism as it is to remember the heroism itself. There are many ways of being brave, and many reasons for facing death; there are some people whose sacrifice has no meaning behind it... In sacrificing themselves as they did, the Christians of the persecutions were pursuing a very definite object. They were giving their lives for a reality which gave those lives their whole meaning. They were, literally, testimonies in themselves. And for this reason, since according to the ancient legal custom the testimony of the humblest folk- the outcasts and slaves -was always obtained under torture, the word martyr has come to mean both he who testifies and he who suffers death in doing so.

Nevertheless the Christians did not in fact go out of their way to give this testimony, or to put it more accurately, they did not seek to provoke the opportunity for testifying...Not to pursue vainglory, even by the means of the most complete sacrifice, but, whenever it was the will of Providence that testimony should be given not to flinch from the obligation, and to go forward steadfastly, testifying to the end: such, in its wisdom and its greatness, is the moral philosophy of the martyrs' heroism. They must accept their fate, never seeking to be revenged upon their persecutors: their act of self-denial must be based on love, just as Jesus, on the Cross, forgave his executioners; 'to live as He lived, to die as He died,' as one of the greatest mystics was to many years later: martyrdom is the climax to a life entirely oriented towards Christian testimony, the crowning point of that life...

### **The Effects of Martyrdom:**

What were the results of this spoken testimony, and of the even more striking testimony of blood? They were enormous. There is something catching about heroism, to which the human soul, though it may not contain a great deal of nobility, is very susceptible. On several occasions Christians who were merely watching a trial in which some of their brethren were appearing were some way or other caught up in the fervor of the latter's faith, going so far as to betray themselves by their own shouts of exaltation. This is how Vetius had given himself away at Lyons. The desire to emulate the example of others carried certain martyrs beyond the bounds of self; for what other emotion could men feel who saw their friends dying; and attaining celestial glory thereby, or sons who like the young Origen, watched the execution of their own fathers? Sometimes they would rush, one after another, to take their place on the scaffold. Nothing links the supporters of a cause together so firmly as the bond of blood: it was the seal that ratified nascent Christianity.

Martyrdom had no less profound effect on the pagan spectators. Probably the majority of those in the amphitheater who watched the extraordinary spectacle of these sacrifices derived nothing from them save the gratification of their basest passions. But other feelings are also apparent...Sometimes the spectators' revulsion at the suffering inflicted on the Christians was so great that their nerve broke: they ended by pitying the victims. This had happened during the time of Nero, and it was to occur again at Smyrna. Certain upright folk were indignant at seeing human beings who had committed no felony treated like criminals, and now and then this reflection alone led to conversion. Even some of the magistrates were moved, and showed themselves not merely humane in their efforts to save the accused, but troubled, even curious about this faith which raised men to such heroic heights....

'It is the man who loses his life for my sake who will secure it.' In this short sentence of Christ's lies the who explanation of the heroism shown by the martyrs; their experience, their sacrifice, has real meaning only when interpreted in terms of a supernatural intention. Of course every human cause can find its fanatics, who are willing to die to ensure its triumph; but properly speaking the martyrs were not thinking of the triumph of their cause in the sense in which one speaks of 'cause' in relation to a modern political party or a philosophical doctrine; they were striving after something which transcended the struggles of the earth. They were Christ's witness and the soldiers of the Kingdom of God.

## The Sacramental Act of Heroism:

Thus martyrdom was not only a political fact, the logical consequence of a conflict between a revolutionary doctrine and an established order. It was a fundamental attribute of the primitive Church, a sacramental act, which was granted like a gift, like 'the Grace of Graces,' to certain privileged souls, and whose supernatural effects were transformed in turn upon the whole community of the children of God. Absolute faith in Jesus, complete trust in His promise, charity so great that it becomes self-oblation: three theological virtues are fulfilled in the act of martyrdom with a completeness unrivaled elsewhere; the entire Christian experience- moral, ascetical and mystical –finds its most perfect expression in the sacrifice of blood...



Thus, St. Gregory the Great was to write, 'Christ will truly become a host for us when we have made ourselves a host for him.' And we think once more of St. Ignatius' desire to be the course grain, ground in the mill of persecution, in order to become the pure white bread of God...

Quite often, at the very last, He would give them the gift of prophesy, and of supernatural visions. But, more important still, it was through death that union with Christ was achieved. As they face execution these privileged souls bore within them the marvelous certainty that they were being freed from the bondage of their earthly bodies to be welcomed into Divine Bliss, they were going straight to heaven...

The blood that was shed in the amphitheaters absolved and redeemed. It assembled all the merits that man could acquire and consecrated them to the Crucified God. 'Whosoever dies for the faith,' said St. Clement of Alexandria at a later date, 'realizes the perfection of charity.'

Their bodies, in which the Lord had resided- those bodies were part of the Crucified Body of Christ –rapidly became objects of special devotion, the first form of the devotion of the saints... The habit of placing relics under the altar is, therefore, the precise result of this very ancient observance, and the Roman liturgy preserves intact a fundamental connection of the Christian faith when, on the Thursday of the third week in Lent, on the festival of St. Cosmas and Damian, it declares: 'In memory of the precious death of thy righteous ones, we offer Thee, O Lord, this sacrifice, which has been the principle of all martyrdom.' There is no better way of marking the affiliation which, through martyrdom, binds the Mass and the Eucharist to the sacrifice of the living God... [I]n remembering the historic role assumed by these defeated folk, these seekers after the Kingdom of God who, by their death, vanquished the kingdom of this earth, we remember that sentence of St. Paul's, which so aptly expresses the guiding principle of the whole primitive Church: 'When I am weakest, then I am strongest of all'" (II Corinthians 13:10).

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*Post Script by Joe Tremblay:*

This last passage by St. Paul is especially profound: "When I am weakest, then I am strongest of all." The act of killing appears to the naked eye to be the ultimate conquest; and being killed, the ultimate defeat. As the bodies of the martyrs lay there in lifeless form in the middle of the Coliseum, their lives seemingly come to an abrupt and tragic end. But the impact and ripple effect of their spiritual sacrifice had only just begun. As with Christ's crucifixion, what seemed to be a loss and a concession of weakness for these martyrs, was in fact, the chosen instrument which God would use to sanctify unclean souls, civilize a barbaric human race and infuse love into a world that had turned cruel.

Just as we are trained to see the Risen Christ under the appearance of bread and wine- to see holy water as no ordinary water –to see the Life of Christ being transmitted through the Sacraments –to hear God's own Word through human language, the early Christians were likewise trained to see through the tragedy of Roman executions. For them, martyrdom was a sacramental offering which had an intimate connection with the Eucharistic sacrifice of the altar. For instance, St. Ignatius of Antioch said, "I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God." (St. Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch and personal friends with St. Peter, St. John and the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Indeed, the loving sacrifice of martyrdom did nothing short of scattering God's graces far and wide. It meant eternal life for the martyr and conversion for sinners.