

COMMENTARY

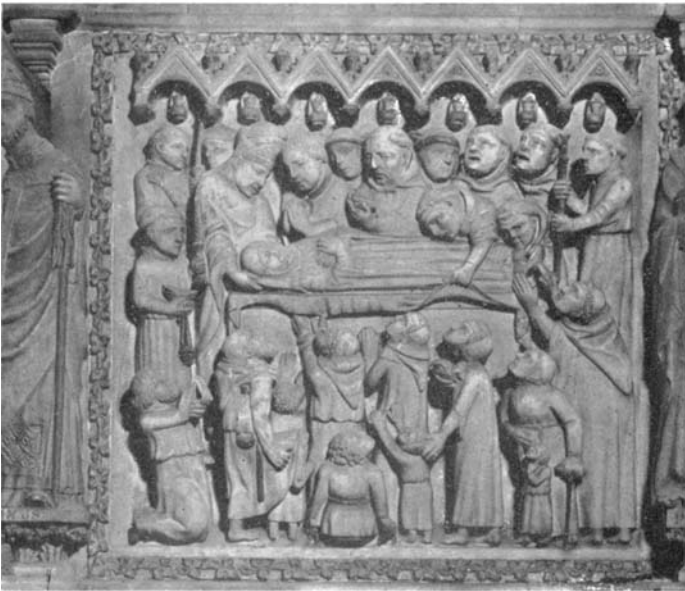
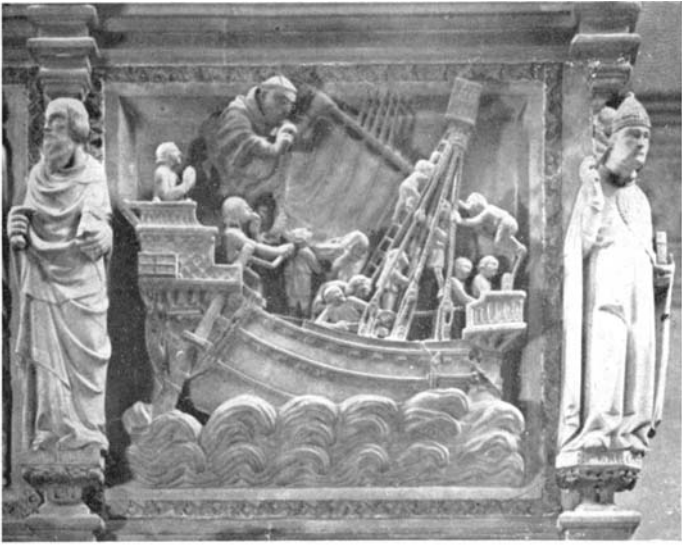
THE MEANING OF A MARTYR. Peter of Verona, Dominican and inquisitor, was martyred on the Saturday in Easter week of 1252. Within a year he was canonised by Pope Innocent IV and this month therefore sees the seventh centenary of his canonisation. He came to be regarded as the medieval archetype of martyrdom: set upon by heretics, the defender of the Faith, who, as he fell, wrote *Credo* in the dust with his finger dipped in his own blood. His murderer repented, became a Dominican laybrother and expiated his crime with a life of penance and a holy death.

It is easy to make of Peter Martyr a figure of history merely: his age and its assumptions too antique and assured for a later understanding. His mission reflects indeed the single-minded mood of a society in which heresy was conceived of as an intolerable assault on the unity of Church and State. But Peter's acceptance of the sanctions of his time does not affect the meaning of his martyrdom. He is not to be counted less holy because our attitude bears the unconscious inheritance of what the centuries of heresy have brought. He died for the Truth and not for the Inquisition, and if we in our generation are anxious to deplore the methods of the Inquisition, it cannot be at the cost of dishonouring the claims of Truth.

Martyrdom remains the constant reminder in every age, and in our own not least, that the witness of man to the truths of God is in the end beyond the neutrality of debate. When argument is over there remains the willing testimony of death, and the first Peter and Peter of Verona and yesterday's unknown Peter are one in why they die. Their tombs are temples, and the memory of their dying is the recurring evidence of the total demand of faith. And the repentant murderer is the figure of all who betray the truth, and of the hope that even they may have. For he, no less than Peter, is a man with a meaning for our time. The pattern does not alter, and Peter Martyr's blood upon the ground and his murderer's prayers remain as a blessing for other men and other days.



An early wood-carving of the martyrdom of Peter of Verona. He is represented in the supreme moment of his dying. The original statue is at the Dominican Priory at Woodchester, Gloucestershire.



Panels from the tomb of St Peter Martyr in San Eustorgio in Milan: (i) St Peter appears from heaven to save a ship from disaster; (ii) the entombment of St Peter.

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THE TOMB OF ST PETER MARTYR. Peter was buried in the Dominican church of San Eustorgio in Milan and his tomb became at once a centre for immense devotion. In 1300 the community began to build a chapel in his honour and the Pisan Giovanni di Balduccio was commissioned to design a new tomb, appropriate to his renown. By 1340 the work was finished, and it remains one of the purest of Tuscan monumental achievements. More than a century later the adjoining Capella Portinari was built, decorated with frescoes by Vincenza Foppa, to contain the silver-gilt reliquary of St Peter's head.

The design of the tomb was inspired by that of St Dominic in Bologna, but, unlike its prototype, it has remained essentially unaltered. A white marble sarcophagus is supported on eight pillars of red Verona marble, each with a carving of an allegorical figure representing a theological or moral virtue. The sarcophagus itself is divided into panels, representing in bas-relief episodes from the life of St Peter Martyr: his healing of a deaf-mute; his clothes applied to heal two sick persons; his martyrdom, burial and translation; his appearing from heaven to avert a shipwreck. The panels are intersected by carvings of saints: St Peter, St Paul, the four Western Fathers of the Church, St Thomas Aquinas, and St Eustorgius. The vertical line of the Virtues and the Saints is continued with figures of angels, enclosing a further bas-relief of the martyrs John and Paul, with figures of donors in attendance. Crowning the whole is a triple-arched canopy; within, a seated figure of our Lady and the Child Jesus, with St Dominic and St Peter Martyr on either side; on the pinnacles, a central figure of Christ in benediction.

The iconography of St Peter Martyr is immensely rich, and the circumstances of his death gave ample scope for the enterprise of artists. But the tomb at San Eustorgio remains the definitive declaration of his praise: grave and architectural, it is all harmony and order, a commentary in stone on the device borne by one of its figures: *super omnia autem vincit veritas*. Less known, and therefore less admired, than the tomb of St Dominic, it is free from the later additions, the Michael Angelo dramatics, which disturb the rhythm of the Bologna monument.