

THE MEANING OF MARTYRDOM

COLUMBA RYAN, O.P.

NO age in Christian history has gone without the grievous accompaniment of martyrdom. We are not singular in this affliction. And so it seems vain upon its occasion merely to protest as if at some monstrous political anomaly. Should we not rather suspect and seek to uncover the profounder connection between it and the economy of our redemption which was effected upon the Cross?

In this enquiry a natural starting point is afforded by St John's vision of the *Apocalypse*. He wrote the record of that vision about the year 96 A.D., when the Emperor Domitian's systematic oppression of the Christians impended. They were a prey to the deepest discouragement. They had already undergone the capricious cruelty of Nero's persecution. Was there to be no end to their suffering? They must call Domitian, now, Lord and God; this would be the test of their civic loyalty, and it would be a loyalty enforced at the point of the sword. Less and less did it seem possible for the elect to live at peace with the world. St John's vision brought them the answer. He saw all time stretched over age upon age of persecution and struggle; but he saw simultaneously the same ages gathered in a single syllable of time, made over to victory in the blood of the Lamb. Through the ages Satan, the great dragon—cast down to earth where alone his power remains unloosed—persecuted the Woman whose children are the brethren of Christ.¹ Deprived of power against her and her Firstborn, he 'went to make war on the rest of her children, the men who keep God's commandments, and hold fast to the truth concerning Jesus'. 'Day and night he stood, accusing them in God's presence. But because of the Lamb's blood, and because of the truth to which they bore witness, they triumphed over him, holding their lives cheap till death overtook them.' This is the diuturnal struggle, the protracted oppression of the martyrs, which is their victory without time.

¹ *Apoc.*, chapters 12 and 13.

In his persecution of the Woman's children the great dragon summoned to his assistance two beasts, the beast of dominion or power, called out of the depths of the sea (element of violence) and the plausible beast of delusion, called from the land (perhaps that land of Asia Minor that was the breeding ground of vain philosophies). All the dwellers of the earth fell down in adoration of the first beast: Who is a match for the beast, they asked; Who is fit to make war upon him?'. And the second beast, gentle in appearance with its lamb's horns (parody of the Lamb) and only betrayed by its dragon's roar, set up an image of the first beast, and made it lifelike, and gave it speech, and deceived men into its worship; 'and if anyone refused to worship the image of the beast it had him put to death'. So did St John see the ministers of the dragon, twin satellites of evil, the one corrupting the world with power, the other with its specious pretence of wisdom and humanity. Each beast contrived the success of the other, for where power failed there propaganda deluded, and where propaganda wanted power was invoked.

This has in fact been the history of persecution. What has been advanced against Christ has been either the sword or theory, either the might of government and mob, or the plausible wisdom of the world. Each has covered over the weakness of the other. Theory has made might right. The sword has made theory strong.

What are those who suffer to make of it? Is it that Christ is weak? Or does his strength use this means to mend a weakness in us?

There is an answer made classical for apologists by Tertullian. *Sanguis martyrum semen Christianorum*. 'Their sect', he wrote to Scapula, 'shall never fail. For know that it is then the more built up, when it seemeth to be stricken down. For every man that beholdeth so much endurance, being struck with some misgiving is kindled with the desire of knowing what is the cause of this, and as soon as he discovereth the truth, himself also immediately followeth it.'² Of course this is true in a measure. But it is not altogether sufficient, not quite as rigidly true as Tertullian's rigid

² Tertullian: *Ad Scapulam*, fn.

formulation may suggest. For one thing, it is very far from being an invariable rule that Stephen's clothes laid at the feet of Saul turn him into Paul; the intellectual force of example is not apodictic. And for another thing, endurance even to death is not the perquisite of Christians alone, still less of Catholic Christians. Then too the apologetic word after much use wears rather too smooth. It is too easy an answer to suggest that the martyr has the glory of giving his life for truth or for his faith or for justice; it is a very different thing for a man in the (often sordid) experience of his own flesh to go down into the terrible vault of death and on the brink of that descent to embrace it with the deliberation of choice.

When a man does make that mortal acceptance, in the unadorned moment when there impends upon him that of which he can have had no previous taste—that death which will overtake him as the absolute denial of his flesh and its well-being—in that moment and in that acceptance he cuts through a tissue of unreal fictions which we all of us weave about ourselves against the penetration of what is real. In that moment as at none other a man may bear witness to reality, to the inexorable truth. And this, if a man deliberately choose it, is to be a *marturo*, a witness to the truth of God pressing in upon his flesh.

Let us go deeper into the matter. We suffer from a lying spirit of optimism that will not face the plight of real existence. And this spirit presents it to us as horrible and grotesque (should we ever permit ourselves to reflect thus far) that there should be at the core of our being the certainty of bodily cessation in death and always the undermining contingency of our existence. Horrible too and grotesque does it seem to our humanitarian ideals that the well-being and smooth ordination of our lives should be soft-sifted by pain and dread and anxiety. And then too we find that we have no natural drift to rectitude but have always to struggle against a root of evil within us, and it appals us as again something horrible to admit as much. Last of all there is the intolerable, not to be borne, imposition of God's demand upon us (if we take his revelation seriously) that we should be taken out of ourselves to bear even his divinity

in our souls and yield to the design of his infinite love, that we should sustain and grow up under his own impact upon us.

We behave in this situation like our first parents when they had sinned and when they heard of the voice of God in the garden. We hide ourselves and cover our nakedness with garments that serve our folly but do not avail against the searching of God. We make ourselves two vestures: the fine weave of abstractions and the thick mantle of material preoccupations. We cover ourselves over with the commerce of the world; and we spin theories and fine webs of speculation and planning. Not that there is any great deliberateness in all this with most of us, simply it seems to be part of the disorder in us of original sin. Enslaved to the material world we let what we can see and hear and touch and manage loom excessive in our concern. And at the same time our minds, dispossessed of their native facility for truth, robbed of their proper mastery, lose themselves in a world of fantasy and fiction. So there is a double tyranny established within us—the tyranny of the material world and its affairs, and the tyranny of our own thought out of touch with the ground of truth.

There is very little deliberateness about this. But these two tyrannies oppressive within us do turn into a terrible Frankenstein without us, very deliberately afflicting the people of God. It is as if they break out overtly into the double persecution of the Church by the spirit who is Prince of the world. Oppression by secular power, oppression in the name of progress or humanitarian ideals or religious enlightenment—these are but the outward reflections of the oppressions in our own souls. They are the exaggerated masks of the evil tendencies in each one of us. And this is the reason why they have such power to hurt us, and why they are endemic in human history. The two beasts of the Apocalypse do not change through the ages. They are made in the image of our fallen nature, they are born in a kind of sympathetic union of evil with all that tends in us to evil.

Against this double tyranny stand the martyrs. They throw off the false garments. They bear witness to the naked impact of truth. By their acceptance of death they cut

through the tissue of lying abstractions, they push aside the thick folds of secular preoccupations. They accept the pressure of God, the exactions that his transcendent truth makes upon our nature. By their testimony they confront us with the same unqualified truth.

For in their acceptance of death they admit in perfectly concrete fashion all those things that we seek to escape from because we find them too grotesque for our vain optimism. The martyrs accept that their existence be sifted away and undermined by the cessation of their bodily being. Certainly, their faith teaches them that this is not the total cessation of all existence, but it does not teach them to forget, still less to deny, the nothingness on which God has founded them, of which their death reminds them. They accept too that it is by pain and dread and agony of mind that we may be delivered from the fancied adequacy of material well-being or humanitarian poise. They accept that their loyalty to God and to the Good—one principle by which their lives must be directed—does require a struggle against sin (in themselves and on the part of other against them) so fierce as to exact the setting aside of every other single good, the whole of life included. Above all, they accept the pressure of a supernatural destiny as sons of God. They proclaim against every opinion and theory of clever human beings and against the distraction of all material concerns—*by their death* they proclaim that God has his designs upon our human nature to raise us out of and past the wisest human counsels and the grandest material achievements. They bear witness that the Word of God has entered the world of men, and changed it, and set up, as sign of the change, the Cross.

The martyrs do all this *by their death*. Death presents them with the adamant opportunity. By dying they state their witness, for death alone seals the supreme decision between the claims of this world and this world's fictions, and the claims of God who exacts all. St Thomas holds that death is a very requirement of martyrdom, 'for', says he, 'the martyr is one so called as being a witness of that Christian faith which teaches us to set at naught things visible for the sake of things invisible. It belongs therefore to martyrdom that a man witness to the faith by showing that he does

in very deed set at naught all present goods that he may reach to those that lie ahead invisible. Now as long as a man is left with the life of his body, he has not yet proved himself to set at naught all things bodily. For men are found to set at naught family and possessions and to suffer grievous pain of body that they may live. So Satan held it against Job: Skin for skin, and all that a man hath he will give for his life. Therefore it is that for the perfect completion of martyrdom it is required that one suffer death for the sake of Christ.³

On the other hand, it is the firm tradition of Christianity that there is to be no fanatical seeking out or provoking of death. 'Martyrdom consists in the just endurance of sufferings unrighteously inflicted. A man ought not to give another any occasion to act unrighteously; he must only bear with patience whatever another unrighteously commits against him.'⁴ St Thomas in using these words does but summarise the teaching of the Fathers. In the Acts of the Martyrdom of Polycarp⁵ we read: 'We have no praise for those who offer themselves up: there is no such teaching in the Gospel'. 'Everyone', wrote St Cyprian, himself a martyr, 'must be prepared to confess his faith, but none may run to seek out martyrdom.' Heretics taught otherwise, but the Catholic tradition has been according to the counsel of our Lord himself: 'When they shall persecute you in this city, flee into another'. Only when death is borne in upon the martyr as the alternative to duty, only when flight involves also abandonment of the faith or of a flock committed to his care, does the moment of martyrdom come. For to be martyred is to be called to bear witness to the exaction that truth makes upon our flesh. It is, as we have seen, to break through the fictions and veils that we draw across the face of truth in its concrete incursion into our lives—but it is the Truth, it is God's exacting finger that must invade us, must find the martyr out and press him to the decision. For a man to make this decision on his own responsibility, to rely upon his own

3 *S. T.* II-II. 124. 4.

4 *ib.* II-II. 124. 1. ad iii.

5 *S. Martyrium Polycarpi. cap. 4.*

strength and to trace his own approach to truth, is to commit the sin of presumption.

So there is a calm dignity that characterises the Christian martyr. Examples of this are too well known to be cited, nor does space admit of it. They would bring home to us that at no time have the martyrs sought death, gone out to provoke death, but that they have accepted it as their witness to the truth of God bearing in upon their flesh.

And it must be the truth of God that they bear witness to. However heroic men's death in the cause of duty—the death of the soldier or of the nurse and doctor, or of the scientific research worker—these do not constitute them martyrs in the strict sense. It is the pressure of God's truth bearing in upon a man that exacts martyrdom. The martyrs may say with their head and in all exactness: 'For this was I born, and for this came I into the world, that I should give testimony to the truth'.

From all that it becomes apparent that there is no martyrdom but in the closest association with the theological virtues, those virtues that have to do directly with God. Itself an act of fortitude, it has for purpose faith, the unshakable holding to the truth of God. There is indeed no act of fortitude but has as well as its own character of firm endurance, some final purpose, some aim of endurance. With the martyrs this aim can be nothing but the preference of God's truth above all creatures. It is a cleaving to this truth as to none other, a witnessing to it through the extremity of death.

Without faith no martyrdom: so too without charity there can be none. For it is the love of God and none other that has to motivate the martyr: 'If I should deliver my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. . . .' It is the love of God that exacts the sacrifice; this was the motive by which Christ was obedient to death, and by which his followers have ever since been obedient. So necessary is this that it is impossible for those who break the unity of Christ's body to bear witness to the truth by any death they may undergo. It is St Cyprian again who writes, with the heretics of his time in mind, 'the quarrelsome and disunited, who holds no peace towards brethren, such an one (as the blessed Apostle and Holy Scripture testify) will never

though he were slain for the name of Christ, be able to free himself from the offence of brotherly disunion. . . . He can never be with Christ, who has chosen to follow Judas rather than Christ. How deep the sin which not even the baptism of blood can wash out! How great the offence which martyrdom cannot expiate!⁶

If faith be the aim, and charity the motive of martyrdom, where is the entry of hope? Hope is that virtue by which the strong man endures beyond even his strength, aspiring after that which is arduous beyond his capacity and lies beyond the termination of life itself. He aspires after nothing else than the reward of God and sets his confidence in God's strength to carry him to it even through the gateway of death. Hope, the holding out for God in the strength of God, is the very secret of the martyr's witness to truth: it is by hope that he is stayed in his fortitude.

By the close connection thus established between the act of martyrdom as the supreme act of fortitude, and the theological virtues which it serves, we may come to two final remarks.

The fortitude of the martyr is one of a very singular order and might be described as incarnational. For he is called to bear the pressure of God himself upon his human nature, to sustain in his flesh the demand of God. Truly the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church; upon their bodies they receive the mark of God, they are the continuing witnesses in their flesh of his interference; they carry on in their measure the work of Christ.

But because it is the pressure of God that this act of fortitude sustains, we have a ground of confidence. God does not try us above our strength. With temptation he makes issue.

⁶ St Cyprian: *De Orat. Dom.*, 16.