



# Allocutio



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## Allocutio: The Martyr

The apostles were the first martyrs, even St. John. You say to me, "Hold on. St. John was not a martyr!" But then you must remember that the word "Martyr" means a witness. And that is what the Apostles did. They were sent out by Jesus to be his witnesses, in other words martyrs to the ends of the earth. What made the Apostles martyrs was their witness and their proclaiming of the Gospel, not their deaths as such. Their deaths were an extra sign and witness to the Gospel they proclaimed. The fact that all Twelve were willing to undergo death and that all but one of them did was a powerful witness in itself and really made firm the truth of what they had believed. When Peter stood up and proclaimed Christ on Pentecost Sunday he was already a martyr, a witness.

In the Church those now called "martyrs" come next after the Apostles as the most venerated. These could not do what the Apostles did in the sense that they were not able to witness directly to all the things that Jesus said and did but they had this great value: any one who is willing to die for the Christian faith had to impress people since no one gives up life that easily and those who were prepared to die must have been utterly convicted of their faith in Christ and the eternal life he offered.

Initially it was local veneration to those who gave their lives for the faith that sufficed to prove martyrdom. Their burial places were venerated, they offered prayers for them, wrote accounts of their martyrdom. As the Church became more organised the matter had to be confirmed by the local bishop and then in the course of centuries it became the norm for the Pope to make the declaration of martyrdom and sainthood.

There is a sense that anytime we witness, especially if we suffer for it, then we too are being martyrs. Sometimes the first suffering comes not with the response from others who might jeer or abandon us, but the very effort to witness on our part knowing that we might suffer.

The spirit of the Christian martyr is contained in those words of Christ, "I came that they might have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10: 10). We love people so much and are so convinced that the Gospel is crucial for each person that we want them to hear about Jesus. That is what St. Paul, another Apostle and martyr did. Then if they rejected it fine. It was not on his head. His job was to witness to Christ Jesus.

There is no doubt but that after the time of the Apostles the greatest witness was done by those who were prepared to give their lives. (Actually note in St. Patrick's Confessions how he is also desirous of martyrdom.) And it is the same today. Suffering is not nice. Even less is death desired and people go to great lengths to preserve their lives. But for those who are prepared to give their lives for Christ's sake, well hear Christ himself, "Those who save their lives will lose it; those who lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel will preserve it for eternal life". And that is what the martyrs believed.

I want you to note another thing here in respect of Christian martyrdom. Christ told Peter to put away the sword. No one else was to die or be wounded in the events of his passion and death. He caused no one's death or injury. Indeed he got Barabbas out of jail! He gave his own life willingly. And the Christian martyr is like Christ. The tone of the Christian martyr is never one of anger or hate of others. He cannot be like Islamic extremists who in being "martyrs" kill another 50 or 60 with them. Christ died with great love and compassion and total forgiveness.



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St. Stephen died with the prayer, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” on his lips. You remember the great story of St. Lawrence the deacon, how as he was tied to the grille and was being roasted over the fire, he quipped, “I’m well done on this side, I think it is time to turn me over!” If so he lived up to the challenge of St. Paul, “Always be a cheerful giver!”

When I was in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints earlier this year they emphasised this point about the spirit of the martyr. You see they always look for three points in the causes of martyrs.

The first is the fact of martyrdom. This does not mean that a person has to be killed in one act, like being hung or beheaded or shot. For example Margaret Ball died in prison as a result of ill-treatment. We were told of the story of a prisoner in a nazi concentration camp who was liberated by the Americans and he lived a whole month after his release. But he died due to disease picked up in the camp. That is enough to qualify for consideration. He stood for a certain truth and was incarcerated for his Christian values and beliefs.

But if killed or died as a result of ill-treatment — and this is the second point they look for — it has to be shown that the motive was hatred of the faith. For example if a Catholic is shot dead in Belfast, is he killed out of hatred of the catholic faith or because he was involved in drugs, or simply that he belonged to the other side of the political divide? Or if a priest’s house is broken into and he dies in a struggle with the burglar? That may not be related at all to the priest’s status or his faith! You have to show that the primary and indeed sole cause was out of hate for the faith.

But the third point is the disposition of the martyr himself, namely that he died according to the values shown by Christ. If he dies like the bad thief railing at his killers then he cannot be said to be identified with Christ or the good thief. I cannot help but think of that priest in Cavan who calmly told the burglar where he could get the money! Or that story I told you about the priest who gave his watch as a present and a sign of no hard feelings to the man in charge of the firing squad who executed him.

In this season when the whiff of Pentecost is still in the air may the Holy Spirit show us all how to be witnesses in our world.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill