

Martyrdom: The Supreme Mark of Greatness

Martyrs are the most widely praised and the least understood of all men. We regard the willingness of Christ, and of all martyrs in general, as being of truly transcendental significance, and yet, in spite of countless opportunities to martyr ourselves, we invariably choose not to. St. Augustine said it first: "It is easy to reverence and venerate a martyr, but a big task to imitate his faith and endurance".¹ All men, of course, sacrifice to some extent. Some give up pleasure, others money or power, — and some give up innumerable hours of their precious time. Some even are willing to suffer great pain and distress. They all get something in return: the enduring happiness that can only result from moral fulfillment. But what about those who die for others? The people who sacrifice their lives so that others may live: don't they also get something in return? We surely praise them too; but is their sacrifice truly worthwhile?

Are the martyrs really great men or 'just pathetics, mentally-unbalanced fanatics who are led to the act of martyrdom by an intense latent desire to destroy themselves or to sublimate away their sexual energy', as the psychoanalysts try to explain through their theory of drives?

To understand the martyrs—and to make our praise for them really meaningful — we need to know what could possibly *moti-*

¹ *Migne* PL 38, 1414

vate them. Are the martyrs really moved by a definite *lofty purpose*?

The martyr who is willing to die for a seemingly just cause does not apparently consider it *in his interest* to remain alive. Rather, given the circumstances, he considers it in his interest to die for the just cause. Man's interests, of course, are not limited to financial success, sexual conquest, or political power. In fact, there is a universal supernatural hierarchy of values, and the martyr's apparent *self-sacrifice* is alined with that hierarchy, and in *that* line his sacrifice is truly for his *greater self-interest*, an interest that is *not just a reward after death*, but the true and *real self-fulfillment*, or simply the true and complete *life-fulfillment*.

This will only be understood, and accepted, if we can understand what life is all about. But how many can? Most of us generally go on living without worrying about any central theme or any central goal which ought to be at the core of our life-plan. All of us wonder at one time or another if life has any significance at all, and then look back at the life we have lived and see it as being in some sense without meaning, without direction, and without purpose. It is understandable then, that a man seek in his death a fulfillment which has eluded him in his life. And that is perhaps one of the main reasons why we praise the martyrs: because they chose to, and did, *die well*. For who is ready to say, after all, that self-preservation is better than self-fulfillment? Of the martyr we can truly say — applying to him Christ's words to Mary — that "he has truly chosen the best part", the best way, and done the right thing.

Thus the martyr who attains self-fulfillment sacrificing himself, dying for the love of God, — to comply with His will —, does it really in his best self-interest. For when someone loves someone else, that one loves and accepts the interests of the one he loves as being his own. The interests of the loved become the interest of the lover. This does not mean that he is sacrificing his interests for the beloved really, for both become in reality one, thus the self is itself expanded to encompass the interests of the loved one. The martyr truly sees his interests as being those of his beloved, God; and his act is seen by him, through faith, to fit in with the universal plan of Christian perfection — the univer-

sal hierarchy of supernatural values — to which he commits himself with full allegiance and fidelity: a truly noble action.

This we praise, revere and admire. We are all really thrilled by the martyrs. But why are we so reluctant to imitate them? Perhaps because it requires a hero to imitate another. And heroism is something for the exceptional, the rare man. Heroes are few and far between. The rest of us generally satisfy ourselves with mediocrity. Yet there is something wrong with this point of view. For courage is essential for ordinary Christian living; and courage implies '*readiness to die*', or facing '*even dangers of death*'. And so we all should have something of the heroic in us.

COURAGE AND CHRISTIAN LIVING

Our Christian life, as St. Paul often reminds us, is filled with difficulties and sacrifices, a constant warfare within and without. The Christian must always try to preserve the good life, '*the good of virtue*', at any cost, even at the cost of Life. The follower of Christ must be truly a valiant soldier, and a close imitator of his outstanding heroes. Fortitude must be exercised constantly throughout the Christian life. "I assert that an imperfect being needs more fortitude to pursue the way of perfection than suddenly to become a martyr", observed St. Theresa of Avila.² Fortitude and magnanimity must be part of daily living. For, although not all of us are called to be martyrs or to perform outstanding deeds, yet the readiness to do good and the readiness to die are involved in the practice of ordinary Christian virtue. And so we must learn to overcome fear if we are to live fully as Christians; fear of personal injury, of loss of reputation or property, fear even of death. If we face death with courage and come to terms with it, the rest will be easy. But to come to terms with death we have to know first where we hope to end, and then be willing to accept that our way is really the way of the cross.

The Theology of the Cross, as an unavoidable imperative of Christian authenticity, is nothing but the key to our '*calling in Christ*'. An evangelical guarantee of our incorporation in Christ here and for all eternity.³ But the Cross, Christ crucified, '*the giving up of life*', has always been, and continues to be a '*scandal*'

² *Autobiography*, Chap. 31, 18.

³ *Cfr.* ROM. 8, 17; II TIM. 2, 11; ROM. 6, 4; I COR. 3, 1.

for some, and 'foolishness' or 'madness' for others.⁴ Truly the Cross is a '*sign of contradiction*'. For anyone who does not have the faith, this will always be foolishness. But that which is scandal and foolishness for reason without faith, is an adorable and admirable mystery for reason enlightened by faith.

In Christ the '*paradox of the Cross*' has become a '*sign of authenticity*', of existential identification with Him, and a guarantee of eschatological salvation. "If anyone, He told us,⁵ wants to be a follower of mine — and be great — let him renounce himself and take up his cross — every day,⁶ — and follow me". For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, "but anyone who loses his life for my sake, — and for the sake of the Gospel,⁷ will find it".

This intimate personal denial of oneself, and the obediential-victimial acceptance of the Cross, to the point of '*losing one's life*' for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, has indeed a deep moral and eschatological meaning. This points to the incompatibility existing between a purely natural life and the fully supernatural or divine life, which we now share partially, and which will be our definite possession throughout eternity. This is essential for the normal supernatural evangelical life of any Christian.

Besides, the Sign of the Cross acquires also a new dimension in the mystery of our Redemption; it becomes a '*sign*' of our redemptive glorification, an existential sign of salvific assimilation with Christ, and a '*sign*' of obediential opening to the Spirit, the Sanctifier.

The spirit of renunciation and self-denial, as a convinced personal attitude, is both a prerequisite for, and a sign of authenticity of the true follower of Christ; and if, and when, maintained with Christian endurance to the end will surely be crowned with the supreme reward: personal salvation, as promised by Christ Himself: "I tell you most solemnly, you will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy... You are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take away from you".⁸

⁴ I COR. 1, 23.

⁵ MT. 16, 24-27

⁶ LC. 9, 24.

⁷ MC. 8, 36.

⁸ Jn. 16, 20 ff.

This is hard, really hard to accept, — and so St. Peter told Jesus once, — but this is so only if we look at it, as Peter did, under purely human considerations, as we all usually do, thus deserving also the same ‘rebuke’ that Christ gave to St. Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God’s but man’s”.⁹

If our Lord and Master went back... through the Cross, so we must do likewise, for “the disciple is never superior to his teacher”,¹⁰ “nor the servant greater than the master”.¹¹ Therefore, “whoever wants to be my follower let him renounce himself and take up the cross and follow me”.¹² “People who are interested only in unspiritual things can never be pleasing to God”.¹³ But the martyr prefers always the spiritual, because he is moved by the love of God and of His Gospel, and so he becomes the ‘friend of God’. And we all must do the same... For a well balanced — spiritual and moral — integral life demands from us to maintain always the proper theological hierarchy of values and exigencies: “That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life... nor about your body... So do not worry... (rather) set your hearts on God’s kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well”.¹⁴ “...Men will seize you and persecute you; they will hand you over to... imprisonment, and bring you before kings, and emperors... because of my name..., and that will be your opportunity to bear witness..., and some of you will be put to death. You will be hated by all men on account of my name, but nothing will be lost.... *Your endurance will win you your lives*”.¹⁵

READINESS TO DIE, FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Ordinary Christian life, undoubtedly involves risks, and since every injury is in fact fatal in its intention, so everybody must be able to accept unconditionally certain degree of insecurity in the ‘abandonment to God’ which Christian life implies.

⁹ MC. 8, 33.

¹⁰ Lc. 6, 46.

¹¹ JN. 15, 20.

¹² MT. 16, 24.

¹³ ROM. 8, 8

¹⁴ MT. 6, 25 ff.

¹⁵ LC. 21, 12-19.

"Whoever, in the physical sphere, egocentrically strains toward complete security for himself, and is incapable of daring a venturesome undertaking, will presumably also fail when to realize the good demands the suffering of injury or, worse, death".¹⁶ The cure of any emotionally induced illness, with over-anxiety as its root, will rarely be successful without the simultaneous readiness for personal moral change.

Fortitude, which deals with human greatness, the greatness of soul, implies also readiness to die, or more accurately, the readiness to fall and die in the battle of life, as truly a prerequisite for Christian perfection. For every truly virtuous act is rooted in courage, in man's reasonable readiness to die, even though, viewed from without, it may appear entirely free from any thought of death.

The Christian hero, then, must dispose himself for fullness of perfection — martyrdom —, by overcoming the fear and daring that are caused by the less severe dangers of daily life. In order to perform the complete act well, a life spent in the practice of less courageous acts is necessary. The hero disposes himself for the one great act of courage in the long painstaking period which precedes the heroic deed, that is, every time he conquers the fear or moderates the daring that comes from lesser dangers. The hero is not made the moment he is killed, but by every virtuous act of his life.

Readiness for martyrdom is the essential root of Christian fortitude. Without this readiness there is no Christian fortitude. In fact, without this readiness there is no Christian perfection at all. Courage is a root virtue which deals with an outstanding material of human life, a virtue which has for its characteristic note an element which is absolutely universal in human living: *greatness of soul*, human greatness. Dangers and difficulties are not affairs that enter into only some few lives; nor is firmness either, and strength of purpose, a thing which can be missing from the life of any one. Every Christian should be ready to endure the dangers and difficulties of life and death in a manner that is reasonable. The courageous man is ready to *die*, yes, but to die *nobly* and gloriously for a good purpose: "... it is in order

¹⁶ J. PIEPER: *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Ed. 1975. p. 139.

to pursue some good that man does not fly from the danger of death", says St. Thomas.¹⁷

Readiness to die therefore, is one of the foundations and pre-requisites of Christian living. Greatness of soul — magnanimity — is necessary to go through a virtuous life. Readiness to shed one's blood for Christ is required by the law of God.

MOTIVATION IN COURAGE

But the brave man suffers injury, and death, not for its own sake, but rather as a means to preserve or to acquire a deeper, more essential self-realization in God. 'First and foremost, the brave man, says St. Thomas, does not suffer injury for its own sake'. For the Christian no less than for the '*natural*' man '*suffering for its own sake*' is nonsense. The Christian does not despise the things that are destroyed by injury. The martyr does not simply consider life of little worth, though he does value it cheaper than that for which he sacrifices it. 'The Christian loves his life, adds St. Thomas, not only with the natural life-asserting forces of the body, but with the moral forces of the spiritual soul as well... Man loves his natural life not because he is a 'mere man'; he loves it because and to the extent that he is a good man, with the greatness of soul'.

If the specific character of courage therefore, consists in suffering injuries and dangers of death in the battle for the realization of the good, as we have said with St. Thomas,¹⁸ then, the brave man must first know what the good is, and he must be brave for the sake of that good. 'It is for the sake of the good that the brave man exposes himself to the danger of death. In overcoming danger, courage seeks not danger itself, but the realization of rational good. To take death upon oneself is not in itself praise worthy, but solely because of its subordination to good. "It is not the injury that matters primarily, but the realization of the good".¹⁹

Courage is, then, not only *necessary* in ordinary Christian living, but it is also, in itself, one of the *most important* virtues because the *steadfast action* used to preserve the good of reason, which is one of the general characteristics of every virtuous act,

¹⁷ *II-II*, 123, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 123, 5, 7 and 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 123, 12, 2um.

becomes the peculiar function of fortitude. "It is courage, writes St. Thomas, which chiefly claims praise for steadfastness... which is accorded... in proportion to the pressure one withstands... (and) amongst mental pains and dangers, those which lead to death are the greatest source of fear, and it is those which the brave man withstands".²⁰

"The stature of virtue is measured by the criterion of goodness rather than by its difficulty",²¹ for neither difficulty nor effort causes virtue, the good alone does. And so courage is not the greatest of the virtues.

In fact, fortitude points to something prior and to something that follows. For the *courage* to face death, the courage to die, is rooted in *faith*, and is moved by *love*. The being accepted into communion with God is what underlies this courage. The encounter with God is the basis for this courage to take upon oneself fate and death. For encountering God means encountering transcending security and transcending eternity: he who is united with God participates in eternity. But in order to participate in, and be united with Him you must be accepted by Him and you must also have accepted His acceptance of you voluntarily. "Courage, as Paul Tillich says,²² is the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being". Courage is real self-affirmation in spite of apparent destruction.

Faith and charity then, are truly the basis of the '*courage to die*'; which is really the '*courage to be*'.

NEED FOR PRUDENCE

But courage depends not only on the good pursued, that is, on charity and justice, but also on '*the good of reason*', on prudence. Without prudence there is no fortitude; only he who is prudent can also be brave; to be really brave is quite impossible without at the same time being prudent.

The man who recklessly and indiscriminately courts any kind of danger is not for that reason brave. The nature of fortitude is not determined by risking one's person arbitrarily, but only by a sacrifice of self in accordance with reason, that is, with the

²⁰ *Ibid.* 123, 11 and 136, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.* 123, 12, 2um.

²² *The Courage To Be*, 1969, p. 172.

true nature and value of real things. "Not in any way whatsoever, but according to reason, or prudence", writes St. Thomas.²³

In other words, genuine fortitude presupposes a correct evaluation of things, of the things that one risks as well as of those which one hopes to preserve or to gain by the risk.

Without the '*just cause*' there is no fortitude. "Not the injury, but the cause makes martyrs", said St. Augustine. "The praise of courage, added St. Thomas, depends upon the '*just cause*'".

PATIENT ENDURANCE THE ESSENCE OF FORTITUDE

However, the '*steadfast action*' by which the brave withstands and endures 'not anything whatsoever, but what is supremely difficult to endure, namely danger of death',²⁴ "comprises not merely standing firm in the good against fear... but also, sustaining, and enduring patiently the '*daily injuries*' of ordinary Christian life, and all the 'evils associated with dangers of death'."²⁵

This presupposes that the brave man in a certain sense is also afraid of evil; for the essence of fortitude lies not in knowing no fear, but in not allowing oneself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept by fear from the realization of good.²⁶ Patient endurance is truly of the essence of fortitude.

Courage is the voluntary and prolonged endurance of arduous and difficult evils for the sake of Christian virtue, so that the soul will not be unreasonably overcome by either fear, sorrow or weariness, which the continuous practice of virtue always entails and produces.²⁷ Patient endurance cannot be separated, therefore, from daily Christian living. For no one will follow the path of virtue for a long time without enduring patience. "Only with courageous patience will man possess his soul", said St. Thomas²⁸, paraphrasing our Lord's sentence: "Your endurance will *win you* your lives".²⁹

²³ II-II, 123, 7; *Cfr.* also 47,2 and 4.

²⁴ II-II, 136, 4, 1um.

²⁵ II-II, 136, 4, 2um and 3um

²⁶ *Cfr.* II-II, 136, 3.

²⁷ *Cfr.* II-II, 128.

²⁸ II-II, 136, 4.

²⁹ LC. 21, 15.

"The man who is brave is for that very reason patient as well".³⁰ But the brave man does not only know how to bear inevitable evil with equanimity; he will also not hesitate to '*pounce upon*' evil and to bar its way, if this can reasonably be done. This attitude of course involves also readiness to attack. For even the readiness to meet the test of virtue in patient endurance, so that the good itself may be realized, does not exclude the willingness to fight and to attack, if that would be reasonable and necessary. True and real heroism, however, is not to be identified with venturesome attack but with patient endurance, which is its primary act and its ultimate decisive test. "The chief activity of courage is not so much attacking as enduring, or standing one's ground amidst dangers".³¹ Courage does not consist mainly in the act of attack but in the act of sustaining, of enduring, of holding on to the good of virtue at any cost, even at the cost of death, for the sake of God.³²

MARTYRDOM THE SUPREME MARK OF GREATNESS

Readiness to die proves itself in any risk of life voluntarily undergone, yet the culminating point of fortitude is reached only in the shedding of blood. "The essential and the highest achievement of fortitude is actual martyrdom; for martyrdom is the act by which one endures the greatest danger for the highest motive, namely, love of God".³³ Martyrdom means 'to stand steadfast in truth and justice, dutifully enduring unjustly inflicted sufferings and death in order to bear witness to the truth of the Christian faith'.³⁴ Martyrdom is an act of patient endurance for the sake of Christ. In other words, the most perfect act of courage and the supreme mark of greatness.

But this is so not because patient endurance is in itself better and more perfect than attack and self-confidence, but because it is only in the supreme test which leaves no other possibility of resistance than endurance, that the inmost and deepest strength of man reveals itself. For to be genuinely brave is possible only when all the real and apparent assurances fail, that is, when the

³⁰ II-II, 136, 4.

³¹ II-II, 123, 6.

³² *Cfr.* *Ibid.*

³³ *Cfr.* II-II, 136, 4.

³⁴ *Cfr.* II-II, 124, 1 and 3.

natural man is afraid, when he cannot help being afraid and, indeed, for a good reason. If in this supremely difficult situation one walks straight up to the cause of fear and is not deterred from doing that which is good; and if he does so for the sake of good, for the love of God, that one is really a brave man, a hero and a martyr, even though perhaps not officially so proclaimed.

But martyrdom means much more than '*suffering death for the faith*', it means also giving *testimony* by suffering death for the Christian faith. Strictly speaking, death for the faith is martyrdom only when it is freely accepted as true '*suffering*'; when a Christian faces actual death for the faith; when he allows himself voluntarily to be put to death as a *witness* to Christ, for only then he *testifies* effectively and perfectly before men to the meaning and truth of his faith. . .

True martyrdom, then, or, as St. Thomas puts it,³⁵ "the perfect idea of martyrdom requires one to *actually* endure death for Christ's sake..., for the martyr is both a *hero* and a *witness*..., and so it is a necessary feature of martyrdom that a man should bear witness to his faith, showing in action that he holds cheaper all the things of this world in comparison to the invisible blessings that are to come. But as long as physical life remains, a man has not yet actually shown convincingly a complete indifference to temporal things. For men would go to any extent... and do any thing... to preserve their lives". The voluntary endurance of actual death is thus necessary to provide *sufficient evidence* for our human judgment. It is necessary for us to accept the martyr as a perfect witness³⁶ of the truth of faith which he professes to defend.³⁷

Now, to accept willingly, and hence freely, to renounce man's greatest possession — natural human life —, surrendering it to men who can not claim any right to it, presupposes clearly that one is convinced of the existence of a transcending reality — God —, to whom he willingly sacrifices himself in a kind of apparent self-destruction, for the love of God. And the whole actuation thus objectively developed by the martyr is of itself also capable of impressing people with its force of testimony.

³⁵ II-II, 124, 4.

³⁶ Cfr. II-II, 124, 4, 4um.

³⁷ II-II, 124, 5.

CONCLUSION: MARTYRDOM THE PEAK OF PERFECTION

Martyrdom, thus, becomes really the ultimate and most perfect act of fortitude, the supreme mark of perfection, and the highest expression of the love of God, for whom one allows one's life to be taken, and to whose love one attributes the pain of this love. But it need not be the explicit intention of the martyr to bear testimony to his love. His intention is rather the loving desire '*to be dissolved and to be with Christ*'.³⁸ Nonetheless, the effect on men is that of testimony. The ultimate and final confession of faith and love for Christ as made by the martyr is in truth an effective existential testimony, which by itself gives his faith in Christ greater credibility for the rest of men.

The martyr, then, is not only a hero and a witness who is ready to bear witness if necessary even unto death, but he is also one who dies *in order* to bear witness, a person whose *death itself is a testimony* of God and of the Christian faith.

But the superhuman courage of the martyr and the greatness of his sacrifice could be satisfactorily explained only as a manifestation of the power of God, acting in and through him. For the martyr attains overwhelming certainty, and steadfastness in the good of virtue only by 'the gift of grace' — *the gift of fortitude* —, by which the Holy Spirit pours into his soul a confidence that overcomes all fear: namely, that God will lead him to eternal life, which is the goal and purpose of all good actions, and the final deliverance from every kind of danger,³⁹ as Christ himself promised: "If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven".⁴⁰ The martyrs become true heroes in the finest sense of the word, only by virtue of the gift of fortitude.

The martyrs can truly say with the Apostle: "With God on our side who can be against us?... Nothing really can come between us and the love of God, even if we are troubled or worried, threatened, persecuted, or even attacked... (for) these are only trials through which we triumph, by the power of Him who loved us... For we are certain that neither death nor life... nor any-

³⁸ Cfr. Phil. 1, 23.

³⁹ Cfr. II-II, 124, 2, 1um and 2um.

⁴⁰ MT. 10, 32

thing else... can ever come between us and the love of God, made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord".⁴¹

It is really the '*hope of victory*', '*the good of virtue*', the goal under the overwhelming '*impulse of charity*', rather than the '*difficulty*', the '*effort*', or the '*steadfast attitude*' itself that makes the act of the martyr — and of the brave in general — the most praiseworthy, in fact, the most perfect act. For "if I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to burn it, but (I do it) am without love, it will do me no good whatever".⁴² It is their faith and love that makes them really great.

And that is what the Church praises most in her martyrs, the real Christian heroes, and what we too should admire and imitate. Not precisely their '*manly strength and courage*', but rather their *faith*, their *hope*, and above all their *charity*. For "greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friend" Jesus Christ.⁴³

The martyrs truly sought first the kingdom of God, and (so) everything else has been given to them.

"Blessed are, indeed, those who suffer martyrdom, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".⁴⁴

⁴¹ ROM. 8, 31-39

⁴² I. Cor. 13, 3.

⁴³ JN. 15, 13.

⁴⁴ MT. 5, 10.

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