

NO GREATER LOVE

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The True Meaning of Martyrdom

Bishop Athanasius Schneider

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No Greater Love: The True Meaning of Martyrdom © 2025 The Most Reverend Athanasius Schneider, ORC, Auxiliary Bishop of Mary Most Holy in Astana, Titular Bishop of Celerina

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“The cause, not the suffering, makes the martyr.”

—*St. Augustine, Sermon 328*

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Introduction

MARTYRDOM IS AN essential part of the life of the militant Church on earth, because she was born of the sacrifice of our redeemer Jesus Christ on the Cross, and He is the “martyr,” the “faithful witness” (Apoc. 1:5) of the Father, of the supernatural and eternal truth. Jesus Christ’s redeeming mission on earth was preceded by martyrs: the Innocent Children of Bethlehem and St. John the Baptist. The beginning of the earthly pilgrimage of the Church was marked with the seed of the blood of the protomartyr St. Stephen. Since then, the Church has been marked by the blood of the martyrs, the imitators of Jesus Christ, the “faithful witness,” and will continue to be so until the end of time. And the martyr’s blood will make the life of the Church flourish by bearing new and everlasting fruit.

Pope Pius XI explained this reality in the life of the Church with these inspiring words:

Unbelievers and enemies of the Catholic faith, blinded by presumption, may indeed constantly renew their violent attacks against the Christian name, but in wresting

from the bosom of the militant Church those whom they put to death, they become the instruments of their martyrdom and of their heavenly glory. [No less beautiful and true are the words of St. Leo the Great:] “The religion of Christ, founded on the mystery of the Cross, cannot be destroyed by any sort of cruelty; persecutions do not weaken, they strengthen the Church. The field of the Lord is ever ripening with new harvests, while the grains shaken loose by the tempest take root and are multiplied.” [*Sermo* 82]

. . . We exhort you to imitate with all diligence the great virtues of these holy martyrs, and to implore for yourselves and for the Church militant their powerful protection. If not all of us are called to shed our blood for the defense of the holy laws of God, all nonetheless, [according to the expression of St. Basil,] through evangelical abnegation, through Christian mortification of their bodies, through energetic striving after virtue, “must be martyrs of desire, in order to share with the martyrs their celestial reward.” [*Hom. 19: In quadraginta martyres*]. (*Sermon for the Canonization of John Fisher and Thomas More* [May 19, 1935]).

The very foundation of all martyrdom is the Divine virtue of love. St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Doctor of the Church, ardently desired to become a martyr even in her body. Yet she recognized that the Lord called her to a

higher degree of martyrdom, that of love, as she explained it in her autobiography:

Above all, I thirst for the Martyr's crown. It was the desire of my earliest days, and the desire has deepened with the years passed in the Carmel's narrow cell. But this too is folly, since I do not sigh for one torment; I need them all to slake my thirst. Like Thee, O Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged, I would be crucified! I would be flayed like St. Bartholomew, plunged into boiling oil like St. John, or, like St. Ignatius of Antioch, ground by the teeth of wild beasts into a bread worthy of God. With St. Agnes and St. Cecilia I would offer my neck to the sword of the executioner, and like Joan of Arc I would murmur the name of Jesus at the stake. My heart thrills at the thought of the frightful tortures Christians are to suffer at the time of Anti-Christ, and I long to undergo them all. Open, O Jesus, the Book of Life, in which are written the deeds of Thy Saints: all the deeds told in that book I long to have accomplished for Thee. . . . These aspirations becoming a true martyrdom, I opened, one day, the Epistles of St. Paul to seek relief in my sufferings. My eyes fell on the 12th and 13th chapters of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. . . . The Apostle then explains how all perfect gifts are nothing without Love, that Charity is the most excellent way of going surely to God. At last I had found rest. . . . Charity provided me with the key to my vocation.

I understood that since the Church is a body composed of different members, the noblest and most important of all the organs would not be wanting. I knew that the Church has a heart, that this heart burns with love, and that it is love alone which gives life to its members. I knew that if this love were extinguished, the Apostles would no longer preach the Gospel, and the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. I understood that love embraces all vocations, that it is all things, and that it reaches out through all the ages, and to the uttermost limits of the earth, because it is eternal. Then, beside myself with joy, I cried out: "O Jesus, my Love, at last I have found my vocation. My vocation is love! Yes, I have found my place in the bosom of the Church, and this place, O my God, Thou hast Thyself given to me: in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be LOVE!" (*Story of a Soul*, chap. 11)

Let us ask the Lord for the grace to be worthy heirs of our brothers and sisters who preceded us in all ages with the palm of martyrdom. May we be strengthened in the gift of fortitude and rooted day by day ever more in the Divine virtue of love. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of martyrs, intercede mightily for us together with the "white-robed army of martyrs" (*martyrum candidatus exercitus*), the ones "who are come out of great tribulation,

and have washed their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Apoc. 7:14).

March 29, 2024, Holy (Good) Friday
+ Athanasius Schneider, Auxiliary Bishop
of the Archdiocese of Saint Mary in Astana

PART I:

THE CHRISTIAN MEANING
OF MARTYRDOM

Christ's Death on the Cross Is the Origin of Christian Martyrdom

“MARTYRDOM” COMES FROM the Greek word for “witness.” Martyrdom is the testimony one renders to Christ and His doctrine by voluntarily undergoing death or at least suffering inflicted on oneself precisely out of hatred toward Christ and His religion. It is the supreme witness given to the truth of the Faith: it means bearing witness even unto death.

In the Book of the Apocalypse, Jesus Christ reveals Himself, in His eternal glory, as “the faithful witness (*martyr*)” (Apoc. 1:5), as the “martyr” par excellence. The Lord publicly declared, before His redeeming death, that He was born and came into the world for the purpose of being a witness, of bearing witness (*martyrein*) to the truth (see John 18:37). The Church, in her liturgical prayer, affirms that every martyrdom has its origin in the sacrifice of the Cross:

“Sacrificium illud offerimus, de quo martyrium sumpsit omne principium” (Secret Prayer from the Thursday after the Third Sunday of Lent). Our Lord compared His redeeming sacrifice on the Cross to the grain of wheat that falls upon the earth and dies and that, because of this death, bears much fruit (see John 12:24). In the liturgical tradition of the Church, Our Lord Jesus Christ is called “Rex et caput martyrurum” (The King and the head of the martyrs).

The death of Our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross was the greatest act of love, and it was a Divine-human act, since His human nature was undividedly and inseparably united to His Divine nature in His Divine Person (this union being called the “hypostatic union”). St. Thomas Aquinas explains the meaning of martyrdom as the expression of the perfection of love: “Of all virtuous acts martyrdom is the greatest proof of the perfection of charity: since a man’s love for a thing is proved to be so much the greater, according as that which he despises for its sake is more dear to him, or that which he chooses to suffer for its sake is more odious. Martyrdom is the most perfect of human acts, as being the sign of the greatest charity” (*Summa Theologica*, II–II, q. 124, a. 3 c). Pope Pius XII taught, “The love of the most Holy Trinity is the origin of man’s redemption; it overflowed into the human will of Jesus Christ and into His adorable Heart with full efficacy and led Him, under the impulse of that love, to pour forth His blood to redeem us

from the captivity of sin" (*Haurietis aquas* [May 15, 1956], 89). Christ shed His precious blood and accepted the violent death on the Cross freely and with a most perfect act of love for God the Father in order thereby to redeem sinful humankind.

Holy Scripture teaches us, "In [him] we have redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7) and "Neither by the blood of goats, or of calves, but by his own blood, [Christ] entered once into the holies, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12). The salvific value of Christ's blood is explained by Pope St. Clement (+96), a disciple of the apostles: "Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world" (*1 Clem.* 7.4). St. Augustine expressed in a concise formulation the salvific value of the blood of Christ: "Christ had a blood with which He might redeem us; and to this end He received the blood, that He might shed it for us to redeem us" (*Sermo* 344.4). St. Thomas Aquinas masterfully explained the redeeming mystery of the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross:

By suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race. First of all, because of the exceeding charity from which He suffered; secondly, on account of the dignity of His life which He laid

down in atonement, for it was the life of one who was God and man; thirdly, on account of the extent of the Passion, and the greatness of the grief endured. . . . And therefore Christ's Passion was not only a sufficient but a superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race; according to 1 John 2:2: "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (*ST*, III, q. 48, a. 2 c)

St. Augustine pointed out that besides its salvific value, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross also has the power to strengthen souls in order that they may lead a life of virtue, even to the point of martyrdom: "In order therefore to profit from this participation in the sufferings of Christ, you must have charity. How to get it? Poor beggar, how to have the love of God? Do you want me to teach you? Yes, with charity, participation in the sufferings of Christ will truly make you a martyr; the martyr being the one whose charity is crowned" (*Sermo* 169.15). By shedding His precious blood on the Cross, Christ poured out from His pierced Heart the gift of Divine love, which produces holiness of life, confession of Faith, and martyrdom in His church, as Pope Pius XII affirms:

This divine charity is the most precious gift of the Heart of Christ and of His Spirit: It is this which imparted to the Apostles and martyrs that fortitude, by the strength

of which they fought their battles like heroes till death in order to preach the truth of the Gospel and bear witness to it by the shedding of their blood; it is this which implanted in the Doctors of the Church their intense zeal for explaining and defending the Catholic faith; this nourished the virtues of the confessors, and roused them to those marvelous works useful for their own salvation and beneficial to the salvation of others both in this life and in the next; this, finally, moved the virgins to a free and joyful withdrawal from the pleasures of the senses and to the complete dedication of themselves to the love of their heavenly Spouse. (*Haurietis aquas*, 83)