

MARTYRS
OF THE
EUCCHARIST

MARTYRS
OF THE
EUCHARIST

STORIES TO INSPIRE
EUCCHARISTIC AMAZEMENT

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TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

Nihil Obstat: Reverend Msgr. Theodore H. Hay
July 24, 2023

Imprimatur: Most Reverend Thomas J. Rodi
Archbishop of Mobile
July 24, 2023

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Cover design by Jordan Avery

Cover image: The Glory of the Saints, Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (1591-1666). 1645, oil on canvas, Musee des Augustins, Toulouse, France / Bridgeman Images.

ISBN: 978-1-5051-3409-4
Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-3468-1
ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-3467-4

Published in the United States by
TAN Books
PO Box 269
Gastonia, NC 28053
www.TANBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

To Saint Joseph:
Guardian of the Bread of Life
Adorer of the Word made Flesh
Spiritual Father of Priests

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INTRODUCTION

THERE is nothing more amazing in this life than the Holy Eucharist. Nothing. No exception. This statement is not hyperbole. This is an objective fact. No miracle of physical healing as at Lourdes, no dancing Sun as at Fatima, no liquification of blood as in St. Januarius compares with the sublime and inexhaustible mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist. As such, every believer should be filled with “Eucharistic amazement.” This was an expression taken from Pope St. John Paul II’s last encyclical entitled *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, dated Holy Thursday, April 17, AD 2003.

The Holy Father reminds all the faithful that the Eucharist makes present the once-in-time Paschal Mystery that is now for all times. The opening statement of his last encyclical declares: “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist.” Perhaps no one appreciates this more than the men and women who preferred physical death rather than betray the source of life available in the Most Holy Eucharist. We call these men and women “martyrs of the Eucharist.” And their witness ought to inspire in us Eucharistic amazement.

The word “martyr” comes from a Greek word meaning “witness.” Its theological significance denotes that a martyr renders the definitive and perfect witness of his faith in Jesus Christ, who offered His own life for our salvation. Jesus gives us Himself so we can live wholly for Him and, if He so wills, give Him our very life with the

confidence that, in surrendering our natural life, we will find a life of unending happiness with Him (see Mk 8:35).

To witness for Jesus, though, is not merely to speak in defense of Him; it is not sufficient merely to call Him “Lord” (see Mt 7:21). In addition to our public profession of Jesus’s lordship, we must live our lives in a manner that they too bear witness to Jesus’s lordship. A Christian’s witness of Jesus must be an authentic and integral witness: his words, his actions, his values, his very life must bear the imprint of Jesus. A Christian’s life, if lived authentically, will be a “sign of contradiction” (see Lk 2:34) in a world that is at enmity with the Person and the values of Jesus Christ.

The principle of Christian witness is simple but challenging: as Jesus gave all for us, so we must give all for Him. Christian witness is a call to self-donation, of surrendering all that we are to the One who created us, who died and rose for us, and who brings us into communion with Himself through the Paschal Mystery. Nothing, therefore, is ever so important that it mitigates a Christian’s obligation to witness to Jesus, not even preserving his own life (see Mt 16:25). The nature of the Gospel of Jesus is that it can never be compromised. Jesus calls for a whole-hearted commitment to Him and His Gospel. Martyrs are those men, women, and children who prefer death to compromise; they prefer integrity to duplicity. But this commitment to Jesus, this willingness to lay down one’s life for Him, is possible only because a person *first* lived for Him. Red martyrdom (to shed one’s blood for faith in Jesus) flows from white martyrdom (to live each day for Jesus).

In the history of the Church, there have been martyrs for many aspects of the Catholic faith. St. Peter (+AD 64) and St. Paul (+AD 67) were martyred because they professed the lordship and divinity of Jesus Christ and would not bend their knee to an impostor. St. Felicity (+c. AD 201) was martyred for her faith in Jesus, her refusal to worship a false god, and her refusal to prefer safety with her father rather than to renounce her Savior. St. Cecilia (+c. AD 230), like

St. Peter and St. Paul, refused to worship a false god, and her fidelity resulted in her execution by the sword. St. Thomas More (+AD 1535) was a martyr for the sacramentality and the indissolubility of marriage. St. Josaphat (+AD 1623) was a martyr for the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome. Blessed Miguel Pro (+AD 1927) was martyred because he was a priest who ministered to the people though it was against the civil law in Mexico.

In this book, I consider the lives of men and women who were martyrs of a very specific aspect of the Catholic faith: the Holy Eucharist. This great Sacrament of the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.”¹ Since the Eucharist is Jesus Christ Himself, to die for the Eucharist is to die for Jesus Christ, who said of Himself, “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35) and, “He who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39).

Recently, on the solemnity of Corpus Christi, I was led to preach on Martyrs of the Eucharist. In doing research for this homily, to my surprise, I discovered there was no book dedicated to this important subject. I believe this is a significant lacuna that needs addressing.

This book treats the Martyrs of the Eucharist in four divisions. Part One relates the heroic stories of priests who were killed for celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or the laity who were killed while attending the Mass. Part Two considers those men and women who fearlessly died defending or protecting the Eucharist. Part Three recounts the remarkable stories of persons who risked their lives for the Eucharist, though they were not actually killed. And Part Four describes the remarkable stories of those who died because of some intimate connection to the Eucharist.

There is a theological connection between martyrdom and the Eucharist. The Church teaches that the Eucharist is not a symbol; it is not a metaphor; it is not something that evokes the presence of Jesus as a memory. The Eucharist *is* the actual Real Presence of Jesus Christ. When Jesus declared at the Last Supper, while holding

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1324. Quoting LG 11.

bread, “This is my body,” it became what He declared, just as when God declared, “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gn 1:3). The Eucharist is the fulfillment of Jesus’s promise that He would be with His Church until the end of the world (see Mt 28:20). His Real Presence is His whole presence: Body, Blood, soul and divinity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist ‘the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially* contained.’”²

Thus, the Eucharistic Presence is not partial; it is not incomplete; it is not half-hearted. All that Jesus is, His full divinity and His full humanity, is made an enduring gift to us in the Eucharist. He gives all to help and empower us to give all we are back to Him. Those who literally die for Jesus do this. And in offering to Jesus their very lives, they make their lives a kind of “Eucharistic sacrifice” to Him. St. Ignatius of Antioch made this comparison: “I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. . . . Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. . . . Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ. . . . Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God.”³ Martyrdom is therefore a Eucharistic act. The Eucharist pours into us a share in the selfless and sacrificial love that animated Jesus in His passion.

In writing this book and sharing the witness of these heroic men and women over the centuries, it is my hope and prayer that we too will have a martyr’s faith with respect to the Eucharist and grow in

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1374, quoting the Council of Trent (1551).

³ St. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans*, chapter 4, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0107.htm>.

our Eucharistic amazement of so great a sacrament. If the Eucharist is Jesus Christ Himself, then what is more important to our relationship with Him than this Sacrament? The Eucharist must be central to our lives since Jesus must be central. He must make a difference, and so the Eucharist must make a difference in how we live. Sadly, according to a survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, only about 24 percent of Catholics in the United States regularly attend the Mass. Spiritually speaking, as Catholics, we cannot absent ourselves from His Eucharistic Presence and expect to persevere in the life of grace. As the “source and summit of the Christian life,” we need the Eucharist in order to live spiritually, just as we need air to breathe and food to eat to live physically. But we are made for more than physical existence; we are made to live in a communion of love that is the very heart of the Trinity. And the Eucharist gives us a share in this heart of love.

May the Martyrs of the Eucharist pray for us that we rediscover Jesus Christ, truly present in the Holy Eucharist. May we go to meet Him in the Eucharist, never missing an opportunity to be with Him. May we open our hearts to His Real Presence and thereby become transformed more perfectly into His image.

Praised be Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar!



Part One

THOSE MARTYRED
FOR CELEBRATING
OR ATTENDING
THE HOLY MASS

Chapter 1

POPE SAINT SIXTUS II

Martyred August 6, AD 258
Rome, Italy

PRIOR to becoming the emperor of the Roman Empire, Valerian, who reigned as emperor from AD 253–260, was apparently responsible for, or at least intimately involved in, the persecution of the Church under Emperor Decius (reigned AD 249–251). Decius specifically targeted the leadership of the Church. His rationale was that if the head is severed, then the body will die quickly. Bishops, priests, and deacons were sought out to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods; among those who died in this persecution was Pope Saint Fabian (reigned AD 236–250).

When Valerian became emperor two years after the death of Decius, it was thus no surprise that he resumed a program of fierce persecution. In AD 257, Valerian ordered bishops and priests to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods or face exile. Additionally, this decree forbade gathering in cemeteries, an obvious attempt to purge Rome and the empire from the celebration of the Holy Mass. The following year, Valerian intensified the penalty from exile to execution. It was in this second phase of persecution that Pope Saint Sixtus II was martyred on August 6, AD 258.

Saint Sixtus II was elected the twenty-fourth pope on August 2, AD 257. To keep his election in context, every preceding pope died a martyr's death. One year and four days after he became the Bishop of Rome, Sixtus II, together with several deacons, gathered in a lesser-known cemetery, that of Praetextatus, located off the Appian Way, for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Sixtus knew his life was in jeopardy, but not to celebrate the Holy Mass, and thereby be deprived of the Holy Eucharist, was a far greater suffering.

On August 6, AD 258, a few days after Valerian issued his second decree and intensified the penalty from exile to death, Pope Sixtus and four deacons gathered for the Mass. At some point in the Mass, while Sixtus was seated, soldiers of the Roman Empire descended upon the pope and his deacons. Either Sixtus was instantly killed while seated or he was taken to the city for a perfunctory hearing and returned to the cemetery, where he was promptly martyred by decapitation.

Pope St. Sixtus II is memorialized in the First Eucharistic Prayer, also known as the Roman Canon, in the list of early martyrs of the Church.

Reflection

Though this martyrdom occurred over seventeen hundred years ago, it is for us an eloquent and perennially pertinent homily preached by the example of our Holy Father about the supreme importance of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus taught us in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 6, that the Eucharist communicates supernatural life to us and that those who participate in this Sacrament of divine life and love will live forever. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6:51–52). Pope Sixtus offered his life to the One whose life makes us a new creation. He now enjoys this life of beatitude forever.

Through his example, the Holy Father reminds us today that, no matter the personal inconvenience, nothing should keep us from the Eucharist. We may not personally like the priest-celebrant or his homily or the style of music or the architecture of the church, but none of that should keep us from the Eucharist, the source of life. Pope Saint Sixtus did not let the threat of death keep him from the Mass. What is keeping us from the Greatest Gift imaginable?