

# PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS AND THE ECUMENISM OF THE MARTYRS

## A BIBLICAL REFLECTION

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“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” In this piece of wisdom from the First Letter of the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth (12:26), one can see the fundamental experience of that community of believers which calls itself the church. As the early Church Father Tertullian put it: “A sole Christian is no Christian” - no one can be a Christian standing alone. One can only indeed be a Christian within the church community. For Christians are members of the One Body. When one organ in the body is in pain, this affects not just that organ, but the whole body.

In this era of ecumenism, this insight extends to all Christians. We have discovered Christ’s greater body. We recognise His wounded body today at a time when so many Christians are subject to suffering and persecution. The persecution of Christians today impacts the whole church and raises the question of what this means for us Christians in the present day.

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## 1. CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

When we hear of Christian persecution and martyrdom today, are they merely historical memories which barely touch on our present day lives? In the mind of the average person today, and even Christians, Christian persecution and martyrdom are matters from the past, consigned to the vaults of history. People usually associate these subjects with recollections from the past, as in the stoning of St Stephen recounted to us in the Acts of the Apostles. We recall the various waves of persecution mounted by Roman emperors in early Christian times, designed to eliminate “atheists”, as Christians were then called, from society. We also recall that the history of Christian missions, above all in Japan and China, and Korea and Uganda, was largely that of Christian martyrs.

It is certainly present in the consciousness of the 20th century that under the terror regimes of National Socialism and Soviet communism, an unimaginable number of Christian men and women were persecuted and executed for their faith, and at the beginning of the last century the first great Christian persecution in modern times took with the Armenian genocide. And so, the conclusion must be drawn that in no other century have more Christians become martyrs than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Once the Soviet regime of terror collapsed, the Berlin Wall came down and the Iron Curtain was lifted, many people believed there was no more persecution of Christians and that the era of the universal recognition of human rights, and above all that most fundamental of human rights, the freedom of religion, had begun. That is a completely naïve estimation of the current situation, undermined most recently by the atrocities committed by the satanic terrorist organisation Islamic State in the Middle East.

These events have made clear that, at the end of the second millennium and at the beginning of the third, Christianity has once again become a Church of the Martyrs. Today we must recognise a new generation of Christians martyred in such numbers as to outstrip those killed during the Christian persecutions of the first centuries. Eighty percent of the people persecuted today for their beliefs, who are discriminated against and massively disadvantaged and who suffer gross violence, are Christian men and women. In the contemporary world, the Christian faith is the most persecuted religion. It must be admitted that today in 25 countries, Christian men and women are threatened with mistreatment, imprisonment and even death because of their faith. And one cannot escape the fact that today in the Middle East cruel Christian persecution is taking place.

It is a scandal that such a shocking reality is hardly referred to in the media, and we must seek the reasons for this strange phenomenon. A few years ago, a very blunt but thought-provoking answer was provided by the journalist Jan Ross from the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. He determined that Christianity is “the most persecuted religion in the world, but with few amongst us being interested, because it clashes with our Western self-hatred”. It is beyond any doubt that in our largely secularised European societies, there is a hostile attitude towards Christianity, especially in certain media. The published view frequently is that Christianity is to blame for nearly all of humanity’s evils: overpopulation; the AIDS epidemic; warlike confrontations and so-called fundamentalist behaviour. Increasingly, we Christians are treated as foreign bodies or even disturbers of the peace in a neo-pagan society if we fail to go along with the general consensus, if as Christian men and women we are not prepared to do what people in contemporary society do.

It is an even greater scandal when not even Christians raise their voices against the persecution of Christians today, but apparently feel a strong inclination to remain silent, recognizing Christianity's own guilty history (and the guilty history of Christian states), and the intolerance and oppression which Christians have been guilty of over the course of history.

We Christians of course have cause to beat our breast and publicly express *mea et nostra culpa* when we look upon the cruel religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly the Thirty Years War, which turned Europe into a sea of blood. Such recollections, however, should not deter us from raising our voices against the wrongs visited on our Christian sisters and brothers in many regions of the world.

The shocking extent of Christian persecutions in the modern world represents a great challenge to us – to show compassionate solidarity with persecuted Christian men and women and to openly denounce situations of martyrdom. But is this solidarity really evident? Or do these cries of distress from the Christians of today go unheard, as did the cries of the prophet Isaiah in his time, when he gave vent in bitter words to his pain: “The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, while no one understands” (Isa 57:1).

This critical question is not only directed at individual Christians, but also at European politicians. It was certainly an encouraging sign when, after the shocking attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket in Paris in January 2015, government leaders from across Europe travelled to the French capital to declare their solidarity with France. On the other hand, I was forced to admit to myself that what had happened in Paris happens every day in the Middle East, and I asked myself, where are European politicians then? Of course, after the insane attacks in Paris of November 2015, we again stand alongside France. But now the Middle East with its brutal Islamic State

persecutions has reached into Europe in a grim fashion; and it is to be hoped that now these horrible events will be taken notice of in the West. Generally speaking, one is sadly left with the impression that the Middle East continues to be ignored on the international level, and that the West remains largely indifferent to the suffering of Christians. In the face of this realisation, urgent questions present themselves: How much longer will European governments simply look on while ancient cultural relics in Syria and Iraq are destroyed; while people – Christians and other religious minorities like the Yazidis – are slaughtered like animals and many are forced to flee? The refugee problem, which is larger today than at any time since the Second World War, can only be controlled if the situation in those countries from which refugees come is changed.

## 2. CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

Making this woeful situation better known is the special responsibility of the Christian churches. It is also incumbent on them to recall that there is no Christianity free of martyrdom. Much more realistic is it to assume that the followers of Christ can be faced with martyrdom. The Christian churches today can only understand martyrdom in the light of faith if they acknowledge it is integral to Christianity – in other words, that it is a “fundamental constituent of Christianity”.<sup>2</sup> This honest recognition has been confirmed a thousand-fold in the course of church history and likewise today, and now requires some theological exploration.

A particularly telling example is the martyrdom of St Polycarp of Smyrna. He lived at the time of the early disciples and ministered in Asia Minor, where the first Christian communities had been founded during the lifetime of the apostles. In this region, Christians had already

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<sup>2</sup> Kardinal W. Kasper, *Ökumene der Märtyrer: Theologie und Spiritualität des Martyriums* (Norderstedt 2014) 8.

been subjected to early persecution, as revealed in the words of John, the visionary writing to the community in Smyrna: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10). Ahead of all those in the community at Smyrna, Bishop Polycarp partook of Jesus’ cup of suffering and death. The oldest Christian accounts of martyrdom report on his martyr’s death. The most striking and undoubtedly most meaningful aspect of the account of his martyrdom is that it takes the form of a liturgy, as if it were a eucharistic prayer.

The account begins with Bishop Polycarp being bound with his hands tied behind his back. In this way, as the martyrdom accounts put it, he appears as though “a noble ram, led to God from his herd, a pleasing and ready sacrifice”. Following this lead-up to martyrdom, which is described as if a gift is being prepared, Polycarp is tied to his funeral pyre and delivers a form of eucharistic prayer. He gives thanks for having come to an understanding of God afforded him through the Father’s beloved Son, Jesus Christ. He praises God for having been found worthy to share the Cup of Christ Jesus and to be close to the promise of resurrection. Finally, he pleads in the words of the Old Testament Book of Daniel, which clearly had found their way into the early Christian liturgy: “to be received as an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice today in your sight”.<sup>3</sup> This eucharistic prayer ends – as do all eucharistic prayers – with a great doxology. After Polycarp says “Amen”, the soldiers set the funeral pyre alight. In conclusion, it is mentioned that his incinerated body does not have the appearance of roasted flesh, but that of baked bread, and the onlookers spoke of a sweet odour “as if it were incense or rare aromas”. If one considers that both images – the transformation into bread and the fragrance – belong together and have their source in Old and New Testament sacrifice

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<sup>3</sup> Prayer of Azariah, v. 16-17.

theology, once again the liturgical and eucharistic character of the event is made clear.

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom as a eucharistic liturgy is mentioned in such detail because it gets to the heart of Christian martyrdom. It shows that Bishop Polycarp, through his martyrdom, has become like Christ and that his life has become a sacrifice and a eucharistic gift: like Christ, it is not the toxic decomposition of the living that has come about through the power of death, but rather that the life force has gone out of him and, as though fine bread, gives life to us; thus the personal transition of Polycarp, a witness to faith, into the Body of Christ through martyrdom has overthrown the power of death. For insofar as a martyr is alive and then gives life through his/her death, he/she has entered into the eucharistic mystery. Herein lies the deepest reason as to why the Acts of the Martyrs describe the martyrdom of St Polycarp as "the martyr becomes Eucharist in full communion with the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ".

Such existential transformation into the Eucharist by faithful Christians has been attested to many times throughout Church history. Arguably the most popular example is the story of St Lawrence on the griddle, in which people from early times saw the model of the Christian life, specifically how the vicissitudes of life can turn into a cleansing fire, which gradually changes us so that our entire life is given over to God and our fellow men and women. In the recent past, the martyrdom of St Maximilian Kolbe<sup>4</sup> stands out; he died singing songs of praise and gave his life in exchange for another's, redeeming his entire life through a radical sacrifice. These examples show that Christian martyrdom not

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<sup>4</sup> At Auschwitz in July 1941, St. Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to die in place of Franciszek Gajowniczek, who cried out for his wife and children after being selected for death by starvation. Kolbe led his fellow prisoners in prayer and song during their ordeal. After two weeks, only Kolbe and a few others remained alive; he was executed by lethal injection on August 14, 1941. He was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II as a "Martyr of Charity".

only means living in the mystery of the Eucharist, but also and above all, having one's very existence incorporated into the mystery itself.

### 3. PARTICIPATING IN THE PASCAL MYSTERY AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS

From the gift of a death offered up new life arises. That is the message of the martyrs; they are fully absorbed into the eucharistic mystery. Although we Christians are largely spared martyrdom - at least in a physical sense - the connection between our existence as Christians and our incorporation into the eucharistic mystery holds true even today. Living the eucharistic mystery must also reach its culmination in our lives. For whoever wants to be a follower of Jesus is granted a share in the paschal mystery of the love of Jesus, He who hangs bloodied on the cross.

This highlights with particular clarity Jesus' response to the appeal from the mother of the sons of Zebedee that they should sit one on his right hand and the other on his left in His glory. Jesus, however, explicitly explains to them that the right to sit in the glory of heaven is tied solely to doing God's will, and cites the cup and baptism as the core requirements of being His followers: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" (Mk 10:38). The decisive words in Jesus' reply - cup, baptism and thus also - make clear that Jesus' disciples ought not be measured by matters of morality, but by an elementary Christological yardstick, which then leads on to a moral commission. Following the Cross is no moral code looking at life through a negative lens, nor a masochism for people who do not like themselves, but truly Good News promising life through death. Being a follower of Jesus therefore is always linked to the paschal mystery and certainly no walk in the park. For it includes a

readiness “to be a Simon of Cyrene on Jesus’ Way of the Cross down the centuries”.<sup>5</sup>

Sharing in the carrying of the cross keeps alive in our faith consciousness that the norm for Christianity is that there are many crosses, not that it is cross-free; the Church has had to learn this over and over since its beginning. An eloquent example of this is provided in the First Letter of John, who reminds his readers: “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree” (1 Jn 5: 6-8).

When first heard, these words sound puzzling. They can only be understood in the context of the account of the Passion in John’s Gospel, where it is said blood and water flowed from the wound in Jesus’ side (Jn 19:34). For John, blood and water are images of the basic sacraments of the Church, namely Baptism and Eucharist. He thereby emphasises that the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and thus the Church itself, come from the Cross of Jesus. Against this background, we see that John is opposing, in a polemical fashion, a Christianity which is only willing to recognise Jesus’s baptism as a salvation event, omitting from our faith awareness His death on the Cross and His presence in the Eucharist. John takes issue then with a Christianity which only wants the water of baptism but not the blood of the Eucharist and, thus, the cross. All that remains of Christianity is the water; and so it becomes a watered-down, even washed-out, Christianity: “Christianity becomes mere teaching, mere moralism and a matter of the intellect, but the flesh and blood are absent”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Auf Christus schauen. Einübung in Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe* (Freiburg i. Br. 1989), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus von Nazareth* (Freiburg i. Br. 2007) 286.

Who in all honesty would dispute that Christianity today is still threatened by the temptation to overturn the miracle at Cana? While Jesus changed water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana, there is a tendency among some Christians today to turn the wine pressed out by Jesus in the Passion back into water. In contrast, John insists, with searing clarity, that water and blood, Baptism and Eucharist, discipleship and the Cross, are inextricably linked. For the Church is always a Church of the water and the blood, and therefore a Church of the Martyrs.

#### 4. COMMUNION WITH CHRIST'S DEATH IN BAPTISM

Jesus' grave warning to His disciples shows unequivocally that martyrdom does belong to the Christian life: "Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you 'Servants are not greater than their master'. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 19: 19-20). While the Church differentiates between red and white martyrdom, the former paid for in one's own blood and the latter exemplified by one standing up for one's faith in daily life, this last kind highlights that every Christian is called to martyrdom. It is based on the baptism through which we belong to Christ. Whoever belongs to Christ also has a share through baptism in His Cross, and to His suffering and death. Once baptism is complete, we are forever entrusted to Him in Whose Name we are baptised. Our life being linked to that of Jesus Christ means for Paul that we are all baptised in the death of Christ Jesus. Therefore, Paul can go so far as to say that we, wherever we come from, "always carry in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10).

Yes, "so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies". That "so that" is decisive. In baptism we are called to have communion with Jesus' pathway to death, so that we can also be part of His new life.

We are baptised in the death of Christ because this communal baptism with Jesus Christ in His death is the pledge that our own life will not end in death, even death by martyrdom, but that it will remain one with the new and eternal life of Jesus Christ, as became evident in His resurrection.

In the early Christian era, this belief was made manifest through being fully immersed in water during baptism, and Paul interpreted this ritual act as a death event. He sees the liturgical immersion of the candidate for baptism in the baptismal water as akin to immersion in the engulfing waters of death, in solidarity indeed with Christ: “We have been buried with Him by baptism into death” (Rom 6: 4a). And the cleansing through the water of baptism, as Paul sees it, points to a new and imperishable life, in community once again with Christ: “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6: 4b). Just as Christ Jesus descended to the dead and yet rose again on the morning of Easter a fully new person, so does one enter into Christ’s tomb through the water of baptism and rise from the grave like Christ, a new person. As baptism grants a share in the Easter salvation of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, it constitutes the final transition from death into new life with God.

In light of this mystery of faith we also have Jesus’ words applying to our taking up of His Cross, a commissioning of every Christian to understand the inner core of Christian martyrdom. When we listen to these words, something suddenly strikes us, which we might otherwise quite willingly overlook or misread. It is not in fact a matter of us Christians of today being obliged to carry Jesus’ cross. Jesus did not say: “Whoever does not carry *my* cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple” but rather: “Whoever does not carry *his* cross and follow me” (Lk 14: 27). So, the contemporary way for Christian men and women cannot be identical to Jesus’ suffering and Passion. We do not have to

reconcile God with the world, for that is Jesus' work. Thus, Jesus' particular Way of the Cross is not our way; He made it His Way on our behalf. Rather, Thus, Jesus' particular Way of the Cross is actually not our way; He made it His Way on our behalf. Jesus' words mean refer much more to how we can follow Him in bearing our crosses in the here and now as to how we become successive cross bearers.

## 5. JESUS CHRIST AS THE MODEL MARTYR

We must adapt to the Way of Jesus if we honestly and above all, as Christians, wish to speak about the personal cross of martyrdom which we must bear in following Him. Then it is not self-preservation that becomes evident as the law of Jesus' life but self-revelation. Thus, Jesus neither sought nor longed for suffering and crucifixion. All the forms of suffering He encountered caused Him to resist them vigorously: suffering that visibly afflicted people physically and mentally, or brought social alienation. But it is this struggle against suffering, in the name of God, which led Jesus to the cross and cost Him his life. Jesus' death on the cross is the significant conclusion to His life, the result of his unflinching adherence to the will of God on behalf of the lives of men and women. He died because of His love for us. For love in the service of the other is essentially service flowing from one's whole being, a surrender which can extend as far as self-abandonment.

When we as Christians align ourselves with the life and death of Jesus, one thing stands out: like Jesus there is no need for us to seek out our cross, for it is not as though there aren't enough crosses in our world already. By not catching sight of one or another of those crosses anyway, we would be letting on that as Christ's followers today we have given up. This cross, however, is to be found in the consequences of our living as Christians, in so far as we live out the Gospel of Jesus on behalf of the fullness of life and humanity of the human person, risking the cross in so doing. That way Jesus' words to us as successors to His Cross today assume their meaning: only the person who is personally

prepared to take on the Christian life with all its consequences and risks can be a disciple of Jesus. Whatever applies to the individual Christian can also be applied to the church as a whole, as Pope Francis emphasised when he commented on the Pentecost event: “The Church at Pentecost is a church that is not content to be harmless or a mere decoration. She is a church that does not hesitate to go out to encounter people and preach the Good News that has been entrusted to her, even if the message is disturbing and unsettling to the conscience, even if the message perhaps leads to difficulties and sometimes martyrdom.”

No Christian can exempt himself or herself from bearing the cross if they really want to follow Jesus, who sacrificed His life for us on the cross. He is, as it were, the protomartyr, or more precisely, the Good Shepherd who is not deterred from His tender seeking of the lost, when evil tendencies in people flare up and mortally strike the Good Shepherd. The cross of Jesus reveals the unswerving conduct of a Good Shepherd whose love knows no bounds, who wants to be close to people in the deepest troughs and most hidden catacombs of their crucified lives. The cross is “love in its most radical form”, as Pope Benedict XVI writes in his first encyclical on Christian love: “His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him.”

Since the total love of Jesus Christ became visible on the cross, it goes without saying that He gifted us with Himself, not simply a mere something. In contrast to the understanding of “victim” in religious history, where the separation of the sacrificial priest from the offering is assumed, in Jesus’ death on the cross the sacrificial priest and the offering are completely identical. Thus, in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, it is not a matter of someTHING being given but of someONE. Accordingly, the Church Fathers saw in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross the fulfillment of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Although

Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his own son Isaac and in so doing offer up to God his greatest love, God spares Isaac and is content with the ram found in the bush put there for Abraham. So while Isaac in the Old Testament does not have to die, the new Isaac, Jesus, offers up His life, as Origen tellingly wrote: “In a wonderful way, God competes with man in generosity - Abraham sacrificed a mortal son to God without him having to die; then God gave His immortal Son up to death on behalf of men and women”. The new and true sacrifice of Jesus no longer consists of sacrificing animals and things to God, but in the self-gift of the Son to His Father on our behalf. It was not enough, therefore, for Jesus to present material sacrifices, either animals or objects, to God, as had been the case in the temple at Jerusalem. When Jesus offered up Himself rather than anything else, He became a new temple and brought a new religious rite into the world, which was made complete by the sacrifice of His life on the cross. This new liturgy is the sacrifice Jesus made to show us the love He bears us, not only with verbal declarations of love, but with the limitless love in the offering up of his own life He wanted us to experience. So, there is no more making do with animal offerings. Now there is only the giving up of one’s own life.

## 6. MARTYRDOM AS THE DEEP DIMENSION OF ECUMENISM

In Jesus’ giving up His life for us on the cross, all the essential elements of Christian martyrdom appear. Since the martyrdom of Jesus Christ stands at the very centre of the Christian faith, the persecution of Christians and martyrdom inherently belong to Christianity, and there can be no Christian church that is not a church of the martyrs. This is the fundamental experience of Christianity today: all Christian churches and church communities have their martyrs. For Christians today are not persecuted because they are Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant or Pentecostal, but because they are Christians. Martyrdom today is ecumenical, and so we must speak of an actual ecumenism of

the martyrs or of an ecumenism of the blood. As Pope Francis correctly points out, for those who persecute Christians, there is only one factor that counts: “Persecutors do not separate us out – Lutherans, Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics...No! We are all one. To the persecutors, we are Christians. Anything else is of no interest. It is an ecumenism of the blood that is being lived out today”.

The ecumenical dimension of martyrdom was particularly highlighted by Pope St John Paul II when, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May in the Year of Jubilee 2000, he was invited to an ecumenical commemoration of the witnesses to the faith and martyrs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the highly symbolic location of the Roman Colosseum, along with senior representatives of the various churches and church communities. Martyrs such as Orthodox Metropolitan Seraphim, Protestant Pastor Paul Schneider and Catholic Fr Maximilian Kolbe were remembered. This commemoration made the deep links between all these various churches and faith communities tangible, in spite of all prevailing differences and obstacles. In the face of a common persecution in National Socialist concentration camps or communist gulags, Christians from different churches and communities came together, recognising their shared faith and becoming friends together.

In honour of 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs, the Sant’Egidio community in Rome has set up a place of memory and reflection in the Basilica of St Bartholomew on an island in the Tiber. When Pope Benedict XVI visited the spot in 2008, he spoke of how to outward appearances, “cruelty, totalitarianism, persecution and blind violence” seemed to hold sway, with these witnesses to faith being silenced and “being looked upon as historical losers”. But the risen Jesus shines a bright light on their witness, so that “in the defeat and humbling of those who suffer for the Gospel”, there is a power at work “which the world does not know; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). It

is the power of love, defenceless and victorious despite seeming defeat. It is the power that challenges death and is victorious.

This is the deep mystery of Christian martyrdom. It gives grounds for saying that the community of martyrs speaks a far clearer language than existing divisions would suggest. This is why it is appropriate to speak of an actual ecumenism of the martyrs. Pope St John Paul II devoted an entire chapter of his sentinel encyclical *Ut unum sint* to its value to ecumenism and showed in a sensitive way that the ecumenism of the martyrs carries an edifying message. Despite the painful drama of sectarian division, steadfast witnesses to faith in all the Christian churches and church communities have shown how God upholds believers and the faith community at a deeper level when they are confronted with the ultimate sacrifice. While we Christians and our churches still enjoy an incomplete community on this earth standing with and by one another, martyrs already live a full and complete community in their heavenly glory. As Pope John Paul II decisively highlighted, martyrs are the “most convincing proof that in giving oneself totally to the cause of the Gospel, any hint of division can be dealt with and overcome”.

In the ecumenism of the martyrs, or as Pope Francis prefers to put it, in the ecumenism of the blood - in spite of tragedy - there lies something of further significance: just as the Old Church was convinced that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of new Christians, so may we yet hold the hope that the many martyrs of our time will prove to be the seed of the complete ecumenical unity of the Body of Christ. We ought even to be convinced that in the blood of the martyrs we have already become one. In this ecumenical hope, we Christians and churches are duty bound to provide effective help to persecuted Christians, to publicly denounce situations in which believers are in danger of martyrdom, to be engaged in defending human dignity and

the religious freedom that is grounded in it, and above all to keep our suffering brothers and sisters in our prayers.

This is a kairologically urgent responsibility for Christians, which must be fulfilled in ecumenical communion, as a vivid phrase of Pope Francis makes clear: “When the enemy unites us in death, how can we separate ourselves in life?”

Isn't it a shame that the persecutors of Christians often have a better ecumenical vision than we Christians ourselves, since they obviously know that we Christians inseparably belong together? In the ecumenism of the martyrs we must therefore sense that the very core of all our ecumenical endeavour is leading to church unity. Because the suffering of so many Christians in the modern world can be seen as one shared experience, stronger than the differences that still divide the Christian churches, the martyrdom in common of Christians today constitutes the “most convincing sign” of ecumenism, as Pope Francis pointed out in his message to participants at the Global Christian Forum in November 2015 in Tirana, a conference devoted to the discrimination, persecution and martyrdom of Christians.

The ecumenism of the martyrs also reminds us that ecumenism is a deeply spiritual task, and that spiritual ecumenism, as the Second Vatican Council emphasised, is the “soul of the entire ecumenical movement”. From its very beginning, the ecumenical movement has been a prayer movement and can only thus remain alive. Using a very elaborate image, Abbe Paul Couturier, a passionate pioneer of spiritual ecumenism, likened the ecumenical movement to an invisible monastery, in which Christians belonging to their different churches in many countries and on different continents are praying together. Even today, praying for the unity of Christians is and remains the beating heart of the entire ecumenical way. Through prayer we express our faith conviction that we humans do not simply create church unity or

decide its shape and timing, but rather that it will be afforded to us, as though a gift. And through prayer for Christian unity, ecumenism will most deeply comply with the desire of the Lord of all Christians, who in His prayer as High Priest prayed for unity among His disciples. It must constantly be borne in mind that Jesus did not command unity among His disciples nor claim it from them, but prayed for it. From Jesus' prayer that "all should be one", we are best able to discern what our ecumenical responsibility in the light of faith is and must be. If unity among His disciples was the decisive focus of Jesus' prayer, then the Christian church can only count itself true to Jesus' prayer, in so far as it makes His prayerful desire its own. If ecumenism is not to be just philanthropically or interactionally motivated, but really Christologically based, it must in the end be "part of Jesus' prayer as High Priest".<sup>7</sup>

## 7. ECUMENICAL WITNESS IN THE MODERN WORLD

In Jesus' prayer as High Priest, He asks for unity among His disciples with a specific intent: "...so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23). In this final utterance, it becomes clear that unity among Jesus' disciples is not an end in itself, but something on which the credibility of Jesus Christ's mission in the world depends, as well as that of His Church. The ecumenism of the martyrs reminds us of how seriously this injunction was taken as far back as one hundred years ago at the first World Mission Conference in the Scottish city of Edinburgh, and how it still counts in the current ecumenical situation. Participants at that inaugural conference became aware of how the various Christian churches and communities were competing in their missionary endeavours, to the detriment of the integrity of Jesus' Good News among distant cultures. Divisions in Christianity emerged as the biggest obstacle to world mission, and this holds true even today, as Pope Francis spelt out

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<sup>7</sup> W. Kardinal Kasper, *Wege der Einheit: Perspektiven für die Ökumene* (Freiburg i. Br. 2005) 204.

clearly in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*”: “Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. Missionaries on those continents often mention the criticisms, complaints and ridicule to which the scandal of divided Christians gives rise”. As Pope Francis sees it, “Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization”.

This critical ecumenical situation indicates that a convincing proclamation of the Gospel in the modern world will only be possible when the Christian churches can overcome their divisions and when mission and the ecumenical striving for unity are collectively demanded and promoted. In the contemporary world Christian witness must be scored so that its melody is heard not as a jarring cacophony but as a sweet symphony. This witness must above all be capable of leading people in today’s secularised societies into the divine mystery and of introducing them to a personal relationship with God and the belief that one’s life is incomplete without God. The God question must remain at the centre of all ecumenical activity, as Pope Benedict XVI highlighted at an ecumenical service during his apostolic journey to Germany, when he met with the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany in the autumn of 2011 in Erfurt to honour the passionate search for God in the life and work of the reformer, Martin Luther: “Man was created for God and needs Him. Our first ecumenical and common duty at this time must be to bear witness to the living God in the world of today and thereby give the world the answer which it needs”.

As Christians we are convinced that by concentrating on proclaiming the living God to men and women, we add to the worth of their lives. Therefore, we Christians have no more important task than to

proclaim the living God and to speak forthrightly of the divine mystery which offers an overarching haven to them, ensuring their God-given rights from the very moment of conception until their natural death, however confronting the message, and even at the risk of sacrificing one's own life. For the most credible witnesses to the faith and the most convincing exegetes of the Gospel are the martyrs, who have given their lives for the faith. The martyrs constitute "the archive of truth written in blood".<sup>8</sup>

The martyrs, therefore, have demonstrated in an exemplary way what the call of every Christian entails, as tellingly emphasised in the First Letter of Peter: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil" (3:15-17). In these words lies the basic option of Christian martyrdom, which posits a reality shared by all Christians. If we are to take them seriously, we cannot then only speak of the martyrdom of Christians; we are also invited to include all Christians who today are persecuted for their faith in our prayers, to bring them before God in their suffering, to thank them for their witness to faith and to allow ourselves to be inspired to live a courageous and compelling Christian witness.

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<sup>8</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nr. 2474.