

A RESPONSE TO CARDINAL KOCH

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Sadly, the theme of the ecumenism of martyrdom is no less immediate an issue than when Cardinal Koch's challenging address was first delivered in 2015. And no less sadly, the level of ignorance on this subject among not only the wider public but the political classes of the West remains troubling.

To be absolutely clear: this is in no way about 'weaponizing' the suffering of Christians in order to secure moral and cultural high ground over other faiths (our Jewish as well as our Muslim friends will remind us that we have no historical monopoly on victimhood, and a pretty mixed history of aggression of our own at various periods). It is a recognition that extreme injustice is being done, in settings where Christian groups are in every way deeply vulnerable.

Refusing to acknowledge this is a perverse form of collusion with the fantasy so popular among some extremists particularly in Muslim and Hindu contexts, as once in the old Soviet bloc, that Christianity is intrinsically a tool of colonialism, capitalism, American hegemony, or whatever.

To put it bluntly, Christians have no reason to apologize for their enduring presence in so many non-European societies where they have lived, not as an alien and privileged class but as people deeply rooted in their local cultures and languages, but also, all too often, as a marginalized and insecure minority.

I suspect that I am not the only person who has had to explain to puzzled fellow-Westerners that Christians in this or that context outside

Europe are not there because of modern proselytism; it is especially dispiriting to have to explain this to government ministers, or even to some religious leaders.

Martyrdom is about life not death

Cardinal Koch reminds us, in a reflection of great profundity, that Christians from the very beginning have seen martyrdom as a gift to the Church. Some of the earliest Christian documents that survive are letters from one local church to another, relating recent experience of persecution and the heroism of believers facing torture and death; and the Cardinal rightly singles out the way in which the story of Polycarp's execution in the second century presents the terrible event as a 'eucharistic' offering in which the self-offering of the martyr becomes united with Christ's gift of life to the whole community.

It is a reminder that martyrdom is, from the believer's point of view, about life, not death: it testifies as fully as possible to the fact that the life that is given in faithful relation to Christ is worth any risk, any loss, any danger, because it is life in its fulness, and any betrayal of that life is a fatal diminution of what is given.

Martyrdom echoes the warning and promise of Christ: losing life for the sake of the Kingdom is the doorway to life itself, and 'gaining the world' at the expense of truthful witness is death.

The Church rightly gives thanks for such witness. But that does not mean that it regards the loss, the risk and the danger as things to be welcomed; certainly not if it is other people's loss and risk that is in view. We rightly give thanks; and we equally rightly seek to expose the reality of persecution, for Christians as for all others at risk, and to defend those living with this acute vulnerability.

Called to name and challenge persecution

It may be the call of the persecuted to suffer; our calling, at a distance from the immediate reality of injustice and violence, is to seek to name

it and contest it, not simply as an expression of *Christian* solidarity but for the sake of justice for all, mindful of the deep-seated insight of Christian theology that to contest and resist injustice is done for the sake of the oppressor or persecutor as well as for the victim (it is always worth recalling the persistent tradition of martyrs praying for their executioners).

And the ecumenism of martyrs is ultimately intelligible in the light of the central recognition of the gift involved. Martyrdom bears witness to the one gift of life in Christ; what it transmits to the Church is the same one gift.

The life that is more treasurable than earthly survival or security is the life of a child of God, endowed with Christlike intimacy with the Father. It is the thing that makes, or ought to make, all Christians recognizable to each other; and that is where the reality of martyrdom teaches us about what it is that finally makes the Church one.

Martyrdom and inter-church unity

The uncomfortable question is how this level of insight that martyrdom displays translates into the institutional relations between church bodies. If our unity is basically about how we recognise in one another the shared process of growing into the condition of adult children of the one Father, what exactly is it that justifies us in restricting and denying the sharing of sacramental life to one another?

The Cardinal understandably does not tackle such a question directly, and I don't think that the answer is quite as straightforward as might appear. But there is no denying that the question presses.

If you read the recently translated journal of Nicolae Steinhardt (*Journal of Joy* *), who spent years in the prisons of the Communist regime in Romania in the early fifties, you will find some profoundly moving accounts of sacramental convergence - not least in Steinhardt's narrative of his baptism.

Clearly, in extreme situations, some barriers dissolve almost without question; mutual recognition is made simple if all are paying the same price for their commitment to the new life in Christ. It rather strongly suggests that something of the same account of that new life is implied by how people are behaving when faced with the alternative of losing it.

And this at the very least might make us pause before settling on excessively formal criteria for this recognition, and lead us to think about what is involved in recognition in the context of crisis. We may not all share the crisis, but we know something of what the gift looks like. We might feel a certain shame that we need the crisis to point us to what we instinctively and internally know about the gift. And, in whatever way, this is bound, surely, to affect how we see one another across confessional frontiers; another dimension of the gift.

*Nicolae Steinhardt, *Journal of Joy*, Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2025