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## **“THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS”- A RECONCILING WITNESS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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### ***Abstract***

One of the results of the Ecumenical Movement is growing awareness of the potential of martyrs, saints, and sanctified people - all those we understand in Christian cross-confessional friendship - as witnesses to the vision of reconciling the Church into a reconciled world. The significance of martyrdom was captured in a 1978 text from the Bangalore World Council of Churches meeting. In an essay on martyrdom for the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, Rowan D. Crews Jr. reported that "by pretending Primary Church martyrs and some of the later Christian Christians as" the common property of all Christians, "many Churches were involved in - a process of mutual recognition of martyrs, this necessitating an ecumenical anthology of both the martyrs in the early Church and later. "This work, begun in 1978, was continued later.

**Keywords:** Ecumenical Movement; martyrs; saints; Church;

### **INTRODUCTION**

On December 26, 1999 on the feast of St. Stephen, a new „Chapel of Martyrs” was consecrated by Church of Sweden Bishop Jonas Jonson in the Cathedral of Strangnas, together with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Stockholm. The spirit of the chapel is one of unity. It provides a welcoming space for all Christians to pray and reflect in the company of women and men who suffered and died as witnesses to their faith. Plaques on either side of the altar list the names of forty twentieth century martyrs. Some have been recognized officially. Others live in the collective consciousness of the faithful. The martyrs come from different continents, cultures, and Christian traditions. At the time the chapel was consecrated, Bishop Jonson was the co-moderator of the Joint Working Group which is responsible for fostering the relationship between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. For many years he had been engaged in the quest for Christian unity, an impulse of churches in response to the prayer of our Lord „that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21) It is not surprising, then, that Bishop Jonson was inspired to create this chapel with a reconciling intention.

A chapel in Canterbury Cathedral has a similar aim. Among the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant martyrs acknowledged are Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oscar Romero. Westminster Abbey in London includes statues of twentieth-century martyrs on its west front.

These are three visible signs of a growing convergence in understanding Christian martyrs as belonging to the whole people of God.

When I entered the Chapel of Martyrs, the experience opened my eyes to this spiritual fruit of the movement to heal divisions among Christians and our churches—namely, the way that Christian martyrs can draw us to Christ, and through Christ, toward each other. As Christians become more familiar with the spiritual gifts of each other's traditions, we are reclaiming those gifts in ways that bring us and our churches closer together. When Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI met in Rome in 1967, they voiced this link between the witness of martyrs and the ecumenical mandate. „We hear... the cry of the blood of the apostles Peter and Paul, and the voice of the church of the catacombs and of the martyrs of the Coliseum, inviting us to use every possible means to bring to completion the work we have begun—that of the perfect healing of Christ's divided church—not only that the will of the Lord should be accomplished, but that the world may see shining forth what is, according to our creed, the primary property of the church—its unity.”<sup>[i]</sup> These religious leaders were clear about the strong link between martyrdom, reconciliation, and Christian witness.

Before walking into the Chapel in Strangnäs, I had not given much thought to the power of exemplary martyrs as a potential force for spiritual edification and Christian unity. I come from a Reformed tradition. Protestants have tended to be nervous about a popular piety that could de-emphasize the role of Christ as the sole mediator between humanity and God. Yet the Scriptures provide abundant reminders of the attractive power of holy living and dying, beginning with Christ himself. Jesus said „unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24-25 NRSV) The Letter to the Hebrews encourages us, „since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” (Heb. 12:1-2a NRSV) I have seen from my own experience what a source of inspiration these witnesses can be. The „I have a dream” speech of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., made before his martyrdom during the civil rights struggles of the 1960's in the United States, stirs me to speak up in support of racial justice, <sup>[ii]</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, reminds me of the importance of witnessing to principle in the face of institutionalized evil. The influence of these twentieth century martyrs transcends the categories of tradition that sometimes bind and separate. These witnesses nurture all of us in the faith. And in this way, they remind Christians of the real though incomplete communion we share through our baptism.

One of the fruits of the ecumenical movement is a growing awareness of the potential of martyrs, saints, and holy people—those whom we have encountered in trans-confessional Christian friendship—as witnesses to the vision of a reconciled church in a reconciled world. The significance of martyrdom was explored in a 1978 text from a World Council of Churches Faith and Order meeting in Bangalore. In an essay on *Martyrdom* for the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Rowan D. Crews, Jr. reports that „Claiming the martyrs of the early church and certain great Christian witnesses of later history as 'the common property of all Christians', the statement notes that many churches are already involved in the process of a mutual recognition of the martyrs and calls for an ecumenical anthology of both early and modern accounts of martyrdom.” <sup>[iii]</sup> The good work envisioned in 1978 has continued.

Pope John Paul II gave fresh impetus to this impulse in this encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* („That All May Be One”), issued in 1995. The second paragraph of the encyclical calls attention to the witness of martyrs as a force for unity. The text asserts that „The courageous witness of so many martyrs of our century, including members of churches and ecclesial communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church, gives new vigor to the [Second Vatican] council's call and reminds us of our duty to listen to and put into practice its exhortation. These brothers and sisters of ours, united in the selfless offering of their lives for the kingdom of God, are the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel.” <sup>[iv]</sup> In an eloquent testimony about the essential nature of the quest to heal divisions among the churches, Pope John Paul II says that „This unity... is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this

community. God wills the church because he wills unity, and unity is an expression of the whole depth of his agape.” [v] In an effort to give visible witness to this idea, on May 7 in the Jubilee Year 2000 the Pope held an „Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century” in the Colosseum, a site of martyrdom in the early Church of Rome, [vi] Representatives of other churches and ecclesial communities from a variety of nations were invited to participate in the service of evening prayer marking the occasion.

The most recent initiative to explore ways that the witness of martyrs can be a force for unity was held at the Monastery of Bose in the fall of 2008. The Feast of All Saints appropriately occurred during the symposium. According to the message of the meeting, „The aims behind this project were: to recognize each other's witnesses of faith, when this is not mutually exclusive; to find ways of commemorating witnesses from various traditions at ecumenical meetings; to develop or recover the commemoration of witnesses in churches that do not have such a practice; to work towards a common ecumenical martyrology.”[vii]

As the participants in the Bose meeting recognized, when one wades into the history of Christian martyrdom, one quickly realizes that the circumstances of martyrdom in some situations have an underside that must be surfaced and addressed as a step toward reconciliation among churches. Over the centuries, many Christians have been martyred in inter-confessional acts of violence, thus fueling the flames of acrimony between Christians. The Bose message says „We began to see that what and who we remember can keep us apart, but our common remembering draws us together. This act of remembering can serve as an act of confession that opens before us a way of reclaiming together past witnesses. Repentance and forgiveness for past acts of inter-confessional violence are more likely to occur when we reflect together on those who in dying forgave their persecutors.” [viii] Ut Unum Sint also acknowledges the need for a „purification of past memories.” [ix] A common exploration of painful memories offers Christians an opportunity to acknowledge past wrongs, repent for sins committed, seek forgiveness, and transcend the past in keeping with the reconciling spirit of the Gospel.

This process is not easy. It requires „speaking the truth in love,” so that „we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” (Eph. 4:15-16 NRSV) In this way, an exploration of a common martyrology offers the possibility for churches to grow together through costly obedience to the reconciling essence of the Gospel.

The Bose message makes a distinction between martyrs and „heroes of the faith”. The former are persons „who suffered violent death for their faith—a death freely accepted for Christ's sake but not sought out as an end in itself.” Christians also have been inspired by „Heroes of the faith.” These are living witnesses—people „who witnessed to Christ throughout their lives but did not meet violent death..” [x] The scriptures speak of such witnesses as saints, „members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). These are persons who participate in the holiness of God in remarkable ways. A popular hymn among Protestants, written in the nineteenth century, is titled „For All the Saints.” The fourth verse reads, „O Blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia!” [xi] In this sense, all are called to holiness through our baptism. The saints show us the way. Their holiness in imitation of Christ shines through especially clearly, inviting us to emulate them in an ongoing conversion of heart.

We also should not underestimate the importance of interpersonal encounters as a transforming means for God to do God's reconciling work through us. The Rev. David W.A. Taylor, former General Secretary of the Consultation on Church Union in the United States, observed that „few if any have gained an ecumenical view of the church and the world on their own. Someone spoke or taught or acted in such a manner as to open up the wider spiritual and ecclesial horizon.” [xii] We have much to learn from these holy encounters.

The Bose symposium acknowledges that churches continue to differ in particular matters („the intercession of the saints, canonization, veneration of saintly relics, and the practice of indulgences.” [xiii]). Yet Christians are united in being attracted to examples of holy living from all our traditions. These saints are accessible because of the way that they have evidenced holiness in their very humanity.

Despite the diversity in practices of piety, one of the gifts of the ecumenical movement has been to make more visible persons who have been stellar examples of holy living to Christians of all traditions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Martyrs, saints, and living witnesses— we have a unity in our diversity in this dimension of our spiritual life. Their experiences nurture and inform us in our relationships in church and society. A daily reading of the newspaper, with examples of heart-wrenching conflicts all over the world, reconfirms the need of Christians to be witnesses to the healing, reconciling power of the Gospel in our own lives, in the life of our churches, for the sake of the world.

The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism says that „There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart.” [xiv] We seek guidance for holy living wherever we can find it. We are inspired by writings from all Christian spiritual traditions. We are enriched by stories of singular commitment and devotion. „So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;” (2 Cor. 5:17-18 NRSV) All have the potential to refresh and rededicate us to the Great Commission to be witnesses „to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Thanks be to God!

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