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Martyrdom

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

WHEN we view the beginnings of Christianity through the mist of nineteen centuries, we are liable to indulge in a garrulous nostalgia for the piety of those ancient days. Like old men recalling the days of youth, we tend to idealize what was not ideal in all its details. Men, weary with the sophistication of their age, usually accuse themselves of a vast compromise with the demands of Christianity. Then they remind themselves, "It was not so in the beginning." In the ancient Church, they tell themselves, men were careless of caution and entertained a contempt for the conformism practiced today with such ease of conscience. In the beginning, men died rather than make the accredited distinctions which might save their lives but leave them with a Christianity that was obliging, serviceable, and ineffectual. Men were not afraid of blood.

Actually the reality did not attain so heroic proportions. There were, it is true, many thousands of martyrs. There were also many thousands who fell away when faced with the choice between Christ and their own lives. The weakness of those who apostatized—many of them later returned to the Faith—gives us no right to think of them with scorn. Who of us can be sure that he would have freely bared his neck to the executioner's ax?

Setting aside all illusions about the heroism of the early Church, we find in the acts of the martyrs a purity and simplicity that are almost scriptural. These documents confound us with their mixture of fear of death and anticipation of joy. With real terror in their hearts at the ordeal before them, the martyrs talked singing to their death. They not infrequently indulged in the scandalous joke. They, more than any, could afford to laugh.

Recurring in the acts is the account of the joy of eternity breaking through the veil of pain. Just before he died, St. Stephen, the first martyr, saw "the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand

of God, and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.' Stephen, about to attain in his martyrdom the perfect imitation of the crucified Christ, was given in a vision a foretaste of the joys of the glorified Christ.

We have no account of the actual martyrdom of St. Ignatius of Antioch, who died at the beginning of the second century, but we do have a remarkable letter which he wrote ahead to Rome pleading with the Romans not to do anything which might prevent his martyrdom. Ignatius was afraid that some who had influence at the royal court might press for his release. And so he wrote, "Permit me to be the food of beasts, through whom one may reach God. I am the wheat of God, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild animals, so that I may be found the pure bread of Christ . . . Grant me nothing more than that I be poured out to God . . . Suffer me to follow the example of the Passion of my God."

Voluntary surrender, so that they might win the martyr's crown, was forbidden by the bishops, but when the Christians were arrested they showed a disarming alacrity. The reaction of Speratus, who was martyred in 180, is typical of the martyrdom accounts. When hearing his sentence of death by the sword, he answered with "Thanks be to God."

Nor were women wanting in the ranks of the martyrs. In the whole of the literature on the martyrs there is no account more moving than the acts of Saints Perpetua and Felicity. Perpetua was a young married woman of noble family, the mother of a baby boy. When she was thrown into the arena of the wild animals, "she sat up and drew her torn tunic about her . . . then she tidied her tumbled hair, for it was not seemly that a martyr should suffer with hair disheveled, lest she should appear to mourn in her glory." Woman to the very end, she fussed with her hair that she might be presentable for the glory of martyr-

dom: We can only love her for this.

St. Felicity suffered martyrdom with St. Perpetua. Because she was pregnant and the law forbade expectant mothers to be executed, Felicity was afraid that her martyrdom would be deferred and she would not be able to die with her friends. So her companions prayed that they might all die together. Three days before the games, Felicity went into a difficult labor, and in her pain she cried out. Her jailer laughed at her: "You are groaning now. What will you do when you are thrown to the beasts?" To which Felicity replied: "Now I myself suffer what I am suffering; but then there will be another in me who will suffer for me, because I am to suffer for Him." St. Felicity recognized that in her martyrdom Christ would be her strength. Christ would suffer in her.

Blaise Pascal once wrote, "I believe only the histories whose witnesses got themselves killed." The martyr is essentially a witness. In his own blood he certifies the history for which he stands. The vocation to martyrdom is as universal as the Christian vocation. The Holy Oil Chrism with which Christians are anointed in Baptism and Confirmation constitutes them "priests, kings, prophets, and martyrs," as the Holy Thursday prayer declares. All who are baptized are called to martyrdom of some kind, to witness to Christ. The actual spilling of blood is not the essential factor. Love, not gore, makes a martyr. "If I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing."

The scandal of Christianity is that its witnesses do not get themselves killed. There are too few joyous martyrs in the marketplace, in the factory, in the home. The Christian is not asked to fight wild beasts. The dry martyrdom asked in these days is much less spectacular and much more difficult. The Christian is asked to witness daily to Christ. He is to show those among whom he works that Christianity is not a casual creed, not convenient but demanding. Not to be a martyr is not to be a Christian.