

Martyrdom in the History of the Church and that of Jean Gabriel Perboyre

by Luigi Mezzadri, C.M.

The life of the Church is lived under the sign of history. The people of God continually live their own exodus, which leads them to go forward, to evolve, to change. The change, however, is under the sign of continuity, of the *traditio*, not of rupture.

Such a principle is also valid for the history of sanctity.

In the first centuries the saint was the martyr or apostle. Then this gift was recognized for the heroic pastor or bishop, for the faithful virgin and the heroic monk. During the period when the nations of Europe were being converted, many holy kings and queens were numbered in the catalogue of saints. Then came the stage of saints of charity and humility, of holy priests, founders, and missionaries. Today lay sanctity, the sanctity of married people and young people, has a special value.

In this evolution, martyrdom is a constant. Every age has had its martyrs and it always will have.

1. The Word

The term martyrdom/martyr appears in the New Testament to designate a simple testimony to a fact, but also a specific testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. 1 In itself it is the equivalent of announcement. Then there are texts that refer to a particular testimony paid with blood. In Paul's defense at Jerusalem, the apostle confirms that "*when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I myself stood by*" (Acts 22:20).

It is clear that progressively, almost unwittingly, the Greek word that means testimony passed into Latin to signify a specific testimony, that of one who has shed his blood for the faith. Caught by the authorities, the Christians were forced to "confess" their faith. Their proclamation, like that of Polycarp, "*Jesus is Lord and not the emperor*" was similar to that of baptism. It was worthy of faith, because the judge "believed" in it. In this way the Christian became a privileged "witness" because death sealed his faith with his life.

In the process of July 17, 1580, at Carthage, the proconsul Saturninus said to the Christians brought to judgment, "*Give up this opinion.*" Speratus said, "*A wicked*

opinion is to commit murder, to give false testimony." The proconsul Saturninus said, "You do not want to be a party to this madness." Cittinus said, "We do not fear anyone except the Lord, our God, who is in heaven." Donata said, "We honor Caesar as Caesar, but we fear only God." Vestia said, "I am a Christian." Secunda said, "I want to remain what I am." The proconsul Saturninus said to Speratus, "Do you persist in wanting to be a Christian?" Speratus said, "I am a Christian." All the others subscribed to his words.

The death sentence that followed in the trial resulted from the confession of the name and not the confession of a crime. In other words, if they had not been Christians, they would never have been condemned.

The cause, therefore, is the faith in the person of Christ. The theological reason for the glorification of the martyr found in these words, "*he who loses his life for my cause will recover it*" (Mark 8:35). The martyr confesses Christ and give his life for him. He shows, that is, "*the greatest love,*" which is that which gives up life. "*The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers*" (1 John 3:16).

There are, therefore, two essential elements for martyrdom.

1) *Material martyrdom.* The martyr must not die of illness or in jail or as a result of this, but he must die precisely because of this.

2) *Formal martyrdom.*

(a) On the part of the persecutor the "odium fidei" is necessary. The motive must be an attitude of hostility toward the Christian insofar as he is a disciple of Christ. His actions must show a hatred of God, Christ, his teaching, or his Church, or also the desire to compel the Christian to commit actions that force him to sin.

(b) On the part of the martyr it is not enough to die. It must be clear "how." In order that the martyrdom be recognized, it is necessary that he "give his life," not that they take it from him. It is not enough to die or suffer for the faith, it is necessary to "offer" for it, it is necessary to accept death for the love of the faith.

2. The Evolution of martyrdom in various eras: data and tendencies.

The concept of martyrdom has not always been the same. An early element begins to be clear beginning in the second century, the distinction between the one who dies (the martyr) and the one who simply suffers (the confessor).

After the Roman Empire became Christian, martyrdom apparently could be found only in its periphery. Saint Boniface, for example, was a martyr, but because he was killed by the "pagans."

Gradually it became clear how certain persecutions could have broken out even in a Christian environment, by Christian princes who were led to kill Christians out of hatred for the principles of the gospel.

This was the case of Saint Thomas Becket, at first chancellor of Henry II and later archbishop of Canterbury. The reason for his martyrdom was his defense of the "libertas Ecclesiae," the need to keep the Church free from the intrusion of the state. The king was a sincere believer (after the death of the archbishop he did public penance), but he sought to make the Church dependent on his will. When the king's four knights, FitzUrse, Brito, Trace, Moreville, entered the cathedral on Tuesday, September 29, 1170, asking in a loud voice, "*where is Thomas Becket, the traitor to the king and the kingdom?*," they established in fact the motivation: with his behavior as bishop, Thomas put himself at odds with the authority of the king. 2

In the case of the martyrs John Fisher and Thomas More (d. 1535), it appears to be found in reference to a matrimonial case. Fisher was the only bishop to take Catherine [of Aragon]'s side when all the others courageously sided with the stronger party. He had understood that by this the king was becoming the head of the Church. The separation from Rome, "*from that Church which has made us suffer so much*," as the bishop of Winchester, Gardiner, was to say, signified the creation of a national church. The unity of the Church was torn. 3

In the period of the French Revolution there was a question as to whether the martyrs were killed out of hatred for the faith or for other reasons, even of a political nature. A typical case was that of the ninety-nine martyrs of Angers. The insurrection in the Vendée (March-December 1793) provoked a terrible repression, which some authors called genocide. At Angers those killed were in the thousands. Not all were martyrs. Without excluding the possibility of other cases, only the sure and documented cases in which there was a religious motive, were taken into consideration. 4

A more delicate case is that of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, killed on March 24, 1980. 5 Was he a martyr?

Indeed the accusations advanced against Catholicism that it is involved on behalf of the lowest and the poor are well known. I believe that it is impossible to prove the accusations of "communism" against Monsignor Romero. A careful examination of his talks and deeds shows us how the bishop was dedicated to defending the poor in the name of Christ. Is it possible, then, to demonstrate the existence of the odium fidei in his executioners and their agents? Was it their intention to attack his political statements? or did they want to silence the prophetic cry of one who protested on behalf of the poor? In a lecture at Louvain, he said, "*The*

real persecution is directed against the poor people who today are the body of Christ in history. They are, like Jesus, the crucified people, the people persecuted like the servant of Yahweh.... For that reason when the Church is organized and unified, gathering together the hopes and sufferings of the poor, it suddenly has the same destiny as Jesus and the poor: persecution." 6

A martyr, then? I do not intend to anticipate the judgment of the Church. I think that it is possible to show the essential elements for formal martyrdom. 7

3. A note on the case of Perboyre.

We are well informed about Perboyre's case by the biographies concerning the life and tortures undergone by this missionary. 8

Still, it would be a mistake to consider only this aspect of the problem. This martyr has never been considered an extraordinary person but an ordinary man and missionary who lived his daily life and tried not to get caught. A person with fears and dreams, a person also with some defects, that a later apotheosis too often causes to be forgotten.

The martyrdom of Perboyre has often been likened to that of Christ. I prefer to find the likeness in the martyrdom of the first centuries.

1) Martyrdom in ancient times began with the arrest. In the case of Perboyre it began with the long voyage to reach China. Then came the apostolate, the burning delusions. Nevertheless, Perboyre was not one to seek martyrdom. The ostentation of the person who had the rashness to present himself before persecutors was always forbidden. The law of martyrdom is this: "*the Christian should not expose himself on his own to persecution, both to spare the unbelievers a crime and not to expose his own weakness, but when he finds himself face to face with the struggle, we should not escape. It is rash to expose oneself, it is cowardly to refuse.*" 9

The capture of Christians in the first centuries occurred in various ways. There were arrests carried out by police forces or legionaries. But at times there were popular riots that forced the authorities to intervene. At Smyrna it was the *irenarca*, a sort of justice of the peace, who went in search of Polycarp.

The search by the police was done with persistence. He was scarcely transferred to another small farm then suddenly those who were searching for him would suddenly arrive. Not finding him, they seized two slaves, one of whom, put to torture, betrayed him. As a result it was impossible to remain hidden when those of his own household betrayed him. The irenarca, whom fate decreed should have the same name as Herod, was in a hurry to take him to the stadium. Here he was to have met the same fate, becoming like Christ, and his betrayers were suddenly to have the same punishment as Judas. One Friday, at dinner

time, police and mounted men, with their customary arms, left, taking with them the young slave, as if they were going in search of a thief. They arrived in the evening and found him in a small house, seated at table on the upper floor. Even there he could have fled to another farm, but he did not want to and said, "May the will of God be done." Having learned that the soldiers had arrived, he went down and returned their greeting, while they were amazed, seeing his advanced age and dignified behavior, and were in wonderment at such concern for capturing such an old man.

2) A jail in antiquity was not a place of expiation but only of custody while waiting for trial. In the first two centuries the custody was brief. From the third century, on the other hand, an effort was made to force Christians to apostatize. Prison became, therefore, a place of torture and punishment.

During the time of imprisonment there were many moral and physical trials. In the martyrdom of Perboyre there was the terrible trial of the weakness of his own people, many of whom renounced the faith, to which was joined accusations of immorality in his own examinations.

3) Good or bad treatment in the first centuries depended in great part on the jailers. Prisons were often caves without light or air. In a confined space many ordinary criminals and Christians, men and women, were imprisoned. Sometimes chains were used, or, worse, the *nervus*, which consisted of adjustable stocks that became progressively tighter up to the fourth or fifth notch and as a result caused excruciating pain. The *lignum* was a wooden pole with some notches to which the condemned persons were chained. It differed from the *nervus* in that the prisoner was condemned to immobility. Hunger and thirst were common in the prisons.

The testimonies of the mistreatments suffered by Perboyre are consistent. He was deprived of everything, beaten, he must have suffered unspeakable conditions.

4) Torture was routine in ancient legal process and in that of the time of Perboyre. There was also torture in that process, but used not as a means of investigation but in order to compel the Christian to abjure. In the case of a virgin rape was a common practice (which also came to be used with married women). The tortures were varied: the scaffold, pincers, the spiked wheel, flogging, a torch, red-hot irons. For the virgins the outrage to modesty, that is, to be exposed to people's view, made the humiliation still crueler. What happened to Anna Kao was not much different from the practices of ancient processes.

5) With regard to penalties, much depended on the Roman official. In some cases there were episodes in which the martyr was *crucified*. That is what happened to the Apostle Saint Peter and to Saint Simon of Jerusalem. That is what happened to Perboyre. The external similarities to the martyrdom of Christ have been highlighted by very many writers.

Not enough consideration has been given to one of the external circumstances of Perboyre's martyrdom. Arrested on September 15, 1839, he was martyred on September 11, 1840. It is important not to isolate the local persecution from the general context. Indeed, in the small history there is a reflection of a larger history.

In 1839 the first Opium War broke out, 10 caused by the confiscation and destruction of large quantities of that narcotic through the work of the imperial commissary, Lin Zexu to the detriment of the smugglers, who were almost all English. England intervened and its ships easily got the best of the Chinese coastal defenses. In the treaty of Nanking (1842) China ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain and opened five ports to western commerce.

Now, between the condemnation and the execution it was necessary to wait for imperial confirmation. By the time this arrived, the Europeans were at war with China. Did that fact not have some consequence for the martyrdom? We think that it is possible to isolate one: for killing Perboyre it was not just China but also a structure of sin built by the colonial powers. In this case by England. For killing the martyr it was not just the cord of the hangman but also the hypocritical commerce in opium and those who managed it.

Stafford Poole, C.M., translator

Notes

1) On martyrdom: There are four works that deal specifically with the question. P. SINISCALCO-C. LEONARDI-A. GALLAS-M. TOSCHI, *Martiri. Giudizio e dono per la Chiesa*, Torino 1981; L. BOUYER-L. DATTRINO, *La spiritualità dei padri (II-IVsecolo). Martirio, verginità, gnosi cristiana*, (Storia della spiritualità, 3/A), Bologna 1984; C. NOCE, *Il martirio. Testimonianza e spiritualità nei primi secoli* (La spiritualità cristiana. Storia e testi, 1), Roma 1987; A. MANDOUZE (ed.), *Storia dei santi e della santità cristiana. II: Il seme dei martiri* (33-313), Milano 1991. For the literary genre of martyrdom, see: G. LAZZATI, *Gli sviluppi della letteratura sui martiri nei quattro secoli* Torino 1956; R. KNOPF - G. KRUGER - G. RUHBACH, *Ausgewählte Martyrerakten*, Tübingen 1965; H. MUSURILLO, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs. Introduction, Text Translation*, Oxford 1979; D. RUIZ BUENO, *Actas de los Mártires*. Madrid 1974; C. ALLEGRO, *Atti dei Martiri. Introduzione, traduzione*, Roma 1974; G. LANATA, *Gli Atti dei martiri come documenti processuali*, Milano 1973. Important are: P. TESTINI, *Le catacombe e gli antichi cimiteri cristiani in Roma*, Bologna, 1966. With regard to the reaction of the pagans: P. DE LABRIOLLE, *La réaction paienne*, Paris 1934. E. R. DODDS, *Pagani e cristiani in un'epoca di angoscia*, trad. ital., Firenze 1970, p. 113. In addition the biographies of Julian the Apostate should be consulted.

For the problems related to hagiography: C. LEONARDI, *I modelli dell'agiografia latina dall'epoca antica al Medioevo*, in *Passaggio dal mondo antico al Medio Evo. Da Teodosio a San Gregorio Magno*, Roma 1980; M. PELLEGRINO, *Le sens ecclésial du martyr*, in RSR 35 (1961): 151-75; L. MEZZADRI, *Le due corone. Martirio e Verginità nella Chiesa antica*, Piacenza 1993.

2) KNOWLES, *Thomas Becket*, London 1970; T. CORFE, *Archbishop Thomas and King Henri II*, Cambridge 1975; P. AUBE, *Thomas Becket*, tr. it., Milano 1988.

3) On Fisher: E. E. REYNOLDS, *St. John Fisher*, London 1955; E. SURTZ, *The Works and Days of John Fisher*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967; R. ROUCHAUSSE, *John Fisher; humaniste, évêque, réformateur, martyr, 1469-1535*, Angers 1973; B. BRANDSHAW-E. DUFY (eds.), *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation. The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, Cambridge 1989. On More: G. MARC'HADOUR, *L'univers de Thomas More*, Paris 1963; R.W.CHAMBERS, *Thomas More*, 2 ed., London 1976; W. NIGG, *Tommaso Moro. Il santo della coscienza*, Roma 1980; R. MARIUS, *Thomas More: A Biography*, London-Melbourne 1985; E. E. REYNOLDS, *Il processo di Tommaso Moro*, tr. it., Roma 1985. V. BARRIE-CURIEN, *La Réforme anglicane*, in *Histoire du Christianisme*, VIII, *Le temps des confessions (1530-1620)*, Paris 1992, 183-221.

4) B. PLONGERON, *Conscience religieuse en Revolution*, Paris 1969; A. LATREILLE, *L'Église catholique et la Révolution française, I (1775- 1799)*, Paris 1970; T. TIMOTHY, *La Révolution, l'Église, la France*, Paris 1986; P. PIERRARD, *L'Église et la Révolution, 1789-1889*, Paris 1988; P. CHRISTOPHE, 1789. *Les prêtres dans la Révolution*, Paris 1986; L. MEZZADRI, *La Chiesa e la rivoluzione francese*, Cinisello Balsamo 1989; C. CHAUVIN, *Le Clergé à l'épreuve de la Révolution (1789-1799)*, Paris 1989.

5) TOSCHI, *Oscar Arnulfo Romero martire del Vangelo del Signore nella comunione con i poveri*, in *Martiri. Giudizio e dono*, 75-103.

6) Ibid., 98.

7) There is an important precedent: the case of Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, beatified as a confessor and canonized as a martyr.

8) The letters: J. VAN DER BRANDT (ed.), *Lettres du bienheureux J. G. Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission*, Pekin 1940. Biografie e studi: [J.B. ÉTIENNE], *Notice sur la vie et la mort de J.G. Perboyre prêtre de la Mission par un prêtre de la même Congrégation*, Paris 1842; [M. VAURIS], *Vie du Venerable Perboyre*, Paris 1857; *Vie du Bienheureux J. G. Perboyre*, Paris 1889; [E. BINDI], *Vita del Beato G. Gabriele Perboyre*, Roma 1889; J. DE MONTGESTY, *Témoin du Christ, le Bienheureux J. G. Perboyre*, Paris, 1906; *La Congrégation de la Mission en Chine*, III, Paris, 1912; A. THOMAS, *Histoire de la Mission de Pékin*, Paris, 1925; L. CASTAGNOLA, *Missionario martire*, Roma 1940; A. CHATELET, *Jean Gabriel Perboyre martyr*,

Paris, 1943; O. FERREUX, *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission en Chine (1699-1950)*, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 127 (1963); J. P. GAUTHIER, *Du Cantal au Kiang Si*, Paris 1981; J. CHARBONNIER, *Histoire des chrétiens de Chine*, Paris 1992; A. SYLVESTRE, *Jean- Gabriel Perboyre, prêtre de la Mission, martyre en Chine*, Moissac 1994. There is still no biography that meets the criteria of scientific history.

9) Gregorio Nazianzeno, *Orazione XLIII*, 5, 6.

10) The monopoly of this plant's cultivation belonged to the East India Company, while the transportation was in the hands of private individuals. In the nineteenth century opium was the principal means of advancement in the English colonial administration in India. Toward 1880 the monopoly on opium, cultivated in the Ganges valley, produced between 6,000 and 8,000 metric tons of the drug, which was smuggled into China.