

STUDY

Martyrdom for Charity

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INTRODUCTION

John Paul II, at the end of the Great Jubilee of 2000, in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio eunte*,¹ invited the Church to “begin again from Christ.” He thanked the Lord for all that he “had done in all the centuries, especially in the century we have just left behind, assuring the Church of a great band of saints and martyrs.”² The faces of the saints and the martyrs represent the face of Christ; these are the riches, the heritage of the Church. “For much has been done, on the occasion of the Holy Year, to collect *the precious memories of the witnesses of the faith in the 20th century*.... It is a heritage that we should not lose, but that we commit to a perpetual debt of gratitude and to a renewed purpose of imitation.”³ The task of evangelization, noted the Pope, is surely one of the priorities of the Church at the beginning of the new millennium. A new evangelization is necessary in this new culture of globalization, to carry the face of Christ, the evangelical proclamation into the new socio-cultural context. But in this new hoped-for “missionary spirit,” John Paul II says that “the brilliant example of so many witnesses of the faith that the Jubilee had called to mind... sustain us and direct us. The Church has always found, in her martyrs, a seed of life. *Sanguis martyrum – semen christianorum*.”⁴

In the post-conciliar debate, H.U. von Balthasar made the observation that a risk inherent to the so-called opening of the Church to the world is that of devaluing martyrdom. Instead, it would be

¹ JOHN PAUL II, apostolic letter *Novo millennio eunte*, 2001.

² *Ibidem*, n. 7. All the italics within the citations are always those of the author cited.

³ *Ibidem*, n. 7

⁴ TERTULLIAN, *Apologetico* 50,13; PL 1,534.

necessary to propose it again with greater strength for the future of the Church. In his work "*Cordula*"⁵ he demonstrates that martyrdom is truly, even today, "something important" for the authentic Christian.

This removal of martyrdom from the spiritual horizon of the Christian and from theology was well noticed by John Paul II who continually exhorted the Christian community to reintroduce some figures of witnesses, so that martyrdom might never be forgotten.

In the thinking of St. Vincent, on which this present work focuses in a particular way, emerges something unique, the idea of *martyrdom for charity*. While in tradition martyrdom is associated with persecution and death, St. Vincent associates suffering in the name of Christ with the ideal of the *service of charity*. We find in his thinking the recovery of the profound nature of martyrdom expressed by St. Thomas: "Martyrdom, among all the virtuous acts, demonstrates in the highest degree the *perfection of charity*."⁶ In reality, the essence of martyrdom is the following of Christ in that supreme act in which he freely offered his own life for ours (Jn 15:13). The originality of St. Vincent stands in paralleling the placing of one's life at the complete disposition of the brothers in charity with the same attitude of the Christian martyr, on the basis of the identification of the poor person with Christ (Mt 25:40). To serve the poor is to love Christ. To give one's life for the poor is to give one's life for Christ.

To be precise, in Vincentian writings we find the term "martyr for charity" only once. St. Vincent refers to a Daughter of Charity, Sr. Mary Joseph, who died at Estampes. Even though she was at the point of death, seeing a poor person in need of a blood-letting, she gathered up her remaining strength, got up from bed, helped the poor person, and immediately dropped dead. "This brave, dear daughter can be called a martyr for charity. Do you believe that only those who shed their blood for the faith are martyrs?... Some brave, dear daughters, although they do not die, put their own lives at risk for the love of God; and many of them have finished their lives at the service of the poor: this is martyrdom!"⁷

Even though this formulation is expressed only one time, the concept of martyrdom for charity often returns. The willingness for martyrdom is part of the spirit of the Company: "May it please God,

⁵ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Cordula, ovverosia il caso serio*, Queriniana, Brescia 1968.

⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II, II, q. 124, a. 3.

⁷ SV X, 510 / SV X, 409.

my brothers — he comments when he comes to know the sufferings of the missionaries in the Barbary Coast — that all those who enter into the Company, do so with the thought of martyrdom; moreover, with the desire of martyrdom by consecrating oneself totally to the service of God.... May they often ask Our Lord for the grace and the disposition to be ready to give their lives for the glory and the salvation of the neighbor: everyone, whether they are brothers, or priests, or clerics — in brief, the whole Company.”⁸

Thus, martyrdom is not reduced to the final resolution of death for Christ. It happens first in one’s spirit and desire. “God asks our good and authentic disposition to embrace all the occasions to serve Him, even to risk our own lives, and also to have and keep the desire for martyrdom which is pleasing to God, as if we had actually undergone it.”⁹

1. MARTYRS AND WITNESSES OF CHRIST AND HIS DISCIPLES

The theme of martyrdom is tied closely to that of witness, and we have to refer to it constantly to understand its original meaning. When we speak of martyrdom our thoughts run immediately to torture and suffering, of which the Gospels and the Acts of the martyrs speak to us. Instead, as the etymology of the word clearly says, *martyrdom* has a priority value as the witness to the truth. Therefore, we search along the line of what Christ and his followers did to arrive at a theology of martyrdom. One cannot develop this theology speculatively, but rather historically, by contemplating the Jesus event. “Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). Jesus cannot be applied to other categories of thought derived from other models or other historical events. One must go to him, “the faithful witness... the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last” (Rev 1:5.8.17). The culmination of the truth is in the glory of his cross. “They shall look on him whom they have pierced,” says John, telling forcefully the historical truth of the passion and evoking the ancient prophet, “they look on me whom they have pierced” (cf. Zech 12:10). And this is the parousia: “Here are the clouds and every eye will see even those who pierced Him” (Revelation 1:7).

A martyr is one who so identifies himself with the truth which he lives, that he cannot even conceive the possibility of living while betraying the truth. If he were to do so, he would lose his true and

⁸ SV XI, 371 / SV XI, 334-335.

⁹ SV XI, 402 / SV XI, 357.

eternal life, not fearing those who can kill the body but do not have the power to kill the soul (cf. Mt 10:28). Only a transcendent truth can be so identified with one's life: God; and indeed the last and final revelation is this: "The Word was God... Without him nothing was made that exists. In him was life and the life was the light of men... He came into the world, the true light that enlightens every man... To all who received him he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:1.3 s.; 9:12). We can learn the word martyrdom/martyrs from the New Testament to designate the witness of a fact. Thus, martyr is a legal term, even a procedural one, meaning witness. In itself the term is equivalent to the proclamation, but there are several witnesses who refer to a particular form of witness, paid for with one's life.

Even in the Gospels there are two ways to express their discipleship demanded by Jesus to the cross. Luke takes the position that a disciple should be faithful in bearing the cross daily until the end of his life, as does the Apostle John. Mark and Matthew, on the other hand, designate a perfect following of the teacher as one who sheds his blood, as happened with the other apostles.

The term martyr in the Church was initially meant to be a witness to Christ by word and life. In this sense the apostles are qualified witnesses on whom the Church is to rest, witnesses who offered up their own lives.

The Greek word for witness goes into the Latin translation meaning a particular form of witness, the witness who shed his blood for the faith. Martyr is the one who gave testimony for Christ and his doctrine with the sacrifice of life. This "exclusive" meaning is affirmed in the tradition of the Church as early as the second and third centuries. Towards the second half of the second century under pressure from the authorities, Christians are obliged to confess their faith. Their confession, like that of Polycarp, "Jesus is Lord and not the emperor," was similar to the profession of faith at baptism. It was worthy of faith and the court "believed." The Christian became a privileged "witness" because his death sealed and authenticated the faith by which he lived. The death that followed the process of confession was the result of a Christian's being a Christian and not because of a crime. In other words: if they were not Christians they would not have been convicted.

The cause of death is therefore faith in the person of Christ. The theological reason for the glorification of the martyrs demonstrated by the Gospel of Mark 8:35: "Whoever, in fact, loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it." The martyr confesses faith in Jesus Christ and gives his life for him. He thus shows that the greatest love is to give one's life. "From this we know what love is,

for he gave his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn 3:16).

In an editorial, the *Civiltà Cattolica*¹⁰ calls for a rethinking of martyrdom, showing that the cause of it is not only faith, but also the love of justice, purity and the defense of the poor. Moreover, martyrdom requires clear and explicit reference to Jesus and the Gospel; death must not be sought or provoked, but undergone without resistance, while forgiving one's executioners.

So they are considered martyrs in the strict sense and in the full sense of the Catholic Church those who suffered in any way unto death or were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God became man, who died, who rose and who lives today in the Church. Thus, these classes of people are martyrs because they died because of faith in Christ: that is, out of hatred for the faith (in odium fidei); or for not renouncing their faith, or because of a single article of faith (propter fidem); or simply because of being Christians, followers of Jesus Christ (propter Christum).

The condition for being considered a martyr is non-resistance: that one has been made to die without any resistance by using weapons. He who is killed in battle, even though he fought to defend the faith, is not a martyr in the true sense. The martyr in the strict sense is the one who dies or is killed because of his faith in Christ, without resistance. Anyway, the saying applies to the martyrdom of St. Augustine "martyres non facit poena, sed questio" (Enarr. in Ps 34, 2:12): that is "it is not the death penalty that makes the martyr, but the reason for which he is killed").

It is on this point that Christian thinking in recent decades has revisited the common doctrine of the Church on martyrdom: it sees that faith is closely linked with the Christian values of charity, justice, chastity, defense of the oppressed, of the poor who are so persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and killed for having committed an act of eminent charity — such is the case of the Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe, who offered to die to save a family man — such a one is a martyr for charity, who voluntarily exposes himself to the risk of death so as not to abandon the humble and helpless. He is a martyr of justice who is killed for defending people in danger of death or people oppressed and exploited, deprived of their essential rights. He is also a martyr of justice who is killed because he raises his voice against social injustice, faced by innocent people unable to defend themselves and assert their rights to live as a human person. She is a martyr of Christian chastity who is killed because she refuses

¹⁰ *Il Novecento, il secolo di martiri* [The Twentieth Century, a Century of Martyrs], in "La Civiltà Cattolica," 2005, I, 321-328, vol. 3712.

to submit to an attempted rape. Christian martyrdom exists where the cause of death inflicted on a believing person who has made the Gospel his rule of life; it is actually an affirmation of an essential norm of the Gospel, whether it is charity, pushed to the point of giving up one's life for one's own brothers, or the defense of an evangelical value. What is important, speaking of martyrdom, is the reference, clear and explicit, to the person of Jesus and the teachings of the Gospel on the one hand, and on the other, that death should be neither sought nor provoked, but undergone without resistance or opposition and in a spirit of forgiveness towards those who inflict punishment unjustly.

In conclusion, martyrdom is always and only a matter of religion which makes explicit reference to faith in Jesus Christ and the values of his Gospel; the Christian martyr is always a witness of Christ and his Gospel in a conscious and explicit way.

What drives the Christian to sacrifice his own life is the witness of love given by Christ. "Therefore, martyrdom, by which the pupil is made like the Master who freely accepted death for the salvation of the world, and who responds by the shedding of blood is esteemed by the church as an outstanding gift and as the supreme test of charity" (LG 42). This definition appears to reconcile the specificity of martyrdom as "an outstanding gift" of the spirit and as "the supreme test of charity." But both the one and the other as gifts and proofs of love, are given in the Church and to the Church, so it can grow into the image of Christ, who is its Head.

Vatican II opens the way for a broader interpretation of the martyrdom, under the form of the "gift of life through love," the sign of its martyr. The conciliar text does not speak either of the profession of faith, nor of martyrdom suffered out of hatred for the faith. Certainly it supposes them, but it prefers to orient itself to the sign of love, as a more globalizing and universalizing experience of martyrdom.

"If one stresses love, more than faith, then you can bring out both the love of Christ, which in its singularity is represented by the death of the martyr, as well as the credibility of this love.... In other words, if the emphasis is on love that leads to the witness of the martyr, it is easier to incorporate into the definition of martyrdom not only witness for the profession of faith, but also the testimony of any form of justice that is minimum of Christian love."¹¹

¹¹ Cfr. AA.VV., *Portare Cristo all'uomo. II Testimonianza* [Carrying Christ to Man. II Testimony], in "Studia Urbaniana 23," Roma 1985, 761.

2. CHARITY

Faith without works is dead. The letter of James calls the Christian communities to have a faith rich in works. Faith manifests itself in charity and it should tend toward charity. This was the testimony of Christ and his disciples. The Church continues to express its faith in its Lord through love: love of God and love of neighbor.

At the beginning, and at the heart of Christian charity, is Christ. Christ is, at the same time, the model, the reason, the guide and support, the beginning and the end of charity itself. It is for his faith in Christ and for his deep communion with him that the Christian is able to love people as Christ Himself loved them and loves them still.

Man's journey towards God, therefore, necessarily passes through love for men. "The love of neighbor is a way to meet with God, and closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God."¹² And that is what St. Augustine expressed with no hesitation in his commentary on the conclusion of the letter of St. John:

"What then? Whoever loves his brother also loves God? If he loves God, necessarily he loves Love. Can one, in fact, love your brother and not love love? Necessarily, we love love. Now, if you love love, you love God, because 'God is Love'. If God is love, he who loves love, loves God. Love your brother and then rest in peace."¹³

The supreme purpose of Christ's charity is to give life, eternal life. To communicate to men that eternal life he gives them food. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. Anyone who eats of this bread will live forever. The bread that I give is my flesh for the life of the world.... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (Jn 6:51-54). In addition, all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy of Jesus work together to contribute to one and the same goal: to give life to men and merge them into communion with the Father. "That all may be one as You, Father, in me and I in you, that they also be in us.... I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them" (Jn 17:21-26).

¹² BENEDICT XVI, encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 16.

¹³ AGOSTINO, in *Epistolam B. Joannis ad Pathos*, PL 35, 2052.

The whole mission of Jesus is to reveal to men the Father's love for them and unite them to the love of the Son for the Father. The rest — healings, miracles, preaching, charitable service — remains subordinate to what is essential, which is primarily the passage from hatred and from selfishness to love that makes all men one body led by Jesus Christ for the glory of the Father. Only love, love expressed through works, affective and effective love, an expression dear to the spirituality of Vincent, only this can generate love. And that is why Jesus entrusted his disciples to continue his mission and to do what he did, to be witnesses of the Father among men.

Having summoned the twelve, Jesus, Luke writes, "gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, then sent them to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick" (Lk 9:1-2). But above all He shows them how to be witnesses of love. "I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, you also should love one another. From this all will recognize that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35); "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:12-13).

It is thus lived through a journey in love and service towards our brothers in their needs, both spiritual and material, willing to sacrifice even their lives for them, that the disciples of Jesus, his followers go to establish the kingdom of God among men.

Certainly this is philanthropy, a love for people, but a divine philanthropy: it is with God, as God, in God that the Christian loves his brothers, men. To love them, leaving God out or marginalized, certainly, would be to love them less; it would betray his vocation to happiness and bliss of which God alone is the source and purpose. Striving to love the brothers with God, as God loves them, the love of Christ gives a supernatural character, a transcendental purpose, trying to make more humane conditions for human life, never forgetting that man lives not only by material food, but that he thirsts for God.

To love is to will the good of those who are loved, is to work for their progress, their perfection, their own happiness. It is an insufficient love who wishes to another only the satisfaction of the biological dimension. "The man over the man," said Pascal. The Christian love of man is that which undertakes to make available to one's brother, a bliss that participates in the same God.

That is the meaning of this love that the text of the Gospels called *agape* in Greek and that the Latin Vulgate translates *Charitas*, charity. It is a love that is open to a universal concern, a love of a generous

giving of one's possessions, most importantly, making a complete donation of oneself to another and fraternal communion with all his love of the common good that is God.

To live this love, one must obviously renounce egotism or self-love, everything that involves hoarding of goods of this world and the next for one's own benefit. And that is why Jesus warns his disciples against the love of money and things. "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Luke 16:13). The kingdom of God is the kingdom of charity, of unselfish love. The disciples are invited to have an undivided heart. They have only to follow the example of the master. "For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). "Who does not take his cross behind me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 10:38-39).

It is impossible to love someone other than oneself without stepping out of oneself, without compromising the welfare and happiness of other brothers. At the heart of Christian love, is the sacrifice of which Christ gave us the example. He is the incarnate love of God. "In his death on the Cross we find the culmination of that turning of God outside of himself in which he gives himself to raise man up and save him.... This is love in its most radical form."¹⁴

Generosity, detachment, renunciation, sacrifice, these are the essential requirements of a genuine love of God in man and of man in God. But the essential thing is to love — that is the desire to do good to the one who is loved, to help him bravely and generously to realize his vocation, and come together to the happiness of heaven.

The gift of love saves man from himself; man opens his horizons to the broader horizon of God himself. Thus freed from himself, man is capable of looking up and directing his choices towards people, things and the world, in love. This charity has been given to us by the Father himself, and the Son is the manifestation of his love incarnate.

Such has been the witness of the martyrs for charity; they believed in love, the love that God has for every creature. They felt themselves called to love. So they went to those who most needed to be loved — the poor, the least — those to whom God revealed himself through the faces of witnesses. In this, Vincent discovered his

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 12.

vocation, he saw in them the path to which Christ called him, and with him his Company, consisting of brothers and sisters who have given their lives in service of Christ, recognized in the poor and suffering brethren.

3. THE CONTEMPORARY MAGISTERIUM

In the Second Vatican Council, the Church sees in “martyrdom” a constitutive aspect of her essence, the never-ending love of the Son that continues to show itself and becomes alive again in the life of the Church through the witness of his followers who, like the Master, offer their lives for the salvation of the world (cf. LG 42). The testimony of the martyrs, which is a continuation of the mission of the teacher by his disciples, has always accompanied the life of the Church. The time of the martyrs is not just a memory from the past, but something always present in the history of the Church, especially in this last century. Moreover, the blood that was shed by martyrs, the witnesses to the Gospel, and the vastness and diversity of the geographical areas involved in the phenomenon indicate that the phenomenon is certainly greater than previous persecutions, including those in early centuries.

John Paul II, on the occasion of the jubilee, highlighted the testimony of the martyrs as living examples for Christians,¹⁵ as exciting examples of authentic Christian life. Their sacrifice is a guide for the whole community because it involves a total commitment to Christ and the Gospel without conditions or compromise of any kind, ready to get on the “cross” if necessary. Their memory, both for the past and the present, must have very special attention in the life of the Church.

“Their memory must not be lost, rather it must be recovered in a documented fashion. The names of many are not known, the names of some have been denigrated by their persecutors, who tried to add disgrace to martyrdom, the names of others have been concealed by their executioners. Christians, however, preserve the memory of a great many of them.”¹⁶

Given such a large number of people killed or persecuted for defending human rights, for free expression of their religious faith or for the witness of fidelity to their vocation, should we perhaps

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecumenical Commemoration of the Witnesses of Faith in the 20th Century*, in *op. cit.*, 329-338.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 678.

admit that the martyrs are now more numerous than we thought? What does this mean for us believers? Is our church still a church of martyrs? This question which the church has asked herself is still alive, and Pope Benedict XVI, on the feast of St. Stephen, answered that the testimony of the martyrs has accompanied the life of the Church from the beginning. They have professed their faith by the gift of their own lives. That testimony is repeated in human history; it is more timely than ever in our age because to witness by word and deed to Christ, the Son of God made man, still carries with it the heroism of martyrs.

In *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican Council II considered martyrdom a perspective always open to the Church (LG 42). The Church, even before becoming the Church of martyrs is itself a martyr, because it is born, lives and is built around Christ who gives his life for mankind. What is of Christ is of His Church. It cannot but follow Him in his passion and death out of love.

The martyrs are the worthy witnesses of Christ who has died and has risen: persecuted and unjustly accused, they remained faithful to the Good Shepherd. These martyrs are witnesses not only to faith but also to justice and charity. They are authentic witnesses of the Gospel and their persecutors attempted to besmirch their name calling them spies, subversives, politicians, or secret agents either of nations or of foreign interests. So it was with Nazism and communism inside of totalitarian systems which disfigured the face of man. Martyrs were kept for interminable years in prison, accompanied by suffering, torture, harassment of any kind, and sometimes they were tortured and killed. There are many faces of men and women, gentle, non-violent, persecuted, who suffered death because they were Christian. This is a world of the weak and the vanquished. Yet, in conditions of great weakness, these Christians demonstrated a particular strength of a spiritual and moral character: they did not renounce the faith, their own convictions, the service of others, or the service of the Church, to safeguard their own lives and assure their own survival. They showed great strength even in conditions of extreme weakness and high risk.

“Wherever hatred seemed to corrupt all of life without the possibility of escape from its logic, they proved that ‘love is stronger than death.’ Within terrible systems of oppression which disfigured man, in the places of pain which included harsh privations, through senseless marches, exposed to cold, starvation, torture, suffering in many ways, they loudly proclaimed their adherence to Christ who died and is risen.... So many have refused to bow to the worship of the idols of the twentieth century, and were sacrificed by Communism,

Nazism, by state and race. Many others fell in the course of ethnic or tribal wars, because they had rejected a logic alien to the Gospel of Christ. Some went to their death because, like the Good Shepherd, they decided to remain with their people, despite the threats. On every continent and throughout the entire twentieth century, there were those who preferred to die rather than betray their mission. Religious men and women have lived their dedication to the shedding of blood. Men and women believers died giving their lives for the sake of others, especially the poorest and weakest. Many women have lost their lives to defend their dignity and their purity.”¹⁷

Martyrdom thus manifests itself not only as direct and explicit testimony of faith but also of love and justice. The term “martyr for justice” repeatedly emphasized by John Paul II, has expanded the common conception of martyrdom. Undoubtedly, in the view of John Paul II, the concept of martyrdom is extended from the classic version of martyrdom out of hatred for the faith.

Thomas Aquinas had already pointed this out. In speaking of martyrdom, as well as indicating that it is among the most perfect of human acts because of the exalted nature of the “love of charity,”¹⁸ he also believes that it can be found as a testimony, not just of faith, but of the other virtues, because “the works of all the virtues, since they refer to God, are somehow proof of that belief, through which we come to know God as he asks us and as these works demonstrate.”¹⁹

The opportunities for martyrdom in the cause of justice and charity, but also of the other virtues in order to preserve communion with the Lord, have become frequent in the last century. John Paul II did not lose the opportunity to venerate their memory and to point out these examples for the whole Church. There was a special recalling of many martyrs for charity — missionaries and nuns, men and women, religious and lay people — who continued their charitable assistance despite grave dangers, remained with their flocks, like the Good Shepherd, and died because of violence or of infection from epidemics. They are witnesses for charity; they have given their lives to make a supreme act of charity they did not have to make: “No one has greater love than this to give his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). These are not only extreme acts of charity but also give witness to Christ and his Gospel.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 680.

¹⁸ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 124, a. 3,c.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, a. 5,c.

They are true witnesses of the Gospel; they preferred the value of the Gospel to their own interest and gain, the Gospel as unique as the precious pearl for which they sacrificed their own lives. They are the riches of the Church, in which the power of God that is revealed in the weak to shame the strong is made manifest. "Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn 12:25).

They speak to us by their example; they are witnesses of the faith. Moreover, in hindsight, the history of the Church of the twentieth century is full of stories that express a resistance to evil unto death rooted in faith.

Finally, the Holy Father calls us to keep alive the memory of the witnesses of the twentieth century in all the Churches, exhorting us to be courageous witnesses of the Gospel of Christ for a profound renewal of Christian life.

4. THE MARTYRS FOR CHARITY IN ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

The martyrs of the 20th century are martyrs of faith, and of violence, but also of love, the love of God. Maximilian Kolbe, one of the most beautiful examples, and other martyrs of charity, died in the service of others, and have marked the life of the Church of our century.

The Church gathers up these witnesses of the love of God for man who give themselves that others may have life. But even this aspect of charity, to minister to others, to the poor and needy, finds in St. Vincent de Paul one of the best expressions in the history of the church of the "martyr for charity." It is a subject dear to Vincent, even if it is not often expressed by the word "martyrdom" (only a few exceptions, in his letters and correspondence), continually return there in its essence and meaning.

A frequent refrain in the teaching and practice of St. Vincent is the desire for martyrdom. The thought of Vincent in the writings that report his conferences to the two communities of priests and sisters would not seem at first sight, full of theological statements. Faithful to the spirit of the time, he insists on exhorting without rhetoric; his talk tends to raise the so-called motion of the affections. But the depth of theological understanding and also the sharp insight that makes him a forerunner of contemporary thought does not escape notice in the frequent pericopes about charity.

As a connoisseur of theology of the Church, we often find him emphasizing the mood with which the ministry and service of charity is exercised, so as to attribute to that service the status of mar-

tyrdom. Augustine had already found in the inner motivation of a person, and in his activity the cause for which one can speak of martyrdom. It is not the pain, suffering, the shedding of blood that makes a person “martyr”, but the deeper reasons why certain acts are done. Of St. Martin, the bishop of Tours, one of the first, who, though not being a martyr is revered as a saint, the liturgy justifies the fact with these words: “If the sword has not struck you, you have not lost the glory of martyrdom.”²⁰

St. Vincent also anticipates the thinking of contemporary theology, and the practice recently “inaugurated” by John Paul II for the canonization of “new martyrs,” not only of faith but also for charity. It is a whole life modeled on charity that must take into account the consummation of one’s existence in the act of serving the living Christ in the poor brother; thus to live in charity is to live in a permanent state of martyrdom. Vincent tells the story of Sister Marie Joseph of Etampes, Daughter of Charity, a victim of the plague, who died in service to the poor and sick and how this experience can be considered as martyrdom.

“Long ago, they told me about a sister who was near death, who saw a poor woman who needed a blood-letting; she got up from bed, bled the woman, collapsed, and died shortly afterwards.... The good girl can be called a martyr of charity. Do you believe that martyrs are only those who shed their blood for the faith? It is a martyrdom, because, although they do not die, they put themselves at risk of dying, and this for the love of God, just as many good sisters who have consumed their lives serving the poor, are martyrs. I think that if they had lived at the time of St. Jerome, he would have counted them among the martyrs.”²¹

Those who give themselves in the service of others, for the love of Jesus Christ at the peril of their lives, can be considered martyrs. The link between vocation and witness for charity has its point of greatest glory in martyrdom, which — by etymology and definition — expresses the fullest possible witness for man. To shed one’s blood for the cause of Christ is “martyrdom;” to give one’s life to the service of the poor in whom one sees Jesus Christ is to be a “martyr for charity.” The first is in the order to faith, the second in the order of charity. To consecrate themselves to God in the service of people abandoned, is this not going to martyrdom? In this case, they are

²⁰ Antiphon for Mary’s *Canticle*, memorial of St. Martin of Tours, November 11.

²¹ SV X, 510 / SV X, 409.

acts of charity, service, the gift of oneself to others, for the love of Christ. Thus the two sides of the medal are united: love of God that manifests itself in love for the poor brother in need.

The Church of the twentieth century gives us numerous pictures of “martyrs of love,” that lead us to recognize the validity of the teachings of St. Vincent that to give one’s life out of love of Christ for others amounts to a martyrdom.

Let me suggest three stories of “martyrs of love” of the twentieth century in which there is a certain analogy to the “Vincentian” martyrs’ stories that are repeated and which continue to repeat of those who live “in a permanent state of love” an expression so dear to Vincent that he recommended to his communities: it is how to live “martyrdom.”

The first relates the story of two Franciscan missionary nuns, Guilhermina and Marie Xavier, who offered themselves as volunteers in the hospital in Totoras during an outbreak of bubonic plague in Argentina in 1919. The hospital where the sisters were assigned was transformed into a sanatorium. After several days, Sister Marie Xavier fell ill, was treated by Sister Guilhermina and resumed her work. But later Sister Guilhermina got sick. Sister Mary Xavier, still recovering, cared for her fellow sister, but had a relapse, so that both became seriously ill. The superior wanted to take care of both of them, but the doctor prevented it. The two sisters did not want to put others at risk: “We offer our sacrifice to God.”²² They put their lives at the risk of death to care for the sick. They understood that their mission was to be close to the sick. It is not the only case where this has happened, but it is a mortal risk accepted with an awareness of the risk.

The second testimony concerns the story of six sisters of the Poverelle of Bergamo, at the end of the century, in 1995, who died in the Ebola epidemic in the Congo: the cause of death was this infection. They had chosen to remain near the illnesses of the poor and, secondly, to assist their fellow sisters sick with the virus. Sister Vitara Zorza had wanted to go to Kikwit to help other sisters sick with Ebola. She said: “Why be afraid? The others are there, why cannot I go too? Right now they need me.” They asked Sister Dinar Belleri during the raging epidemic, “Are you not afraid of being always in the midst of these sick people?” Her response was: “My mission is to serve the poor. What did my founder do? I am here

²² Archivio della Commissione Nuovi Martiri [Archives of the Commission of New Martyrs], II, 2-4096 and 4097.

to follow in his footsteps.... The Eternal Father will help me.” Sister Annelvira Ossoli was called the “lady of life,” because as midwife she had overseen the birth of thousands of children; as Sister Provincial she watched over the sisters who were sick. Sister Floralba Rondi was the eldest of six sisters: she was seventy years and had spent forty three of them in Africa.²³

Both stories show how the proximity to the poor is more important than protecting oneself. They died for love of the sick. They show that for Christians the protection of their life is not an absolute value, if, to avoid any risk, you must pay the price for abandoning those in need. This kind of martyr is not always easy to recognize, but which is taken with great awareness, knowing that the commitment to the sick can endanger one’s health or one’s life. One thing is certain — to practice charity, to be at the service of others, puts one’s own life at risk.

A final example of a martyr of charity we know, is that of Maximilian Kolbe, for whom the security of his own life at all costs was not the supreme value, and whose life was not worth more than the other’s. Maximilian Kolbe, canonized by John Paul II, is an example of a martyr of charity in a Nazi extermination camp and in an environment dominated by the terrible problem of survival under extreme conditions. For the pope, Father Maximilian Kolbe is a “martyr of love:” “The death he underwent, in the place of a brother, is the act of a heroic man.”

John Paul II said “... he being a prisoner in the camp, vindicated in the place of death the right to life of an innocent man, one of the four million....” Father Kolbe declared, according to the pope, “the willingness to go to death in his place because he was a father and his life was necessary to his loved ones.”²⁴ Maximilian Kolbe lived his martyrdom in the terrible machinery of the Nazi concentration camp that destroys human personality and existence.

A few days after the assassination of Father Alfonso Navarro Oviedo,²⁵ who was killed along with the young Luis Alfredo Torres in the parish house at the time of this act of aggression, Monsignor Romero, commenting on the situation of persecution in which the Church and Christians were called to live said:

²³ ACNM, I/51 - from 1427 to 1432.

²⁴ Cf. in C. CALTAGIRONE, *Vittime per amore e proclamati santi: alcuni casi del Novecento* [Victims for Love Proclaimed Saints: Some Cases in the 20th Century], ed. S. Barone, Caltanissetta-Roma, 51-52.

²⁵ Alfonso Navarro Oviedo had been killed on May 11, 1977: cf. ACNM, II/16 5660.

“Not everyone, says the Second Vatican Council, will have the honor of giving their physical blood, of being killed for their faith, but God asks all those who believe in him the spirit of martyrdom, that is, all must be willing to die for our faith; even if the Lord does not grant us this honor, we do, we are available so that when our time comes to give an account of ourselves, we can say: ‘Lord, I was willing to give my life for you. And I gave it.’ Because to give one’s life is not only to die; to give one’s life is to have the spirit of martyrdom in doing our duty, in silence, in prayer, in the honest fulfillment of duty in the silence of everyday life: giving life little by little.”

If martyrdom, in the order of faith, is a privileged fact, fruit of the absolute gratuity of grace, martyrdom in the order of charity is accessible to all who have been constituted in that state, the “state of charity.” Therefore, it is the love of Christ which invests a person in a special vocation, and establishes the person in love. The service of Christ in the poor becomes a way of transforming the love of Christ: it is “operative” love translated into works.

Returning to St. Vincent, in this last part of this presentation we see some situations in which he has proposed to himself and to his Company that we live in this “state of charity;” in imitation of a “martyr” par excellence. We are dealing with the martyrdom of charity which — as St. Vincent sustains — can be lived in an unbloody manner as well, through the complete absorption of oneself in the works of charity. Among the poor are the sick, abandoned babies, delinquents, convicts, soldiers who have been wounded in battle, children without education in general, and without religious instruction in particular, populations struck by natural disasters, epidemics, and wars. Vincent will continue to repeat and teach that service to the neighbor must be preferred to everything: “There must not be delays in that which concerns the service of the poor.”²⁶ The motivation is simple: “Charity is superior to all rules, and all rules must bow before it. She is a grand lady; we must do what she commands.”²⁷

With regard to vocations that would dedicate themselves to serve the church, Vincent wanted from those who were called to the Congregation of the Mission heroic vocations: “May God will, gentlemen and dear brothers, that all who apply to be admitted to the company have the thought of martyrdom, the desire to suffer martyrdom, and to consecrate themselves entirely to God’s service,

²⁶ SV IX, 215 / SV IX, 171.

²⁷ SV X, 595 / SV X, 478.

both in distant lands, and here, wherever it pleases God to use our poor company.”²⁸ The readiness for martyrdom, the giving of oneself for others, the call for a good missionary is synthesized in one of the most beautiful sections composed by Vincent:

“Whoever wants to live in a community must be willing and determined to live as an alien on Earth, to live only for Jesus Christ, to change his ways, to mortify his passions, to seek God alone, to submit to all, to convince himself that he came to serve and not to command, to suffer and not to live comfortably, to work and not to live in idleness and indolence. He must know that he will be tested like gold in the crucible that he cannot persevere without humbling himself before God and, finally, that the real way to be happy is to nurture the desire and the thought of martyrdom.”²⁹

The theme of martyrdom in Vincent recurs in all his activities; it is a component of his spirituality. In his conferences to prospective candidate priests and sisters, he does not miss an opportunity to point out that martyrdom is an essential feature for those who want to serve the church and the poor. The spirit of martyrdom has accompanied the new community to achieve this desire of Vincent: “Inflame the hearts of men to do what the Son of God did, he who came to bring fire in the world to ignite it with his love.... Thus, it is true that I am sent not only to love God, but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not also love him.”³⁰

In the sending of missionaries for the evangelization of Ireland, in a tough environment because of the presence of Protestants, repression raged especially against priests. Being a priest meant death. The bishop managed to escape disguised as a soldier and so did the missionaries, although at first Vincent thought they had died.

In the letter he had written to Father Bryan, Vincent had thought the worst and had tried to prepare them for martyrdom, exalting the dispositions for it so they could face it:

“We were greatly edified in your letter, seeing in it two wonderful effects of the grace of God. The first is that you have

²⁸ SV XI, 371 / SV XI, 334-335.

²⁹ L. ABELLY, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* [*The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*], 3 voll., Paris 1664, part 1, ch. 34, 162.

³⁰ SV XII, 262 / SV XII, -; conference of May 30, 1659.

all offered yourselves up completely to God by not abandoning at any cost the country where you are, despite all the dangers, ready for death rather than failing to assist the neighbor and the other is that you have taken such care to protect your confreres by sending them back to France, safe from all danger. The spirit of martyrdom prompted you to the first, and prudence made you do the second; both are derived from the example of Our Lord, who when he was going to face the torments of death for the salvation of men wanted to protect and save his disciples, saying, 'Let them go and do not touch them.' So you did as a true son of a most adorable Father, to whom I give great thanks to have produced in you great acts of supreme charity which is the sum of all virtues. I pray to God that he fill you with his grace, so that you practice virtue at all times in all, while you share it with those who may lack it. As the other priests who are with you have the intention to remain there whatever the peril, we judge that we should let them stay. Do we know the designs of God for them? Certainly He has not given them in vain a resolve so holy. Oh My God! How inscrutable your judgments!... They are all meant to gather up souls well prepared and assemble the good seed in your eternal barns. We adore your paths, O Lord."³¹

Fortunately, only one of the missionaries suffered martyrdom, accepted in advance by Vincent de Paul with a total submission to divine will.

Fathers Bryan and Barry were able to escape, and managed to reach France, after various vicissitudes, in 1652. But the youngest of the group, Thaddeus Lee, not yet a priest, at first had escaped from Limerick, but was discovered by the English in his native village, where he had fled. There he was brutally murdered before the eyes of his mother. The executioners cut off his hands and feet, then smashed his head. The Congregation of the Mission has in him its first martyr.³²

Some missionaries, Fathers Duggan and White, having reentered Ireland, to whom was added the following year the Scot Thomas Lumdsen in 1653, got themselves passage to Hebrides and Scotland, disguised as merchants. Fr. Lumdsen traveled for several years the districts in the far north of Scotland, before moving to the Orkney islands. He wrote little, for fear that his letters would fall into the hands of the authorities. His apostolic successes and those of other missionaries of the Propagation of the Faith awakened the jealousy

³¹ SV IV, 15 / SV IV, 17-19.

³² SV IV, 343, 481-484 / SV IV, 342, 466-469.

of the Protestant ministers. Cromwell, “informed that many Scots, especially in the northern provinces, went to popery” ordered “further research, especially against the priests, who were to be imprisoned and punished under the laws of the kingdom.”³³

One of the first victims of those laws was Fr. White. In 1655 he was arrested, along with a Jesuit priest and a diocesan priest and was thrown in jail in Aberdeen and then in Edinburgh. When the news arrived in France, Vincent saw the rise of a new martyr and recommended that the community pray for him.

“Let us commend to God our good Monsieur le Blanc (White), who, working in the mountains of Scotland, was taken prisoner, along with a Jesuit priest, by the English heretics. They were conducted at Aberdeen, where Fr. Lumsden is located, who will not fail to see him and assist him. There are many Catholics in this country who visit and comfort the poor priests who are suffering. Here is that good missionary on the way to martyrdom. I do not know if we are to rejoice or grieve, because, first, God is honored by the conditions under which he is imprisoned, for the sake of His name, and the company would be very lucky if God deemed it worthy of having a martyr, and he himself happy to suffer for the name of God, offering himself as he does for all that God wishes for his person and his life.... All this fills us, in God, with joy and gratitude. But on the other hand, it is our confrere who suffers; therefore should we not suffer with him? As for me, I confess that, from a natural standpoint, I am very distressed, and feel a special pain; but with the spirit, I believe that we bless God, as having given us a special grace.”³⁴

White did not shed his blood. After several months he was released, with threats of death were he to be found surprised while preaching and saying Mass, criminal actions formally sanctioned with capital punishment by English law. He fled, once free, into the mountains, where he continued his work of evangelization, until his death in 1679.

The mission of Scotland, adds a particular facet to the missionary work of evangelization. Lost in the wilderness and rugged headlands of Scotland, those missionaries evangelized the poor in the most remote and abandoned places. In disguise, persecuted from place to place, hiding in the castles of the nobles or in the huts of fishermen,

³³ SV V, 124-125, 145 / SV V, 129-130, 148-149; SV VI, 530-531 / SV VI, 545-546.

³⁴ SV XI, 173 / SV XI, 166.

they made possible the survival of Catholicism in a country. If they did not grasp the palm of martyrdom, they lived and have offered themselves for the evangelization of the poor and in charity to help people of the mountainous region.

Poland also had its martyrs who fell as victims for charity. Maria Luisa Gonzaga, Lady of Charity, having become queen of Poland, wished to have in her kingdom Vincentian works: missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. Vincent accepted the request and sent the first group of missionaries. There were five, leading the group was Father Lambert aux Couteaux.

They were welcomed in Krakow, where there was a battle against a ferocious outbreak of plague. The missionaries were prodigious in the aid of the sick. Shortly after news came that the epidemic had spread to Warsaw. Fr. Lambert, with his fellow priests, were prodigious in the service of those who had the plague, a service laborious and risky because the city lacked any sanitary and hygienic equipment. Fr. Lambert fell victim to his untiring zeal. He died of plague January 31, 1653. The queen was upset by his death, and in a long letter written to Vincent, she said, among other things: "If you do not send me another Fr. Lambert, I do not know what to do."³⁵

The choice fell on Charles Ozenne, along with some clerics and religious of the Visitation; after various vicissitudes they came to Poland in mid-January 1654, in time to minister to those who had the plague.

Things began to go well in missionary work: preaching, missions, seminary. The war soon upset the most optimistic hopes. Poland was attacked simultaneously by Russia and Sweden. War and hunger followed the plague.

The war had ups and downs and ended in October 1657, with the recapture of Warsaw and the expulsion of the Swedes. The situation had created an opportunity for the missionaries to engage in assistance to the sick, to soldiers and those who had suffered damage. Faced with so many disasters, speaking of the fate of Fathers Desdames and Duperroy, Vincent said to the community: "Neither guns, nor fire, nor plunder, nor the plague or other hardships and dangers in which they found themselves have made them give up their place, namely the place in which Providence had put them, preferring to risk their lives rather than betray the practice of mercy."³⁶ In this practice, they were prodigious, meeting the most

³⁵ SV IV, 560-561 / SV IV, 537-540.

³⁶ SV XI, 364 / SV XI, 329.

urgent needs left by war and plague. The missionaries in Poland and elsewhere were an example of “martyrs of love;” they chose to live among those who had the plague, the armies at war, in the midst of famine, knowing they exposed their lives to disease and death. Father Ozenne paid the highest tribute; he died August 14, 1654, because of fever taken from the plague.

Even the convicts were to Vincent one of the many categories of people to help. Nobody should be excluded from the benefits of the love of God working through the Christian charity of his children, as Vincent explained to the missionaries. “Since the virtue of mercy has several operations, he led the company to assist the poor in different ways, as attested by the service that was done for the convicts and the slaves on galleys of Barbary.”³⁷

The missionaries had been trained in the school of Vincent, imbued with the spirit of selflessness and service. Soon there were the first martyrs of charity. Two years after the foundation of the house of Marseilles, Fr. Louis Robiche died of disease contracted while attending the convicts. He was thirty five years old. His great love for the convicts earned him the admiration of Marseilles, who during his funeral, Vincent writes, there was such a crowd that tried to see him and touch him that there were scenes of hysteria. A man grabbed a pillow with his teeth to take a piece stained with the blood of Fr. Robiche. There was someone who scraped the catafalque on which he was placed, to pick up the candle wax from the funeral. After reporting these manifestations of popular devotion and affection, Vincent concluded: “The voice of the people (which is the voice of God) calls him blessed because he died, so to speak, a martyr, being exposed and having lost his life for the love of Jesus Christ, working for the corporal and spiritual health of the sick poor who had disease that usually leads to death and that he knew well to be contagious.”³⁸

Fr. Robiche was not the only one. In 1651, Fr. Brunet, “a good worker of the Lord, a great friend of the poor, luminary of the company,” and Mr. Sirmian de la Costa, “founder and patron of the hospital in Marseilles,”³⁹ died in similar circumstances, victims of the plague. They too are in addition to the countless martyrs of charity.”

With **the entry of France into the Thirty Years War** and the Fronde, conditions for survival of the poor became desperate:

³⁷ SV VIII, 238 / SV VIII, 277.

³⁸ SV II, 517-521 / SV II, 570.

³⁹ SV III, 471, 474 / SV III, 466, 467-468.

the population was decimated by famine and epidemics. The government, bled dry by the effort to fund the war, failed to provide any help to the devastated provinces (Lorraine, Picardy, Champagne, Ile-de-France). Vincent organized the assistance, and was involved in the forefront with his sons and daughters who had absorbed his spirit. Organized charities saw missionaries in the frontline, the Daughters of Charity supported by volunteers who succeeded in distributing food, clothing, medicine, distributing tools and seeds for cultivating a small piece of land for their livelihoods. The burial of the dead was also necessary; this was an act of mercy and at the same time it eliminated outbreaks of infection. The Daughters of Charity, at the request of the queen herself, were sent to the areas devastated by war to treat the wounded and provide health care to the poor in military hospitals. Even here Vincent, through his sons and his daughters, wrote pages of heroic service and giving. In these areas decimated by the war the work was backbreaking, and missionaries were not spared. The poor and the sick were in a state of extreme need. At Etampes, the situation was worse than elsewhere because of the repeated sieges which left behind many dead caused by epidemics. The streets were full of corpses of men and animals. Missionaries on the recommendation of Vincent cleaned up the city, giving Christian burial to the dead. In July 1652 Fr. David died, a victim of the epidemic. He was twenty-five years old and one year a priest. Fr. David was the first in a series of "martyrs of charity." He was not killed by any persecutor, but suffered a death which could have been avoided if the service to the Gospel had not pushed him to live among those suffering from the plague.

His substitute, Fr. De la Fosse, returned to Saint Lazare, the mother house of the Mission, on a litter, after one month of work. Fortunately, his life was saved. In September, 1653, all the missionaries at Etampes were sick. Two of these, Fr. Wateblad and Dechamps, died.⁴⁰

To assist the poor in the devastated regions, neither resources nor efforts were spared. In the most critical moments of the Fronde, Saint Lazare remained almost deserted. All missionaries were in the disaster zone, and many did not return. They are among the ranks of heroes, and as Vincent said of those who died "with weapons in hand, like martyrs of charity."⁴¹

In the summer of 1656, the plague broke out in Genoa with devastating fury. The sick were piled into insufficient hospital wards

⁴⁰ SV X, 510 / SV X, 409.

⁴¹ SV X, 510 / SV X, 409.

or died in the street without any help. Food placed in the square was left abandoned because no one came to pick it up. Between four thousand and five thousand died each week. The city became a vast and silent sanatorium. Writing to Stephen Blatiron, superior of the house of Genoa, on December 1, 1656,⁴² Vincent recommended prudence. The house in Genoa, was transformed into a hospital, missionaries became nurses, offering their assistance to the dying and the sick. The confrere Luke Arimondo offered to assist the plague victims and died of plague in Genoa November 4, 1656.⁴³ He was the first to succumb. Twelve days after he had moved in Lazzaretto Consolata, he fell sick and died three days later. Fr. Blatiron took the contagion while administering the last sacrament to three plague victims. After a short illness, he died. The other missionaries, took the infection and died in the summer of 1657. Seven priests and a brother died in assisting the sick. Vincent when he learned the terrible news, despite the pain, accepted it in a spirit of faith.

In October 1656, the plague also infected the city of Rome, where the missionaries had taken the direction of the College of Propaganda Fide with the intention to adjoining a seminary to it. Missionaries offered themselves to assist the plague victims and the sick.⁴⁴

St. Vincent carried, together with his confreres, the weight of the cross of so many trials. He was concerned about their health; he tried to give them advice to facilitate their ministry, and suffered in the knowledge that they were not very numerous and sometimes alone before a mission so big. Finally, he accepted in faith before God's plans when he learned of the brutal and too early death of his young missionaries.

The service of charity finds a wonderful achievement in the Daughters of Charity, "country girls" gathered by Vincent with the help of Louise de Marillac in the service of the poor, "our lords and masters." Service held the first place, because their service was "to serve our Lord in the poor, and the Lord, on the day of judgment, will hold as done to himself the services rendered to them."⁴⁵ One of the images which Vincent used very often in his conferences and meditations, proposing it as a model of service and charity for the whole company, was Margaret Naseau (1594-1633). She was considered the first Daughter of Charity, and at her school other

⁴² SV VI, 137 s. / SV VI, 157 s.

⁴³ Cf. SV VI, 152 s., 157 / SV VI, 172 s., 177.

⁴⁴ SV V, 643 / SV V, 640; SV VI, 151, 163 / SV VI, 171-172, 182-183.

⁴⁵ L. MEZZADRI - M. PÉREZ FLORES, *La regola delle Figlie della Carità di san Vincenzo de Paoli* [*The Rule of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul*], Milano 1986, 137.

young people were inspired to help the poor, forming that network of solidarity and self-giving love, the image of the Father who gives his life for love.

The willingness to offer his life in service of others recurs often in conferences to the Daughters of Charity: serving the poor was to be completed at the risk of their lives:

“God permits that we gather today, on the feast of St. Rocco, one of the saints that you must love more, since he spent his life in the exercise of charity, to the point of catching the plague from the people he served who suffered from it for the love of God.... It is just this love taught by the Holy Spirit with the words: ‘There can be no greater love than to lose his own soul — that is, his life — for love of neighbor’ (cf. Jn 15:13).”⁴⁶

The vocation to service is the guarantee that God still loves the world and the poor in his sons and his daughters. The Daughters of Charity are the shining face of God toward man. The poor see in a Daughter of Charity the proof of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Her vocation is therefore “the greatest there is in the church of God.” This grandeur does not come, as, for example, that of priests, from functions or privileges beyond those of any other faithful, but the greatness of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity is in being united to Christ; they are his spouses to whom he himself has asked for love. But let us hear what Vincent says about this:

“A holy father says that whoever gives himself to God by serving others and suffers willingly whatever difficulty he meets, is a martyr. Have martyrs suffered more than they? Certainly not, because having one’s head cut off is an evil that soon passes. Even if they endured painful torments, they were not, however, long-term, because they came to an end with death. But the young women who give themselves to God in your Company, they do for life, sometimes, among the sick full of infection and wounds, and often with repugnant tumors, sometimes with poor children who need to have everything done for them, or the poor convicts weighed down with chains and pain; and place themselves under the direction of people who do not know what is needed, to be in all these offices under their obedience.... If we were to see on earth the place where a martyr had passed, we would approach it with respect and kiss the earth with great reverence; would we disparage our sisters whom God preserves and helps live their martyrdom? O my dear daughters, let us hold them in high esteem, let us

⁴⁶ SV IX, 40 / SV IX, 34.

maintain our esteem for them, whatever happens, and let us consider them martyrs of Jesus Christ, because they serve our neighbor for his sake.”⁴⁷

The privilege and position of the Daughters of Charity is to “give life.” It is the most radical ministry, similar to that of the martyrs, “it is certain that your life is shortened by the work that you have, consequently, you are martyrs.”⁴⁸ And this desire for Vincent, to have people called to a heroic vocation, is not lacking in the company of the Daughters of Charity, people who have lived martyrdom; they have offered their lives to proclaim the Gospel in service to others. They, along with many brothers, have inflamed France and the whole world with that zeal, that “fire” of love that has warmed suffering humanity and the abandoned.

“Being in service” has been a constant in the early life of the community: the martyrs of charity who have not been spared themselves in bringing relief to people’s needs through the evangelization of the poor “in word and deed” by paying in person, offering themselves as a gift to others on the model of the Master. From this participation in the sacrifice of Christ — in the words of St. Paul: I complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ — the spirit of martyrdom can and must, according to Vincent — be nourished in persons and in the community. It is the sublimation and the perfection of the cross; it is not the offer of suffering, but the offer of life, a gesture of love, but love in its ultimate fulfillment. Vincent will never stop speaking of martyrdom, to propose it, and to encourage others toward it. In France, Ireland, Poland, Italy... even in Madagascar, despite the long and tragic rosary of suffering, Vincent remained faithful to the idea of martyrdom against everything and everyone, so that the missionaries would still be willing to participate in the martyrdom of Jesus, becoming completely consumed by love:

“If God were to permit them to be reduced to the need to serve, to live, as vicars in the villages, or even any of them were forced to beg for bread or lie in the bushes, all torn and numb with cold, and were asked: Poor priest of the Mission, who would have reduced you to this state? What happiness, gentlemen, to say: Charity!”⁴⁹

Translation: ROBERT J. STONE, C.M.

⁴⁷ SV IX, 270 / SV IX, 214.

⁴⁸ SV IX, 460 / SV IX, 362.

⁴⁹ SV XI, 76 / SV XI, 66-67..