

Unit 2C: TRADITION

53: Martyrdom and Monasticism from the 1st to 7th Centuries

What Is Martyrdom?

The word “martyr” is from a Greek word meaning “witness”; and a martyr was originally a witness of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 1.22).¹ As set out in Acts 1.8, this witness received power when the Holy Spirit came upon him or her. Thus when Christians faced persecutions, as The Gospel of Mark says: “When they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand [about] what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (13.11). For the first three hundred years of Christian experience until Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians after winning the battle of the Milvian Bridge at Rome in 312, “Christians regarded the martyr’s task in the time of their trial to be above all one of witness (*martyria*) or public confession of the faith.”²

So those Christians who witnessed Christ’s resurrection, whether that witness was immediately after the crucifixion or on the day of Pentecost or in later years in their minds, achieved “the most complete conceivable fullness of being.”³ As Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367) reflects in a commentary on Mark 13:13:

It is neither a blessed nothingness that awaits us, nor is non-existence the fruit, nor annihilation the appointed reward of faith. Rather the end is the final attainment of the promised blessedness. They are blessed

¹ See F. L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone (eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, p. 1046; originally published as *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Third Edition). Eastern Orthodoxy has been covered by Metropolitan Kallistos (Dr. K. T. Ware).

² Father John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 1, 73, 266). All of the more than 400 entries in this remarkable book have been written by Father McGuckin.

³ Quoted in an overview of Mark 9:13 in Thomas C. Oden & Christopher A. Hall (Eds.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament II Mark* (Downers Grove ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 183.

who endure until the goal of perfect happiness is reached, when the expectation of faith reaches toward complete fulfilment. Their end is to abide with unbroken rest in that condition toward which they are presently pressing.⁴

This theme of “Blessed is he that endures to the end” is a foundational theme for understanding early Christian martyrdom.

This was the experience of the proto-martyr, the first martyr, the Hellenistic Jew Stephen, according to tradition the first deacon (Acts 6-7). As Stephen was being stoned about 35AD, he “gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” and Stephen died confessing Christ, praying “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7.55, 59). In his life and his death, Stephen, like Jesus, was a servant leader (Mat 20.25-28).⁵

Why Be a Martyr?

What is going on here? What were the early martyrs thinking? What was the early Church thinking? What were the persecutors thinking? These are tough questions, but there are concise answers. Today we sometimes forget that, as the blunt entry on “martyrdom” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* puts it: “Jesus was controversial even in death; the witness [for Jesus] was involved in conflict, and met scepticism and more hostility.”⁶

1. The Attitude of the Early Christians to Martyrdom

Before 312 AD the decision to become a Christian often meant risking your life. The long catechetical process taught you (rightly) that you would gain a new

⁴ Oden & Hall, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Mark II*, p. 184.

⁵ See also Ken Blanchard & Phil Hodges, *The Servant Leader: Transforming Your Heart, Head, Hands & Habits* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 12.

⁶ Alison Mason & Haddon Willmer, “Martyrdom,” in Adrian Hastings (Ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 411.

life spiritually and practically, but you usually knew that by being baptised you also risked your life. And if you were not aware of that possibility when you were baptised, you were often made aware of it when you were asked to either renounce your new-found faith or to die. Individual Christians seldom sought martyrdom, but it was often thrust upon them; and they accepted it, as did Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107-110) who wrote in *To the Romans* on his long journey to martyrdom from Antioch to Rome:

May I have the joy of the beasts that are prepared for me. I pray too that they may prove prompt with me. I will even entice them to devour me promptly, and not to refrain, as they have refrained from some, through fear. And even though they are not willing without constraint. I will force them. Pardon me. I know what is expedient for me. Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nought of things visible or invisible seek to allure me, that I may attain unto Jesus Christ.⁷

What Stephen the deacon and Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, were welcoming was nothing short of deification (from the Greek *theosis*)— “the process of sanctification of Christians whereby they become progressively conformed to God.”⁸

That awareness of deification is first found in Peter’s reference to “becoming partakers [or participants] of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1.4). We are not going to achieve it tonight, but we can begin. Even if we are not eyewitnesses of Jesus, we can share with the martyrs their key traits—“courage and charity and even imperviousness to pain in his Name.”⁹ This idea of deification was taken by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius and Cyril “and related it to the incarnation of the Logos, wherein the divine Logos assumed flesh so that all humankind could be lifted up into the mystery of his divinity.”¹⁰ So the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus Christ are all part of a pattern in which Jesus Christ shows that

⁷ Ignatius, *To the Romans*, V, in J. Stevenson (Ed.), *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of Church to AD 337* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 12-13. This essential reference book revised by W. H. C. Frend is readily available.

⁸ McGuckin, p. 98.

⁹ Mason & Willmer, p.411.

¹⁰ McGuckin, p. 98.

what He is by nature, we can become by grace. What the early Fathers were seeking, what many martyrs were hoping for, what we still seek today is oneness with God. The Romanian theologian, Father Dumitru Staniloae, suggests that “the goal of Orthodox spirituality is [quite simply and explicitly] the perfection of the believer by his union with Christ.”¹¹ In summary, the early Christian martyrs were seeking to be one with God; and they often achieved their aim at the cost of their earthly lives.

2. The Attitude of the Early Church to Martyrdom

What was the Church thinking? That adage, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”¹² is [certainly] fulfilled in the conversion of Saul who had participated in Stephen’s death.”¹³ But the Church had to be careful. At times, unbalanced people embraced martyrdom as a suicidal wish to reject life itself. So, as the entry in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* reflects:

The Church could not disown martyrdom but it nevertheless needed to control its immense spiritual power. Martyrdom was not to be sought; indeed, it was legitimate to flee in persecution to avoid being martyred if faith was not at stake. A martyr also had to be orthodox, to be dying for the true faith, if the martyrdom was to be of value.¹⁴

Although the early Church did not wish to encourage martyrdom, she did recognize the need “to preserve a formal record of the martyrdoms of the Christians who had been executed on account of their faith.”¹⁵

A group of texts known as “The Acts of the Martyrs” was often read in churches, and according to St Augustine, was “overshadowing the reading of the Gospel.”¹⁶

¹¹ *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan PA: St Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary Press), 2002, p. 21.

¹² Tertullian: “*Apologeticus*” Ch. 50

¹³ Mason & Willmer, p. 411.

¹⁴ Mason & Willmer, p. 411

¹⁵ McGuckin, p. 1.

¹⁶ McGuckin, p. 1.

These testimonies, written for “the Church’s edification,” were certainly dramatic. Consider the prison diary of Vibia Perpetua, a martyr of the third century North African church, who was executed in the arena in Carthage on 7 March 203. She has given us one of the earliest pieces of writing by a Christian woman—an outstandingly authentic description of being martyred:

Another day as we were at meal we were suddenly snatched away to be tried; and we came to the forum. Therewith a report spread abroad through the parts near the forum, and a very great multitude gathered together. We went up to the tribunal. The others being asked, confessed [their faith as Christians]. So they came to me. And my father appeared there also, with my son, and would draw me from the step, saying: ‘Perform the Sacrifice; have mercy on the child.’ And Hilarian the procurator . . . said: ‘Spare your father’s grey hairs; spare the infancy of the boy. Make sacrifice for the Emperor’s prosperity.’ And I answered: ‘I am a Christian.’ And . . . my father was smitten with a rod. And I sorrowed for my father’s harm as though I had been smitten myself; so sorrowed I for his unhappy old age. Then Hilarian passed sentence upon us all and condemned us to the beasts; and cheerfully we went down to the dungeon. Then because my child had been used to being breastfed and to staying with me in the prison, straightway I sent Pomponius the deacon to my father, asking for the child. But my father would not give him. And as God willed, no longer did he need to be suckled, nor did I take fever; that I might not be tormented by care for the child and by the pain of my breasts. (para.6)

[She then told of some remarkable dreams and concluded:]

And I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory. Thus far I have written this, till the day before the games; but [of] the deed of the games themselves let him write who will. (para. 10) ¹⁷

¹⁷ The story is readily available on line: <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp>
Cf. McGuckin, p. 261.

Martyrdom was such a great testimony of faith that, in terms of salvation, it qualified as a type of baptism in blood for those catechumens and others who confessed Christ unto death. In Epistle 73, St Cyprian wrote of "the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood". In *The City of God* 13:7, St. Augustine declared: "When any die for the confession of Christ without having received the washing of regeneration, it avails as much for the remission of their sins as if they had been washed in the sacred font of baptism." Accordingly, the martyrs were held to have passed straight to Paradise on their deaths. They were also granted a perpetual remembrance by the faithful in that their relics were often interred in the altar tables of the churches. This practice probably originated in Rome where the tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs also served as tables when Christians met and offered the Eucharist in secret. We should recall that the persecution of the Church lasted for nearly 300 years, but with varying levels of severity according to the place and time and the varying political and religious policies of individual Caesars.

3. The Attitude of the Early Persecutors

The persecutors, both the Emperors and ordinary people who at times formed mobs to kill Christians, were puzzled by these strange people who refused to worship the Roman gods and affirm the power of the emperor. Indeed, at times the emperors felt threatened, because many emperors aspired to advance to the rank of deity and be worshipped.¹⁸ The first imperial persecutor, Nero, executed Peter and Paul and later many other Christians, because of a strong wish to be seen to be doing something in response to the immense fire of Rome. From Nero's viewpoint in AD 64, the Christians were an ideal target, because they were already suspected as a foreign group that did not worship the many Roman gods.

There were further significant government-sponsored pogroms under a long list of emperors—Domitian in 95, Trajan in 112, Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Septimus

¹⁸ McGuckin, p. 98.

Severus in 202, Maximus Thrax (225-238), Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260), and finally the Great Persecution of 303 to 315. Intermittently, for some 300 years until Constantine gained full control of the Empire, Christians were persecuted because, as the pagan apologist Celsus argued in AD 178, they were seen as taking secret oaths to support one another and “undermining Roman values by negating the gods and refusing public service.”¹⁹ Thus all three groups—the martyrs, the Church and the emperors—had reasons for their actions.

Monasticism

Constantine’s victory at Milvian Bridge in Rome in 312 is also a bridge between martyrdom and monasticism. With Constantine’s affirmation of Christianity as a legalised religion in the whole of the Roman Empire, the path of martyrdom was largely removed for many centuries. So how were Christians in the 4th to 6th centuries to demonstrate their commitment to Jesus Christ? Some experienced a call to the monastic life. This provided the necessary voluntary sacrificial and ascetic impulse, formerly necessitated by the imposed constraints of persecution, ... to embrace the way of the Cross with radical repentance in the following of Christ. In a time of normalisation ushered in by the ending of Roman persecution, monasticism took over the role of setting a prophetic challenge before Christians of living the life of Christ in the “fast lane” (so to speak). All might achieve their goal in the end, but those with different challenges living “in the world” would benefit from such a benchmark of radical discipleship. Indeed, the spiritual counsel of the monks became so important from the 4th century onwards that even archbishops of major sees and politically powerful persons in the Empire would seek out their advice. This prophetic dimension of monasticism has been important ever since.

¹⁹ McGuckin on “persecutions,” pp. 262-267.

1. Who is a monk?

It is hard for us today to believe that the early monks “were not scholars or clerics, wealthy or with positions in society, but just ordinary people who were sincerely concerned to live out their understanding of the Gospel.”²⁰ The men and women who became monks chose to be ascetics—to abstain from physical comfort and pleasure. The root of the word “ascetic” is the Greek word *ascesis* meaning “athletic training.” This was the context in which St Paul “fought the good fight . . . finished the race [and] . . . kept the faith” (2 Tim 4.7).²¹

Sister Benedicta Ward’s powerful definition of a monk, written more than thirty years ago, remains relevant to both men and women of any century:

The monk is a baptised Christian who makes his whole life a detailed and specific response to the gospel to the exclusion of all other interests and responsibilities. His aim is to receive Christ in the centre of his being, by the power of the Spirit, to act in Him for the redemption of creation. This, therefore, demands a radical and visible break with the ‘world’ in order to enter into the eternal moment of the Cross of Christ and to be made thereby into the New Adam Basic to this way of baptismal life is continuous meditation on the Scriptures, both in solitude and in the corporate worship of the Liturgy.²²

So the monastic life becomes in Benedicta Ward’s phrase, “a special form of baptismal commitment.” However, a true monastic theology is not “a dualistic theology, with a rejection of matter implicit in its renunciations.” On the contrary, the decision of a person to become a monk does not “imply a rejection of the material world; it emphasises rather the sacramental character of the created order, and its redemption by Christ through those who are in him.” (p. 379).

²⁰ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. xxii.

²¹ McGuckin, p. 34.

²² See Alan Richardson & John Bowden (Eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 379.

The Greek word for single person, *monos*, is the root of the word “monasticism” and the movement of single ascetic persons into the desert, especially in Egypt from the 4th century onwards attracted much attention, based on the prototype of St Antony.²³ Ironically, the early monks fled from all civic responsibility; yet after the early fifth century, monks “more or less commandeered the episcopal offices in both East and West.”²⁴ Perhaps those who reject power and wealth and fame are best fit to exercise full responsibility within the Church for the lives of others.

2. The Monastic Experience

The two main forms of monastic life are the eremitical (or hermitic, solitary) life and the coenobitical (or communal) life, with St Antony (c. 251-356) as the forerunner of the hermitic life and St Pachomius (c. 290-346) as the forerunner of the communal life.²⁵ However, it was not unusual for single individuals to spend many years living within each form of monastic life as they sought a greater oneness with Christ.

During the 105 years of his life, Antony the Great, often known as “the Father of Monks,” because he influenced so many others, moved from his early life as the son of Christian peasant farmers to become a mentor of many Christians who sought to live in the desert—an adviser and nemesis of emperors and bishops, as well as a stout defender of the Church in its battle with the heretical Arius. Much of his life has been set down in hagiography by St Athanasius and his followers, but St Anthony is also remembered, probably more accurately, for the advice and reflections collected in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* by Benedicta Ward:

35. Abba Antony said, ‘Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first

²³ McGuckin, p. 34.

²⁴ McGuckin, p. 34.

²⁵ Cross & Livingstone, pp. 1102-1103.

decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge or we labour in vain.²⁶

That remains sound advice today for both monks and non-monks: Define carefully the virtue you seek before you start striving for it.

In the 56 years of his life, St Pachomius, who was born of pagan parents 39 years after St Antony but died 10 years before him, served in the Roman army until the age of 23 and was then converted and baptised. By 320 he had founded a monastery at Tabennisi near the Nile; and at his death in 346 St Pachomius was ruling over nine monasteries for men and two for women. St Pachomius's brother John wanted to remain a hermit but Pachomius insisted that "each one should find his own perfection in serving others [because] personal perfection is brought about in community, in the service of the brethren."²⁷ A Pachomian monastery was a walled and isolated village of some 1,200 to 1,400 monks with a single entry door and a porter checking arrivals who were then tightly organized into 10 "tribes," each with three or four houses with 40 brothers exercising the same craft (e.g. cooks, cobblers, scribes, etc.). However, all of Pachomius's monasteries were dependent on his personal leadership and disintegrated soon after his death.

3. Rules for Monastic Life

For a monastery to survive, agreed rules were needed which guided life not only under the founder but also after his or her death. For monasteries in the East, the Rule of St Basil developed by St Basil the Great (c. 330-379) often provides the pattern of life, while for monasteries in the West the Rule of St Benedict developed

²⁶ (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications), 1975, pp. 1-9.

²⁷ Luc Brésard, *History of Monastic Spirituality*, Saint Pachomius Library available online at: www.scourmont.be/studium/bresard/05-pachomius.html.

by St Benedict of Nursia (c.480-550) is a model for prayer and living together in community.²⁸

St Basil the Great, was one of the three Cappadocian Fathers with St Gregory of Nazianzus and St Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, who were instrumental in defeating the Arian heresy. He was been rightly described as “eloquent, learned, statesmanlike, pugnacious, sensitive [with] great personal holiness . . . and an unusual talent for organization;” and he knew which quality to exercise in the face of different challenges.²⁹ His Liturgy was the chief liturgy of the Orthodox Church in Constantinople for many centuries and is still used today on his feast day, on the Sundays of Great Lent and on the eves of the Nativity, the Theophany and Pascha. His vast monastery on the outskirts of Caesarea (now in modern Turkey) included a church, episcopal residence, hospitals, hostels, a planned welfare system for the poor, and many caves for the monks which can still be visited today. His rule of 358/359 was originally a collection of 80 questions and answers on the monastic life which were then carefully revised and expanded over the centuries.

St Basil the Great challenged people, as is clear from the single saying Benedicta Ward gives in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*:

One of the old men said, ‘When Saint Basil came to the monastery one day, he said to the abbot . . . “Have you a brother here who is obedient?” The [abbot] replied, “They are all your servants, master, and strive for their salvation.” But Saint Basil repeated, “Have you a brother who is really obedient?” Then the abbot led a brother to him and Saint Basil used him to serve during the meal. When the meal was ended, the brother brought him some water for rinsing his hands and Saint Basil said to him, “Come here, so that I also may offer you water.” The brother allowed the bishop to pour the water. Then Saint Basil said to him, “When I enter the sanctuary, come, that

²⁸ Daniel Rees, pp. 445-446 in Hastings (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*.

²⁹ Cross & Livingstone, pp. 166-167.

I may ordain you deacon.” When this was done, he ordained him priest and took him with him to the bishop’s palace because of his obedience.³⁰

St Basil the Great made a practice of shaking people up and changing their lives.

In the west, St Benedict was the monastic pioneer and monasticism in this part of the Church was deeply indebted to his Rule for many centuries to come. St Benedict taught that manual work as well as prayer and study, kept the life of the monk in balance and orientated towards God:

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. And therefore, at fixed times, the brothers ought to be occupied in manual labour; and again, at fixed times, in sacred reading. ... there shall certainly be appointed one or two elders, who shall go round the monastery at the hours in which the brothers are engaged in reading, and see to it that no troublesome brother chance to be found who is open to idleness and trifling, and is not intent on his reading; being not only of no use to himself, but also stirring up others.³¹

In his Rule, St Benedict drew upon the earlier Rule of St Basil, an Italian *Rule of the Master*, as well as the writings of the monk St John Cassian (c. 360-after 430) who had lived in a monastery in Bethlehem, studied monasticism in Egypt and later founded two monasteries near Marseilles.³² The Rule of St Benedict is “safeguarded and applied by an . . . abbot, chosen by the monks, with full authority, who is directed to take counsel and to care for the individual.”³³ The “chief task and central act” of a Benedictine community was originally and remains today the saying of the Divine Office, which is combined with “private prayer, spiritual reading and work.”³⁴ The Benedictine nun Margaret Truran has commented that:

[The] teaching [in the Rule] is experiential and has to be lived to be understood. The monk is handed the gospel as his guide, provided with

³⁰ Benedicta Ward, p. 39.

³¹ See Rule 48 (Manual Labour) the year 530, from the online *The Medieval Sourcebook* at: www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/rul-benedict.html .

³² Cross & Livingstone, pp. 182-183, 295, 1377.

³³ Cross & Livingstone, p. 183.

³⁴ Cross & Livingstone, p. 183.

basic Christian and monastic maxims as ‘tools of good works’, and given instruction, supported by scripture, on the traditional monastic discipline of obedience, silence, and humility.³⁵

Strikingly, the very first rule suggests that monks should live as hermits not in “the new fervour of conversion,” but only after “the long probation of life in a monastery” in which they have “been well prepared in the army of brothers for the solitary fight of the hermit [against the devil].”³⁶

All of these manifestations of monasticism in both the East and the West have grown from the experience of “the first monk to achieve historical recognition . . . St Anthony.”³⁷ Here was a man who visited a church in Egypt where he heard the words, “Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor ... and come follow me” (Matt. 19.21), and then applied those words to himself.³⁸ The impact of a monastic rule has been to create and sustain “a form of life where dependence on God is to be a felt reality.”³⁹

Conclusion

To conclude, consider the relationship between martyrdom and monasticism: it’s very much a unity. Through martyrdom (*martyria*) a person seeks deification (*theosis*). A person (*monos*) embraces asceticism (*ascesis*). Yet to achieve *theosis*, the path to martyrdom certainly goes through *ascesis*; and the *monos* seeks to move beyond *ascesis* into *theosis*. Therefore, it is appropriate to see clearly that both the martyr and the monk are seeking deification through asceticism. That’s quite a challenge. It is very much in keeping with the challenge that Metropolitan (now Patriarch of Antioch) John laid down in his Enthronement Address in September

³⁵ in Hastings (Ed.), pp.68-69.

³⁶ From the online *Medieval Sourcebook*, *The Rule of St Benedict*, c. 530 at: www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/rul-benedict.html).

³⁷ Rees in Hastings, p. 445.

³⁸ Ward, p. 1.

³⁹ Rees in Hastings, p. 446.

2008: “True Christian life consists in embarking on the adventure of transformation of the self. It also consists in the inclination of the heart, the call for renewal inside the Church, and in serving the people in whom He [Christ] has chosen to dwell.” Both the martyr and the monk seek to transform the self and thereby serve the Church.

Even if we choose not to be monks—you don’t make a choice to be a martyr; it is thrust upon you—we can still progress in our lives as Orthodox Christians. I close with the challenging reflection of Father Dumitru Staniloae—making it more personal by changing his “they” to “we”:

Of course Christians in the world can’t exercise such radical self-control as monks, but we too can practice a certain amount of moderation, which as it grows can in time equal monastic self-control. We go slower, but we can get just about as far. If we are lacking in the toils of our own choosing, God compensates for it by giving us more troubles to bear, the unchosen burdens and obligations of life. If we accept them [i.e. those toils and troubles] with patience, we can be purified from our passions, almost the same as monks. If self-control is more of a virtue of monks, patience is more that of lay people, although neither one should totally forget the virtue of the other.⁴⁰

Perhaps gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of monks and martyrs will help us to live our own lay and clerical lives with a greater openness to God’s transformational grace.

⁴⁰ Staniloae, p. 150.