



There Is No Greater Love: The Close Bond between Martyrdom and Religious Life

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*By faith, the martyrs gave their lives,
bearing witness to the truth of the Gospel that had transformed them
and made them capable of attaining to the greatest gift of love (Porta Fidei 13).*

The above quote from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's apostolic letter opening the Year of Faith reminds all Christians of Jesus' words, "There is no greater love than to lay down your life..." Jesus did more than just speak these words—He showed us how to *love to the end* (Jn. 13:1), living and dying for the salvation of humankind.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us that we, in turn, are not mere observers of Jesus' love, but receivers and givers: "God has poured out his love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf. Rom. 5:5); therefore the first and most necessary gift is charity, by which we love God above all things and our neighbor because of him" (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). One way we receive God's merciful love by meditating on the passion and death of Christ. Gazing upon Jesus' pierced Heart enables us to know the depth of God's merciful love for us and to open our hearts to Him, allowing our hearts to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of His abiding love. Receiving His love makes us desire to love like Him—to give ourselves totally to Him and to those for whom He laid down His life.

The Council Fathers call us to cultivate the seed of love given to us by hearing and carrying out the Word of God in our daily lives. We can only do this through the help of grace—frequently receiving the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist; taking part in the Liturgy; and applying ourselves to prayer, self-denial, loving service, and virtuous living (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 42). The Council Fathers do not stop there, however. Rather, they exhort us to follow Jesus to the end in laying down our lives:

*Martyrdom makes the disciple like his master, who willingly accepted death for the salvation of the world, and through it he is conformed to him by the shedding of blood. Therefore the Church considers it the highest gift and supreme test of love. And while it is given to few, all however must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the cross amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks (*Lumen Gentium*, 42, emphasis mine).*

Although a call to embrace martyrdom may seem radical or shocking to modern Americans, since the second century martyrdom has been referred to as the seed of Christianity. Contrary to the intent of those persecuting the early Christians, the blood of the martyrs gave rise to the spread of Christianity. This was because the martyrs gave authentic witness that Jesus was who He said He was—the Son of God—the Christ. He was not only worth living for; He was worth dying for. Martyrs in every century give witness that this world is only temporary and pales in comparison to the promise of eternal life with Christ forever.

It is with this same radical desire to love Christ and to lay down one's life for Him that religious freely choose to embrace the evangelical counsels and to give themselves totally to Christ and His Church. In the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and persecution of Christians in the Empire ceased, many turned to the "white martyrdom" of the ascetical life as a way of laying down their lives for Christ. While we find the celibate life for the sake of the kingdom mentioned in the Gospel of Mathew and the Letters of St. Paul, it was during this time in the fourth century when the eremitical life of prayer and solitude; monastic life of prayer in community; and the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience developed and flourished, giving rise over subsequent centuries to many varied forms of consecrated life.

Thus, there is a close relationship between the spirituality of martyrdom and that of consecrated life. Pope Paul VI makes this connection more explicit:

What has been said indicates what degree of renunciation is demanded by the practice of religious life. You must feel something of the force with which Christ is drawn to His Cross – that baptism He had still to receive, by which that fire would be lighted which sets you too ablaze – something of that ‘foolishness’ which St. Paul wishes we all had, because it alone makes us wise. *Let the Cross be for you, as it was for Christ, proof of the greatest love.* Is there not a mysterious relationship between renunciation and joy, between sacrifice and magnanimity, between discipline and spiritual freedom (*Evangelica Testificatio* 29, emphasis mine)?

In discerning a vocation, it is, of course, not a matter of discerning if one is called to embrace the Cross. All Christians are called to follow Christ and to embrace the Cross—all are called to love as Christ has loved. The question is this: What way of giving yourself in loving sacrifice best matches the person who God made you to be? Those called to religious life are specially consecrated to Christ by laying down their life through embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Religious renounce family life, personal possessions, and following one’s own will for the sake of Christ and His Church. This radical way of letting go of the world and those things that the world deems most important is for the greater good of giving oneself totally in loving and serving Christ and His Church. Like the martyr, the religious who gives up the goods of this life bears witness to the supreme love of Christ and directs all Christians to gaze toward heaven, our true home, where the greatest Lover desires us to be with Him forever.