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The Poor and the Martyr as Catalysts of Nicene Ecumenism

Abstract

Christians have recognised the urgency of moving from high to popular ecumenism. In this paper, I argue that the Nicaean faith in the Son of God, who was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and Mary of Nazareth and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, inspires us to see the poor and the martyrs as unifying powers, protagonists, and catalysts of popular ecumenism. Their mystical identification with the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ calls us to imagine a shared table hosted by the poor and the martyrs, leading us to our eschatological banquet. Through a Nicaean lens, I explore how solidarity and friendship with the poor, and our imitation and remembrance of the martyrs, are paths toward a renewed vision of church unity today. At the end of this paper, I support this proposal by



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providing some encouraging historical and current events and initiatives where the poor and the martyrs have become habitats for Christian unity.

Keywords

Nicaean Creed, Christology, Popular Ecumenism, Poor, Martyrs

1 Introduction

In the minds of many, the Nicene statement of faith is a common ground for Christian unity. Historically, the Nicene Creed has proven to be a reference point for church unity across many Christian families. The 1700th anniversary of Nicaea in 2025 has provided an opportunity to reconsider the role of the Creed in fostering ecumenical initiatives. A fresh view of the Nicene theological affirmations can renew our vision and mission for church unity in this day and age.

The fresh lens I propose in this paper highlights the importance of grassroots ecumenism through a Christological reading of the Nicene Creed. Leaders have repeatedly affirmed that unity cannot be achieved through theological dialogue or official leadership initiatives alone; authentic ecumenism must also take root within the life of the community. Church leaders often remark privately, “We cannot impose unity on our congregations; we should not confuse our simple people.” Such caution underscores that these efforts must emerge and mature at the popular and practical levels. The community of faith itself must become the principal agent of this ecumenism.

Indeed, the unity of the Church is the unity of its people, the unity of the entire body. Authentic popular ecumenism arises from the grassroots, growing from the lived faith of the community. True popular ecumenism is from the bottom to the top. The Council of Nicaea was significant not because it created unity, but because

it safeguarded and affirmed the unity already embodied in the Christian communities of the ancient world.

Such an approach remains both valid and urgently needed today. On this basis, as I argue in this paper, the poor and the martyrs hold a distinctive potential to act as unifying forces and catalysts of popular ecumenism. According to this paradigm, the unity and universality of the Church rest on the life and witness of the community; on the steadfastness of confession, the blood of the martyrs, and the bonds of fraternal love, more than on hierarchical order and institutional initiatives.¹

In the coming lines, I unfold this suggestion in three steps: 1) I look at the Christology of the Nicene symbol of faith, 2) I stress the connection between this Christology and the poor and the martyrs today, and finally, 3) I present some practical examples that embody this paradigm of popular ecumenism.

Throughout this paper, I draw on voices from diverse Christian traditions – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – and from various global contexts to illustrate that this vision of anticipated popular ecumenism encompasses the whole body of Christ.

2 The Nicene Christology

The foundation of this approach is the living faith in the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Son of God. The reality of Jesus' life, cross, and the empty grave unites Christians globally. After firmly confessing the oneness of essence between the Father and the Son, the Creed presents the Son of God as the saviour of humanity. Salvation through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection has historically occurred through Jesus' poverty and martyrdom. Although poverty and martyrdom do not appear explicitly in the Creed, they are

¹ Cf. Dimitrios G. Oulis, 'Silence, Shusaku Endo,' in *Suffering and Persecution*, edited by Myrto Theocharous (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2024), p.74.

affirmed implicitly through the mention of two biblical and historical figures: the Virgin Mary and Pontius Pilate. These two names, which are the only characters mentioned by name in the Creed apart from Jesus Christ, direct us to see the Poor Jesus and Jesus the Martyr.

We confess in the Creed: “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.”² First, the Son of God, out of love for humanity, “became poor so that by his poverty (humans) might become rich.”³ Jesus’ birth, cross, and resurrection are foremost signs of love, a love shown by God, who accompanies us in our lower state in absolute solidarity.⁴ Second, He has chosen to become human through the Virgin Mary. Jesus’ kenotic action has been real and tangible. It was through Mary of Nazareth that Jesus entered the world of the poor. St. Ephrem the Syrian vividly portrays a dialogue between the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, emphasizing God’s choice of the humble and poor Mary. He writes:

“Mary: O angel, reveal to me why it has pleased your Lord to dwell in a mere poor girl: the world is full of kings’ daughters, so why does he want me, who am totally destitute?

Angel: It would have been easy for him to dwell in a rich girl, but it is with your poverty that he has fallen in love, so that he may become one with the poor and enrich them when he has been revealed.”⁵

² References from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed are taken from the version used in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches.

³ 2 Cor. 8:9 NRSV.

⁴ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ our companion: Toward a theological aesthetics of liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), pp.9-10.

⁵ St Ephrem, ‘The Angel and Mary’, in Sebastian P. Brock, *Sogiatha: Syriac Dialogue Hymns*, Syrian Church Series 11, edited by Jacob Vellian (Kottayam: St Joseph’s Press, 1987), p. 19.

The Anglican Bishop Christopher Cocksworth comments on this passage from St Ephrem, noting a striking continuity between Ephrem's vision and Luther's reflection on Mary's poverty. He writes, "Luther's commentary on Mary's Magnificat continually underlines Mary's ordinariness. Luther argues that this 'poor and plain citizen's daughter,' with no wealth, wisdom, power, position, or reputation, was not a predictable choice for the purposes that God had for her." Cocksworth continues, affirming that, "That is the gospel. That is the way of God – to choose and to exalt the lowly."⁶

Paying attention to the socio-cultural and political context in which the Virgin Mary lived is key to understanding Jesus' poverty. The Second Council of Vatican speaks of Mary that "She stands out among the poor and the humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive redemption from Him [God]."⁷ Víctor Codina reminds us that Mary of Nazareth was

"a woman of the people, a peasant, a poor villager from a little-known Roman colony, the wife of a carpenter, a simple mother of a working-class family, who knew the difficulties of everyday life, who lived the darkness of faith before the mystery of Jesus, her Son and Son of the Father, who suffered loneliness and anguish before the Passion and the Cross, who experienced the joy of Easter and accompanied the newly-born Church at Pentecost with the power of the Spirit... She is also the courageous and prophetic woman of the Magnificat who sings of the God who overthrows the powerful from their thrones and exalts the poor and humble; she is the new woman of the Apocalypse who fights the dragon, generating life... She is a pilgrim of faith,... a believing woman, filled with the Spirit, who has been raised

⁶ Christopher Cocksworth, *Mary, Bearer of Life* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2023), digital copy.

⁷ Vatican II Council, 'Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,' in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: The America Press, 1966), Sec.8, p.87.

to the glory of heaven and is, therefore, a sign of hope for all who live, believe, and suffer like her... The Mother of God (Theotokos) is Mary of Nazareth.”⁸

Therefore, the credal mention of the Virgin Mary by her name removes any possibility of a fictional or romanticised incarnation. It rather directs our minds to the reality of Jesus’ poverty, a reality that blossomed from the womb of Nazareth, Nazareth from which nothing good was expected to come.⁹

Furthermore, the mystery of Nazareth is a gate to the mystery of the resurrection as well. This reminds us of what the young man said to the women at the grave: “The resurrected one is the crucified one, the crucified one is from Nazareth.”¹⁰ If Christian unity is believed to be empowered by Christ’s resurrection, the mystery of Nazareth must be at the centre of this hope.

After confessing the incarnation, the following clause in the Nicene Creed points to another historical evidence of Jesus’ crucifixion: the verdict of death issued by the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate. We confess, “He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures.” Here, the Creed points out the historical reality of Jesus’ trial and martyrdom. Through biblical and non-biblical sources, we learn that Pontius Pilate was an insensitive – if not a cruel – governor: a political leader who closely cooperated with the local religious authorities for the peace and benefits of his colony at any cost.¹¹ Most importantly for us, it is the ruler before whom Jesus witnessed (μαρτυρήσαντος) for the Truth till death.¹² Commenting on 1 Timothy 6:13, St John Chrysostom explains that the “good

⁸ Víctor Codina, *Una Iglesia Nazarena* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2019), pp.84-85. (my translation).

⁹ Cf. John 1:46.

¹⁰ Víctor Codina, *Una Iglesia Nazarena* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2019), p.213. (my translation).

¹¹ Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.204-205.

¹² 1Tim. 6:13.

confession” mentioned by St Paul refers to Christ’s declaration that He came to inaugurate God’s Kingdom – not an earthly one – and that He is the Son of God. The “good witness” is shown in His readiness to accept death as the cost of this testimony.¹³ Therefore, the mention of Pilate reminds us that Jesus is a martyr, a witness of truth, love, and justice. Jesus is a martyr who historically was killed as a “consequence of a life, and a judgment on the religious and political quality of this life.”¹⁴

3 Christ in the Poor and the Martyrs

In sum, the Creed tells us that Jesus is the Son of God and that Jesus is a Poor and Martyr. This means that the eminent resurrected Christ will be present in this world as a poor and martyr. This leads our discourse to three significant theological and practical moves:

3.1 First theological move

In the first move, we are called to reflect on the poor and the martyrs today as the mystical continuations of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. Jesus’ self-identification with the poor and the martyrs is the basis for these reflections. The traditional understanding of Jesus’ words highlights this voluntary identification. Two examples from the New Testament are often connected: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me,”¹⁵ and “Why do you

¹³ Cf. St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Timothy*, Homily 18, translated by Philip Schaff, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 13, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, found online <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230618.htm>

¹⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Pasión de Cristo, Pasión del Mundo* (Salamanca: Sal Terrae, 1987), pp.65-66. (my translation).

¹⁵ Matthew 25: 40 NRSV.

persecute me?"¹⁶ St Augustine, who frequently pairs Matthew 25:31-46 with Acts 9:4,¹⁷ writes:

"Already enthroned in heaven, Christ was not being touched by any human assailant, so how could Saul, by raging against the Christians on earth, inflict injury on him in any way? He does not say, 'Why are you persecuting my saints?' or 'my servants,' but 'Why are you persecuting me?' This is equivalent to asking, 'Why attack my limbs?' The Head was crying out on behalf of the members, and the Head was transfiguring the members into himself."¹⁸

St Augustine stresses that the resurrected Christ is above with the Father and below in his vulnerable church and the suffering poor. For St Augustine, this means that Christians must "Fear Christ above," and "recognize Him below. [Recognize] Christ above bestowing His bounty, recognize Him here in need. Here, He is poor; there, He is rich."¹⁹ Here on earth, He is a stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned; there, He is praised by the angels. Inspired by Fr Lev Gillet, the late Bishop Bimen, Coptic bishop of Malawy in Upper-Egypt, writes,

"Today, on this earth, Jesus has no hands or feet except those of humans. If you cannot ascend to Jesus in prayer, leave your home and go down to the street, and immediately you will find Him in the form of passersby in front of you."²⁰

¹⁶ Acts 9: 4 NRSV.

¹⁷ Andrew Hofer, 'Matthew 25: 31-46 as an Hermeneutical Rule in Augustine's Enarrationes in Psalmos,' in *The Downside Review* 126, no. 445, 285-300, 2008, p.287.

¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *Second Exposition on Psalm 30*, quoted in Guevin, Benedict. "'Saul, Saul, Why are you Persecuting Me?': Augustine's use of Acts 9: 4 in his Enarrationes in Psalmos,' in *The Downside Review* 127, no. 449, 261-268, 2009, p.264.

¹⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 74.4*, quoted in Tadros Malaty, *A Patristic Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Part I, translated from Arabic by George Botros, undated, p.443.

²⁰ Bishop Bimen, *The Social life from Orthodox perspective* (Arabic) (Malawy, Egypt: Dioceses of Malawy, Ansená, and Ashmonein, 1971), p.9.

Regarding the martyrs, Jon Sobrino reminds us that those who die for the same cause for which Jesus died must be regarded as what he calls “Jesuanic martyrs” – “martyrs of the Kingdom, of humanity.”²¹ Hence, in carrying forward Jesus’ cause, they embody his continuing presence in the world.

3.2 Second theological move

This takes us to the second theological move: since the poor and the martyrs today embody mystically Jesus’ sufferings and hope of resurrection, they are, therefore, privileged theological symbols who should play special roles in the anticipated popular ecumenism. Our solidarity and friendship with the poor and our imitation and remembrance of the martyrs become paths to our unity in Christ. The walk in solidarity and friendship with the poor, and the imitation and remembrance of the martyrs, require a path of self-denial and voluntary poverty.

In this context, we must pay attention to the significance of self-denial and voluntary poverty – beginning at the personal level and extending to the communal – as a vital pathway toward Christian unity. Regarding self-denial, St Paul, writing to the Philippians, could not have stressed more strongly the necessity of humility for preserving the Church’s unity: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.”²² He presents this as the very mind of Christ the martyr.

In our time, this challenge manifests as what may be called ecclesial pride – a sense of communal self-sufficiency and collective arrogance within Christian communities. According to Matthew the Poor, this very disposition lies at the root of what he describes as the “crime of Christian divisions” committed

²¹ Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), p.3.

²² Philippians 2:3–4, NRSV.

against the body of Christ.²³ In contrast, the martyrs stand as pioneers, showing us the path of ultimate self-denial. This self-denial, or, in other words, total surrender to God, as a spiritual way toward Christian unity, is emphasized by both Matthew the Poor and Sergius Bulgakov. They affirm that true unity cannot be achieved solely through theological dialogue. Still, through a shared “surrender to God” in Christ, culminating “before the altar,” that is, in the Eucharistic celebration.²⁴

As for the voluntary poverty in solidarity with the poor, it “will inevitably demand of those in [wealthier positions] some limitations on their lifestyle,” argues Ignacio Ellacuría.²⁵ Segundo Galilea echoes this statement by affirming that “poverty is inner freedom (which necessarily manifests itself in an external lifestyle) concerning people and things, which allows the growth in friendship with Jesus.”²⁶ Bishop Bimen, in his turn, sees that the poverty of the church is a genuine sign of its apostolicity, without which it loses its apostolic spirit. He urges the church to live a life of voluntary poverty: “But if the church resorts to luxury, accumulation of money, and preoccupation with possessions, these thorns are enough to suffocate its apostolic spirit.”²⁷ Inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dominique DuBois Guillard writes, “when we practice the spiritual

²³ Père Wadid Al-Macari, ‘La vision du Père Matta el Maskine sur l’unité chrétienne,’ in *Irénikon* 96, no. 1/4 (2023): 71-80.

²⁴ Daniel Kisliakov, ‘Encounter between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox: an Example of Spiritual Communion according to Sergius Bulgakov’s Theology of Ecumenism,’ in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 10:3 (2019), pp.60-61.

²⁵ Martin Maier, ‘The Civilization of Poverty and Today’s Global Challenges,’ in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, edited by J. Matthew Ashley, and others (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), p.227.

²⁶ Segundo Galilea, *La Amistad de Dios: El cristianismo como amistad* (Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1987), p.68. (my translation).

²⁷ Bishop Bimen, *The Signs of the Church* (Arabic) (Elminia, Egypt: Coptic Diocese of Malawy, 1981), p.30 (my translation).

discipline of solidarity, we strive to embody 'the same mindset of Christ Jesus.' (Phil. 2:5)."²⁸

Hence, this desired solidarity is the work of the entire church community, called to walk humbly and act justly. This dimension becomes even more significant when we consider Mary of Nazareth as a model of the Church: just as Mary was a poor and humble servant, so too must the Church embody humility and poverty. From the Latin American context, St Oscar Romero writes,

"Mary appears in the Bible as the expression of poverty, of humility, of one who needs everything from God. When she comes to America, her intimate, motherly converse is with an Indian, an outcast, a poor man. Mary's dialog [sic] in America begins with a sign of poverty, poverty that is hunger for God, poverty that is joy of independence. Poverty is freedom. Poverty is needing others, needing brothers and sisters, supporting one another so as to help one another. This is what Mary means and what the church means in Latin America."²⁹

In his turn, Fr Andrew Lowth extends the vision of the suffering Church to the Marian suffering of the martyrs. He affirms that Blandina, a martyred slave-girl, embodies the Church as Virgin Mother, sharing Christ's suffering and nurturing those spiritually reborn, subtly paralleling Mary's sorrowful witness.³⁰ This vision of ecclesial vulnerability, following Mary's example, should allow the Church to become, humbly and openly, a place of unity accessible to everyone.

²⁸ Dominique DuBois Guillard, 'Sacramental Theology,' in *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice*, edited by Mae Elise Cannon and Andrea Smith (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019), p.342.

²⁹ Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, compiled and translated by James R. Brockman (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2007), p.35.

³⁰ Andrew Louth, 'Mary the Mother of God and ecclesiology: some Orthodox reflections,' in *International journal for the study of the Christian church* 18, no. 2-3, 132-145, 2018, p.135.

3.3 *Third theological move*

The third theological move is to apply these concepts in the Eucharistic liturgy. St John Chrysostom could not stress more the mystical identification between the Eucharistic Jesus on the altar and the poor Jesus in the streets. He wondered how one would honour Christ's body with silk and gold inside the church, while neglecting Him and leaving Him to perish without food, shelter, or clothes outside the church. He argues that He who said, "This is my body," and confirmed the fact by his word, also said, "You saw me hungry, and gave me nothing to eat." And, "Since you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."³¹ DuBois presents an evangelical perspective, asserting that "Salvation is often found in these stigmatized places, forbidden relationships, and prohibited eucharistic encounters."³² He affirms that Communion is "A divine banquet that unifies the global church, it is a nourishing, restorative meal that not only reminds us of what Christ did for us, but also informs what we are called to do for others."³³

Liturgically, the poor Jesus presented by the Virgin Mary, and Jesus the martyr presented by Pontius Pilate are also found in the last confession before communion in the Coptic Basilian Anaphora. This confession of faith returns us to the Nicene Christology with which we began our talk, but it goes further and applies these theological notions to the Body and Blood of Christ present on the altar. It stresses that this body, with which the believers are about to unite, is the one taken from Mary of Nazareth, and the one who "confessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate." Here again, but this time within an Eucharistic context, we see Mary of Nazareth and Pontius Pilate appear as pointers to the historicity of Jesus' poverty and

³¹ John Chrysostom, *Homily 50 on Matthew*, sec. 3-4, PG 58.

³² Dominique DuBois Guillard, 'Sacramental Theology,' in *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice*, edited by Mae Elise Cannon and Andrea Smith (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019), p.334.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.331.

martyrdom. This liturgical setup is expected to transform our beliefs into a living practice: our unity with Jesus, who is present on the church altar, must not be separated from our meeting with him at the table of the poor and from following him in the martyrs in public spaces.

This Eucharistic and sacramental identification between Jesus, the poor, and the martyr becomes the real power of unity. While churches cannot yet share one common Eucharist, they can still accept the Poor's invitation to host them around their table outside the church. They can still follow the martyr's example. In this way, authentic solidarity, genuine fraternity, and profound fellowship with the poor and the martyrs become spiritual and practical paths for popular ecumenism. This ecumenism will be led by the vulnerable, insignificant, and suffering ones of history and marked by their blood. Their suffering and blood become then the Spirit's call for each church to humbly go out to the peripheries where the marginalised are, and there and only there, they can meet, eat, and unite.

4 Practical Examples

In this final section, I examine briefly how the poor and the martyrs have served as vital agents of popular ecumenism in both the Nicene and modern contexts.

Tradition holds – though historical evidence is limited – that the Council of Nicaea gave particular weight to the voices of those who had suffered for the faith, i.e., the confessors. The gathered church in 325 A.D. saw in the confessors of faith who attended Nicaea with the persecution marks in their bodies an authentic voice of the Spirit.³⁴ Writing in the fifth century, Theodoret of

³⁴ To learn more about this debate refer to James A. Kelhoffer, 'The search for confessors at the Council of Nicaea,' in *Journal of early Christian studies* 19, no. 4, 2011, 589-599.

Cyrrhus, recounts the following about the bishops gathered at the Council of Nicaea:

“At that time [the Council of Nicaea], many men were distinguished by their apostolic gifts, and many bore in their bodies, according to the divine Apostle, the marks of the Lord Jesus... Paul of Neo-Caesarea – a fortress situated on the banks of the Euphrates – endured the fury of Licinius. His hands were bound, and red-hot iron was applied to them, stretching and destroying the tendons of his joints. Others had their right eye gouged out, and still others had the tendon of their right leg severed. Among them was the Egyptian Paphnutius. In short, one could see gathered in that place *an assembly of confessors and martyrs.*’³⁵

The contribution of the suffering people was hence influential, or rather substantial, as tradition affirms.

Over the past 50 years, cooperation among denominations in philanthropic initiatives has provided fertile ground for grassroots ecumenism. Faith-based organizations offering humanitarian aid have been particularly active in impoverished regions and crisis zones. What were once perceived as arenas of proselytism or “sheep stealing” at the beginning of the century gradually became, toward its end, spaces of genuine encounter and collaboration, spaces of popular ecumenism.

At the leadership level, the common declaration of Pope Shenouda III and Pope Paul VI in May 1973 reveals promising theological agreements between the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholics on Christology and sacramentology. St. Mary and the saints are present in this ecumenical initiative. More remarkably, the last paragraph of this declaration, which is no less important than the rest of the document, clearly states the common stance of both churches toward the suffering and

³⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Histoire ecclésiastique, Sources Chrétiennes*, 501, edited by Jean Bouffartigue et al. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006), p.202. (emphasis added).

displaced Palestinians, calling for sustainable justice.³⁶ Following the same spirit, more than 50 years later, on 6th of June 2025, in a brief phone call between Pope Tawadros II and Pope Leo XIV, the Coptic Pope congratulated the Roman one for his election as leader of the Roman Catholic Church. During the short call, they affirmed the ongoing relationship of love and the annual celebration of the Day of Brotherly Love. They also discussed the suffering in Gaza due to the war and humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the urgent need to end the assaults.³⁷ In the Latin American context, the Christian response to diverse forms of injustice has united Protestants and Roman Catholics in a shared journey toward justice and peace. As Justo González affirms, out of the struggle for the liberation of the poor, a new ecumenism has been born.³⁸

Common believers in Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities give special reverence to the martyrs and saints as their heroes who exemplify their popular perseverance in faith. The people often overcome theological divisions in their celebrations and veneration of the martyrs. We could see on numerous occasions how Catholics and Orthodox believers would go on pilgrimage to shrines to ask for blessings from the relics of St George or St Thérèse of Lisieux, regardless of the denomination of the church that keeps the relics. The life and blood of martyrs have, hence, indeed special powers to bypass

³⁶ Holy See, 'Common Declaration of His Holiness Paul VI and His Holiness Patriarch Anba Shenouda III,' Thursday, 10 May 1973, Dicastero per la Comunicazione, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, found online https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1973/may/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19730510_dichiarazione-comune.html

³⁷ Coptic Orthodox Media Centre, Friday 6th of June 2025, found online <https://copticorthodox.church/en/2025/06/06/phone-call-between-h-h-pope-tawadros-ii-and-h-h-pope-leo-xiv-of-the-vatican/>

³⁸ Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p.74.

divisions and bring people together. In the common declaration of Pope Tawadros II and Pope Francis, in April 2017, we read: The mystery of Jesus, who died and rose out of love, lies at the heart of our journey towards full unity. Once again, the martyrs are our guides. In the early Church, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of new Christians. So too in our own day, may the blood of so many martyrs be the seed of unity among all Christ's disciples, a sign and instrument of communion and peace for the world.

Another striking example comes from the witness of the Coptic martyrs of Libya, whose steadfast faith and public confession have inspired countless Christians and drawn many churches closer together. In May 2023, the Roman Catholic Church took concrete steps towards this communion by adding the Coptic martyrs of Libya and other non-Roman Catholic saints to its Martyrology.

In the Asian context, the Easter 2019 Sri Lanka bombings claimed 253 lives, targeting both evangelical and Catholic sites indiscriminately. The perpetrators regarded Christians as a single group, even though Christians themselves do not. Among the Catholic victims, many are now on the path to canonization as a reflection of their recognized witness. For evangelicals, the tragedy prompted a renewed reflection on their theology and practice of commemorating martyrs, highlighting its biblical and pastoral significance.³⁹ In doing so, they have moved several steps closer to the approach of traditional churches in this regard, providing hope for a shared ecumenical space.

³⁹ Nathanael Somanathan, 'Easter is for Remembering our Martyrs,' in *Christianity Today*, 3rd of April 2025, found online <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/04/easter-sri-lanka-bombings-martyrs-persecution-evangelicals/>

Conclusion

These examples of how the poor and the martyrs play effective roles in grassroots ecumenism are not just hopeful and practical. Neither are they the result of a simplified or superficial understanding of faith. But their success in promoting popular ecumenism relies on their deep theological foundation, as we saw in the Nicene Christology. It is hoped that this approach encourages every church community to acknowledge the poor and the martyrs' appropriate theological and practical place for popular unifying actions to flourish, to let the Spirit of the One from Nazareth inspire and transform our eyes, so we see the poor and the martyrs as warm habitats for Christian unity.

Jesus has come and died "to gather into one the dispersed children of God."⁴⁰ It is Jesus' crucifixion represented in the crucified people, the poor, and the martyrs today that has the power to unite us. As Jürgen Moltmann said, "Beneath the cross, the boundaries of denominations and culture collapse."⁴¹ This approach allows the Nicene Creed to expand its role in uniting all Christian families into one family under one cross.

⁴⁰ John 11:52 NRSV.

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. xii.