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Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century: Missing Links in the Golden Chain

Abstract

This paper is dedicated to the significance of saints who are not venerated publicly and recognized officially by the Church. There are questions in Romania about individuals who were killed for confessing Christ, individuals who despite complex lives and sometimes flawed choices, chose first and foremost to confess Christ even when they knew they would be tortured and killed for doing so. Faced with brutal choices, the martyrs made one very important choice – despite all the questions we may have about their lives, they confessed Christ and died for doing so.

Keywords

Communism, death, martyrs, saints, suffering



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1 Introduction

St. Symeon the New Theologian describes saints this way: "The saints in each generation, joined to those who have gone before, and filled like them with light, become a golden chain, in which each saint is a separate link, united to the next by faith, works, and love. So in the One God they form a single chain"¹. This paper examines the significance of missing links in the golden chain – saints who are not venerated publicly and recognized officially by the Orthodox Church. It begins with a discussion of the challenge martyrdom poses and some of the reasons for which we may fail to recognize martyrs as saints. This is followed by a discussion of martyrdom and the importance of recognizing the Orthodox Christian martyrs as such.

2 The Challenge of Martyrdom

The history of Christianity is replete with struggles, including many struggles that ended in the death of martyrs – men, women and children who died for confessing Christ in the face of Muslims, communists, pagans and others. Those of us living in the 21st century in the West might find it very difficult to imagine the circumstances of these martyrs. First, even though Christians regularly are killed for being Christians in parts of the world today, their deaths generally are not reported by the popular media as the deaths of martyrs. We do not know first-hand what it is to be faced with the choice of dying for Christ. Similarly, we have not known first-hand the violence experienced by the Orthodox Christians in Eastern Europe during much of the 20th century and by the Jews and other groups during the Holocaust. From our vantage point, we might

¹ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Centuries*, quoted in Timothy (Kallistos) Ware. *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 255-6.

look at this tragic portion of the 20th century and see only darkness, cruelty and terrible choices made by many. If ever there were a God-less time, one might think, that was it. Yet we know that on our end of this dark time there is a vibrant Orthodox Church full of faithful Christians. This Church and its believers did not spring from nothingness. When we look closely, we see that despite complex circumstances and terribly problematic choices, there were people who confessed Christ and preserved the Orthodox faith. Many of them were killed for doing so, and this is why St. John Chrysostom reminds us that “The blood of the martyrs nourishes the Church much more than the moisture of dew brings gardens into bloom.” And, this is why Tertullian held that “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Some of these 20th century martyrs died for the Faith despite their involvement in organizations and movements that were deeply problematic. From our privileged place, privileged in the sense of not knowing such violence and not facing the stark choices they faced, we must take care not to “waste saints”. We face a real temptation to try to separate ourselves completely from this past, and in doing so we risk blinding ourselves to martyrs of the recent past.

We also may be tempted to avoid recognizing these martyrs as saints because we have become confused by secular uses of the word “saint”. The secular world has adopted the language of saints, but the word is used very differently from how it is used in the Church over its two-thousand-year history. For example, Susan Wolf defines a moral saint as “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be.”² Secular uses turn on secular notions of “doing good” or “being a good person”. They are divorced from the Christian focus on repentance, forgiveness, and holiness. In the Orthodox Church, we recognize saints who

² Susan Wolf, Moral saints. *Journal of Philosophy* 79(8) (1982): 419-439, p. 419.

led quite diverse lives as prophets, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and warriors. The communality in all of them is repentance and forgiveness leading to holiness. If we adopt a secular definition of saints, we are lost because the saints cease to be defined by holiness. We must remain clear about what it is to be a saint, independently of what the secular world understands as a saint.

Finally, we may hesitate to recognize martyrs as such because of the challenge they pose to 21st century liberal secularist commitments. Martyrs, both in terms of what they stand for and in that they are willing to die for it, are an affront to secularist sensibilities. Martyrs know that there is something infinitely more important than the here and now. Contemporary society focuses on the immanent – what we have and what we do define us. Such a society is not interested in martyrs, people who give their lives for the transcendent and, in doing so, challenge the view that the only thing that matters is our present happiness, comfort, and peaceful co-existence. Martyrs are willing to die for their commitments. Orthodox Christian martyrs die for the Truth. They reject the commitments of a culture driven by satisfying earthly pleasures and passions, and they do so in a way that presents a great challenge to everyone around them since bloodshed and death tend to shock.

The martyrs do more than challenge contemporary culture. Their deaths provide evidence of the culture wars.³ The culture wars are deep disagreements between groups or communities regarding substantive moral or socio-political concerns. These disagreements include disputes between Christians and secularists, or among traditional and nominal Christians, or among different groups of Muslims. In the United States and throughout the world we have many examples of the culture wars. They include competing views of many issues in

³ James D. Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

bioethics.⁴ But they also include radically different views about education, family life, and many other areas. Such deep, intractable disagreements are an offense to those persons who believe that we all ought to commit ourselves to the “politically reasonable” so that we can live in harmony.⁵ There is no doubt that the culture wars are real when we see that they can lead to bloodshed and the loss of life.

Martyrs challenge the secular culture’s pursuit of perpetual peace through liberal democratic regimes and the abandonment of deep metaphysical commitments. Near the end of the 20th Century, Francis Fukuyama argued that we were approaching the end of history in the sense that we are approaching a time of peace, a time when “the really big questions had been settled” and the vast majority of humans recognize and accept the superiority of liberal democratic governments over all others.⁶ In his analysis of the obstacles to liberal democracy, Fukuyama argues that religion can be an obstacle to democracy: “...there is no inherent conflict between religion and liberal democracy, except at the point where

⁴ See Mark J. Cherry. Sex, abortion, and infanticide: the gulf between the secular and the divine. *Christian Bioethics* 17(1) (2011): 25-46; Mark J. Cherry. The search for a global bioethics: fraudulent claims and false promises. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 27(6)(2002): 683-98; H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. Christian bioethics after Christendom: living in a secular fundamentalist polity. *Christian Bioethics* 17(1) (2011): 64-95; Ana S. Iltis. Bioethics and the culture wars. *Christian Bioethics* 17(1) (2011): 9-24; Christopher Tollefsen. Mind the gap: charting the distance between Christian and secular bioethics. *Christian Bioethics* 17(1) (2011): 47-53; C. Griffin Trotter. The UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights: a canon for the ages? *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 34(3)(2009): 195-203.

⁵ See John Rawls. *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁶ Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. Xii.

religion ceases to be tolerant or egalitarian.”⁷ He makes the further observation unless a religion secularizes itself, it cannot make way for liberalism:

Christianity in a certain sense had to abolish itself through a secularization of its goals before liberalism could emerge. ... Protestantism eliminated the need for a separate class of priests, and religious intervention into politics more generally.⁸ He notes that other religions have done similar things in the name of peaceful co-existence. Martyrs frustrate the vision of peaceful co-existence achieved by accepting the same answers to “the really big questions”. Martyrs are not “reasonable.” Their commitments are so important that they are willing to “give up” everything here on earth. The Orthodox martyrs’ insistence on the supreme authority of God and the significance of confessing Christ is an affront to all those who deny Christ and who wish to live as if God were dead. It is no wonder, then, that there is resistance to recognizing and acknowledging recent and contemporary martyrs.

3 What is a Martyr?

The Greek words *martyria* (μαρτυρία), which refers to witness, testimony or evidence given, *martus* (μάρτυς), which refers to a witness, give us the English word “martyr”. The word “witness” appears throughout the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to having seen (witnessed) an event, as in Matthew 26:65, when the high priest says “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses?” Many times, however, the word “witness” refers to one who passes on the Faith in some way.⁹

⁷ Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 216.

⁸ Idem, pp. 261-217.

⁹ All scriptural references are from *Orthodox Study Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

For example, from Acts 1:8: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And, from Acts 13: 30-31: “But God raised Him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people.” And, from Acts 22:15: “For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.”

Martyrs are a special kind of witness.

(1) These Orthodox Christians *voluntarily* accept suffering and death in the name of Christ. As Metropolitan Kalistos Ware says:

“Innocent suffering does not by itself make someone into a martyr. [The martyr](...) should voluntarily *accept* that suffering, even though we may not have originally chosen it. Self-dedication (...) changes the martyr from one who suffers and dies into someone who *bears witness*. We are to *take up* our cross; it is not simply imposed upon us by exterior coercion.”¹⁰

Furthermore, martyrs must offer themselves and it is this self-offering that changes death into a sacrifice. Ware observes that “‘to sacrifice’ bears precisely the meaning ‘to sanctify something by offering it to God’ (...). The martyr is the one who chooses to say at the moment of crisis, ‘Her am I’ (Is 6:8), ‘Lo, I come to do They will, O God’ (Heb 10:7).¹¹ There is no better example of voluntary suffering and death than the example of Christ, who said “I lay down My life for the Sheep” (John 10: 15) and “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself” (John 10: 18).

(2) A second characteristic of martyrs is that, although they accept suffering voluntarily, they do not bring suffering and death onto themselves: “True martyrs do not draw punishment

¹⁰ Kallistos Ware. *The Inner Kingdom*. (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 113.

¹¹ Idem, p. 114.

upon themselves by any gesture or willful and aggressive provocation, but equally they do not tell lies or run away.”¹²

(3) The suffering and death of martyrs are not private matters, although they may begin as private acts. As Metropolitan Kalistos Ware notes, an important feature of martyrdom is solidarity because as St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians states, “when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it” (1Cor. 12:26).¹³

A martyr is a holy Orthodox man, woman or child who dies for the Faith, and for this reason is recognized as a saint. (4) A martyr is not necessarily a person who lives a morally exemplary life, which is how the word “saint” is used in the secular world. The history of Christianity is replete with people who did not lead “perfect” lives but who are recognized as saints because they were martyrs or in other ways were transformed through repentance. In the case of a martyr, Tertullian taught the martyr “obtain[s] from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange for his blood (...) [so that they martyr] secures the remission of all offences.”¹⁴ The martyr is through martyrdom rehabilitated.

Martyrs die for the Faith, and in doing so are witness to the Faith, to the strength of the spirit over the flesh, to the significance of eternal life relative to earthly life, to the power of God over all who try to kill Him, and to the power of the resurrection over death.

4 The Importance of Recognizing Martyrs

The Orthodox Church must take care to recognize the martyrs given to us by God. Throughout the age, we are reminded of the

¹² Idem, p. 114.

¹³ Idem, p. 117.

¹⁴ Tertullian, Apology L. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3*, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.) (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1994), p. 55.

importance of venerating the martyrs. St. Ephraim of Syria emphasized this:

“[W]e all must laud with songs of praise the struggles of the saints, because with a courageous spirit they have striven to implore God’s mercy shedding their blood to cleanse us all.”

Moreover, as Metropolitan Kalistos Ware has said, martyrdom is “[t]he only triumph that the Church on earth can or should expect.”¹⁵

We must recognize and venerate martyrs because the martyrs teach us and remind us of what it is to enter the kingdom of God. As St. John of Kronstadt said, given that Christians seek “eternal peace and joy in heaven,” we must bear all the sorrow and sickness in this world. If we do not, he asks, “what would be the meaning of the future rest and peace? What peace and rest shall there be for him who has already had his peace and rest here, without enduring anything?”¹⁶ It is through the troubles, trials, and tribulations of this life that we enter God’s kingdom.

We must recognize and venerate the martyrs because they encourage us to hold fast to the Faith in the hope of eternal salvation, and it is through this faith that the Church is nourished and grows. As St. John Chrysostom taught:

“The death of martyrs is encouragement to the faithful, daring of the Church, confirmation of Christianity, destruction of death, proof of the Resurrection, mocking at demons, condemnation of the devil, teaching of the true wisdom and a pious way of life (...). The blood of martyrs nourishes the Church much more than the moisture of dew brings gardens into bloom.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, p. 111.

¹⁶ St. John Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1984).

¹⁷ This quote is widely attributed to St. John Chrysostom.

We must recognize and venerate the martyrs because martyrs help to spread the Faith. As Tertullian noted, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” No doubt, in at least some cases, the witness of the martyrs has led others to Christ. Persecution and death for Christ often leads new people to the faith, lost sheep return home, and there is renewed piety among the faithful.

Finally, we must recognize and venerate the martyrs because they are a model for us, not only models of paying the ultimate price for faith in Christ but models for earthly martyrdom. The church speaks of the universal vocation of martyrdom, including the martyrdom of monasticism and marriage, because we are all called to take up the cross with Christ: “All are cross-bearers, all are in some sense martyrs. Whether we are called to die outwardly for Christ (...) depends largely on factors outside our control (...). What does depend directly on us, however, is whether we take up the cross inwardly.”¹⁸ Martyrs who die for the Faith can serve as a model to all persons called to live out a form of martyrdom on earth.¹⁹

St. Cyprian of Carthage noted the distinction between martyrs who shed their blood for the faith and those who experience inner-martyrdom, referring to “red” and “white” martyrdom. Red martyrdom is the martyrdom of the persecuted – those who die for the Faith. White martyrdom is the martyrdom of self-sacrifice and charity.²⁰ Red martyrdom involves death – the martyr is called to die for the Faith; white martyrdom involves continually dying to oneself – the martyr “is called to make a life-long self-giving, continually renewed; not one great sacrifice, but a multitude of small ones. (...) As St Luke’s Gospel insists, we are to take up our cross *daily* (9:23).²¹ The martyrs

¹⁸ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, p. 121.

¹⁹ Idem, pp. 115-6.

²⁰ Cited by Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, pp. 121-22.

²¹ Kallistos Ware. *The Inner Kingdom*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p.124.

who died confessing Christ serve as a model for what it is take up our cross each day and die unto ourselves.

Given the importance of the saints for Orthodox Christians, it is no wonder that we find ourselves asking whether there are any missing links in the golden chain St. Symeon the New Theologian describes. There are questions in Romania about missing links – individuals who were killed for confessing Christ, individuals who despite complex lives and sometimes flawed choices, chose first and foremost to confess Christ even when they knew they would be tortured and killed for doing so. Faced with brutal choices, the martyrs made one very important choice – despite all the questions we may have about their lives, they confessed Christ and died for doing so.

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