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## Witness – Confessor – Martyr. A Newtestamentary Perspective

### Abstract

This study aims at highlighting the main quality of the Holy Apostles that of being witnesses of Word of God Incarnate. A witness is someone who attests a fact or event which he saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. The Holy Apostles were witnesses of „the Christ event”, witnesses of all that Jesus “did and taught”, from His baptism in Jordan to His Ascension to heaven, but especially witnesses of the most important act of our salvation, which has been and will always be the Resurrection of Christ. The Lord Himself attributed them this quality: “you are witnesses of these things”, that is of the events which occurred (Lk 24, 48); “You shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you and you shall be witnesses unto Me” (Acts 1, 8). Later,



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aware of this quality, the Apostles said: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life, that we declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us"(1 Jn 1, 1-3).

A witness is a person who speaks through his life. In this sense, the perfect model is Jesus, Who, before Pilate said about Himself: "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth; every one that is of the truth hears my voice" (Jn 18, 37). The Book of Revelation refers to Christ the Lord as "the faithful Witness" (Rev 1, 5). The Lord experienced what He stated and what He taught people and then He gave his life in order to bear witness to the truth.

We, His disciples, the ones who are baptised in His name, we are all called to bear witness to Christ, as confessing Him is not a privilege reserved to saints! Any baptised person must also be a confessor of Christ in this "crooked and perverse nation" (Php 2, 15). However, this confession can make us be in an open conflict with the world and its leaders and thus one can reach its supreme form, which is martyrdom.

Saint Luke has and develops in his writings a very clear theology of bearing witness to Christ, referring to what the Holy Apostles did from Jerusalem to the end of the earth, clothed with power from on high. The present study intends to, highlights and constitutes at the same time an invitation, an urging for the one who wrote it and for all who will find time to read it to become confessors and witnesses of the Word of life.

## Keywords

witness, confession, martyr, servants of the Word, truth

*“For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.” (Rm 5, 7)*

## 1 Introduction

The image of the martyr has accompanied the life, the theologisation and the *raison d'être* of the Church since its beginnings, as a fulfillment of the prophetic words of Christ the Saviour: “*If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you*” (Jn 15, 20). Today, the discussions on this topic might seem strange to the modern culture and society; these are discussions which might concern the people in Church, its servants, discussions ‘reserved’ only to religious people. However, even in the world of ‘religious people’, the martyr represents something extraordinary and exceptional, something that involves only a few ‘privileged’ people, a few who were capable of showing God the highest form of love. This progressive estrangement of the figure of the martyr from concrete Christian life is obvious. What is the use of speaking about martyrs in the context of the modern world in which there is no place for the transcendent? What is the position of the martyr in a secularised world, in a modern and postmodern culture marked by the incessant development of globalisation, in a society led by mass-media and advertising, in a world in which people are only ‘bodies’? Has not he become the pathetic symbol of the past and does he not lack relevance for the modern man?

Today, the martyr, just like the saint, risks of being “an antique”<sup>1</sup>. Maybe we should also apply to the martyr the procedures of the art of antiques, which cleans old objects,

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<sup>1</sup> Tecele Vetralli, *Il santo e l'esperienza di Dio*, (Milano, Edizioni Paoline, 2000), p. 28.

forgotten or ignored masterpieces, in order to put them forth to the world in a new light and in a fresh form.

The present study suggests a discourse on the topic of the witness, of the confessor and of the martyr, *from a newtestamentary perspective*, a pilgrimage, a way to follow, from being a witness, servant and disciple of the Truth, to suffering and dying for the Truth, a way which many people followed and whose beauty they tasted.

The first to walk on this 'path', on this 'way', on this 'pilgrimage' was the Lord Himself, and Saint Luke, in his Gospel, presents us in detail the way of Jesus to his Passion (Lk 9, 51 – 19, 27). On this way, Jesus was accompanied by His disciples, who, in time became "witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem" (Acts 10, 39), starting from Galilee (Acts 10, 37). On this way, Jesus *foregoes* His disciples. Referring to the entrance of the Lord in Jerusalem, Luke the Evangelist writes: "And when he had thus spoken, he went before, ascending up to Jerusalem." (Lk 19, 28). In few words, the evangelist reveals us a fundamental truth: that being Christians means considering *the way* or *the path* of Jesus to Jerusalem as the most adequate way for us to be accomplished as human beings. The way of Jesus represents *the way* towards an authentic humanness, plenarily accomplished. Thus, our life means 'a journey to make', more precisely 'a pilgrimage' with Jesus, a journey in which the direction is upwards, a direction He has always indicated to us.

It is not less true that man can choose a convenient way, a 'circumvolution' which avoids any effort and pain, a 'variant' which avoids the way to Jerusalem. He can choose to walk downwards, he can go below human dignity, in vulgarism, in grossness and barbarity, he can sink in the gutter and mud of lie, of indecency, of impudence, of incorrectness and dishonour. However, Jesus goes before us, towards what is pure and holy, towards the pure air of heights, towards the life in accordance with truth, towards the courage which is not intimidated by the peroration of dominant opinions, towards the patience which

supports and bears with the others. Jesus leads us towards the readiness of offering our help to others, towards the kindness which is not disarmed before ingratitude, towards “*the greatest love*”.

In the extension of Jesus’ ascension to Jerusalem the dimensions of our conditions as Christians will become visible: He wants to lead us in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, up to *the heights of God*, up to our communion with God, up to being *in* and *with* God. This is our true *destination*, our true *aim*, the true *purpose* of our pilgrimage on this world. The communion with Christ means *always being on a journey*, in a permanent *ascension* towards the height of our calling!

This journey begins in the coordinates of the daily prosaic, in what is natural, among the things of the *habitualness* in which we are usually very deeply rooted. And God tells us all, just like once he told that errant Aramean who impressed Him with his faith: “*Get thee out!*”. “*Where should I get out, Lord?*”. “*Get thee out of thy country, and thy kindred and from thy father’s house*” (Gen 12, 1).

In the life of each person, there is an important and decisive moment on which depend the orientation and the aim of his entire life. Most of the times, we speak of a stroke, of the arrow that pierces man’s heart and directs his energies and attention in a certain way or towards a certain person, placing all the other interests in the background. For the martyr, things occurred in almost the same way: he allowed himself to be summoned by the calling of the Lord and followed it at the expense of his life; he went where the heart called him, and what he found out is above his life. His whole existence was resolved in his heart. This experience can be transmitted very hard, if not impossible to others through words and logical reasoning.

Despite many images and definitions with the help of which we often want to characterise and indicate the martyrs, *the image of marriage*, the matrimonial image, is the one that synthesises best their experience, but also the experience of our relation

with God. It is not fortuitous that in order to present His message and mission, Christ the Saviour frequently used *the image of marriage*: the presence of Jesus in the world and in the middle of His disciples represents 'the presence of the bridegroom' (Mk 2, 19), and the invitation to enter the kingdom is 'an invitation to the marriage' (Matt 22, 2-14; Lk 14, 16-24); waiting for Jesus means 'waiting for the bridegroom' (Matt 25, 1-13). The appearance of Jesus in public life inaugurates, in the perspective of Saint John the Apostle, *the marriage* of the New Covenant of God with humanity (Jn 2, 1-11), and the Forerunner of the Lord experiences the joy of discovering in Christ the Bridegroom the most significant expression for the love of God Who revealed Himself to the world (Jn 3, 29)<sup>2</sup>.

The people who discovered the love of God in Christ responded this love in an admirable way. Paul the Apostle affirms in the Epistle to the Philippians that for him to live is Christ, and to die is *gain*, because it would get him close to the One he longed for, and further he affirms that he is "*in a strait betwixt two*", so that he wishes to depart and be with Christ, although for the Christians in Philippi it was very needful for the Apostle to abide in the flesh (Phil 1, 21-24). Saint Ignatius of Antioch, preparing for martyrical death wrote: "*It is good to set from the world unto God, that I may rise again to Him... And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ... Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake*"<sup>3</sup>.

In the Song of Songs, the bride, man's soul, is the one who says to the bridegroom: "*Set me as a seal upon thy heart!*" (Song of Songs 8, 6). This desire is the expression of the supreme devotedness and fulfillment. Christ the bridegroom fulfilled this

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<sup>2</sup> G. Zevini, *Gesù lo sposo della comunità messianica*, in: *Parola spirito e vita*, 13 (1986), pp. 105-117.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistola către Romani*, 2, 1; 5, 1; 6, 1., in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*. Translation, footnotes and index by Fr. Dumitru Fecioru, (București, Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 1995), pp. 210-212.

wish. The New Covenant between God and man was ‘sealed’ with Christ’s blood, becoming an ineffaceable seal! However, this invitation is mutual. The bride, that is man, must set Christ as a ‘seal’ upon his heart; and Christ says to our soul: *“Set me as a seal upon thy heart!”*, a seal which does not prevent us from loving other persons or things in this world: wife, children, parents, beautiful souls and things, but which prevents us from loving without Him, outside Him or instead of Him!<sup>4</sup>.

If the Church, in its profound reality is the bride of Christ (Eph 5, 25; Rev 19, 7), then what can one expect and wish from a bride but to love her bridegroom? Is there something more important that she, the bride, could do? Is there something which is worth more than this love? The love for Christ is *“the appropriate action for the souls baptised in His name”*. *“The true purity of the heart – says Nicholas Cabasilas – means a resolute orientation of our mind towards God”*<sup>5</sup>. In its turn, the world will try to tempt us in all possible ways, but it will not manage to divert us from the love for Christ, as *“greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world”*(1 Jn 4, 4).

## 2 The Witness

The words *witness, to confess, testimony*, often appear in the writings of the New Testament. The Greek correspondent is μάρτυς, with its derivatives and it appears 34 times in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Acts. The verb μαρτυρεῖν appears in 76 texts, firstly in the writings of John the Apostle. The word μαρτυρία is found 37 times in the New Testament, 30 times only in the writings of John the Apostle. The word μαρτύριον appears 20 times. This statistic data reflect the

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<sup>4</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *Gesù Cristo Il Santo di Dio*, (Milano, Edizioni San Paolo, 1990), pp. 122-124.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre viața în Hristos, VI, 4*. Translation, introduction and footnotes by Fr. Teodor Bodogae, (București, Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 2009), p. 204.

development in the history of salvation of the newtestamentary concept of ‘witness’, which was created by Saint Luke and the literary circle of Saint John the Apostle<sup>6</sup>.

The word μάρτυς comes from the juridical field, and already in classical Greek and in the Septuagint it indicated the one who saw with his eyes an event and can speak about it (Lev 5, 1; Num 5, 13; Deut 17, 6; 1 Kg 20, 23). In classical Antiquity, however, the word μάρτυς did not refer only to the one who saw an event, but also the one who was ‘witness’ of the truth or of faith, in other words, the one who bore witness to the truth, the one who had certain convictions, expressed them and motivated them<sup>7</sup>. In the Old Testament, this significance appears fortuitously and it is expressed with the help of the expression “*the testimonies of the Lord*” (Deut 4, 45; 6, 17; Ps 118, 14. 24. 31 and 46), whereas in the New Testament it appears very frequently.

In the New Testament, God Himself is called as μάρτυς (witness): “*For my witness is God, Whom I serve*”, “*Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul*” (2 Cor 1, 23) and “*For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ*”(Phil 1,8). Therefore, God Himself is called or taken as a witness in asserting and supporting a truth or even a simple affirmation.

In the Book of Isaiah, in chapter 43, vv. 9-13, Jehovah calls Israel as ‘witness’ in a trial against pagan deities. God appeals to this gesture so that Israel, by virtue of the great interventions God fulfilled in its history and which Israel experienced and knew through faith, should declare before the whole world that Jehovah is the only and unique God, and, at the same time, ruler of history. “*Be ye My witnesses, and I am a witness, saith the Lord God, and My servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know, and believe, and understand that I AM: before Me there was none*

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<sup>6</sup> *Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, (Brescia, Morcelliana, 1965), p. 1434; original title: *Bibeltheologisches Wörterbuch*, Graz-Wien-Köln, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1435.



*other God, and after Me shall there be none. I am God; and beside Me there is no Saviour” (Is 43, 10-11).*

Almost all great exegetes agree that the expression “I AM”, so frequently in the Gospel according to John, is a direct allusion to the divine name, as it appears in the text we quoted from Isaiah. Christ, the Saviour, in the controversies with the spiritual leaders of Judeans, says: *“ye are of this world; I am not of this world...for if ye believe not that I AM he, ye shall die in your sins...When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I AM he...Before Abraham was, I AM.”* (Jn 8, 24. 28. 58). Christ the Saviour said these words in the most holy place of Judeans, at the Feast of Tabernacles. In this discourse of Jesus there is a *sign of emergency*. People – in this case, Judeans – have a very short time to *see* Jesus, to *look for* Him and *find* Him. Judeans are given only one occasion and there will not be another one. If they refuse the gift of Jesus, they will die in their sin. In John 8, 21 Jesus says: *“I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sin”*. In this text, the sin appears in the singular, as in the perspective of John there is only one capital sin: that of rejecting Jesus, of refusing to believe in Jesus, which is refusing life itself<sup>8</sup>.

One might object and say that these words belong to John the Evangelist or that the evangelist himself put these words in the mouth of Jesus or that these might be subsequent developments of the Christology of John or subsequent or belated developments of the faith in Jesus. The modern and postmodern epoch witnessed such objections. There is a rather wide practice today which consists in differentiating the affirmations in the Holy Gospel. This is how one came to refer to authentic and non-authentic words, that is, words uttered by Jesus during His life and public activity and words that the evangelists themselves attributed to Jesus, after His death on the Cross. This difference is very ambiguous and it is unfounded

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Giovanni*, (Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 1999), p. 455, original title: *The Gospel according to John*, (New York, Anchor Bible, 1970).

in the case of Christ the Saviour, as it is in the case of any human author<sup>9</sup>.

It is true that Jesus Himself, in the Holy Gospel, through that *egō eimi*, proclaims Himself as God, identity proven very clearly through His Passion and His Resurrection. The gainsaying that Jesus proclaims Himself as God appears in the pages of the Gospel: *"Thou bearest record of thyself; thy record is not true"* (Jn 8, 13). But here is Jesus' answer: *"Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true: for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go."* (Jn 8, 14). This affirmation is only apparently absurd and contrary to any idea of us about testimony. If a person knows himself in such a perfect way, with a knowledge which, through its nature cannot be shared with others, the unique possible testimony will be that of the one who bears witness to himself<sup>10</sup>.

Jesus bears witness to Himself in the Gospel for the same reason for which God – says the Scripture *"because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself"* (Heb 6, 13)<sup>11</sup>.

Jesus illustrates and exemplifies this fact using the image of light: *"I - says Jesus - am the light of the world"* (Jn 8, 12); He, the word – says the evangelist in the prologue of his Gospel – *"was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world"* (Jn 1, 9). Can the light of the world receive light from the world? Can the Sun receive light from the torch? The characteristic of the light is that of receiving light from itself, of lighting everything, without being lit by somebody or something. It can just shine, hoping that it will find open eyes to receive it. The true meaning of Jesus' answer is that His affirmation can find confirmation in itself. Actually, the claim of being the Light of the world cannot be proved but shining over the world. The purpose of the Fourth Gospel is this one: to

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<sup>9</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *Gesù Cristo Il Santo di Dio*, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Dodd, *L'interpretazione del Quarto Vangelo*, (Brescia, Morcelliana, 1974), p. 260.

<sup>11</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

prove that the work of Christ bears witness to itself, the works and deeds of Jesus are done, and through them, Jesus shows His glory to the disciples and to all who want to see it<sup>12</sup>. John the Baptist came *to bear witness* to the Light (Jn 1,8), but as a small torch which remains lit waiting for the dawn and which ‘withdraws’ as soon as the Sun comes out. And he withdraws indeed, saying to all: “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” (Jn 3, 30). Only One can bear witness to Jesus and He did it in the Gospel: *the Heavenly Father*. Repeatedly and in many ways, the Heavenly Father bears witness to Jesus in the Holy Gospel: through the Scriptures that mention Him (Jn 5, 39), through the words He gave to Him to utter and through what He asked Him to do. However, all these imply a condition in order to become efficient: to have in yourself ‘the love of God’ or to be ‘a messenger of God’, to love the light and to fulfill the will of God. That is why, Judeans are guilty: they do not have in them the love of God (Jn 5, 42), the word of God does not abide in them (Jn 5, 38), they do not obey the word of God, because they are not from God (Jn 8, 47).

The Book of Revelation calls Christ “the faithful Witness” or the “Amin”, God’s “Yes” par excellence, the absolute assurance of truth. Christ the Lord showed His glory to the disciples and they believed in Him (Jn 1, 14). Thus, the disciples were the ‘witnesses’ par excellence of the Lord; the witnesses of all He did and said. When he wrote the Gospel, Saint Luke made a necessary and compulsory endeavour: he went back to the Christian origins, as in his perspective, the connection with the ‘witnesses’ of those events, witnesses who were still alive and whose testimonies could be easy to find. Between Luke the Evangelist, he himself a ‘witness’ of Jesus Christ and the faithful Witness, Who is Christ Himself, there are ‘eye and ear witnesses’, those ‘servants of the Word’ who will become, after Pentecost, ‘preachers’ or ‘witnesses’ of what they saw with their

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<sup>12</sup> Charles H. Dodd, *L'interpretazione del Quarto Vangelo*, p. 261.

eyes and heard with their ears<sup>13</sup>. Commenting this text, Saint Ambrose writes: *“Because reference is not made to an ordinary word, but to the Word of God, to the Word Who assumed a body and abode among us, we must know Whom the apostles served. The Word of God was seen and heard and touched by the Apostles, they saw the Word not only as a Man, but also as Incarnated Logos; indeed, they saw the Word when, together with Moses and Elijah, they saw Him surrounded by glory (Matt 17, 3)”*<sup>14</sup>.

Indeed, the ‘Word of Life’, Christ, was seen and heard and was contemplated and touched by the hands of the Apostles. The ‘Word’ in Luke 1,2b is Christ Himself, and the text sends to His teachings and deeds, to “everything Jesus did and taught”<sup>15</sup>.

### 3 The Confessor

During His trial or during the interrogatory before Pilate, Christ the Saviour made an affirmation which appealed to the judge of that day, an affirmation on which the present study is focused. When Pilate asked: *“Art thou a king then?”*, Jesus answers with the following words: *“Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.”* (Jn 18, 37).

These words of Christ confronted Pilate with a curious situation: the Accused claimed a kingdom, but underlined, at the same time, the radical difference between His kingdom and

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<sup>13</sup> Alexandru Moldovan, *Evangelhia „copilăriei” lui Iisus; Luca 1-2 Exegeză și teologie*, (Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2011), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ambrogio, *Esposizione del Vangelo secondo Luca 1, 5*. În *La Bibbia commentata dai Padri*. A cura di Arthur A Just Jr., edizione italiana a cura di Sara Petri e Giovanna Taponocco, Roma, Città Nuova Editrice, 2006, p. 27. Original title: *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*. Downers Grove IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> A. Feuillet, *„Témoins oculaires et serviteurs de la Parole”* (Lc I, 2b), in: NT 15 (1973), pp. 241-259.

the kingdoms of this world: *no one fights with the sword for this Kingdom*. If power, and particularly military power, the power of weapons, is a characteristic of the rulers in this world, nothing of these is to be found in Jesus. The kingdom of Jesus is not violent and does not have military legions<sup>16</sup>.

Besides the obvious delimitation of the concept of kingdom (no one fights for it), Jesus introduced a positive concept in order to make accessible the essence and the particular character of the power of this type of kingdom: the truth. The Roman prosecutor, in the subsequent development of the interrogatory mentioned another term, which came from his world, and which is usually connected to the concept of kingdom, and this term is ‘power’: *“Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?”* (Jn 19, 10). The kingdoms of this world claim ‘power’; moreover, power defines these kingdoms. Nevertheless, Jesus indicates bearing witness to truth as the essence of His kingship.

*“What is the truth?”* asked Pilate (Jn 18, 38) and he did not wait for an answer to this question. He probably considered it irrelevant and, for his mission on that day, impracticable. However, without Truth man cannot taste the meaning of his life. Our redemption and salvation were possible because the Truth could be known. Truth can be made known, only if God is acknowledged: *“Every one that is of the truth – says Jesus – heareth my voice.”* (Jn 18, 37). The truth can be known only in Jesus Christ. In Him, God entered our world and lifted up the criterion of truth in the midst of our history. The truth, on the outside, is helpless in this world, just as Christ, according to the criteria of the world, lacks power: He does not have an army at His disposal and is crucified. Nevertheless, in this very apparent

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Benedetto XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret. Dall'ingresso in Gerusalemme fino alla Risurrezione*, (Roma, BUR Saggi e Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), p. 213, original title: *Jesus von Nazareth: Band II – Vom Einzug in Jerusalem bis zur Auferstehung*.

lack of power, He is powerful and only in this way does truth always become a power<sup>17</sup>.

John the Evangelist did not present us Jesus as a ‘preacher of the Kingdom’, but as a unique Person Who reveals this Kingdom, The Only One Who could tell us the truth as concerns God. He has no ‘subjects’, as he would have if His Kingdom were from this world, but instead He has ‘disciples’, who ‘listen to His voice’. Only the ones who belong to the truth can understand in what way Jesus has a kingdom and in what way He is a King or an Emperor<sup>18</sup>.

The One Who turned the witnesses into confessors was the Holy Spirit. Before His ascension, Jesus asked the apostles not to draw away from Jerusalem, but to wait here for ‘the promise’ of the Heavenly Father. Jerusalem becomes the city in which the testimony must be spread by the witnesses of Resurrection “*unto the ends of the world*”. The text in Acts 1, 8 has a *programmative character*: it fixes the horizon of the spread of the word of God, the objective the Apostles must attain, taking with them the word from Jerusalem “*unto the ends of the world*”. For the Holy Apostles, the word of the psalmist is appropriate: “*Their sound is gone out into all the earth, and their word to the ends of the world*”(Ps 18, 4).

The text in Acts is *programmative* because it underlines the spread of the Word and it is an admirable synthesis of the contents of the whole book, as it will unfold: the witnesses of Resurrection, the servants of the Word – the Holy Apostles – will bear witness to Christ in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and “*unto the ends of the world*”, they will take the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome<sup>19</sup>.

In the Book of the Acts, bearing witness and confessing Christ and His Gospel becomes ‘a literary motif’ or a *leitmotif*: Acts 1,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Giovanni*, p. 1074.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli, Introduzione e commento*, Brescia, Editrice Queriniana, 2003, p. 179. Original title: *The Acts of the Apostles. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (New York, Doubleday, 1998).

22; 2, 32; 3, 15; 4, 20. 33; 5, 32; 8, 25; 10, 39. 41; 13, 31; 18, 5; 20, 21. 24; 22, 15. 18. 20; 23, 11; 26, 16; 28, 23<sup>20</sup>.

First of all, the Holy Apostles are eye and ear witnesses of Christ the Resurrected one. When one had to choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, Peter the Apostle presents the work or the fundamental role of an apostle: *“Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection”* (Acts 1, 21-22). With great enthusiasm *“and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all”* (Acts 4, 33). Further, in the address of Peter the Apostle in the house of Cornelius the centurion, it is said that the Apostles are witnesses for all that Jesus did in the country of the Judeans and in Jerusalem and that the Lord showed Himself living after His Passion, but not to the whole people, but only *“unto witnesses chosen before God who did eat and drink with Him after He rose from the dead”* (Acts 10, 39. 41).

Paul the Apostle also proclaims the right to the title of ‘witness of Christ’, even if He saw the Lord glorified only in a vision (Acts 9).

The witness of the Apostles includes the whole life of Jesus: His baptism, the wonders and healings He performed, His addresses, preaching the good news.

A witness of Christ the Resurrected One could be only the one chosen by God or the one *“chosen before God”* in order to occupy such a position<sup>21</sup>. Full of the Holy Spirit, the witness of Christ the resurrected One confesses Him bravely and boldly before all, but especially before the Judean authorities: *“For we (the Apostles) cannot but speak (about) the things which we have*

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<sup>20</sup> G. Schneider, *Die Zwölf Apostel als „Zeugen“: Wesen, Ursprung und Funktion einer lukanischen Konzeption*, in *Lukas, Theologe der Heilsgeschichte: Aufsätze zum lukanischen Doppelwerk* (BBB 59, Hanstein, Bonn, 1985), *apud* Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> *Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, p. 1436-1438.

*seen and heard*" (Acts 4, 20). Opposition and persecution cannot thwart God's plan. Although rejected by Judeans, Messiah's activity did not end in a failure. Jesus brought salvation to the 'New Israel', to 'the new people of God', and hence repentance and remission of sins will be preached with audacity (παρρησία) in the whole world, starting from Jerusalem.

Thus, the main activity or work of the Church since its beginnings up to this day and up to Parousia is preaching Christ the crucified, dead and resurrected One: *"ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain Whom God hath raised up"*(Acts 2, 23-24). When a child comes into the world, a cry, a shriek indicates to all the fact that he is alive and is breathing<sup>22</sup>. In the same way, the Church made its entrance into the world – at Pentecost – with a shriek that will help all admit it is a living Church: *"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ"*(Acts 2, 36). It is as if Peter the Apostle had said: *'Let everyone know!'*. There is much courage and much παρρησία in the Apostle's words.

One can take only two attitudes to this message. The first - *"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* (Acts 2, 37), and the Apostle called them to repent and to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (v. 38). The second reaction is antipodal: *"when they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them"* (Acts 5, 33) or *"When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him (Stephen) with their teeth"...* *Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him and stoned him"* (Acts 7, 54. 57. 59).

Hence, the witness of the Holy Apostles is authentic only if it carries on its forehead the sign of oppression, on suffering for Christ and of persecution, of violence and of malice. The destiny

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<sup>22</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *I Misteri di Cristo nella vita della Chiesa*, (Milano, Editrice Ancora, 1992), p. 557.



of the Teacher becomes the destiny of His disciples. Full or filled with the Holy Spirit, the first Christians saw in the condemnation of Jesus to death, in killing Him and in the threats of the Judean Sanhedrin and the chains of the Apostles, the fulfillment of a prophecy in Psalm 2, 1-2: *“Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done”* (Acts 4, 25-28).

Freed by the members of the Sanhedrin, the Holy Apostles, *“went to thier own company”* (Acts 4, 23), to the Christian community, and *“they lifted up their voice to God with one accord”* (Acts 4, 23), saying an impressive prayer, which must also have been said by the Christians in catacombs and by those who suffered in communist prisons and by all those who suffered persecutions because of their faith in Christ: *“And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word. By stretching forth thine hand to heal - Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemies. And in the abundance of Thy glory Thou hast broken the adversaries to pieces (Ex 15, 6-7a ) and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus”* (Acts 4, 29-30).

Saint Luke tells us that this prayer was like an *epiclesis* and that the place where they were gathered and prayed ‘was shaken’ and the Holy Spirit again descended upon them, and the visible effect of the Holy Spirit was that *“they spoke the word of God with boldness”* (Acts 4, 31). Out of fearful and hesitant people, the Apostles become confessors of Christ in power, ready to drink ‘the cup’ that the Lord had drunk and receive ‘the baptism’ that the Lord had received (Mk 10,39). The Apostles left the Judean Sanhedrin glad that they have been worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Christ (Acts 5, 41).

#### 4 The Martyr

The Book of Acts uses – as we have seen, as a leitmotif – the witness full of power that the group of the Holy Apostles, but also individual persons such as Saint Archdeacon Stephen, Philip the Deacon, Barnabas or Timothy, bear to Christ and their witness, animated and supported by the Holy Spirit extends the Church in the whole world. Preaching the resurrection exerted an enormous attraction over the Judean world, but also over the pagan world towards the Church, where a bright spring ‘flourished’<sup>23</sup>.

The resolute faith of the first Christians in the resurrection of Christ, the assurance of their own resurrection, spread in their hearts the odour and perfume of Pascha, the seed of joy and unending happiness which were especially manifested in the liturgical celebration, in *the Holy Liturgy*: “*And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart*”(Acts 2, 46). The fervent preaching of the Holy Apostles enflamed in the hearts of the young Christian communities the spark of a faith working through love: the most authentic and persuasive witness given to Christ.

However, in the picture presenting ‘the spring of the Christian Church’ chill and the cold wind of oppression and persecution quickly appear, and on the bodies of ‘witnesses’ appear “*the marks of the Lord Jesus*” (Gal 6, 17). Preaching Christ attracted want, oppression, persecution, beatings, prison, trouble and toil. Paul the Apostle, for example, is aware that he is “*always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus*” (2 Cor 4, 10). He knows that the life of Jesus must be shown in our mortal bodies. He knows all Christians are called to experience the crucifixion of Christ and to carry in them the dying of Jesus. The Christian experiences death every moment, in a sacramental

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<sup>23</sup> *Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, p. 1441.

way, wishing for the life of Jesus to be revealed to him in his mortal body.

Thus begins the endless procession of Christian ‘martyrs’, and at the head of it is the image of the first Christian martyr: Saint Stephen, “*a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 6,5). The Acts of the Apostles make reference to this ‘martyr of blood’ (Acts 22, 20). This man did not know the Lord in body and did not see Christ risen, but through the Holy Spirit, he was able to bear witness to Christ in a way that amazed heaven!

The oppression and persecution of Stephen imitates almost in the smallest detail the persecution, the trial and the Passion of the Lord because they come from the same adversaries (the Judean Sanhedrin) and because they are a ‘repetition’ for the great time of the persecution that will come from the pagan power.

Very soon the persecution and violent death for Christ will become the “daily bread” of the Church, and the term *μάρτυς* started to be used as a technical term in order to indicate the bloody witness of the martyr<sup>24</sup>.

## 5 Conclusions

At the beginning of this study we asked this question: ‘What is the position of the martyr in modern society?’ We think we could not confine just to find him a place next to the great transformations that disturb today’s world. We think we must see if it is possible to acknowledge him a meaning and a role ‘inside’ these transformations. Secularisation appears more and more as a ‘conquest’ of enlightened and emancipated spirits that, with the help of reason, manage to lead their life on the way of progress and development without limits, transferring reason from the sphere of the religious to the profane one<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1444.

<sup>25</sup> Teclè Vetràli, *Il santo e l’esperienza di Dio*, p. 26.

This phenomenon is characterised by frequent and peculiar expressions of religious syncretism and, at the same time, of religious fundamentalism in certain cultural areas, and what is normally found in our society is a widespread attitude of *religious relativism*. In matters of faith man follows the principle 'Do as you please!' or 'Have it your own way!'.

In the space of social cohabitation develops the phenomenon of globalisation, which shows a tendency towards social openness only apparently, but whose purpose is the prosperity of the economic powers, with tendencies of marginalisation, absorbing, acaparating or even eliminating minorities and the most vulnerable parts of society.

Everything is experienced and cultivated in the epoch of mass communication, in the era of the internet, which, on the one hand promotes a network of relations unknown so far, luring people that they have unlimited access to knowledge, and which, on the other hand, takes advantage up to the extreme consequences of acerbic advertising, capable of imposing less cautious communities the will of some groups of interests.

In this culture, the idea that martyrdom might still find a place may seem impossible or utopian.

We think that our present situation, as concerns the witness we owe Christ, has much in common with the situation of the first witnesses and servants of the Word. After they were freed, Peter and John went "*to their own company*", to their brothers, to the Christian community and told them the wish of the Sanhedrin, that they can no longer speak to anyone in the name of Christ. What did the Apostles and "*their own company*" do in this situation? They started to pray: "*And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word; by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus*". And the Lord answered their prayer immediately, just as he answers our prayer. Just like the day of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came over them and "*they spoke the word of God with boldness*" (Acts 4, 31).

Today, in the same way, forces ‘conspire’ and ‘intrigue’ to eliminate God, Christ and His Church from the people. Which forces? Culture, Welfare, Ideologies, what is outside man and what is inside him<sup>26</sup>. Lord, stretch forth your hand to heal, for we have become distracted, deaf and blind, hardened in our heart and ears and words are no longer enough!

It is true, Paul the Apostle teaches us that some wonders can be “*a sign, not to them that believe*” (1 Cor 14, 22), but our world *is still or has become* unfaithful again to a great extent! Therefore, we need Your signs and Your wonderful intervention. You promised that you would accompany our work of preaching and that you will confirm ‘through signs’ the strength of your word or preaching (Mk 16,20). And today, just as in the beginnings, Your word falls upon a world in which there is a mixture and a discord of voices and religious offers up to the most absurd ones. What will Your word do to make itself heard in this blatancy of voices? What wonderful way will it follow in order to overcome all the obstacles in its way?

The trials of Christians who remained faithful to Christ continue as history advances. Who knows their number and who knows their suffering? Only ‘at the return of the Master’, the witness with blood or without blood of Christians will be replaced by the witness of the Master Himself, “*the faithful Witness*” (Rev 1,5), a confession which He will make before His Father in heaven for all those who confessed Him in this world (Matt 10, 32-33).

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<sup>26</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *I Misteri di Cristo nella vita della Chiesa*, p. 563.

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