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CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM: SOME REFLECTIONS

by William Weinrich

ACCORDING TO JOHN 15:20, in the Upper Room Jesus said to His disciples, “A slave is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” In these words, our Lord foretells and forewarns us that we live in the last days. Later in the Gospel of John, we are told that when Jesus received the sour wine, He said, “It is completed,” and handed over the Holy Spirit (John 19:30). The last days commenced with the death of Jesus, which is to say that the last days (*sub cruce*) have as their essential mark the confrontation of Christian faith with the world. In his First Letter the Apostle Peter makes this point quite explicitly: “Beloved, do not be astonished at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). One who is baptized into Christ must expect the destiny of Christ. The Gospel of John does not allow us to ameliorate this point. In this Gospel, the Evangelist conjoins the gift of the Spirit and the story of Thomas. Upon the risen Jesus’ command to touch His side and His hands, Thomas recognizes Jesus to be his Lord and his God (John 20:24–29). This is a distinctly martyrological moment: Communion in the passion of Jesus, at the same time, bears within it the confession of Jesus as Lord and God. The last days demand such communion and such confession. Here, we might point out that the idea of “the last days” is not so much a chronological reality as it is the reality of the cross in the world. When the world is not confronted by the cross, it does not experience the fullness of “the last days.”

When commanded to deny God and to disobey His will so that one might claim oneself for the powers of futility, the only response of one who is Christian is to acknowledge one’s freedom from such non-entities and one’s free allegiance to the God who truly is and who alone creates.

Dr. Weinrich’s historical references regarding Christian persecution and martyrdom provide insight and encouragement for Christians now facing persecution.

Christians have faced hostility and rejection at some time and in some place ever since the foundation of the Church. Yet special factors, new to *our* experience, may be mentioned which make the theme of persecution and martyrdom understandable and pastorally necessary at the present time. A recent report of the Vatican on the

persecution of Christians throughout the world makes mention of two of these special factors. In part, the report states the following:

“Credible research has reached the shocking conclusion that an estimate of more than 100,000 Christians are violently killed because of some relation to their faith every year. Other Christians and other believers are subjected to forced displacement, to the destruction of their places of worship, to rape and to the abduction of their leaders ... In addition, in some Western countries where

historically the Christian presence has been an integral part of society, a trend emerges that tends to marginalize Christianity in public life, to ignore historic and social contributions and even to restrict the ability of faith communities to carry out social charitable services.”

Groups such as *Persecution.org* concur with such findings: According to this group, some “two hundred million Christians currently live under persecution.” And the number is rising. Concerning active persecution of Christians, *Persecution.org* mentions especially places like Africa and the Middle East. In Egypt, the ancient and

traditional Coptic Christians face increasing hostility, and according to one observer “what has happened in Iraq and Syria is *de facto* ethnic cleansing of Christians” (Neil Hicks of Human Rights First).

There are two major threats in the world to Lutheran churches: the rise of an expansionist, jihadist Islam, which is unwilling to give place to Christian communities, and the increasing dominance of Western secular egalitarianism, which claims that traditional Christian thinking and habit are intolerant and discriminatory, and so secularists also are unwilling to tolerate Christian influence in the public square. Those of us who live in Western Europe or in the United States are well aware of the social and even legal forces which intend to define Christian faith as a mere private opinion and rob it of any legitimate public or social role. This is, to be sure, a new phenomenon, and our people are largely ill-prepared for this emerging challenge. Since the time of Constantine, biblical perspectives and understandings have determined the social habits of the Western world, which in turn have been more or less enshrined by custom and law. Although our theology might teach us that we are to live a theology of the cross, our *experience* of being Christian in the world has for a long time been uncontested and without serious public challenge (at least this is true of Western Europe and the USA). That is no longer the case. Christian convictions increasingly represent a minority view, and traditional Christian social and legal protections no longer hold sway.

Today, being a Christian in the world is contested and is facing serious challenges — in some places with murderous consequences. It benefits us all to contemplate how we might best prepare ourselves and our people to meet this existential challenge. I would like to offer some reflections on stories of early Christian martyrdom as narrated in early Christian martyr texts. It is quite evident that early Christians *thought* about the reality of martyrdom as a Christian reality and consciously prepared themselves for this eventuality. Indeed, our very first evidence for an emerging martyr cult makes this clear. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 157), we are told that upon the death of Polycarp the Christians gathered his bones and buried them “in a suitable place.” What made the location “suitable” is then described: “Gathering here, as we are able, in joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both as a memorial for those who have already struggled and for the training and preparation of those who will

[in the future struggle]” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 18).¹ The language suggests that on the anniversary date of Polycarp’s martyrdom, the Christian community gathered at the place of his burial and there commemorated the death of past martyrs (probably through the reading of martyr narratives), and by prayer and exhortation prepared the living for future suffering. Moreover, the language suggests that this took place within, or in conjunction with, a Eucharistic service. It is instructive to note that the Eucharist was regarded as a proper occasion for martyrological reflection. To commune with the Body and Blood of Christ was to be bound with Him who was Himself the “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5) and received the crown of life: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Union with Christ’s body and blood unites the faithful to the *goal and destiny* of Christian faith, namely, to that perfection whereby the confession of the mouth is instantiated by the sacrifice of one’s life for the true confession. The death of the martyr was itself “witness” and “demonstration” that in Christ God had overcome death by the new creation of the resurrection.² Participation in the Supper of the Lord, therefore, bears within itself the destiny of martyrdom — should that be according to God’s will and purpose.³ As we think about the present circumstances of our Lutheran churches in the world and about how best to prepare our people for future suffering, we should not forget the great resource we have in the Sacrament of the Altar. For it is not merely that which “strengthens” faith but *is itself the reality of life over death*: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my

¹“The birthday of his martyrdom” — a striking expression but quite typical of early thinking about martyrdom: the death of the martyr was, in fact, his/her entry into life.

² It may be helpful here to remind ourselves that the term “martyr” did *not* designate one who had only given an oral witness before an unbelieving audience. The term referred exclusively to those who had died, and *in their death itself* were “martyr.” The witness of the martyr was the death itself. One who gave an oral witness but yet did not suffer death for that witness was called a “confessor.”

³ In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of the future suffering of his followers *within* the Upper Room discourse. The Synoptic Gospels have no such discourse, while John has the discourse, but no explicit institution narrative. One may well interpret John 13–17 as a catechesis on the implications of partaking in the Supper, of the life received and then lived. Ignatius of Antioch gives an early tradition of a conversation between the risen Jesus and his disciples: Jesus commands them to touch him and see that he is not a “bodiless spirit.” “And straightway they touched him and believed, being closely united to his flesh and blood. For this reason they despised death, indeed were found to be superior to death” (*Smyrn.* 3:2). In my judgment, the last two sentences speak of the disciples partaking of the Eucharist and then, and for that reason, proving to be “superior to death” in their various bold confessions and also martyrdoms.

blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54).

Early Christian thinking about martyrdom did not arise from general notions of courageous conviction and heroic death. While one may find references to classical heroes in early exhortations to martyrdom (ex. Tertullian, *Ad martyras*), these did not provide the substance of early Christian martyr theology. For that, the prototype was clear; the passion and death of Jesus were the pre-eminent paradigm. Nor was his death regarded in general terms. Were that the case, his death would possess no meaningful martyrological significance. The death of the martyr possessed nothing natural about it; rather, it was a conflict with the powers of evil in which the martyr *fought* precisely by the willing submission to those powers. In considering the passion and death of Jesus as paradigm, certain features are of importance.

In his little exhortation *To the martyrs*, Tertullian interprets Eph. 4:30 as a martyr text: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Tertullian thus connects the reality of the Baptism with the difficulties of persecution and martyrdom. In the case of the martyrs, the Spirit which has sealed them at Baptism has also led them to the moment of their martyr sufferings. Now in the face of such sufferings, the martyrs are exhorted not to “grieve” that Spirit of God by denial of Christ and apostasy. For should they deny Christ, they would thereby cause the Spirit to flee from them. The thinking behind this little exhortation requires some further comment.

The New Testament speaks of Baptism as a begetting from above (John 3:3) or as a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Through Baptism, therefore, the sinner has received a new identity, a new personhood which is defined by a new set of relationships and obligations. This new identity is not natural, nor of the flesh. It is of the Spirit, and so this new identity is grounded in God and is directed toward the resurrection of the dead. Paul speaks of this new identity given in Baptism: “For we have received the Spirit of the adoption into sonship, by which [Spirit] we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Rom. 8:15; also Gal. 4:5–7). The identity of the baptized is that of child/son of the heavenly Father. There is in this conviction a distinctly ascetic, other-worldly aspect, which makes all earthly, natural, fleshly relationships radically penultimate. In early martyr texts, this is especially expressed in relation to earthly familial ties and to the claims of imperial authority and power. In this context, it is important to remember that Christian

faith cannot be reduced to private opinion. Christian truth does not understand itself to be an opinion which may be added to or subtracted from the storehouse of other opinions. Rooted in Baptism, Christian faith makes a claim concerning the fundamental, irreducible reality of the human person. Hence, the common, recurring confession of the Christian martyr: *sum Christianus*; “I am a Christian.” To make that claim was not merely to state that one believed so-and-so to be true. It was a claim of personal identity that re-ordered one’s basic social, familial and political allegiances. Christian martyrdom, therefore, was intrinsically a statement that had social, familial and political implications. Christian martyrdom was not an act of heroism that was personal and individual. It was an essentially *public* act that called into question any ultimate, transcendent attachment to that which was not God. What characterizes all martyr stories is the report of public trials and public spectacles. The martyr stands before the world and gives witness, first with the mouth, then with his death. This is why martyrdom must be regarded as a fundamentally ecclesial act.⁴ In his death, the martyr makes clear that no earthly attachment — not that of family, not that of nation or ruler — was an ultimate good (*optimum bonum*). That which alone was ultimately true and good was the confession of faith, “I am a Christian.”⁵ A couple of examples will suffice.

In the second century *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* the proconsul, Saturninus, demands that the Christians honor the emperor with oath and prayer: “We [Romans] are a religious people, and our religion is a simple one: we swear by the genius of our lord, the emperor, and we offer prayers for his health Swear by the genius of our lord, the emperor.”⁶ It is clear that the proconsul thinks that the Christians owe the emperor a pledge of allegiance. He is “our lord” (*noster dominus*). That such an oath suggests an *ultimate* allegiance is clear from the fact that the punishment for *not* swearing by the emperor’s genius is death. To live requires allegiance to an earthly, political power. In response to the proconsul’s demand, the Christian Speratus replies, “I do not recognize the

⁴ In his treatise *On the Churches and Councils* Luther lists martyrdom as one of the marks (notae) of the Church.

⁵ From this perspective we can understand why the martyr was a special object of honor and veneration. By his voluntary, steadfast death he gave form to the first commandment: “You shall love the Lord, your God, will your heart, soul and mind” (Matt. 23:37).

⁶ All citations are from Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Here *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 3–5 (Musurillo, 86/87).

rule (*imperium*) of this world. Rather, I serve that God whom no man sees or can see with these eyes.” Another Christian, Cittinus, says, “We have no one whom we fear except our Lord (*domnum nostrum*), God, who is in heaven.” To this Donata adds, “Pay honor to Caesar as Caesar, however, give fear to God.” Thereupon various Christians said, “I am Christian,” and Speratus too said, “I am Christian,” and, we are informed, “All concurred with him.”⁷ In this simple early martyr text we see quite clearly that the question in play is this: Who is the true Lord in the world? The confession “I am Christian” is nothing other than the claim that all earthly powers are penultimate and cannot legitimately claim ultimate loyalty. This is a central idea in early martyr thinking, and we must shortly return to this aspect of early Christian martyrology.

But it was not only political attachments that are rendered secondary and penultimate in early martyr texts. Family ties as well are surrendered up and sundered altogether. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is to be found in the *Passion of Perpetua* (c. 202). When Perpetua, a young, noble woman, is arraigned before the Roman magistrate, her father appears and begs her not to dishonor her family and bring upon it ill-repute and social disgrace: “Do not abandon me to the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, of your mother, of your aunt; also consider your child Give up your pride! You will destroy us all.” Later, when the Christians were brought to a public hearing at the forum, Perpetua is again confronted by her father who has brought along with him Perpetua’s small child. He says to Perpetua, “Sacrifice—have mercy on your infant.” Urged by the governor to take pity upon her father and infant, Perpetua is officially asked, “Are you Christian?” And she said, “*Christiana sum*.”⁸ The claim to Christian identity bears within itself the claim that all family ties and associations and obligations are temporal, penultimate and may not assume our deepest loyalties. In Perpetua’s confession “I am Christian,” she embodies the words of Jesus: “Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt 10:37-38).

Let us turn now to what is the central issue in all early martyr accounts, and that is the question of idolatry.

We have already referred to the words of Speratus in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*: “I do not recognize the rule (*imperium*) of this world. Rather, I serve that God whom no man sees or can see with these eyes.” It is an interesting fact that in early Christian martyr texts the primary confession of the martyr is not, as we might expect, belief in Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. The central confession is to God as the Creator of all things living. The late second century *Martyrdom of Apollonius* (c 180) gives a good example of this. When Apollonius is brought before the court, the proconsul, Perennis, asks him, “Apollonius, are you a Christian?” To this inquiry Apollonius responds, “Yes, I am a Christian, and for that reason I worship and fear the God who made heaven and earth, and sea, and all that is in them.”⁹ The confession of Apollonius is not explicitly that of the second article of the creed, nor of the third article. It is a confession of the first article: “I believe in God the Creator.”¹⁰

In the context of martyrdom this cannot be an abstract claim such as “I believe that God has created the world.” Luther’s explanation of the First Article is to the point: “I believe that God has made *me* and all creatures.” Let us again emphasize: The confession of the martyr, *Christianus sum*, was not merely a statement of membership in a particular religious group. The confession *Christianus sum* was a confession of personal identity; it expressed *who* one was not merely *what* one believed to be true. It is this fact that made the question of idolatry so trenchant, for the question central to all martyr stories is this: Who is it who possesses the power to kill and to make alive? The claim concerning the martyr’s identity is at the same time a claim concerning the true God!

The narratives of early Christian martyrdoms are stories of conflict. In such stories there is no neutral ground.¹¹ The Christian is either to sacrifice to the gods or he is not to sacrifice; he is either to confess or he is to deny; he is to live or he is to die. Within this existential moment for the martyr lies the conflict between God and the false gods. Let us take a few other examples of interrogations by Roman officials and the responses

⁹ *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 2 (Musurillo, 91).

¹⁰ This confession of God as Creator occurs frequently. See the *Martyrdom of Justin* 2.5 (Musurillo, 43); *Martyrdom of Carpus* 10 (Musurillo, 23); *Martyrdom of Pionius* 8 (Musurillo, 147); *Acts of Cyprian* 1 (Musurillo, 169); *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 2 (Musurillo, 179).

¹¹ For a more complete treatment of this issue, see William C. Weinrich, “Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66.4 (2002): 32–38.

⁷ *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 6–10 (Musurillo, 86/87–88/89).

⁸ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* 5–6 (Musurillo, 112/13–114/15).

of Christian martyrs. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the martyr is commanded: “Swear [to the gods] and I will let you go. Curse Christ.” To this Polycarp responds: “For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my King and Savior?”¹² In the *Martyrdom of Apollonius* the martyr is commanded to sacrifice to the gods and to the image of the emperor Commodus. When Apollonius refuses, the proconsul says, “I shall grant you a day’s time, that you may take some thought about your life.” Upon Apollonius’ continuing refusal, the proconsul urges: “I advise you to change your mind and to venerate and worship the gods, which we all venerate and worship, and to continue to live among us.” To this Apollonius says: “It is the God of the heavens whom I worship, and him alone do I venerate, who breathed into all men a living soul and daily pours life into all.”¹³ Finally, we mention a third example. According to the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, the presbyter Pionius is arrested and reminded of the imperial edict that all should “sacrifice to the gods.” To this Pionius replies: “We are aware of the commandment of God ordering us to worship him alone.” To this response of Pionius, Sabina and Asclepiades add their voices: “We obey the living God.”

It is clear from these interchanges that the question in play is this: Who has the power to give and to take away life? The Roman magistrates believe that such power lies in their hands: They may stay the execution of Christians and release them, or they may exact the punishment of death. What does the Christian believe? In the moment of decision/confession, the Christian must declare his ultimate faith. Faith is directed either toward the gods, or it is directed toward God the Creator. By refusing to offer sacrifice to the gods, the martyr rejects the claim of the magistrates that they possess the power to give life. Rather, in the refusal to live on the court’s terms, the martyr confesses that it is God the Creator, and He only, who possesses the power to give and to take away life.¹⁴ The life that the magistrate offers in exchange for sacrifice to the gods is a verdict of death, for those gods are no gods and have no life in them. The gods, and indeed all earthly

power, are intrinsically futile and empty when placed in opposition to Him who is the Creator of all things. Thus, when commanded to deny God and to disobey His will so that one might claim oneself for the powers of futility, the *only* response of one who *is Christian* is to acknowledge one’s *freedom from such non-entities and one’s free allegiance to the God who truly is and who alone creates*. Thus, when the Roman proconsul demands of Apollonius that he sacrifice to the gods so that he might continue to live, Apollonius replies: “I have become a man who fears God so that I may not revere idols made with hands. Therefore, I will not bow down to gold or silver, bronze or iron, or before false gods made of stone or wood, who can neither see nor hear; for these are but the work of craftsmen, workers in gold and bronze; they are the carving of men and have no life of their own.”¹⁵ Similarly, when Carpus is commanded to sacrifice to the gods, he responds: “May the gods be destroyed who have not made heaven and earth.” Upon further pressure to sacrifice, he says: “The living do not offer sacrifice to the dead.”¹⁶

Idolatry is a form the dominion of death assumes, and to worship dead idols is not to live but to succumb to the power of death. When, therefore, the martyr willingly receives the judgment of death from the hands of the earthly power and takes this judgment upon himself in martyrdom, he confesses that the one, true God is the Creator who has given him life and will give him life again in the resurrection of the dead. It is the deep paradox, it is the deep truth of martyrdom that in it the real and proper relationship between God and the world is revealed. The martyr’s death witnesses to the fact that the only source of man’s life and hope is God Himself. Thus martyrdom, for those who see, reveals the living God. In the *Martyrdom of Fructuosus*, it is reported that after his martyrdom, the heavens were opened, revealing the bishop with his deacons “rising crowned up to heaven, with the stakes to which they had been bound still intact.” The Roman consul, Aemilianus, was summoned to see this as well: “Come and see how those whom you have condemned

¹² *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9 (Musurillo, 9).

¹³ *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 10–13 (Musurillo, 93, 95).

¹⁴ From time to time the martyr will remind the human judge that his authority is itself derived from God in whose hands alone all power resides. The judge, whatever his verdict, is a servant of God, and for that reason how the judge disposes of his authority and power will become an issue at his own judgment on the last day.

¹⁵ *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 14 (Musurillo, 94–95). The translation of this passage by Musurillo is inadequate: “I am a pious man, and I may not worship artificial idols. Hence I do not bow before gold.” We may paraphrase the meaning as follows: Through Baptism I have become a man who reveres the true God. That has freed me from the false reverence to gods made by hands, and so in no way am I now going to bow down to such lifeless deities, as you command me to do. The future tense with double negative is the most forceful way to express a negative in the Greek text: “I will by no means bow down!”

¹⁶ *Martyrdom of Carpus* 10–12 (Musurillo, 22–23, 24–25).

to death today have been restored to heaven and to their hopes.” However we are told, “When Aemilianus came, he was not worthy to behold them.”¹⁷

According to *Persecution.org*, Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Church recently said concerning the contemporary period in Egypt, “We are passing through a dark tunnel of violence, feeling the grief of death and injustice. But we are committed to the love that never fails. We are pressed hard on every side, but not crushed.” This last sentence echoes the sentiment of the Apostle Paul concerning his own apostolic sufferings: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed” (2 Cor. 4:8). In the New Testament the theme of imitating Christ in his suffering and death is connected with suffering under earthly powers and human opposition. 1 Peter 2:21 is classic: “For to this have you been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” Nowhere in the New Testament is this idea more vivid than in Paul’s reflections on his own apostolicity. Precisely because he was an apostle his life was an icon of his preaching. When Paul asserts, “We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23–24), he implies that his life stands under that proclamation and is given form by that proclamation. Thus, when against certain detractors, Paul must defend his apostolicity, and he does so by referencing his sufferings for Christ. Consider these remarkable statements of Paul (2 Cor. 4:9–11):

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over

to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Paul directs our eyes to his flesh/body. To see in it the marks of his suffering is to recognize him as an apostle who for that reason is an image of the life of Christ.¹⁸ Indeed, to speak of his sufferings as an apostle Paul at times adopts the language of Jesus’ passion. In 2 Cor. 12:7–10, Paul refers to his apostolic sufferings as “a thorn in the flesh” As did Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Paul asked three times that these sufferings be removed from him. To this the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power reaches its goal in weakness.” Behind such statements lies the conviction of Paul that the cross of Jesus is the form of the apostolic life. Suffering for Jesus is not merely the result of adverse fate or of the unlucky circumstance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is the calling of the apostle to be the image of the Crucified in the world (Acts 9:16). When, therefore, the church confesses herself to be “apostolic,” she acknowledges this fact to be true as well as of her own sojourn in the world. If the church is apostolic, then she is martyrological as well.¹⁹

Of course, this does not mean that every Christian will be called upon to suffer rejection, persecution or martyrdom. Yet, this does not give us leave to ameliorate the demands of being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Perhaps no Lutheran thinker reflected more deeply upon the condescension of Christ than did Hermann Bezzel, the successor of Wilhelm Loehe at the diaconal institute in Neuendettelsau. For Bezzel, the Lord’s words to Paul, “My power is perfected in weakness,” was not only a hermeneutical perspective for interpreting the whole of the Scriptures. It was also a by-word for that service to which all Christians are called. “That [passage] is in reality the rubric which stands over the life of Jesus.” It expresses the mystery of His person whereby the Almighty makes Himself known and gives

¹⁷ *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 5 (Musurillo, 183). The paradox of martyrdom that when one dies, in fact one has won the victory and so lives is illustrated graphically in the *Passion of Perpetua* 10 (Musurillo, 118/19). In a vision Perpetua sees her own coming martyrdom. She is wrestling with a huge Egyptian (the devil). After some struggle, “I [i.e. Perpetua] put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the [victor’s] branch. He kissed me and said to me, ‘Peace be with you, my daughter!’ I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life (*Porta Sanavivaria*).” Although depicted as a triumph, this is evidently an account of Perpetua’s death. She steps upon the head of the Egyptian, a sign of *his* death and of *her* triumph. However, in the reality of her martyrdom it is she who is killed. Her walking toward the *Porta Sanavivarium* imitates the walk of those gladiators who had survived their fight. But in the reality of her martyrdom she does not walk to the Gate of Life *in the arena* but to the Gate of Life *into heaven*.

¹⁸ In 2 Cor. 11:23–33 Paul lists his sufferings at the hands of his persecutors. Interestingly, the literary form he adopts for this is that of the *res gestae* which was commonly used to praise the victories of a king or emperor. Thus, Paul’s various sufferings are (paradoxically) interpreted as his victories! In the literature of martyrdom Christians often saw in the suffering martyr the image of the cross or of Christ. In the *Letter of the Lyons Martyrs* the holy Blandina “was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross.” Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.41 [Musurillo, 74–75].

¹⁹ Here it is well to be reminded that Christology, apostolicity and ecclesiology are mutually inherent. The apostle was an image of Christ, and the church is an image of the apostle (see 1 Thess. 1:5–10).

himself as one who is weak and humble. “That which is small in power, that power which perfects itself in weakness, is not a power in and of itself; it is not a power which is self-consciously a power. Rather, such a power achieves something only if God adopts it as his own.”²⁰ When Jesus, sorrowful even to death, prays to his Father to remove the cup of suffering from him, he nonetheless places himself under the will of the Father: “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39). The Gospel of John presents us with Jesus as he who has received the Father’s reply, and so he sets himself to do the Father’s will: “Now is my soul troubled. But what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (John 12:27–28). To live according to the cross is to do the Father’s will. In the Lord’s Prayer we are taught to pray: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” When upon the cross Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46), he reveals how God’s will is done: Faith — committing one’s life to God — doing God’s will. These are but different ways of saying the same thing. Therefore, in his First Letter the Apostle Peter adopts these words of Jesus in order to exhort Christians under duress to faithful and holy living: “Therefore, let those who suffer according to God’s will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:19). Christian faith is essentially ascetic. It knows that the things of this world are but temporary and fleeting. To place one’s hope on them is to lose sight of that which abides. Thus, the entirety of the Christian life is to be, as it were, a bloodless martyrdom, faith lived through a hope which lies in God.

The simple Christians of *Scilla* suffered in the second century. Yet, Christian preaching kept them in memory. In the early fifth century, Saint Augustine preached on their anniversary. But of what relevance was the story to his audience? Augustine knew that the time of overt persecution was in the past. The Roman Empire in which his congregation lived was now Christian in conviction and habit: “There is no persecutor raging, no plunderer despoiling, no torturer working on you.” Yet, says Augustine, many are adopting the necessities of life as well as the superfluities of life as their persecutors: “How many evil deeds are committed as if for the sake of necessities, for food, for clothing, for health, for a friend; and all these

things which are being desired are in fact being lost. But if you make light of these things in the present, God will give you them for eternity. Make light of health, you will have immortality; make light of death, you will have life; make light of honor, you will have a crown; make light of the friendship of man, you will have the friendship of God.” As the holy martyrs “preferred to live by dying, in order not to die by living,” as the holy martyrs “despised life by loving life,” so the Christian in his/her daily life is to live the life of Christ by despising the things of the world: “Do you seek well-being? Make light of it, and you shall have it. You deny Christ, being afraid of spoiling your friendship with men; confess Christ, and you will enjoy the friendship of the city of the angels, the city of the patriarchs, the city of the prophets, the city of the apostles, the city of all the martyrs, the city of all the good faithful. Christ himself established it forever” (Ps. 48:8).²¹

Augustine used the self-denial of the Christian martyr as a paradigm for the daily life of all Christians. Martyrdom is in the first instance not an event but a spiritual *habitus*. It is a stance toward the world as that which is temporary and secondary and toward God as He who is Lord and Savior. Within this *habitus* lies the confession: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Indeed, this spiritual *habitus* is itself the instantiation of the confession: “God has made me.” To prepare our people for the coming strife, we must teach them to be Christians so that they may, with robust faith and in a living hope, confess and say, “*Christianus sum*.”

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²⁰ These are words interpreting Bezzel by Manfred Seitz (*Hermann Bezzel: Theologie-Darstellung-Form seiner Verkündigung* [München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960], 161 (my translation). This book is an excellent introduction and presentation of Bezzel’s theology.

²¹ Augustine, *Sermon 299D* “On the Birthday of the Holy Scillitan Martyrs” (WSA III/8:256–262).