

Jesus Christ, King of Martyrs

Mary, Queen of Martyrs

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavishes upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth. ... In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him were sealed with the promised holy Spirit, which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14.)

This magnificent passage on God’s will for us and the destiny we share with Him in and through Christ speaks to the reason why we have the reality of martyrdom at all. The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word “martyria” or witness and refers to one who gives testimony to the truth and stands firm in his belief even in the face of suffering and death. In Christian usage it is reserved for those who actually die giving witness to their belief in Christ and Divine Truth and pay the ultimate price of being Christ’s disciples in faith and love; hence, martyrdom is considered the most perfect imitation of Christ.

In the first covenant God made with man He sent prophets to speak to His people on His behalf, calling for the repentance of sin. Many prophets were rejected and killed, prefiguring Jesus, the Prophet of all prophets, the King of martyrs Who is Truth Itself, not only speaking for God but Who IS the very Word of God, that Eternal Word of divine mercy and love. In laying down His life for all mankind in obedience to the Father’s will, even to the most ignominious death on the cross, Jesus gives testimony to the truth of the Father’s unfathomable Love for us and His eternal will to save us and reconcile us to Himself in and through His Beloved Son. Jesus, like the prophets of old, was rejected by His own and was crucified by them because they would not believe His Word that He **IS** the Son of the most high God, the long promised Messiah and only Savior of the world, the only Mediator for men before the throne of God. No one is saved but through Jesus. The Old Testament closes with the martyrdom of John the Baptist, often called the greatest prophet of God’s first Covenant with man because of his immediacy to Christ and his preparation for that blessed Incarnation of God in our

world in human form. John's death at the hands of Herod Antipas in revenge for John's upholding God's truth prefigures Christ's own death for speaking God's Truth. John, cousin of Jesus and precursor of the Sacred Humanity, is our first introduction to Christ as the fulfillment of all that was foretold in the First Covenant and was exemplified by the prophets and martyrs of old.

In the Christmas story we hear of the birth of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh and dwelling amongst us as both God and man. We also hear of the massacre of the Holy Innocents, those boy babies two years old and under whom Herod the Great had murdered when seeking the life of the newborn King of the Jews announced to him by the Magi. While some consider the deacon Stephen the first martyr of the Church, a **martyr by will, love and blood**, dying at the hands of a mob under Saul's direction for his profession of faith in Jesus' Resurrection, the Church, nonetheless, venerates the earlier deaths of the Holy Innocents as **martyrs by blood alone**. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that the Church venerates these children as "**martyrs (flores martyrum); they are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution; they died not only for Christ, but in his stead.**" (St. Aug., "Sermo 10us de sanctis"). Ref: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07419a.htm>

Tradition tells us all the apostles but John died like Stephen, as martyrs by **will, love and blood**, fulfilling the three requirements for martyrdom in its strictest Christian sense: actual death, freely embraced, and done so in joyful and loving witness to and in imitation of Christ as our Lord and Savior. John, the beloved disciple, is said to have died a **martyrdom of desire, by will and love only**, when, according to Tertullian, attempts to boil him alive in a cauldron of hot oil did not harm him. Christ's Beloved Mother likewise is said to have suffered a **martyrdom of desire, by will and love**, as she shared in Christ's Passion and death as no other and longed to die with Him or even in His place if it would spare Him. St. Augustine reminds us that **it is not the suffering itself that makes the martyr but the reason why he suffers -- his or her witness to the truth of Jesus Christ**. As co-redeemer with Christ who could have witnessed to Christ more than His Mother? Others speak of a "**white martyrdom**" for those who suffer persecution for the Faith but do not actually die from their sufferings.

Why do we call Jesus the King of Martyrs? First and quite simply, as God He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who reigns over all martyrs, all angels and saints, all creatures great and small. Secondly, having declared His divine sonship before men, Jesus proceeded to lay down His life for us, giving testimony to the Father's Eternal Will to save all mankind through His own death. His most Precious Blood is our ransom, poured out and into us in the Eucharist, making us one Body with Him and sharers in His divine life, thus the adopted children of God. Jesus is the **first witness to that Eternal Truth of the Father's love** born out in the works of creation, redemption and sanctification. He is **the first martyr testifying to Divine Truth, the first in the order**

of the Divine Will to lay down His life for others as a witness to God's unfathomable Love for all mankind and in imitation of it.

“Since Jesus, the Son of God, manifested His charity by laying down His life for us, no one has greater love than he who lays down his life for Christ and his brothers. (1Jn 3:16) From the earliest times, then, some Christians have been called upon – and some will always be called upon – to give this supreme testimony of love to all men, but especially to persecutors. The Church, therefore, considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the highest proof of love.

By martyrdom a disciple is transformed into an image of his Master, who freely accepted death on behalf of the world's salvation; he perfects that image even to the shedding of his blood. Though few are presented with such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow Him along the way of the cross through persecutions which the Church will never fail to suffer.” (The Documents of Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, #42.)

The Roman Church celebrates these three kinds of martyrdom with the feasts of St. Stephen, the Holy Innocents and St. John during the Christmas octave as an introduction to the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus who was born precisely to die so we might be re-created in grace in a way more marvelous than the first creation. The placement of these feasts within the octave of the birth of our Savior is a reminder of the awesome mystery and scope of Christ's mission and challenges us to ponder what an identity with and imitation of Christ really means. Martyrdom, the gift of one's life, whether in love or by blood, is the price of true discipleship which must necessarily mirror God's kind of love—Agape Love-- that self-emptying and self-gifting love that knows no bounds and loves even one's enemies.

The blood of the early martyrs within the Church was the seed of the faith burgeoning forth with the growth of the Church throughout the world. The persecutions were many as Christians gave witness to Christ in a world where the Good News of the Gospel had not yet been proclaimed. Today we have a new kind of paganism for there is barely a place on this earth where the power of Jesus' name has not been proclaimed. This new paganism is often amongst those previously educated and rooted in the Christian message who now turn away from it to embrace the idolatry of self or the illusory but glamorous adoration of the secular world, a world clearly under the dominion of the evil one whose only ambition is to rob Jesus of His disciples and souls of the salvation won for us by the shedding of Christ's Blood. How many reject the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in order to fabricate a gospel more suited to their weakness and perverted desires! How many nations long recognized as Christian now reject their Judaeo-Christian heritage and fall into that dark abyss without the Light of Christ and without the blessing of God! This new paganism is far worse than the first; it

is a rejection of man's true nature as little less than a god for some false, fleeting deification. It thrives on the hardened heart that is as hard as a rock, unable to receive or absorb the living waters of grace that heaven pours out on it. Where is our faith? Only Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, our only hope for eternal salvation!

How unsettling are those words of Jesus spoken in locutions with Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil in the message of Our Lady of America® on May 29, 1954, as He addresses her as His "little white dove":

"My little white dove, do you know what I find most lacking in the world today? It is FAITH. There are so few souls that believe in Me and My love. They profess their belief and their love, but they do not live this belief. Their hearts are cold, for without faith there can be no love. Pray and sacrifice yourself, My child, that faith may once again find entrance into the hearts of men. ... I am a Beggar for love, but how few give to Me the means by which to satisfy My divine hunger. I hunger for the love of My own, and I receive only the crumbs no other would accept."

(Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA®, Fostoria, Ohio, Pg. 5-6.)

Our contemporary world is well classified as a "culture of death" for it has turned away from its God Who is both the source and the end of all Life. Others identify it as a "culture of rejection." It denies the incomparable dignity and value of the human person, reducing it to mere scientific specimen or a commodity in the market of greed, power and indulgence. God is no longer feared, although one day He will have to be faced, and only those who have known Him in His Son will be able to face Him without fear. Who dare follow Jesus if he or she is not willing to be nailed to His cross?

At Pentecost those who had walked with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry, His Mother, the apostles and disciples, numbering about 120 in all, were baptized with the fire of the Holy Spirit and were emboldened to come out of hiding and fear and to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, the anointed one sent by God as our Savior, He Who was crucified and died but was raised up in testimony of His divinity and His victory over sin and death. With Peter's bold sermon the crowds gathered in Jerusalem had their own Pentecost experience as each heard the Word proclaimed by Peter in his or her own language. Many came to believe in Jesus, repented of their sins and were baptized that day. How fitting that the one who denied Jesus three times during His Passion should also be the one who proclaims Him first and so boldly now, the one who would give witness to the infinite mercy of God in the forgiveness of sin and follow Jesus to the cross, humbly asking that his be turned upside down, as he was not worthy to die in the same manner as His Lord Whom he had thrice denied. Discipleship is the vocation of every Christian and following Christ will inevitably lead one to the hill of

Calvary, to the cross of victory! Jesus forewarned us what to expect because He has chosen us to be His own!

If the world hates you, realize it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you, 'No slave is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also....And they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me. ...Whoever hates me also hates my Father. ...When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me....I have told you this so that you may not fall away. They will expel you from the synagogues; in fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God. They will do this because they have not known either the Father or me. I have told you this so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you.

(John 15: 18-27; 16:1-5)

Are we not in a new age of martyrdom? It is said there were more martyrs in the 20th century than in all the other centuries combined. Roughly two thirds of the Church's official martyrs endured martyrdom during the 20th century under dictatorial regimes. Pope Pius XI called the Soviet Union, Spain and Mexico the "Terrible Triangle" from which communism and free masonry spread its attempts to annihilate the Catholic Church by killing priests and religious, Catholics and Christians. The Bolshevik Revolution with its ideology of atheistic communism took place in 1917, followed in the 1920's by Fascism which saw the Catholic Church as the enemy of the state. We are familiar with the persecution of the Church in Portugal when Our Lady appeared to the Fatima children in 1917. The Mexican Revolution begun in 1910 led to the Cristero War and its attack upon clergy and Catholics from 1926 – 1929 and is highlighted in a recent film, *For Greater Glory*, depicting the Cristero War to defend the Catholic Church and Faith in Mexico. In 2000 blessed John Paul II canonized 25 martyrs from that war; in 2005 Pope Benedict beatified the teen martyr depicted in that movie, Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio. The Spanish Civil War of 1936 earned Spain the title "a nation of martyrs" because of its persecution of the Church. It is estimated that over 6,800 priests and religious and 4,000 laity suffered martyrdom during that war and about 1,000 have been canonized or beatified to date. The devastation of World War I left people easy prey for dictators who promised strong leadership and national recovery, like Mussolini, Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, with their socialistic, atheistic ideologies. The power struggles that ensued, however, gave rise to World War II as forewarned by Our Lady at Fatima and saw over 6 million Jews and another 5 million non-Jews annihilated in the holocaust of the Nazi regime. Two of the most well known martyrs of the Nazi concentration camps canonized by Blessed John Paul II are Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein. Documents show that Blessed John Paul II alone canonized 482 saints during his reign

in the 20th century. Among them were 103 Korean martyrs; 120 Chinese; 116 Vietnamese, some in Japan and some in the Slovak Republic, and 25 from the Mexican Revolution. These numbers do not even consider martyrs, such as Maria Goretti, canonized by other Popes of the 20th century. With the present trend toward increasing atheistic socialistic ideology in America and in the world we can expect more persecution of the Catholic Church and of Christians who hold fast to their belief in Jesus and in Divine Truth over man's law.

Interestingly, Blessed John Paul II formed a "New Martyrs Commission" in 1996 in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, to undertake a study of so many unknown martyrs who either died or suffered terrible persecution for the Faith at the hands of totalitarian regimes so we might honor them and be inspired by their lives. If we choose to follow Jesus, we must be prepared to face persecution and/or martyrdom in any age. The Old Testament gave us the warrior as the model for battle. The New Testament, following the example of Jesus, gives us the martyr as the model for battle, for the battle is not one for territory and goods but a spiritual battle for men's souls, a battle not against men but against the powers and principalities and evil spirits in the heavens and against the evil one himself. Spiritual victory is won from within, not from without. It is won, not with weapons made by man but on the battlefield of the mind, the heart and the soul with the sword of Divine Truth and Love aimed at conversion, not destruction. This spiritual battle demands courageous suffering and death born for the love and forgiveness of the enemy in imitation of Christ and in witness to a higher Truth -- that there is no evil that love cannot conquer! While the soldier often dies out of hate for his enemy, the martyr dies out of love for his persecutors, for as long as there is life the enemy is a potential friend. Jesus speaks to the gift of one's life in martyrdom, for the sacredness of natural human life is not an absolute good but is always ordained to the higher good of the supernatural life and union with God. Jesus tells us:

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn 15:13.) "Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father." (Mt 10:32.) "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." (Lk 9:23.) "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father." (Mt 5:44-45.)

Why is Mary called Queen of Martyrs? Because she is the Queen of heaven and earth as Mother of her King Son, and because not even martyrdom by blood can compare to the martyrdom of suffering she endured as co-redeemer with Christ in God's plan for our salvation. No other human person has lived more intimately with Christ than she, nor followed Him more closely. She shared in His Passion and death as no other creature has or ever will. The same lance that pierced the heart of Jesus pierced

her own heart; her mystical death with Jesus on Calvary was more cruel than any physical martyrdom could have been for her. She is Our Lady of Sorrows. "Come and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow."

The bounty of martyrs in the 20th century stands against the enormity of evil that has characterized that century with its world wars and atomic bombs and holocausts of innocent lives in the power struggle of one dictator after another. Is it any wonder then that the Queen of Martyrs should come to earth in that same century assuming a prophetic role under the new image of Our Lady of America®, calling us to a reform of life and return to Faith and Purity? In April 1957 Our Lady spoke thus to Sister Mildred Neuzil:

"My sweet child, unless my children reform their lives, they will suffer great persecution. If man himself will not take upon himself the penance necessary to atone for his sins and those of others, God in His justice will have to send upon him the punishment necessary to atone for his transgressions."
(Diary, Pg. 17.)

Is it any wonder that Our Lady, having revealed herself as the **Immaculate Conception** to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes on March 25, 1858, a title by which the United States honors her as our patroness, should acknowledge our devotion to her under that title and should favor us with her visit under the title of our country, **"Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin"**? Is it any wonder that with that favor comes the responsibility that **America be the nation dedicated to her purity, the nation mandated by heaven to lead the world in a spiritual renewal never before so necessary or so urgent?** Is it any wonder that Our Lady asks that she be honored under this title in our National Shrine and that a statue made in this image be enthroned there after being carried in solemn procession? **Has she not promised, to the United States in particular, miracles greater than those granted at Lourdes and Fatima if we fulfill her requests?** Has she not asked that the National Shrine be a place of special pilgrimage and she will make it a place of wonders, not just for America but for her children from all over the world? **Is it any wonder that Our Lady chose the feast of the North American martyrs whose blood was the seed of the faith in America for her great favor to us?** Is it any wonder that the most loving of all mothers should come to warn and plead with us to turn away from sin lest the hand of God's justice be forced to send us punishment in atonement hitherto unknown to us in America?

[Her particular warning to America] "My beloved daughter, what I am about to tell you concerns in a particular way my children in America. Unless they do penance by mortification and self-denial and thus reform their lives, God will visit them with punishments hitherto unknown to them." (Diary, Pg. 21.)

Given the state of affairs in America and in the world, it is no wonder Our Lady is calling for an army of chaste soldiers ready to fight to the death to preserve the purity of their souls, an army of brave lovers to bear, not the sword of destruction but the flaming sword of Divine Truth and Divine Love to once again set the world on fire with love for God and for one's fellow man. These are her words:

“My child, nothing is accomplished without pain. Prepare to suffer much. You see the sword in the Heart of your Mother. Suffering completed the work of divine grace in my soul. He who refuses to suffer will never abide in the Spirit of Christ, will never be formed into His image. (Diary, Pg. 23.) “My Son asks of souls love, that true love willing to sacrifice itself for the One loved. Man fears to sacrifice himself because he is selfish. If souls would place themselves into my keeping, I would teach them the way of true love. If men truly loved my Son, they would not quarrel with each other and they would have peace in their hearts.” (Diary, Pgs 15-16.)

“Beloved daughter, there is no true love unless there is sacrifice. A selfish heart cannot love because it is filled with self and so has no room for love. My precious one, if self-love be true, it contains within itself the love of all and ignores no one. Your love then becomes God-love because it embraces and contains the love of everyone. Heed this, sweet child, then you will despise no one, no matter what their conduct might be. The Heart of my Son is open to anyone who wishes to enter and is closed to none.” (Diary, Pg. 43.)

St. Michael was sent to Sister Mildred as a special protection against Satan’s attacks upon her and this vital message of Our Lady’s for America and the world. A host of angels was often seen hovering around her. The Church has always taught that nations, like people, have guardian angels, so it is no surprise that the guardian angels of America and the United States should not only appear to Sister in regard to this urgent message to pledge their help, but that they should identify themselves to her and refer again to the blood of martyrs.

“I am the Archangel Sardus, Protector, Guardian and Defender of America whose soil is saturated with martyrs’ blood and honors so highly the Queen of Heaven and Her holy Spouse who work only to further the Kingdom of Jesus. With these shafts of light God seeks out and binds with eternal chains the evil powers and those who have sold themselves to these enemies of God and His people. They who are chained to habits of sin through weakness but have hearts filled with guilt and repentance will have their chains broken so that they will be free once more to love and serve their Master. Listen to the words and warnings of the Queen of Heaven and you will experience my protection and I will fight in your defense that with the people of all Nations you can at last come to the peace of the Kingdom which is within you.” (Diary, Pg. 42, August 22, 1981.)

Let us heed the words and warnings of Our Lady so we might know these angels’ mighty protection! Let us pray for our enemies and the enemies of Christ and His Church so we may truly be the children of God!

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