

THOUSANDS DIE
FOR THEIR FAITH EACH YEAR.
HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND?

Modern Martyrs

BY DANIEL PHILPOTT

In Rome, martyrs' relics are nothing unusual. Bones of early Christians who were beheaded or thrown to lions seem to lie in or under every piazza. The relics at the Basilica of San Bartolomeo, however, often provoke a double take. In the shadows and candlelight of the side chapels in this 10th-century church, visitors will find relics of a more modern sort: the Bible of Pakistan's Shahbaz Bhatti, whom terrorists shot dead only last year; the missal of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed while celebrating Mass in San Salvador in March 1980; the Bible of Evariste Cagorora, who had sought shelter in a church during the Rwandan genocide of 1994; a letter by Christian de Chergé, a Trappist monk of Notre Dame de l'Atlas in Algeria, whom Islamist terrorists killed in May 1996.

The basilica, which sits on Tiber Island astride Rome's Trastevere district, is run by the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay movement, as a unique testament to today's Christian martyrs. Yet few of the stories told by its relics have reached Catholics in Portland, Paris or Pittsburgh.

The global church must be more ardent in its solidarity with today's martyrs. How should it show this solidarity? What is most distinctive about today's martyrs is their witness to justice and reconciliation. Tertullian famously wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church." History has proven him right. The witness of Christians willing to die for Christ propelled the astonishing growth of the early church; hence the abundance of their relics in Rome. Today's martyrs build the church as well.

But today's martyrs also further the apostolic work of the church in broader ways articulated during the Second Vatican Council and the years that followed: by promoting religious freedom, unity among

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CNS PHOTO BY ARTURO CAMPOS CEDILLO

Christian churches, friendship among world religions and the transforming power of forgiveness in politics. In solidarity with the martyrs, we, too, should recognize and promote these dimensions of their sacrifice, commemorated by the relics in San Bartolomeo.

Taking Notice Today

Behind the witness of today's martyrs lies the stark reality of their numbers. More Christians were martyred in the 20th century than in all previous centuries combined, according to David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, two of the world's leading religious demographers. The trend has not abated in this century. Though the statistics are uncertain and highly dependent on counting methodologies, the number of Christians killed for their faith every year almost certainly lies in the thousands and possibly tens of thousands. According to the International Society for Human Rights, Christians are estimated to make up 80 percent of those who are persecuted for their religion. They have been killed in India, Vietnam, Iraq, Colombia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Sri Lanka, China and Indonesia.

As the ranks of Christian martyrs have grown, more and more activists and organizations have taken notice. In the early 1990s, once the cold war no longer dominated global human rights debates, several advocacy organizations, along with activists like Nina Shea, author of *In the Lion's Den*, and Paul Marshall, who wrote *Their Blood Cries Out*, succeeded in drawing attention to what had become one of the largest classes of human rights violations in the world: the denial of religious freedom to Christians. Others joined their efforts, including Jewish writers like A. M. Rosenthal of *The New York Times* and the Hudson Institute's Michael Horowitz, several Jewish organizations, numerous Protestant churches, the Mormon Church and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Mainstream human rights organizations were skeptical at first. In an interview in 1997, Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, derided the cause as "special pleading" and "an effort to privilege certain classes of victims." Religious freedom achieved a major victory, however, in 1998, when the U.S. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, which established an office in the State Department to promote the religious free-

dom not only of Christians but of people of all faiths.

For its part, the global Catholic Church drew attention to the issue in preparation for the Jubilee Year in 2000. Pope John Paul II created a commission to study Christian martyrs of the 20th century, one that worked in the Basilica of San Bartolomeo to assemble 12,000 dossiers on incidents of martyrdom. Meanwhile, Catholic writers like Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, and Robert Royal of the Faith and Reason Institute wrote histories of 20th-century martyrs.

Over the years that followed, the church's attention tapered off, though martyrdom did not. Now voices in the church are taking up the cause again. John L. Allen Jr. writes regularly in his columns for *The National Catholic Reporter* urging the global church to wake up to ongoing Christian bloodshed. On Sept. 12, the U.S. Catholic bishops held a conference on international religious freedom in Washington, D.C. Still, the question of how to respond to martyrdom today is one that the church has only begun to confront.

Martyrdom as Eucharist

The church's response should stress the fact that modern martyrs' witness for justice flows from the very meaning of the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI, in his exhortation on the Eucharist, "Sacramentum Caritatis," describes the conversion of bread and wine to body and blood through the remarkable metaphor of nuclear fission, which, he says, "set[s] off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire

world." This transformation includes the world's social relations, the pope explains. The Christian who lives out the grace of the Eucharist will strive, for instance, to bring reconciliation to armed conflict, transform unjust structures and restore respect for human dignity.

Anticipating being fed to wild beasts by the Emperor Commodus, St. Ignatius of Antioch, a first-century bishop, wrote that "to make bread the wheat must be ground, and to make wine the grapes must be crushed, so I want my members to be broken and ground by the beasts' teeth to become a sacrifice to God." Martyrdom is a eucharistic act, Ignatius tells us. Like the Eucharist, it entails not only the martyr's death—which his executioners hope will annihilate his efforts—but also transformation. This transformation always involves the building of the church but also involves justice and reconciliation in politics,



**Blessed Miguel Pro, S.J.,
faces his executioners, Mexico, 1927.**

society and relations among churches and religions.

The church itself has come to see more and more that recognizing martyrdom can promote justice by expanding its view of who counts as a martyr. It used to be that a martyr was one who was killed strictly in *odium fidei*, out of hatred for the faith. Increasingly, though, the church has come to recognize martyrs who were killed not precisely for their faith but rather for acts of justice motivated by their faith. Take, for instance, St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan priest who was killed after he took the place of a condemned prisoner at Auschwitz, not for his faith *per se*; or Don Pino Pugilisi, a Sicilian priest whom the Mafia killed for speaking out against its thuggery; or Archbishop Romero, who stood against oppression of the poor.

That martyrdom furthers justice may be difficult to believe in view of the thousands of Christians who have died alone and anonymous in the dark jail cells of dictators during the past century. But if we look closer at acts of martyrdom, perhaps with the eyes of faith, we can see at least four ways in which they have furthered the church's mission of justice and reconciliation.

First, martyrs give testimony to the justice that is violated in their very murder: that of religious freedom. The most memorable of the Second Vatican Council's teachings on social justice was the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (1965), which taught that the human right of religious freedom is grounded in the very dignity of the human person as one who searches for and flourishes through religious truth. Today, nearly 75 percent of the world's population, including people of all faiths, live in countries with high restrictions on religious freedom, the Pew Forum reported in 2010. Martyrs offer a witness against the denial of religious freedom and a demand for regimes to protect it.

One recent martyrdom testifies strikingly to the cause of religious freedom, that of Shabaz Bhatti, assassinated in Islamabad, Pakistan, on March 2, 2011, in a shooting for which Tehrik-i-Taliban, a militant Islamist group, claimed responsibility. A Catholic in a country where Christians make up 2 percent of the population, Bhatti had dedicated his life to the cause of religious minorities and had become Pakistan's federal minister for national harmony, a cabinet post that he accepted for the sake of "the oppressed, down-trodden and marginalized" of Pakistan, as he explained.

Lobbying against Pakistan's harsh blasphemy law, promoting interfaith cooperation and advocating for minorities of all faiths, including the browbeaten Ahmadiyya movement of Islam, Bhatti knew that his life was in danger. He had renounced marriage because he did not want to leave a family fatherless. In a video that he made to be released in the event of his death, he stated, "I believe in Jesus Christ who has given his own life for us, and I am ready to die for a cause. I'm living for my community...and



The Impact of Catholic Education in America: Past, Present and Future

Conference June 20-22, 2013 • University of Portland

Request for Papers: The Garaventa Center at the University of Portland invites paper proposals for a conference highlighting the history of Catholic Education in America and the conditions, programs and circumstances which have allowed Catholic schools to flourish across the nation. Steeped in a rich tradition of educating all who present themselves at our door, the Catholic educational system has transformed American society and culture in creative and meaningful ways. This gathering of scholars, administrators, students and Church leaders will review the past and assess present circumstances as a lens through which to view current challenges and future possibilities.

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The deadline for submissions of a one-page abstract for individual paper is Friday, January 11, 2013. Notification of acceptance will be sent by Friday, February 1, 2013. One page abstracts with full contact information, should be emailed to Powell@up.edu

Keynote Speaker: Thomas Groome, Chair, Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College

Invited Speakers: Regina Haney (NCEA), Rev. Joseph O'Keefe, SJ (Boston College), Sr. M. Angela Shaughnessy (St. Catharine College), Lorraine Ozar (Loyola University-Chicago), Martin Scanlan (Marquette), Sr. Dale McDonald (NCEA), Sr. Clare Fitzgerald, SSND, and Kathy Mears (NCEA)

Additional Information: The conference will be held on the University of Portland campus and begins with the keynote address on Thursday, June 20, 2013 and ends Saturday, June 22, 2013. Additional conference information at www.up.edu/garaventa or email powell@up.edu



I will die to defend their rights.”

A second fruit of martyrdom is ecumenism. The Community of Sant’Egidio quite deliberately includes Protestant and Orthodox martyrs in its displays in San Bartolomeo, as it does in its annual prayer service, held in Rome’s Basilica of St. John Lateran during Holy Week, to remember Christians who were slain during the past year. Building friendships with the “separated brethren” in pursuit of the unity of the church, of course, is also a theme of the Second Vatican Council. Each martyrdom affords church communities the chance to recognize in each other what all Christians regard as the truest devotion to Christ—following him in his death on the cross. Historically, as John Allen points out, shared martyrdom under the Nazis and the Soviets propelled rapprochement among Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches. Cardinal Kurt Koch of Switzerland, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, calls it “ecumenism of the martyrs.”

Third, martyrdom witnesses to friendship not only among Christian churches but also between religions. Some might question this, pointing out that martyrdom is a result of conflict with other faiths. In this regard, attention may be given especially to Muslims, who, according to a report by David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, are responsible for more martyrdoms today than any other religion in the modern era. Still, it is important to remember that Christians are killed by members of many faiths as well as by militant secularists and that they sometimes also kill others for their faith. How, then, does martyrdom build anything other than tension between faiths?

An answer comes from Christian de Chergé, abbot of the Trappist monastery in Atlas, Algeria. He and his fellow monks had inhabited Atlas for two generations, living among the Muslim villagers, befriending them and providing them with medical care. When civil war broke out in the 1990s between Algeria’s repressive secular government and Islamic opposition forces, the monks were in danger of being murdered by Muslim terrorists. As portrayed in the recent film “Of Gods and Men,” the monks decided to stay and remain true to their mission.

Abbot de Chergé then penned a note to his future killers. He did not desire martyrdom, he made clear, lest it reinforce caricatures of Algerian Muslims as fanatics. But should he be killed, he desired to “immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ.” Here is neither syncretism nor triumphalism but rather Christ-like love for Muslims. Then, to “the friend of my final moment,” he writes, “may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves’ in

Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both.”

The funeral for de Chergé and his fellow monks, held in June 1996 in Algiers, drew a crowd of 100,000, displaying Algerian Muslims’ love for the monks. Similarly, after 25 Christians were slain on New Year’s Day 2011 in Alexandria, Egypt, thousands of Muslims congregated in candlelight vigils and formed human chains around Coptic churches to protect them during worship. As with Christian churches, members of different faiths recognize holiness in martyrdom and thus are, or at least can be, brought together in friendship.

In his last testament, Abbot de Chergé willed “to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.” Forgiveness is the fourth way that martyrdom transforms social and political life. In the Christian tradition, forgiveness is a gift that one who has been offended or wounded gives to the offender. It is not only a waiving of charges or a cancellation of debt but also an invitation to conversion and reconciliation. The Eucharist is an act of forgiveness because it performs the sacrifice by which God died for humanity “while we were still sinners” and in so doing lifts up humanity.

Paul Bhatti, Shahbaz Bhatti’s brother, forgave his brother’s killers on April 5, 2011, when he traveled to Rome for a conference that the Community of Sant’Egidio held in his brother’s memory. His family had forgiven the assassins “because...our brother Shahbaz was a Christian and the Christian faith tells us to forgive,” he explained. Paul Bhatti was living in Italy when his brother was slain, John Allen reports, and was at first filled with rage and shunned appeals to move back to Pakistan and carry on his brother’s fight for minorities. When he traveled back to Pakistan to attend his brother’s funeral, though, his heart was moved by the love for his brother that he saw among Pakistanis, including Muslims. Picking up his fallen brother’s standard, and practicing the martyr’s constructive forgiveness, Bhatti accepted the position of minister for national harmony to the president of Pakistan for religious minorities.

The global church’s response to today’s martyrs must consider another link to the Eucharist: It is an act of remembrance. In remembering, we make the past present. So, through the Spirit, as common members of the body of Christ, let us recall, honor, praise, commend and imitate the martyrs’ act of love in our liturgy and in our prayer, in our parishes and in our homes. Let us also make present the martyrs’ eucharistic sacrifice by joining ourselves to this act’s transforming dimension. More than any speech, tract or academic argument, the martyr’s act lends credibility and motivation to the work of justice and reconciliation. In continuing this work, we, like Paul Bhatti, take up our fallen brothers’ standards. **A**

ON THE WEB

Luke Hansen, S.J., reports on his trip to Guantánamo Bay. americamagazine.org/podcast