MARTYRDOM AND THE CALL TO DAILY WITNESS IN THE TEACHING OF POPE JOHN PAUL II[1]

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Abstract. This article explores Pope John Paul II's understanding of martyrdom and its meaning for Christian life and witness today. Drawing especially on the cathcal *Veritatis Splendor* and post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, it presents martyrdom as the fullest expression of fidelity to Christ, rooted in his Paschal Mystery and sustained by grace, truth, love, and hope. The article examines the Christological, anthropological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions of martyrdom. It also highlights John Paul II's understanding of "daily martyrdom," through which Christians are called to give themselves faithfully to Christ in ordinary life. In this sense, martyrdom remains a living vocation amid secularization, moral indifference, and contemporary challenges.

Keywords: martyrdom, John Paul II, daily witness, Christian discipleship, Paschal Mystery

Introduction

Martyrdom stands at the heart of the Catholic Church's witness and faith,[2] embodying the ultimate act of fidelity to

1 GenAI Disclosure Statement: This paper used GenAI for grammar check of the introduction and conclusion only. The GenAI technology used was ChatGPT.

2 "Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death." Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), par. 2473. Hereafter CCC followed by paragraph number.

Christ, the "origin of martyrdom,"[3] and participation in His Paschal Mystery.[4] Far from being a relic of the early Church, martyrdom continues to speak powerfully to the present, as seen in the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where many still suffer and die *in odium fidei* (in hatred of the faith).[5] According to *OpenDoors USA,* there are millions of Christians around the world who suffer intense persecution and discrimination for their faith.[6] While *Pew Research Center* reports that Christian persecution happens in more than one hundred forty-three countries around the world.[7] At the same time, in secular and pluralistic societies, martyrdom takes on a new form, such as the struggle to defend human dignity,

3 St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* [As the Third Millenium Draws Near], Apostolic Letter, November 1994, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html, para. 37.

4 Early Christian historical sources show evidence of how the early Church suffered from persecution due to the act of witnessing Christ by expressing the Christian faith and imitating Christ's Paschal Mystery. See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts, and Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.)

5 See stories in Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), https://www.churchinneed.org. This pontifical foundation publishes reports which meticulously document and analyze the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities, calling for religious freedom. The reports detail instances of violence, harassment, and death suffered in odium fidei in those regions. See also Global Christian Relief, "Christian Persecution Stories," https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/.

6 OpenDoors, "The 2025 World Watch List," https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/.

7 Pew Research Center, "Key Findings from the Global Religious Futures Projects," December 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/. Also, "Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down," https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/.

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family life, and religious freedom. These people who defend these values, goods, and virtues, according to St. John Paul II, though do not shed their blood for Christ, are "teachers of the faith, missionaries, confessors, bishops, priests, virgins, married couples, widows and children...[and the] nameless '*unknown soldiers*.'"[8] We also include those who fervently fight against moral indifference, systemic injustice, and what the late Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) called the dictatorship of relativism.[9] St. John Paul II, in his insightful and enriching theological reflections, deepened this understanding by presenting martyrdom not only as the shedding of blood but as the highest expression of truth and love that gives life to the Church. In *Veritatis Splendor,* he describes martyrdom as an "exaltation of the inviolable holiness of God," fully manifested in the martyr's joyful embrace of "death to a single mortal sin."[10]

Pope John Paul II presents martyrdom not only as an extraordinary event but also as a fundamental Christian calling that permeates daily life. The magisterial teachings of the Church, particularly in *Veritatis Splendor* and *Vita Consecrata*, describe martyrdom as the highest expression of truth, love, and freedom, rooted in total adherence to Christ. This expanded understanding invites further reflection, viewing martyrdom both as a historical reality and as an ongoing mission for all Christians.

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8 St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente,* para. 37.

9 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, Documents, April 2005, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

10 St. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* [The Splendor of Truth], Encyclicals, August 1993, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html, para. 90.

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In the secular context of the modern world marked by moral relativism and, at times, hostility toward religion believers are increasingly called to witness to their faith through daily acts of martyrdom. This "daily martyrdom" does not necessarily involve physical death but rather demands steadfast fidelity to the Gospel through self-denial, moral courage, and active love. Such witness allows believers to participate in Christ's Paschal Mystery, as they continually die to themselves in order to live according to truth and love. In this sense, martyrdom is both an event and a lived experience, shaping a common path of discipleship for all Christians.

This study examines the relationship between martyrdom and the call to daily witness in the teachings of Pope John Paul II. It argues that his vision presents martyrdom as a dynamic and enduring reality that bridges heroic sacrifice and everyday Christian life. Grounded in faith, love, and hope, his theology emphasizes that all believers are called to embody the spirit of martyrdom in their contemporary context. Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate that martyrdom is not a distant ideal but an essential dimension of the Christian vocation. In the thought of Pope John Paul II, the witness of life, lived in truth, sustained by grace, and expressed through love, remains a powerful testimony that continues to shape the mission of the Church in the present age.

Theological Context of Martyrdom

Martyrdom has long been considered one of the most profound forms of witness of the Christian faith, deeply rooted in Scripture, tradition, and the lived experience of the church. The word "martyr" derives from the Greek term *martys*, meaning "witness" or one "who testifies". The verb form *martyreō* means to "bear witness" or "to testify." Before Christianity, the ancient Greek culture used the term in

judicial or legal contexts. Hence, a "*martys*" is someone who was called to give testimony in a court of law. This meaning of "martyr" is also carried over into the New Testament, where witnessing is closely associated with the mission of Christ and his disciples. Jesus Christ is described as "the faithful witness" as mentioned in Rev 1:5 that "From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth, to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" and again as "the faithful and true witness" (Rev 3:14). These passages show that the language of *martyrdom* in the New Testament is rooted first in the idea of faithful witness and testimony.

The same understanding is evident in the mission entrusted to the disciples. After his resurrection, Jesus tells them, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). Likewise, before his ascension, he tells them: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus, in its original New Testament sense, *martys* refers not merely to someone who dies for the faith but, more fundamentally, to one who bears faithful witness to Christ and the Gospel through words, actions, and the whole of one's life.[11] But later on, the word "martyr" meant someone who died due to persecution or by hatred of the Christian faith (*odium fidei*).[12] In this context, a martyr came to be identified with those who bore the ultimate testimony of faith through death, most notably during the persecutions in the first three centuries. In this sense, it was understood as a "proof" sealed

11 Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8 (New Revised Standard Version).

12 Otto Semmelroth, "Martyrdom," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 3, edited by Karl Rahner (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 417.

with blood for the truth of Christian belief.[13] This view is inked in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* which defined martyrdom as "the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity."[14] Gradually, the word "martyr" was understood in a narrower sense, referring specifically to those whose witness was confirmed by the offering of their lives.[15]

On the other hand, the term "martyrdom," first used around the year 160 in a letter of St. Polycarp, usually indicates death for the Christian faith.[16] The 2nd-century Church Father Tertullian said, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."[17] According to him, martyrdom implies a total sacrifice of a Christian's life for the faith. It was a "proof" sealed with blood.[18] While St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, viewed it as an act that consists in the will to do all in sacrifice for Christ, the desire to confess the faith, and to die for Christ.[19] In Polycarp's Martyrology, the martyrs are urged to act prudently and yet bravely.[20] With these ideas, we can say that martyrdom is for those who are deeply faithful to God and Christ who testify and confess their faith until death. The love of one's Christian faith

13 Msgr. Shim Sang-Tai and Others, *The Founding Ancestors of the Catholic Church in Korea*, trans. Prof. Hamm Meeja (Suwon, Republic of Korea: The Committee for the Beatification and Canonization, Diocese of Suwon, Catholic Church in Korea, 2015), 44.

14 CCC 2473.

15 CCC 2473.

16 James Edward Sherman, *The Nature of Martyrdom* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1942), 10.

17 Joyce Ellen Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

18 Sherman, *Nature of Martyrdom*, 3.

19 Sherman, *Nature of Martyrdom*,16.

20 Shim Sang-Tai, *Founding Ancestors*, 48-49.

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is considered the best form of active confession or witness of faith and truth.

Along with the confession of faith is the upholding of the truth and other virtues that come with it. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* understands martyrdom in this sense. He understands it as a "manifestation of the truth of Christ. The reason is that all virtues concerning God are a clear profession of faith. Therefore, not only faith but also all virtues can be the basis for martyrdom."[21] For him, the necessary ground for martyrdom is not limited solely to the Christian faith but also encompasses individual virtues and ascetic practices. That is why, for Karl Rahner, an active manner of fighting to defend God's truth, justice, and individual ethical virtues is a form of martyrdom.[22] For instance, Archbishop Oscar A. Romero was killed for his active manner of defending justice for the poor and the oppressed in El Salvador.[23] Affirming the views of Aquinas and Rahner, St. John Paul II also sees martyrdom as the virtue exalting the glory of God's infallible law.[24] He also pointed out that John the Baptist became a martyr as he never hesitated to speak about God's law and protest evil without any excuse: "John the Baptist sacrificed his life for 'truth and justice.' So, he became the one who prepared the way of the Lord."[25]

Martyrdom, therefore, should be understood not only in terms of the moment of death but also in terms of the life of

21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, pt. 2, sec. 2, q. 124 (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 2.2.124.

22 Karl Rahner, *Dimensionen des Martyriums*, in *Schriften zur Theologie XVI* (Zürich: Benziger, 1984), 295–299.

23 Shim Sang-Tai, *Founding Ancestors*, 44.

24 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 90-94.

25 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, trans. Keong Seung Hyeon (Seoul: Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea, 1994), 90–95.

witness that leads to it. For St. John Paul II, martyrdom is a testimony of fidelity to Christ that involves the whole person and the whole of one's life. It is expressed through faithfulness to the truth, courage in the face of suffering, and the willingness to give oneself for Christ and for others. John the Baptist is a good example of this understanding. St. John Paul II states that John "sacrificed his life for 'truth and justice'" and thus became the one who prepared the way of the Lord. His witness was not limited to his death; it was already evident in the way he proclaimed God's truth and confronted evil. His death finally confirmed the witness he had given throughout his life. In this sense, martyrdom reaches its fullest meaning in a life faithfully given to Christ. The shedding of blood remains the supreme expression of martyrdom, but the martyr's final witness is rooted in a life of faith, truth, courage, and self-giving love. This understanding helps us appreciate St. John Paul II's broader vision of martyrdom as a witness that involves the whole person and the whole of one's life.

The Theological Vision of Martyrdom according to St. John Paul II

1. The Trinitarian Dimension: Christological and Pneumatological

Martyrdom reflects a kind of life that is like Christ. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, martyrdom is an act akin to Christ, who laid down his life for us. With this, "Christians have been called upon – and some will always be called upon – to give the supreme testimony of this love to all men, but especially to persecutors."[26] Therefore, the martyrs are living witnesses of self-giving. By their deeds, they worship God in Spirit and in truth, and just

26 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (hereafter LG), no. 42.

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as Christ shed His blood to show God's mercy, so the martyrs, through their bravery and constancy, show that very mercy to the world.[27] That deep-seated faith by which the martyrs are actuated does not come from themselves, but rather from a gift in which God speaks to His Church. They have been chosen for this by the Father to fulfill His holy will as it shapes and governs their whole lives, which include their thoughts, decisions, and concrete actions. Martyrdom is not simply the end of earthly life, but rather a passage into new life, eternal life in communion with God and the Church. The true meaning of martyrdom is found in integrating the divine and human dimensions, as it is both a sanctifying act of theological significance and a living homage to human dignity, fully dedicated to God.

St. John Paul II has considered martyrdom in such a way that the death of the martyrs themselves is actually an image of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. For example, at the Beatification ceremony for the martyrs of the French Revolution, and those who suffered in Spain during the Civil War, on October 1, 1995, in his homily, he said, "In these new blesseds Christ is manifested in a particular way: the riches of his paschal mystery, his Cross and Resurrection."[28] In other words, they are living portraits of Jesus Christ. Their life and death reflect a visible sign, in a powerful way, of the core pattern of Christ's life, that is, suffering leading to glory, and death leading to new life. Further, one can say that their lives are a concrete, historical demonstration of how the power of

27 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of Eight Spanish Martyrs*, Homilies, March 7, 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_07031999.html

28 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of the Martyrs of the French Revolution and the Spanish Civil War*, Homilies, October 1, 1995, https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/martyrdom-a-special-gift-of-the-spirit-beatification-of-martyrs-of-8729?

Christ's death and resurrection is still active and transformative in the lives of ordinary people. In this context, one can say that John Paul II emphasized the Christological orientation of martyrdom, which is obviously highlighted in the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*, which describes martyrdom "as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love."[29]

Interpreting martyrdom in the light of the Paschal Mystery allowed John Paul II to continue the theological orientation of Vatican II and deepen its implications. He emphasized in his interpretation the parallelism between the Christological and ecclesiological dimensions of martyrdom, highlighting that martyrdom is not a defeat but rather a victory, a conformity to Christ, which benefits the life of the Church and serves as a prophetic sign of the eschatological hope of resurrection. It is from the Paschal Mystery that every martyrdom derives its meaning and strength to be fully lived. In his homily at the canonization of St. Maximilian, John Paul II noted that the life exemplified by St. Kolbe was inseparable from the perfect example of Christ. He said, "Maximilian Kolbe did not die, but he gave his life. [...] This offering made possible through the power of Christ."[30] In this respect, the proclamation emphasizes that martyrdom, more than a noble human act, is a grace derived from an intense union with Christ, who died and rose again. Jesus Himself is the absolute model, and in Him, every witness is called to imitate His self-giving and His love unto the end. Hence, St. Maximilian Kolbe becomes a sign of the victory of love over hatred and selfishness, as he conformed to Christ in offering his life for others in the highest expression.

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29 LG 42.

30 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe* (10 October 1982), PiercedHearts.org, https://www.piercedhearts.org/jpii/jpii_homilies/homilies_1982/oct_10_1982_canonization_max_kolbe.htm (accessed Oct. 4, 2025).

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In every instance in which the Church confers the laurel of martyrdom, the martyrs become endowed with a likeness to Christ crucified. In the homily for the canonization of Edith Stein, John Paul II invokes this Pauline passage: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."[31] There, the mystery of Christ's own self-offering frames the saint's life in martyrdom, while the saint's sacrifice participates in the Paschal sacrifice of the crucified Messiah. In this way, every martyr is pulled further into the mystery of the Cross, not as an isolated event but as an extension and icon of Christ's redemptive act.

Moreover, John Paul II formulates a eucharistic imagery in which the lives of the martyrs are understood as becoming "broken bread" for others. In his Message for World Mission Sunday (2005), he mentions "bread broken for the life of the world" to underscore how Christ's self-giving serves as the model of mission and sacrifice, which can be easily applied to the subject of martyrdom.[32] Turning toward Christ's sacrifice thus renders a martyr a living sacrament: self-giving in life for the life of others, just as Christ gave Himself. The ground where their blood watered as life is coupled with that sanctifying confession. Their suffering, then, was for the Church.[33] Hence, martyrdom is not an isolated act of dying but shares in

31 John Paul II, "Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein," Homily, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), 14 October 1998, Weekly Edition in English, 1.

32 John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for World Mission Sunday 2005 - "Mission: Bread Broken for the Life of the World,"* 22 February 2005, Messages, http://vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/missions/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20050222_world-day-for-missions-2005.html.

33 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs*, 5 March 2000, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041231_te-deum.html

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the Paschal Mystery of Christ and serves as an eschatological seed of ecclesial life.

Martyrdom is also understood in the context of how the Holy Spirit works. In the Gospel of John, Jesus affirmed that the Holy Spirit would come to bear witness to him (John 15:26). Any spirit that does not confess Christ is not from God (cf. 1 John 4:2). On the contrary, for the witnesses who confess Christ, it is certainly the Spirit of God who is at work in them. Martyrdom is the most eloquent expression of Jesus' sacrifice. The witnesses themselves cannot do this without being consecrated by the Holy Spirit. John Paul II said: "Where the Spirit of sanctification (cf. Rom 1:4) is poured out, everything contrary to holiness is destroyed." [34] Moreover, the Holy Spirit accomplishes the sanctification and divinization of man. John Paul II emphasized that the Spirit of God not only destroys sin but also sanctifies man.

In addition, witnesses are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Gospel. "Just as he transformed the first disciples into courageous apostles who preached the word of God, the Holy Spirit continues to prepare witnesses to the Gospel in our own time."[35] John Paul II added that the inner strength and supernatural courage for martyrdom are a special gift given by the Holy Spirit to those who follow him. Jesus promised: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

34 John Paul II, *General Audience*, July 22, 1998, Audiences, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_22071998.html

35 John Paul II, *Message for World Mission Day*, May 28, 1996, Messages, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/missions/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_28051996_world-day-for-missions-1996.html

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2. The Anthropological Perspective on Martyrdom

2.1 The Dignity and Value of Human Life

In John Paul II's view, martyrdom cannot be dissociated from the noble dignity of the human person created in the image of God. He often cited *Gaudium et Spes* no. 24 as the anthropological foundation for his theology of martyrdom: "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."[36] In this sense, to John Paul II, martyrdom represents the ultimate expression of self-giving whereby the human person comes to know the deepest truth of his own identity. Through the act of freely giving his life for love of God and for others, the martyr fulfills the human vocation perfectly "to love God and neighbor as oneself" (cf. Rom 13:9–10; 1 Jn 4:20). The unity for which Christ prayed for His disciples becomes a living reality in the martyr who becomes one with God and with humanity through love and truth. Thus construed, martyrdom is not just an act of heroism but a mystery of communion and self-gift that shows the full dignity of the human person in the light of the Holy Trinity. By giving his life, the martyr enters into the deepest communion with Christ, who gave himself in full measure that humanity might be together in love and in truth.

Furthermore, in his homilies for beatifications and canonizations, John Paul II often said that blood speaks loudest for the dignity of man. Speaking about Bernhard Lichtenberg and Karl Leisner, he said that their deaths were "a proclamation of the Gospel of life in the midst of a world of violence and death." Similarly, in the canonization of Edith Stein, he highlighted her self-offering as a profound affirmation that "love

36 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

is stronger than death," emphasizing that only love can fully safeguard the dignity of life in its integrity.[37]

Martyrdom exalts human dignity. The martyrs die not just for the reason of defending the divine truth but also for valuing the worth of the human life that is being given up for God's sake. During the beatification homily for Father Frelichowski, John Paul II described him as a "witness of love for others" and as a sign of humanity willing to live for one another. Therefore, there is never such a thing as senseless martyrdom, but rather, a proclamation of eternal life and of the indefeasible dignity of the human person as seen through Christ, who changes sacrifice into the fullness of life.[38]

2.2 Promoting Human Values in Honoring the Law of God

John Paul II believes that faith and morality are connected profoundly and irrevocably. This conviction has found its most striking expression in the life stories of martyrs who, at the cost of their blood, bore witness to moral truth and defended it even to the point of dying.[39] For them, the ultimate testimony to the Gospel was not doctrine in the abstract, but integrity, a life rooted in faith and ethical fidelity. Their sacrifice reveals that authentic morality cannot be divorced from faith in Christ, and likewise, true faith demands moral coherence.

Further, John Paul II reiterated that martyrs are defenders of both divine truth and the fundamental rights of the human person. Their witness proves that often, the preservation of human dignity and order needs the ultimate sacrifice. By

37 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein*.

38 John Paul II, *Homily in Toruń*, June 7, 1999, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19990607_torun.html

39 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 91.

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dying, martyrs give a blood-borne signature for the inviolable worth of the human being, thereby linking Christ's action of redemption with their own testimony to human freedom and justice.

But those martyrs have experienced, in the here and now, what it means to enjoy true freedom, such that they now no longer carry within themselves selfish motives or seek worldly glory. Their self-offering is not a deed of despair, but a manifestation of freedom, a divine gift that transcends all limitations of earthly power. That is how John Paul II made the point that the freedom we enjoy in this world is always fragile and limited, much like a seed, which needs cultivation and nourishment to grow.[40] Thus, martyrs have brought human freedom to its best realization by choosing to give up their lives that they might secure eternal life. For a world today epitomised by violence, injustice, and indifference, their example becomes a prophetic call to a new generation of witnesses, martyrs of love, justice, peace, and forgiveness, who are willing to transcend self-interest for the sake of society, not into an easy life, but toward a more humane and reconciled society.

2.3 Building a Just Society

St. John Paul II believed that martyrdom and the creation of a just society are closely linked because both are based on the same principles of human dignity, truth, and freedom. In his view, martyrdom is the highest proof of the existence of truth and justice. The martyr literally gives up their life as proof that the moral truth cannot be compromised, not even in front of the most tyrannical forces. Thus, martyrdom becomes a prophetic act that reveals the untruth of the power

40 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Maximilian Kolbe* (October 10, 1982).

structures that refuse to recognize both God and the worth of human beings.

John Paul II stated that a just society would have to rely on the supreme human dignity as its foundation and that this person's dignity was none other than the one attributed to God, as he said: "the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate, no individual, group, class, nation or State. Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority, by isolating, oppressing, or exploiting it, or by attempting to annihilate it."[41] This dignity, in turn, requires a society that is based on truth, solidarity, and the common good. The acts of the martyrs convey the message that society must be ethical and just, as these are the only conditions under which society can survive. The martyrs' lives and deaths demonstrate that selflessness is the true meaning of freedom, which is essentially the same principle that sustains social justice.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II points out that the martyr's "no" to evil is also a "yes" to the moral order willed by God. Therefore, martyrdom becomes a basis for the transformation of society, since it demonstrates that true justice must be built on moral truth, respect for conscience, and fidelity to God. A society that values such an example becomes more humane, peaceful, and just because it accepts the idea that the truth is more powerful than human authority and love is more victorious than death. As he said,

41 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (accessed October 13, 2025), par. 44.

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> Martyrdom is an *outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church*. Fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem*, so that the splendour of moral truth may be undimmed in the behaviour and thinking of individuals and society. This witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off, in civil society and within the ecclesial communities themselves, a headlong plunge into the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: *the confusion between good and evil*, which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities. By their eloquent and attractive example of a life completely transfigured by the splendour of moral truth, the martyrs and, in general, all the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law (cf. Wis 2:12), and they make the words of the Prophet echo ever afresh: 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!' (Is 5:20).[42]

The passage contains insightful statements that help us find the link between martyrdom and its social relevance and value. It speaks of martyrdom as the Church's most potent and luminous act of public witness. It says that by choosing death rather than betraying the moral good like justice, truth, and the welfare of all, the martyrs perform a supreme act of "missionary commitment" that cuts through the fundamental crisis of humanity, i.e., the catastrophic confusion between good and evil. In a world adrift in moral relativism, where the very foundations of a just society are eroded, the martyrs' blood becomes an undeniable testament, a stark light that refuses to let evil be called good or good evil. Their ultimate sacrifice is thus an extraordinary act of public service, a living reproof that reawakens the collective conscience and preserves the

42 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, par. 93.

very possibility of a moral order by demonstrating that truth exists and is worth everything.

John Paul II's theology and anthropology of martyrdom can be summarised as follows. Martyrdom is a form of faith in action. It is the consequence of a life lived completely for Christ. The martyr does not live for himself but for humanity and for the glory of God. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit for man to be able to transcend himself in this way. It is at this point that the martyr demonstrates the noble dignity of man.

3. Ecclesiological and Eschatological Dimensions of Martyrdom

3.1. Ecclesiological Dimension

The New Testament presents Jesus as the central model of Christian martyrdom. His obedience to the Father reached its highest point in his suffering and death on the cross. As Paul states, Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Hebrews similarly presents Jesus as the one who "endured the cross, disregarding its shame," and who remained faithful to his mission, "for the sake of the joy that lay before him" (Heb 12:2). Jesus' death, therefore, was not an isolated event but the culmination of a life completely given to the Father and to others. In this sense, he is the supreme model of Christian martyrdom.

At the same time, John the Baptist should also be considered in the biblical understanding of martyrdom. John remained faithful to his prophetic mission and courageously confronted Herod's wrongdoing, even though he knew that doing so could put his life at risk. Mark recounts that John had told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). Because of his faithful witness to the truth, John was imprisoned and eventually beheaded at the request of Herodias

(Mark 6:17–29). His death, therefore, was not simply the result of political circumstances but the consequence of his fidelity to God's truth and his prophetic mission. John's example shows that martyrdom is closely connected with a life of faithfulness to God and to the truth.

Therefore, Jesus should not be called the "original martyr" in a chronological sense. Rather, he is the supreme model of Christian martyrdom, while John the Baptist provides an important biblical example of a witness whose fidelity was ultimately confirmed by his death. This helps us understand martyrdom as the culmination of a life faithfully given to God.

This ecclesiological dimension is most apparent in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20. Here, Jesus makes it clear that he is not sending his disciples out into a neutral world.[43] Thus, Jesus expects his disciples to acknowledge him openly and to bear public witness to him. There is to be no attempt at concealment, and a general sense of piety does ccnot suffice. It is not possible to be a Christian or to be a church without the communion of suffering and fate with Jesus. The church is also a church of martyrs. A church that does not suffer would not be the church of Jesus Christ. Martyrdom is an essential part of the church.[44]

As Tertullian once said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." In fact, the martyrs have never stopped preaching the Gospel and testifying to what they preached with their blood. According to John Paul II, "The Church throughout history remains deeply rooted in the testimony of

43 Walter Kasper et al., *Theological Studies on Martyrdom, Series of Martyrdom* No.1 (Seoul: Brotherhood Publishing House, 2013), 351.

44 This does not mean that God the Father wills our suffering, but that the suffering is the consequence of witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

the martyrs."[45] Because, as he said, the Church as triumphed in all times, all nations, all languages, the people of God are strengthened in faith. The drops of blood of the martyrs are likened to bricks that build the temple of God. To concretize the aspect of the witness building the Church, we see that martyrdom contributes to the vitality of the Church, and is also the light and sign of the Church.

Through persecution and bloodshed, the Church has not weakened but, instead, has become stronger. At the beatification of 44 martyrs on March 5, 2000, Pope John Paul II pointed out the contribution of martyrs in Brazil. He said, "The martyrs have watered the land of their homeland, making it fertile so that new Christians can be born."[46] Not only have they contributed to the vitality of the Church, but they have also shone before us like lamps for the Church and for humanity, because they received the light of Christ to illuminate the darkness. In *Ecclesia in Europa,* he says:

> I intend, however, to draw particular attention to some of the signs which have emerged in the life of the Church herself. In the first place, together with the Synod Fathers, I want to point out to everyone, so that it will never be forgotten, that great sign of hope represented by the many witnesses to the Christian faith who lived in the last century, in both East and West. They found suitable ways to proclaim the Gospel amid situations of hostility and persecution, often even making the supreme sacrifice by shedding their blood. These witnesses, and particularly those who suffered martyrdom, are an eloquent and magnificent sign which we are called to contemplate and to imitate. They show us the vitality of the Church; they stand before us as a light for the Church and for humanity because they caused the light

45 John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium: Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, Documents, November 29, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html (accessed October 8, 2025), no. 13.

46 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs.*

https://publications.lst.edu/

> of Christ to shine in the darkness; to the extent that they came from different religious traditions, they also shine forth as a sign of hope for the journey of ecumenism, in the certainty that their blood 'is also a vital source of unity for the Church.'[47]

For John Paul II, the blood of martyrs unifies the Church. The Second Vatican Council's decree on unity, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, urged Catholics to recognize the richness of the body of Christ and some positive actions of their separated brothers, who also bore the name of witnesses to Christ, sometimes shedding their blood for the faith.[48] In this regard, John Paul II was constantly in dialogue with other Churches in the pursuit of unity. He saw that unity in the Church could be achieved if the "principles of martyrdom," such as selfless love and self-sacrifice, were incorporated into the relationship between the Churches. "The martyrs," he explained, "radiate a sign of hope for the process of unity." Their blood is also "a vital source of unity for the Church."[49] Jesus' cry, "That they may all be one" (John 17:21), echoed in the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, is made alive by the martyrs, who become "superior witnesses of love."[50]

John Paul II further stated that martyrdom is seen as a way of understanding "full communion" in the Church. "Communion," he explained, "is perfected in the way in which we recognize the greatness of a life filled with grace, which

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47 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, June 28, 2003, Apostolic Exhortations, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html (accessed October 8, 2025), par. 13.

48 Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, November 21, 1964, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html (accessed October 8, 2025), par. 4.

49 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, par. 13.

50 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995).

is witness unto death, and self-giving in order to draw back those who are far away (cf. Eph 2:13)."[51] Citing the countless witnesses to the faith in the Churches, the Holy Father asked: "Despite the tragedy that separates us, these brothers and sisters have remained firmly attached to Christ and to the Father even to the shedding of their blood. Is it possible that this attachment is not present among the souls to whom I have invited a 'dialogue of conversion'?"[52] John Paul II's question has become a challenge to those who, while looking to the example of the martyrs, fill their hearts with attitudes of hostility. These people need to be open to the hope of the undivided body of Christ. This will be seen in the eschatological dimension of martyrdom.

3.2 Eschatological Dimension

In the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, Pope John Paul II affirmed the eschatological dimension of the pilgrim Church, and in his work *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, he elaborated on this theme. Pope John Paul II's eschatological vision is deeply rooted in the doctrine of Christian hope. They include both the object toward which hope is directed and the consequences that hope produces. Eschatological hope is the path to the future and the afterlife, overcoming the limitations, darkness, or injustice of the present.[53] For Pope John Paul II, eschatology is not only a part of the Church's doctrine, but moreover, its eschatological dimension must be proclaimed by all Christians, by each person individually and by the Church as a whole. In making this declaration, John Paul II first maintains that only the hope arising from faith in the Resurrection enables

51 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 84.

52 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 83.

53 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 179.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the human person to live a life worthy of God's infinite love. For him, martyrdom is the highest expression of the Gospel of hope. He argues that, in light of the Resurrection, martyrs accept pain and death as a passage to eternal glory. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II indicates that there are three dimensions of the Gospel of hope, reflected in the martyrs' witness: they preach it, celebrate it, and serve it.[54] By their testimony, they restore the faith and hope of those who are trying to overcome despair, thereby giving them back a sense of meaning in life.

From his experience in the twentieth century, John Paul II defines the human condition as caught up in a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death," between the *mysterium pietatis* (mystery of holiness) and the *mysterium iniquitatis* (mystery of evil).[55] This conflict between good and evil was revealed during the collapse of totalitarian regimes, yet it was there that martyrs conquered death through faith in the Risen Christ. John Paul stresses that only a deep faith in Jesus, "who came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10) could give the human being courage over the powers of death. Hence, the blood of martyrs becomes a symbol of hope and restoration of human dignity in Christ.

Following the ancient tradition of the Church, John Paul II recalls that the day of martyrdom is called *dies natalis*, the "birthday into heaven."[56] Their death is not an end. It is the beginning of full life in the risen Christ. By the mystery of the

54 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, par. 13.

55 John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, trans. Wanda T. Starkie (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 15-16.

56 John Paul II, "Martyr's Death Shows Christ's Love," Angelus, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), December 31, 2003, Weekly Edition in English, 6.

Incarnation and of the Cross, the human body is drawn up into the glory of God and transformed into the likeness of that risen body of Christ. In beatifying the 233 Spanish martyrs on March 14, 2001, it was affirmed that they are "a sign and prophetic announcement of the glorious resurrection." Their death is a testament to the victory of divine love over hatred and violence, and thus martyrdom is the reward for those who remain faithful and holy until the end, triumphing with Christ on Calvary. This shows that the Pope considered martyrdom a reward for those who live a faithful and holy life.

The Spiritual Meaning of Martyrdom in the Thought of John Paul II

1. Martyrdom as Interior Transformation

For John Paul II, martyrdom is not a moment of destruction but a transfiguration instead. In the martyr's heart, suffering is transformed into a praise act, pain into a love language, and death into a divine life passage. The Pope declared that martyrdom manifests the human person's deepest freedom, i.e., the capacity to affirm truth and goodness even when everything external is taken away.[57] Thanks to the Holy Spirit's grace, the martyr undergoes what the Pope has labelled an "inner victory of the spirit,"[58] a victory not over enemies but over fear, sin, and despair. The transformation is linked directly to the Paschal Mystery. The martyr's gift of life, given freely, is a reflection of Christ's total surrender, the one who "loved to the end" (Jn 13:1). In this alignment with the Crucified One, the martyr comes to realize that life is all about self-giving which John Paul II often referred to as "the law of the gift."[59]

57 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, par. 91.

58 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 203.

59 John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), par. 10.

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The martyr thus becomes a living representation of Christ's redemptive love, a visible proof that holiness lies in surrendering oneself totally to God and to others.

2. The Mystical Communion of Suffering and Love

For John Paul II, martyrdom is more than just a single act of heroism; it is a mystical event, a divine blessing that allows the person to experience the suffering of Christ more deeply. He asserts in *Salvifici Doloris* that when a person suffers with Christ, "it becomes a participation in the redemptive work of the Savior."[60] It follows that the martyr is not only the one who suffers violently but also the one who takes part in God's plan of redemption through Christ. By giving up their life, the human being engages in a mysterious love dialogue with the Divine, where suffering is transformed into prayer and the very one witnessing through death. In this connection, the Holy Spirit is the key player. It is the Spirit who empowers the martyr to love unconditionally, to pardon, and to be unyielding to hate. The martyr's support reveals the Spirit's power to sanctify, the assurance that divine grace can transform human frailty into holiness.[61] From this mystical viewpoint, martyrdom occurs at the intersection of heaven and earth where the faithful believer's "yes" to God resounds with Christ's obedience in Gethsemane.

3. Forgiveness as the Soul of Martyrdom

One of the most remarkable spiritual features in the teachings of John Paul II is his emphasis on forgiveness as the core of true martyrdom. The martyr's real victory, he states, lies

60 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), par. 19.

61 Ibid.

not in defiance of the persecutor but in loving them.[62] This love is not a mere feeling, but a participation in redemption; it reflects the mercy of Christ, who prayed for His executioners. Forgiveness transforms the act of dying into a declaration of the Gospel of peace. The martyr's last words and demeanor are a revelation of Christ's mercy, demonstrating that love can conquer even death and that evil can be subjected only through goodness.[63] Martyrdom, thus, is not an act of despair, but of hope. The martyr transcends the suffering of the moment and looks forward to the everlasting promise of God's communion. In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II stated that the martyrs are "the most eloquent sign of the truth of the Gospel, for they proclaim with their lives that the hope of glory is greater than the fear of death."[64] The martyr's peace in suffering becomes the foreteller of the resurrection and the proclamation that every cross hides within it the power of eternal life.

4. Martyrdom as the Victory of Hope and Communion

Ultimately, martyrdom for John Paul II serves as a beacon of Christian hope. Martyrs' blood is not a sign of tragedy, but a sign of birth, the seed of a renewed humanity reconciled through love.[65] Their martyrdom has the certainty that divine mercy is stronger than evil and that suffering borne in faith

62 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of the Vietnamese Martyrs*, Homilies, June 19, 1988, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19880619_martiri.html.

63 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), par. 25.

64 John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), par. 37.

65 John Paul II, *Homily at the Beatification of the Spanish Martyrs*, Homilies, March 11, 2001, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_07031999.html.

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is mysteriously connected with the redemptive act of God over the world. Besides, martyrdom is a factor that unifies the Church more. The Pope teaches that the testimonies of all martyrs belong to the whole Church, which transcends the boundaries of countries and even those of religions.[66] Their loyalty connects all the Christians of the different denominations, and as he put it in *Ut Unum Sint*, "a vital source of unity for the Church."[67] The saints, through their suffering, encourage the Church that holiness is not a gift for the few, but a universal vocation —a road of constant conversion from self-love to the love of God. In the end, John Paul II saw martyrdom as the revelation of God's own heart, a love that totally gives itself without regard for the cost. The martyr's demise is not the silence of the defeated; it is the song of the conqueror, victory announcing the truth that love and life in Christ are indestructible. Moreover, he expressed this point during the Jubilee of the Martyrs, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians and the sign that love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death."[68]

To sum up, for Saint John Paul II, martyrdom represents the pinnacle of Christian discipleship, characterized by a profound union with Christ in love, suffering, and hope. It is not just dying as an external act but an inward change where the believer's freedom and God's grace come together in complete self-giving. The martyr, through forgiveness, communion, and hope, becomes an image of God's love that wins over hatred and death. Thus, martyrdom shows the person's highest dignity

66 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), §13.

67 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, par. 84.

68 John Paul II, *Homily for the Jubilee of the Martyrs*, May 7, 2000, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000507_test-fede.html.

and the Church's ultimate mission: to live and die in the truth of love. After examining the spiritual meaning of martyrdom in John Paul II's theology, we now explore its contemporary relevance. We will explore how this enduring witness continues to inspire evangelization, support faith during modern persecutions, and shape the understanding of "daily martyrdom" in the lives of today's Christians.

The Contemporary Relevance of Martyrdom

1. Martyrdom and Evangelization

At the heart of St. John Paul II's concept of martyrdom is not just the ultimate personal, martyr-like confession of faith, but also a crucial factor in the Church's worldwide mission. He points to the missionaries of old who were killed in the mission lands and said that the martyrs "crowned their testimony ... with the sacrifice of their lives."[69] This indicates that the mission must be undertaken with the same spirit of self-giving: to evangelize is to be ready to die. During the canonization ceremony on March 6, 2000, he said:

> These martyrs made their lives a generous response to God's gift and are eloquent models of Christian witness for us all. ... Let us pray to God that the example of fidelity of these first Christians, especially of those families of martyrs - many of whom had tender-age children - and of the numerous unknown people, will spur us to renew our commitment to a courageous and fruitful evangelization at all levels of society.[70]

69 ZENIT Staff, "John Paul II Remembers Murdered Missionaries," *ZENIT*, October 24, 2004, https://zenit.org/2004/10/24/john-paul-ii-remembers-murdered-missionaries/?

70 Pope John Paul II, *To the Faithful Gathered for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs*, March 6, 2000, Speeches, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/jan-mar/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000306_beatifications.html.

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Hence, martyrdom and evangelization are closely linked: the preaching of the Gospel demands bravery and the willingness to be a witness even unto death.

In the *Angelus* on August 29, 2004, Pope John Paul II quotes St. John the Baptist, pointing out that "martyrdom ... is the highest point of witness to moral truth ... Although relatively few are called to make this supreme sacrifice, it is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice"[71]. At times, a truly heroic effort is also needed in daily life, in order not to give in to the difficulties that are an incentive to compromise and to live the Gospel "*sine glossa*."[72] This means that while not all Christians are called to die for their faith, they are all invited to participate in evangelization, being ready for anything that would require full witness to Christ.

Missionary activities face numerous challenges, including cultural opposition, persecution, and poverty, and martyrdom can then become the greatest act of evangelization. The congregants are called to live like martyrs, to proclaim the Gospel with generosity, even if it means losing their lives. To sum up, the relationship between martyrdom and evangelization is so close that the two cannot be separated: the real preaching of the Gospel requires nothing less than total surrender. Martyrs are the perfect example of "silent evangelization," proving that the life of a martyr in witness can be fruitful for the Church, and John Paul II invites all Christians to join this mission with boldness and liberality.

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71 John Paul II, *Angelus, 29 August 2004, Castel Gandolfo*, Angelus, August 29, 2004, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20040829.html

72 Ibid.

2. Martyrdom Amid Modern Persecution

In the present-day world, John Paul II notes that martyrdom is not an event of the past Church alone, but remains very much alive. "Martyrdom is not a reality that belongs to the past, but also a reality of the present time. ... every day the possibility arises of continuing to endure sufferings for the love of Christ."[73] This knowledge enables the faithful to see that persecution still takes place, be it through marginalization, coercion, or social exclusion, not only by direct violence.

In the *Angelus* on December 26, 2003, the Pope announced: "Today I would especially like to remember the Christian communities that are suffering persecution and all the faithful who suffer for the faith. May the Lord give them the strength to persevere and the ability to love even those who cause their suffering."[74] In this sense, "persecution" refers not only to the outright religious suppression but also to the societal and cultural hostilities. He further pointed out that the martyr not only gives the faithful strong evidence of their belief but also acts as "a seed of life" for the oppressed. So, modern persecution does not hinder the Church's mission. It might even facilitate its growth, for. as he asserts: "in them, as in all martyrs, the Church has always found a seed of life."[75]

Today's believers are invited to recognize that faith might demand suffering, to respond with bravery and wisdom, and, when the option comes up between disowning faith or

73 ZENIT Staff, "Martyrdom Is Reality of Our Times, Pope Says," *ZENIT*, March 12, 2001, https://zenit.org/2001/03/12/martyrdom-is-reality-of-our-times-pope-says/

74 Pope John Paul II, *Angelus: Feast of St. Stephen*, December 26, 2003, Angelus, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20031226.html

75 Pope John Paul II, "We Must Follow in the Martyrs' Footsteps," *CatholicCulture.org*, March 12, 2001, https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3521.

https://publications.lst.edu/

testifying, to opt for loyalty. As Jesus tells us: "Do not fear those who kill the body..." (Mt 10:28), a passage which he said,

> wherever there is no need for the witness of blood, the witness of daily life should be even more evident. We need to bear witness to God in word and deed everywhere, in every place: in the family, in the workplace, in offices and schools. In places where people work and where they rest. We need to profess our faith in God by taking an active part in the life of the Church; by concern for the weak and suffering, and also by taking responsibility for public issues, in a spirit of concern for the future of the nation, built on the truth of the Gospel.[76]

To sum up, martyrdom as a living witness still holds its ground through modern persecution. It inspires courage, fortifies communities in times of trial, and prepares every believer for ultimate faithfulness if the time comes.

3. Daily Martyrdom

John Paul II presents daily martyrdom not as a mere image, but as a real challenge to live one's faith in the same way as it is lived out in everyday situations. He points out that although only a few die for the faith, all Christians, through small but constant acts of fidelity, are part of the living and essential family, as evidenced in their work, study, and neighbour relationships, which give testimony to their faith. Daily martyrdom is seen in perseverance in prayer, moral uprightness, love for the poor, and advocacy of justice and truth, even in the places where Christian values are either totally rejected or at least not welcomed.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, martyrdom is described not only as a sacrifice for those who give their

76 Pope John Paul II, *Homily of John Paul II at the Celebration of the Word in Gorzów*, June 2, 1997, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19970602_gorzow.html

lives for Jesus but also as a deeper and wider concept known as "daily martyrdom," which involves constant self-surrender and faithfulness in a typical Christian life.[77]

Daily martyrdom signifies that all Christians are invited to die to themselves so that Christ may live in them. It is an internal struggle of constant conversion, where one gives up their own desires, aspirations, and sins so that divine grace can live and work totally in one's life. Saint Paul said it in this way: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2:20). Thus, martyrdom is not limited to a single heroic death scene but is experienced daily, through minor but loving choices, whenever believers carry their cross and follow Jesus (cf. Lk 9:23).

This is what John Paul II describes as "bloodless martyrdom," a mighty yet silent way of giving one's life by daily fidelity to the Gospel amidst the ups and downs of modern life.[78] He mentions in *Vita Consecrata*: "The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God."[79] But the reality also applies to laypersons; indeed, every baptized Christian is encouraged to practice daily martyrdom, giving oneself in love to God and serving others.

Innumerable, everyday situations are the arena for daily martyrdom: the father, the family hero; the mother, the faithful nurturer of the children; the young person, the Gospel reader and heir of heaven, etc.; the sick person, the God-truster; or those who, like the poor, serve, despised and misunderstood, yet always lonely, holding on to their faith. These are all hidden

77 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, par. 25.

78 Ibid., par. 104.

79 Ibid., par. 105.

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acts of love, the little martyrdoms buried in the world's heart like seeds.

Daily martyrdom is a constant struggle and requires dedication. Martyrdom without loyalty cannot exist. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux is a remarkable example of such a silent witness. Although she did not lose her blood, she dedicated every minute of her life to God through love and called it a "martyrdom of love." She was dying every day in little acts of sacrifice, which were all for the glory of God.[80] This again is the path that is open to every believer, to live normally with extraordinary love.

Today, daily martyrdom is a great deal in the secularized world. When people are carried away by comfort, ambition, and egoism, being faithful to the Gospel, really in honesty, humility, or purity, requires the same amount of strength as dying. It is indeed the true form of martyrdom. Many christians may not be killed for their fait, but they can still "die" for choosing the truth in the midst of lies, "die" for being chaste in a permissive culture or "die" for the right to life and human dignity in the midst of a death culture. The crosses of modern times are these, and every believer is invited to bear them with joy and hope.

The term "daily martyrdom" refers to the specific decisions made by Christians on a daily basis, such as truth-telling, living according to the Gospel, and tolerating minor inconveniences. It encompasses the sacrifices of parents for their children, the relinquishment of youthful pleasures for the sake of others, and the dedication of clergy to pastoral care. Moreover, it is claimed that even the most common believers are allowed to participate in this silent witness: "This martyrdom in ordinary

80 Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *Story of a Soul*, ch. XI.

life constitutes a testimony more important now than ever in the secularized societies of our time."[81]

The Pope, besides, adds that the daily life suffering, no matter whether it is through sickness, personal sacrifices, or moral struggles, can be a part of Christ's redemptive suffering. In his words, "suffering accepted in union with Christ becomes a participation in His saving work, transforming ordinary daily challenges into a form of witness."[82] Thus, every Christian's life becomes a living testimony, a silent yet powerful Gospel proclamation that may touch even family, friends, and society who are not so receptive.

The concept of daily martyrdom encourages Christians to be morally courageous even when confronting the modern world's social pressures. For instance, being honest in one's job or among friends, refusing to be part of corrupt practices, and being a voice for life and human rights are the witnesses of today. Additionally, John Paul II indicates that the daily martyrdom has communal repercussions. These acts, though mostly private and unnoticed, enhance the moral and spiritual values of the Christian community. The believers, by being true in their daily lives, not only encourage others to do so but also create a chain reaction of the Church's empowerment.

Daily martyrdom instils in Christians the virtues of perseverance, patience, and hope. The choice to constantly bear witness to Christ, by the means of honesty, love, and service, turns out to be a heroic act of faith in a world full of distractions, materialism, and moral compromises. The Pope instead calls the believers to see the extraordinary worth of

81 Pope Benedict XVI, "Holy Father's Angelus on Martyrdom in Everyday Life," *Catholic News Agency*, October 28, 2007, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/10810/holy-fathers-angelus-on-martyrdom-in-everyday-life.

82 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, §19.

https://publications.lst.edu/

common fidelity: "Even the smallest acts, united with Christ's sacrifice, have eternal significance."[83] Thus, the daily martyrdom prepares Christians with the necessary qualities to face hardships with boldness, maintain their faith in unwelcoming places, and, through small but regular, faithful deeds, sanctify the world.

Conclusion

The theological reflections and teachings of Saint Pope John Paul II lead to the conclusion that martyrdom is not merely an ancient Christian tradition but signifies a new era of martyrs whose understanding would thoroughly encompass all aspects of theology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. He considered martyrdom as the highest proof of the faith, a full meeting of God and mankind, of grace and freedom, of love and truth. In the context of the Paschal Mystery, the blood of martyrs is turned into seeds that bear Church, revive faith, and proclaim with a loud voice that love is victorious over death.

John Paul II's insight reveals that martyrdom is not so much a death penalty for being a Christian, but even more an ultimate expression of love, in which one offers oneself freely to God and others. In this, human dignity is elevated through the Savior's fellowship, in which the man learns the most profound significance of his being: "Man can not completely find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." Accordingly, martyrdom is not just a past historical event, but a living message for the present world, which still endures persecutions of different kinds, violence, and indifference.

The teaching of Saint John Paul II serves as a reminder to the faithful that every Christian is called to be a witness - even without bloodshed - through the Gospel's faithfulness in daily

83 John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §10.

life. "Daily martyrdom" refers to the perseverance in the face of difficulties, the courage to live by the Gospel in a secularised world, and the steadfastness in pursuing justice, peace, and love. It is the quiet yet strong witness of faith that turns suffering into communion and loyalty into mission.

Martyrdom as perceived by Saint John Paul II is a puzzle that can only be solved through faith and love, the highest point of human freedom and dignity, and at the same time, a spring of renewal for the spiritual life and missionary zeal of the Church today. By martyr's blood, the Church is cleansed and born again in the hope and glory of the Resurrection. Their martyrdoms are viewed as a purification of the Church; thus, Christians are encouraged to keep on living, to speak of Christ through their actions and words, and to testify that real life is only found in love that is entirely given.

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