

# Today's Martyrs

*Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom*

## Document

Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen

Homily of February 19, 1936

Xanten, Germany

I have just consecrated a new altar in your venerable and splendid cathedral, in a small space deep beneath the choir. But why? Your church is already so richly endowed with altars.

You know the answer. The researches of the past few years have given proof that there below us lies a holy and particularly venerable place. Not only has the tradition been substantiated, according to which several previous churches were said to stand on the site of this present church, the oldest of them dating back to the time of the martyrs, to the fourth century A.D. We are also provided with fresh evidence that holy martyrs, who with their blood bore witness to Christ, were interred here, to await the resurrection. We believe in the resurrection of the body. Christ's words have given us this promise: The hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God. Whosoever does not believe in the independent life of the individual soul, in its continued existence after the death of the body, in its reunification with the body in life everlasting, this man is no true Christian. We hold these beliefs, because we believe in Christ, who is the truth. Because we hold fast to the beliefs of the Apostles and of our Christian forebears. The entire history of your city, speaking to you through the its towering churches, which are monuments in stone, proclaiming itself in the stones found lying beneath them, is evidence of our faith.

In confession of that faith St. Victor and his companions, and likely also those men whose mortal remains have now been found, shed their blood. It is clear that their grave has not been opened, has been disturbed by nobody, since the wooden coffin in which, notably, both bodies were laid was interred, around sixteen hundred years ago. Thus it has been possible to establish „with a probability bordering on certainty“, according to the testimony of highly respected and expert

scholars at the University of Bonn, that the two men died a violent death, and that what remains for us to see of the wounding and shattering of their limbs is in the main attributable to wounds and torture inflicted before their deaths, which led to their deaths. Above this ancient and newly discovered double grave, lying deep beneath the floor of the present Cathedral, you, out of love, have erected an altar, which I have just now consecrated, and upon which the sacrifice of the New Covenant has just been celebrated for the first time. We have offered it up to the glory of God, in thanks for His Divine favors, in atonement for our sins, to beseech Him for His blessing upon us, upon your town, our diocese, the German people and our country. We have also offered it up in remembrance and adoration of the beloved saints, especially those who found in this spot their last earthly resting place, and who slumber here awaiting the glorious resurrection. The glorious resurrection. “The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” (John 5, 28) Will these two men rise again at the resurrection?

Perhaps it was feared that these men, who were probably, like St. Victor, soldiers serving under Roman command, here to defend the Rhine border against Germanic tribes pressing in from the east, would not be sufficiently dependable fighters against the German enemy, seeing them also as children of the same heavenly Father, made equally in the image of God. Foolish fear! For genuine Christians have always been the most loyal of citizens, the most reliable public servants, the most courageous soldiers among their people. Their loyalty, their reliability, their courage is not only founded upon a naturally good predisposition, upon goodwill, be it ever so weak, upon conscious efforts to guard their honor in the sight of other men, to avoid punishment on this earth, perhaps to gain of others respect, recognition and reward. True Christians are aware that loyal fulfilment of their duty as citizens, as public servants, as soldiers, is an exercise of virtue which God, our supreme Lord, demands of them unreservedly, regardless of witness, recognition or reward by other men, but throughout which they are supported by God in his goodness, with the help of His divine grace. The Christian looks beyond reward, praise and fame after death, all be they worthy worldly possessions, because he knows all these to be small and slight and undependable and finite compared to the hundredfold reward, the honor and glory which God almighty bestows upon them who in accordance with Christ’s word have been found faithful in the face of the ephemeral.

Thus did the Christian confessors and martyrs think and act. You know that many martyrs of the Catholic church have been drawn from the ranks of brave soldiers: St. Theodore, St. George, St. Sebastian, St. Mauritius, Cassius and Florentinus, Gereon, and your own St. Victor, with whom according to legend all the officers and men of their legion suffered martyrdom for the sake of Christ. They allowed themselves to be mown down by their heathen comrades, without defending themselves or offering resistance. The swords which they had so heroically wielded in the heat of battle for their emperor and their fatherland they did not draw against their comrades who on the orders of the emperor fell upon them like enemies, to massacre them. In them they saw not enemies, but misguided friends. They did not fight the emperor, rather they obeyed the emperor unto death. For it was the emperor who ordered that they must either sacrifice to the idols or die. Because they could not offer up that sacrifice without sinning, they chose to die, in order not to sin. Is that not faithfulness? Is that not heroism? Is that not courage in the service of the emperor, and in the service of God even unto death?

Christ our Lord, the King of kings, and Ruler of rulers, our only judge and He who shall mete out our eternal reward, declared them saints, these warriors loyal unto death. For he says: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." Theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

From the torture bench, from their place of execution, from the hands of their bloodstained executioner, where they left behind their transitory, mutilated, lifeless bodies, their souls ascended and were taken up into Heaven, into the eternal realm of the living God. On the Day of Judgement they will also once again take possession of their mortal dust, the sometime habitation, place of work and place of suffering of their heroic souls, their bodies, their bones and relics, because these too shall be rewarded, transfigured, granted eternal bliss. "The hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the son of God. And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life."

In this place also, in this Cathedral, shall this wonder come to pass. The saints will arise in glory. That was their belief, their faith, and their sure hope of victory during their torture and death. That was also the belief of the Christians of that time who, with deep emotion and joyful solemnity, witnessed that martyrdom, and who afterwards collected up the bloody, shattered,

disfigured remains, bore them away, and reverently interred them in a common shrine. That was the belief of the Christian era that followed soon after, of the Christianized Romans, and even more so of your forefathers, the Frankish Germans, who settled here and erected one church after the other, each more magnificent than the last, over these martyrs' graves. That is why they called this place "Ad sanctos", "by the saints", Xanten. Here, for more than fifteen hundred years without interruption, the Sacrifice of the Holy Mass has been offered up, the renewal of Christ's most sacred, obediently suffered sacrificial death, whence all martyrdom, all Christian devotion, courage, self-sacrifice, have gained their worth and effect. The love of Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, and the devotion of the martyrs, who gave themselves for Christ, have in this place throughout the ages roused and inspired your forefathers to devotion, courage and self-sacrifice for God and the highest good. Emulate them!

Yes, emulate them! For the sake of your souls, of your children, of our people. We too are called, are bound through the faithful fulfilment of duty to our family, our occupation, our community, based upon the fear of God and the love of God, to serve God and the kingdom of God on earth, our fellow beings, our nation and the state, as did the holy martyrs. We have been chosen to swell the glorious ranks of the saints, one day to belong with them in Heaven. And if in consequence we are misjudged, despised, slandered, reviled, even persecuted, tortured and killed, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."

Yes, rejoice and be exceeding glad! You know that the time is come when not a few of us will be granted such a portion. How are the holy church, the Pope, the bishops, the priests, the members of religious orders, how are the faithful children of the church in Germany disparaged, defamed, derided, publicly and without sanction. How many Catholics, priests and laity, have been attacked and abused in newspapers and in meetings, have been driven out of their professions and positions, and have without due process of law been imprisoned and maltreated. The head of the episcopal information service in Berlin, Canon Dr. Banasch, has for months been languishing in prison, and at no stage have his superiors the Bishops been informed of any charges against him. The Bishops' appointed leader of the Young Men's Association, Msgr. Wolker, was arrested three days ago, and how long will it be before he is able to prove his innocence before

an independent German court? There are in Germany fresh graves, in which rest the ashes of such as the Catholic people hold to be martyrs of their faith, because their lives are a testimony of the most faithful fulfilment of duty to God and the fatherland, nation and church, and because their deaths are shrouded in closely guarded mystery. And how often does the heaviest burden of conscience weigh upon public servants and employees, parents and teachers, who are faced with having to choose between faithfulness to God and their Christian conscience and winning the pleasure and favor of those upon whom their position and whole livelihood depend!

Do not be surprised if the good Lord sends us times of trial. Our church is the church of martyrs. If you question how matters can come to such a pass, the answer lies in the words of our Savior when he said: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you." (John 15,18). "The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them."(John 16, 2).

The answer to this question lies also in the sacrificial death, the death by martyrdom, the heroic death of Jesus Christ, who submitted himself obediently to an earthly judge, acknowledging before him that the power authorized him by his position stemmed from God; and who then, in order that the truth he preached, that his claim to be the Son of God and the King of Creation, might be recognized, freely accepted the death sentence, humiliation and prison and captivity and the crown of thorns and finally crucifixion. We celebrate his memory, and the bloodless renewal of his self-sacrificial and bloody death, in every holy mass said over the relics of holy martyrs, who, like St. Stephen, gave thanks with their deaths unto him who, through his death, purchased life for us all. Since then the sign of the cross, once a sign of ignominy, has become a symbol of victory and triumph; yea, a pledge of God's grace and of His choosing of us for Heaven. For St. Paul assures us: "If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." (Romans 8, 17).

Like Christ, like the Apostles, like the holy martyrs, we are obedient to authority, loyal to our nation, conscientious in our occupations, at work, in our families, in the community, willing to sacrifice ourselves, even to give our lives, like St. Victor and all soldiers, like our brave soldiers who in the World War by the thousand staked their lives and sacrificed them for the German fatherland. But when we, like those saints, are confronted with the choice between earthly happiness and confession of the faith, the choice between the service of God and death, then, like our brave exemplars, we will with God's grace stand fast in our faith, for like them we would rather go to our deaths than commit a sin. May today's celebration and the memory of the holy heroes of our faith whose remains are enclosed in this cathedral, may the power of the holy sacrifice on the cross, which we now reverently celebrate together in the holy mass, strengthen us all in this sacred resolve, so that one day that which Christ promised those who follow him on the glorious way of the cross shall be true for us all: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."

## **Today's Martyrs**

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