United in suffering: Martyrdom as Christian vocation

by Kathryn Greene-McCreight in the September 30, 2015 issue

Icon of the 21 martyrs of Libya by Tony Rezk

> *The peace of God, it is no peace,*
> *But strife closed in the sod,*
> *Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing—*
> *The marvelous peace of God.*
>
> (William Alexander Percy, 1924)

In our doctoral seminar we were discussing theories of mission. Our professor, who had grown up in the mission field in China, had personal experience with the ideas we were playing with. He closed the heated discussion with a question that has haunted me ever since: “The real question is not why or whom or how we are to share the gospel. The real question is this: Are we willing to die for the gospel?”

Christians look with horror at the martyrdoms of Christians in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. But we are not horrified enough. We cannot bear to ask what these martyrs might demand of us personally. Our faith and witness often demand so little of us in comparison to theirs. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “costly discipleship” may appeal to us on the surface, but ultimately it is frightening, even repellent.

A case in point is the debate over this summer's slaying of nine Christians at prayer and Bible study in Charleston's "Mother Emanuel" AME Church. Pundits questioned the perpetrator's motivation. As if these issues were not inextricably linked, they asked: Were the murders racially motivated? Or did they constitute religious persecution? Why did the survivors at Mother Emanuel so readily embrace a commitment to forgive? The commentators suggested that such forgiveness must be a sick symptom of the racial poison the survivors had been force-fed for generations.

All of these suggestions missed the point, and ultimately belittled Mother Emanuel and her parishioners. Yes, the Charleston nine were black. Yes, the perpetrator was white. Yes, the families quickly declared their intent to forgive in the name of Christ. But like Job's friends, critics ultimately could not bear to sit with Mother Emanuel in her suffering. They could not allow her to interpret her own experience. How ironic for a culture that wants so much to be free of racism.

Are the rest of us really so different from our brothers and sisters in Christ gunned down at prayer in Charleston, beheaded in Libya, blown up in Syria, or kidnapped and beaten in Iraq? Are they heroes in the faith with whom we can never truly identify? What can it mean for us when we hear Paul say that he is completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of the church? Are we not each also called to suffer for the sake of the body of Christ? Can we even begin to imagine that martyrdom could be part of our own vocation?

At the April 2015 meeting of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, Pope Francis remarked that the bond that unites all Christians is found in the martyrdom of those who endure persecution and violence because of their faith.

Echoing Pope John Paul II and yet true to his own voice, Pope Francis implied that ecumenical meetings are well and good, but ultimately mean little if we presume that our unity hinges on our agreements.

In a sense, Pope Francis was pointing to the abiding truth of Tertullian's dictum: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Our life together is nourished by the blood of the martyrs because it is mingled with the blood of Jesus. This is what makes the church strong. Ironically, this is what makes for "church growth." Our ecumenical unity dwells in the witness of Christian martyrs and fulfills Jesus' high priestly prayer that we "may all be one" (John 17:21).

If Pope Francis is right, ecumenical work does not take shape at the level of meetings and discussions and documents. It is found in the self-offering of those who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, and who witness to Jesus' reconciling love with the spilling of their own blood. True justice and peace grow out of the Holy Spirit's empowering ordinary people called to extraordinary witness like those in Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, South Sudan, and South Carolina. These people are really not so much different from us. We are one with them as together we lift high the cross of Christ, the tree of life.

The word *martyr* means "witness." Martyrs are signposts, pointing like John the Baptist to Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Being this kind of signpost is more than simply being "saints." According to Romans 6, we are all saints by virtue of our baptism into the death of Jesus. When Paul addresses his letters "to the saints at . . ." he is not simply referring to people who attend worship together in a particular city in the first century.

But martyrdom is more than this. It is more than a state of being. It is more than seeing ourselves as standing among the great cloud of witnesses. Martyrdom is an activity tied to and indeed demanded by our baptismal identity.

Christian martyrdom is never to be sought for fame or glory. If there is a way to remain steadfast in Christian witness without spilling one's blood, one must choose that way. For the Christian, martyrdom is never to be enacted as a means of political protest. It is never accomplished in pursuit of spiritual health, ecstatic vision, or self-enlightenment. This makes Christian martyrdom distinct from other types of religious martyrdom.

Christian martyrdom itself is never to be romanticized. These martyrs are not heroes any more than we are. The Charleston nine did not ask for their murder. They did not have any say in their martyrdom. Yet their community received the slayings in an act of forgiving the perpetrator, an embodiment of the peace and healing that comes in Jesus Christ.

Not all Christian martyrs lose their lives in their witness. In the fifth century, St. Jerome made a distinction between different types of martyrs. Red martyrs (or wet martyrs) are those who lose their lives for the sake of the name of Jesus. They are "red" because their own blood was spilled in their refusal to deny Christ. White martyrs (or dry martyrs) are those who embrace the cruciform life in the humdrum

of their own daily walk. For most of us, our lives do not require the shedding of our own blood.

This is in part because physical death is not the only way for Christians to die to self. It is our decrease alone that brings the increase of love. In the 12th century, St. Catherine of Siena put it this way: “By how much the more a person dies to himself, by so much more they live to God.” In a culture that’s fond of comfort, this can be a difficult word carrying a very different sense of what makes for well-being.

Scripture tells us that if we live at the foot of the cross we will encounter affliction, but that this affliction is accompanied by consolation. This is in part because affliction tied to the cruciform life is not to be endured in isolation from the body of Christ. Our unity with Christ establishes and grounds our unity with each other. This means that even, and maybe especially, through our affliction we make Christ known. This is for our personal and communal benefit and well-being.

> For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering (2 Cor. 1:5–6).

When grounded in Christ’s death and resurrection, our affliction yields a joy that shields us from the powers of death. Even though we may suffer, we are not crushed. Even in our pain and confusion when God may seem absent, by the power of the Holy Spirit we are protected from complete despair. And by carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus we make visible his life. Each of us is to make evident the power that belongs to God and not to us (2 Cor. 4:7–12).

The Christian martyr absorbs hatred and violence in the name of Jesus, and hands it all back to Christ for the sake of the world. In this way, the Christian martyr furthers the reconciling work of the Lord. These deeds of self-giving in turn spread the proclamation of the gospel. Where one might have thought that murder would stifle the cry for peace, in fact it amplifies it. This is why the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” It holds forth the paradox of how bearing the cross witnesses to the power of the resurrection.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” In the old hymn “They Cast

Their Nets in Galilee," William Alexander Percy speaks poignantly of this: "The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod; Yet let us pray for but one thing—that marvelous peace of God." Martin Luther King Jr. knew that the blood of Abel still cries out to the Lord from the ground. He knew that, in his own strife "closed in the sod," violence absorbed into the grave of Christ does not silence the voice of the innocent suffering of the righteous. He knew that in our fallen world violence when returned with further violence only begets hatred. But in Christ the power of God overrules even the powers of violence and death and brings healing.

Wherever we Christians struggle in our own various afflictions to witness to the self-giving of Christ, he again closes "strife in the sod." There the church flourishes. There Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 is fulfilled.

Because Thomas was not present with the disciples when the risen Jesus appeared to them, he refused to believe that the risen Jesus had appeared to the disciples. He needed to see Jesus himself to be assured that it was really him. When Jesus appeared again later, he invited Thomas to probe his wounds. Thomas's doubt turned to authentication: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Jesus' invitation for Thomas to probe his wounds prompted Thomas's confession, an authentication that expanded the witness to the risen Lord even to those "who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This continues to our day.

While the red (wet) martyr is never to seek death, the white (dry) martyr has the privilege of seeking out places of witness. The self-giving which leads to the spreading of the kingdom is also the vocation of the white martyr. Where in our lives can we see ourselves emptying our hands for the name of Jesus, trusting that God will fill them? This is very difficult for those of us who perceive our hands already to be full. Many of us in the West expect that material and bodily comfort should be the norm. But the vocation of the white martyr is to seek fullness of life only by being emptied.

Our vocation to martyrdom, too, is tied to the invitation to bury ourselves in the wounds of Christ. It is there that we find sorrow and love mingled in perfection in a way we do not experience anywhere else. As we relinquish our own afflictions into the wounds of Christ, we too find sorrow and love poured out together in a way that "fills our hearts brimful and breaks them too."

The third-century biblical interpreter Origen wrote in the prologue to his *Contra Celsum* that Jesus' silence at his trial shapes our own vocation. Because Jesus was silent before his accusers at his passion, the responsibility is now on us to be his voice. This vocation will take a different shape for each of us.

Here is one example of how a 20th-century North American took up her vocation as a white martyr. She was employed by a major chemical company bidding on a contract to develop nerve gas components for the U.S. Army. The only purpose of this gas was indiscriminate slaughter. Use of the gas could not be confined to any specific target of war: an air base, naval port, weapons plant. The manufacturers and buyers of the gas could not rule out the possibility that its deployment might result in civilian casualties. Faithful to the Lord of life, this woman refused to participate in the development of the chemical component of this deadly gas and was fired. She lost her livelihood.

But white martyrdom does not need to be this dramatic. Can we set our own sufferings, puny as they may seem, at the foot of the cross? Can we lay down our pain as an offering to Christ and to the church? Can we even rejoice in our sufferings, "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24)? We may need to pray hard and think creatively here. But we do not need to look far.

Suffering is simply part of our fallen condition. It is already part of our lives. Afflictions surround us: loss of loved ones, failing health, dashed hopes and dreams. When we place this suffering at the foot of the cross, we may be able to point beyond ourselves to the God who redeems our griefs and draws us into the light of his presence. We might in this way serve as white martyrs, signposts and witnesses to Christ. This kind of living into our afflictions can forge in us gifts of patience, hope, compassion, and peace that can witness to Christ in powerful ways. Thus we can give voice to Christ, who went to the cross in silence.

My professor's question remains: Would we be willing to confess the name of Jesus even at the sword? Most of us may not encounter that blade. For many of us that question may become: Can we witness to the reality that the peace of God is indeed strife closed in the sod? Maybe white martyrdom could provide a framework for the privilege to respond to that question in our time, context, and vocation.

This article is from Kathryn Greene-McCreight's forthcoming book, I Am with You: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2016.