

# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

**(ENTIRE BOOK)** A biographical account of many Christian martyrs through the centuries, some not well known in the West. Each article is written by a student of Dr. Balasundaram as a project from his class based on the subject at The United Theological College in Bangalore, India. Despite the shortcomings of the text, the bravery of the great Christian martyrs comes through prominently.

## **Preface**

The reasons for martyrdom in antiquity, in the Classical Period, and in the twentieth century.

## **Part 1: Martyrs of the Early Era**

### **Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of Polycarp -- Bishop of Smyrna, By Priscilla Singh**

Christians, a rapidly growing group, claimed on moral and spiritual grounds exclusive loyalty to Christ and opted when confronted with loyalty to the Emperor for the Heavenly king they worshipped. Bishop Polycarp's martyrdom makes it clear, however, that despite the intense hostility of an apparent majority, the persecutions of Christians in the region of Asia was limited and selective.

### **Chapter 2: The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, by By L.H. Lalpekhlua**

In our context today where millions of people are in hunger and live in sub-human conditions on account of the unjust socioeconomic and political strictures of our country (India), Polycarp's faith in Jesus Christ challenges us to identify ourselves with the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for justice and liberation.

### **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of Prominent Martyrs of Lyons and**

## [Vienne, by M. Reginold](#)

Many Christians in Lyons and Vienne were martyred after being assaulted, beaten, stoned and tortured. They were charged with incest, cannibalism and murder and subject to the most cruel and inhuman treatments before dying.

## [Chapter 4: The Martyrdom of Appollonius, by Hudson Christopher](#)

Appollonius inspired the Christian communities of his times by refusing to make sacrifices to the statue of the Emperor Commodus, despite the fact that many of Appollonius' motives were selfish. (e.g. he believed in the *rewards* of a faithful life, thus not helpful to his neighbor in need.)

## [Chapter 5: Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas by Thomas John](#)

The martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, though in their early adolescence and females -- who are usually considered to be the weaker sex -- yet because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their constant dependence on His sustaining grace and power were able to face the discouraging pleas of a father, the sadistic mob and the wild animals in the amphitheatre at Carthage.

## [Chapter 6: The Martyrdom of Cyprian of Carthage \(Ad 200-258\), by Vijoy T. Oommen](#)

For Cyprian of Carthage persecution is seen as an opportunity to testify one's faith and hope, a wellspring of the highest example of generous devotion, love and freedom.

## [Chapter 7: The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian, by James Jacob](#)

This writing deals with a biographical sketch including Cyprian's life history, priesthood, martyrdom, writings and the author's reflection on St. Cyprian.

## [Chapter 8: The Martyrdom of Crispina, by Varneihthangi](#)

Crispina is a mother who, like all mothers, was willing to sacrifice her all for her children, but her love for Christ, comes above all else thus she was willing to even give up her life with her children for Christ's sake.

# **Part 2: Martyrs of the Medieval and Reformation Era**

## [Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of John Wycliff \(1324-84\), by Philip George](#)

Wycliff is considered as the morning star of Reformation. He initiated and shown forth a bright light of moral and doctrinal reform of the church and society in a time of darkness. Many of the

ideas of the later Reformers were reflected in these predecessors. At a special synod in 1382, the Archbishop of Canterbury took strong action against his doctrines. However, he was allowed to end his days in peaceful retirement at his Lutterworth presbytery.

## **Chapter 2: The Martyrdom of John Huss (1374-1415), by K.P. Thomas**

John Hus was a Bohemian reformer with strong reformation views. The Council at Constance (November 1, 1414) condemned Hus. The archbishop ex-communicated him and he was burned at the stake despite his denial of some views attributed to him.

## **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of Joan of Arc (1412-1431), by Varneihthangi**

For Joan of Arc, It was "better to obey the voice of Heaven than that of man." It was her passionate love of freedom that made her ready to sacrifice her life. She was burned at the stake as "Heretic, backslider, apostate, idolater..." at the age of 19.

## **Chapter 4: The Martyrdom of Thomas More (1478-1535), by Mathew Kuruvilla**

Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of England and a humanist, disagreed with the King on his divorce issue and he refused to take the oath to the Act of Supremacy. He was tried for treason for refusing to the King his titles. He was tried on 1st July 1535 and executed. The Roman Catholic church canonized him in 1935. But in fact the reason for his martyrdom cannot be confined only to the refusal of recognizing the king as the head of the Church of England. As a humanist his words and deeds were the main reasons for his martyrdom.

## **Chapter 5: The Martyrdom of Thomas Muentzer, by John George**

Muentzer saw in the rebellion of the peasants war (1524-25) the dawn of a new age in which God would rule through the sword and the elect. For this, and other's of his views , he was arrested, tortured and beheaded. His head was exhibited, with others, as a warning to the living.

# **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

## **Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of Paul Ni Tsiong-Hoi of Korea, by F. Pachhunga**

We do not know the exact date, month and year of Paul Ni Tsiong-Hoi's date of birth or where he was born. Moreover, the sources do not tell us in which year he died. All we know about him is that he died in prison at the age of 36. We do not know how he died. Details are given of his conversation with the governor and others as he stood firm as they tried to get him to deny his

faith.

## **Chapter 2: The Martyrs of Madagascar (1835-1861), by Alex P. John**

In time, early missionaries were stripped of all influence and had to depart from Madagascar leaving behind a small handful of Christians. Although they witnessed and won many, all were ultimately persecuted and martyred. Their martyrdom holds a special place in the memory of the protestant churches of Madagascar.

## **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of David Livingstone, by Philip George**

Livingstone was criticized severely for apparently doing more exploring than missionary work, yet probably no missionary had ever preached to so many blacks and did so much to open Africa for the world to see.

## **Chapter 4: The Martyrs of Uganda (1885-1887) by R. Sashikaba**

Christian missionaries were at first invited to Uganda, but when the colonial division in Africa occurred the missionaries were identified as White conquerors and persecuted. But still local Christians increased in numbers. Nevertheless, many of these were martyred under the most cruel conditions. These martyrs were "crazy for God," and did not give in to human weaknesses.

## **Chapter 5: The Martyrdom of Marie Skobtsova (1891 -- 1945), by Chanda Sahi**

It was to the Russian émigrés working the factories of the suburbs of Paris, in the mines and steel works, who had sunk their lives in alcohol and drugs, that Marie Skobtsova was called. When World War II broke out she helped the Jews, but the SS arrested and imprisoned her. The exact nature of her death is unknown but she died in the Ravensbruck concentration camp.

## **Chapter 6: The Martyrdom of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe (1941), by Manas Ranjan James**

Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest, offered his life in substitution for that of a father of a family who had been condemned to die in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz. The father lived; Kolbe died in his place. He was a man who was not concerned for his own future but looked ahead for the future of others.

## **Chapter 7: The Martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, by Biji C. Markos**

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor, a theologian and a great realist. He steadfastly opposed Nazi inhumanity and moved in the direction of Christian humanism inspired by the vision of Jesus as "the man for others." On 5th April 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo on suspicion that he was involved in the attempt on the life of Hitler at Smolensk. He spent 18 months in prison at which time he wrote his famous *Letters from Prison*. He was finally taken to the concentration camp at

Fiossenburg, and was hanged on the morning of 9 April 1945.

## **Chapter 9: The Martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, by Moses Billygraham Raj**

Archbishop Romero was a resolute defender of human rights and was known as "The Prophet of the Poor." The government became so repressive that he called from his pulpit: "In the name of God and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise daily more loudly to heaven, I plead you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God : Put an end to this repression." The next day he was murdered by an assassin as he was standing at the Altar.

## **Chapter 10: The Martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, by M. Reginold**

The assassination of Archbishop Romero in March 1980 shocked the world. Oscar Romero lived all his life in the midst of poverty and injustice in Latin America. As the archbishop of San Salvador, he became the leader of the church, and he also became a man who stood for the poor. He became their voice when they were voiceless. He suffered and gave his life for them.

## **Chapter 11. The Martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr., by Sunny, P.**

The purpose of this writing is to share the Christian faith of Martin Luther King, Jr. and to find out whether those means and methods are rightly used to bring about social change in our context today.

## **Chapter 12: The Martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr., by John Roberts**

Although Martin King's failed to establish freedom in his existing situation, he prevented despair from becoming the defining characteristic of his life by looking forward to God's eschatological freedom which was to come. Although he had to face the threat of death daily, King denied that it had the last word.

## **Chapter 13: The Martyrdom of Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko, by G.J.B. Theophilus**

For the Church to be alive in Poland as nowhere else under the Communist rule several priests had to lose their lives. Among them the most prominent was Father Jerzy Popieluszko. He died as a martyr for the cause of human dignity and freedom.

## **Chapter 14 The Martyrs of Karamchedu and Tsunduru, by K.L. Richardson**

An examination of the two historic atrocities on Dalits that took place in Karamchedu and Tsunduru in 1985 and 1991 respectively.

# Appendix: Non-Christian Martyrs

## [1: The Martyrs of Punnappra Vayalar Struggle, by Saji, K.V.](#)

The Punnappra Vayalar struggle is a chapter which was written by blood in the history of the independence struggle of Kerala and India. The blood of the martyrs of Punnappra and Vayalar was shed to control the autocratic reign of a ruler and to begin the process of humanizing people, the people who were once *no people!*

## [2: The Martyrdom of a Working Class Hero: Sankar Guha Niyogi, by Vijoy T. Oommen](#)

Sankar Guha Niyogi was an activist organizer of manual workers of various sorts and an aggressive trade Union Leader under severe and repressive tactics of industry and government. His activities became irksome to the establishment which led to harassments and arrests. On September 20th, 1991, he was murdered by an assassin.

## [List of Contributors](#)

A biography of each contributor to "Martyrs in the History of Christianity"

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## **Preface**

Christians, throughout their long history, have met with martyrdom and this happens regularly. The regularity of martyrdom confirms a certainty. The earliest apostles were warned by Christ in this regard and Christians knew that the choice which they had made exposed them to death and, that this would always be the case.

Faith calls for sacrifice and Christians have within themselves seeds of martyrdom. Jesus himself, their Master, was delivered over to the wrath of his compatriots. Shortly before his arrest, he spoke to his disciples those unforgettable words which we read in Jn.10:18 thus: "No one takes my life, but I lay it down of my own accord". Thus, Jesus was the first martyr in the History of Christianity, the martyr par excellence.

Centuries before the Church became a norm, a power which was armed, inflicted persecution. Christianity had that radical character in keeping with the Gospel which made its members endure death rather than renounce the One to whom they lifted up their prayers.

In many parts of the world, Christians even now run the risk which makes their origins and the interminable succession of Christian martyrs in different parts of the globe today reminds us the fact that faith is still focused on a CRUCIFIED MAN, on what he said and did. Societies, mentalities, institutions and sciences may be different, but faith in Jesus Christ is drawn irresistibly towards a passion. However, not everyone is led to experience this in the flesh, but martyrdom remains as

an eventuality.

The long list of martyrs, thousands of men and women, in responding to the call of the Gospel, accepted death willingly. However, they were not offensive. They were peaceful, sober and loyal people and they practiced alms giving. Men and women, educated and simple, young and old, poor and rich, famous and anonymous, -- all these were stubborn about one thing: they refused to offer sacrifice to the idols, whether it be other gods or the Emperor. They died for refusing to make a gesture, not saying a word, making a distinction between heaven and earth and their message was CAESAR IS NOT GOD. Their basic loyalty was to God. However, they respected and prayed for the authorities. They even prayed for the success of their enterprises and that was the only symbolic crime that they had committed, but they would not submit to any other authority on earth except God. Thus, we can say that martyrdom arose out of refusal to worship the idols. In other words, their message was: GOD IS GOD and CAESAR IS NOT GOD.

‘But the power does not like any other symbols but its own. Thus, persecution broke out in three stages in the first four centuries in the asingly carried on with conviction.

The diversity of martyrdom and its meanings in the history of Christianity:

### **1. Reasons for Martyrdom in the Antiquity**

We identify six aspects in this regard. The first reason for martyrdom in the antiquity is the confession of Jesus Christ. Martyrdom in the antiquity, above all, had a catechetical and missionary urgency. Therefore, in the antiquity martyrdom arose quite naturally out of the work of proclamation. That is, in this proclamation, -- God, made man, was born, lived, died and rose again for our salvation -- Christians died specifically for Christ.

The second reason is that the aspect of refusal. When Gospel encountered the two different cultures, those two societies responded by suspicion and rejection. Jews could not accept the idea of God incarnate. The divine is transcended for them. Hence, they were offended about the "God, made man" language and the content. But the Romans should have been less hostile because, they had the custom of opening their

Pantheon to the gods of the nations which they had conquered. Thus they would not let one religion to stop them. They were also steeped in metaphysics and so, they should have been less hostile. But they got aroused by Christians. This was because Christians exerted pressure in the Jewish region like a malignant tumor. What appeared to be an internal squabble within Judaism, it was found out by the Romans that the religious squabbles had political consequences. The new sect was not confined to the narrow sphere of Judaism.

Thirdly, the new sect had the proselytizing ardor. It sent out missionaries; faith spread fast and it made progress. For Christians, the spread of faith meant progress. But others saw this as a "contagious disease". Although the converts were disciplined people and did good works from two fronts the vindictiveness was exerted: among people whose traditions were disturbed, there circulated atrocious lies, namely: Christians practiced incest; they devoured children in the secret assemblies, etc. And, in the State, it could not tolerate its subjects refusing to sacrifice to the gods of the country. That was the essential cause of the quarrel. Their refusal meant challenging the divine right claimed by the emperor. He had to be called "Lord". But, Christians had only one Lord and therefore, they would not bend their knees to any one else. No arms, no laws and no power could intimidate Christians. Litigation was reduced to a question of words. The rulers were confounded by the fervor of Christians and so, they were sent to the stake, beheaded and thrown to the wild beasts.

Fourthly, martyrdom occurred as a result of misunderstanding and mutual incomprehension between Christians and Romans. Romans thought that punishment would punish, dissuade and eventually divert the attention of the converts. So, Rome wanted to take their lives in order to deprive them of their religion. They wanted to reward those who took pleasure in the barbarism of the games., State, thus organized the spectacle of torture! Why amuse crowds! It was to distract the crowd. Circus and amphitheater and games became sources of distraction. Thus, people got rid of their latent violence, forgot their political grievances and took stock on the terraces where they were seated of their national and social dignity because fate had never made them slaves or barbarian and they were not put in the arena. The most recent example of this kind is the Olympic games conducted in Seoul, South Korea. What happened to Korea which was burning until recently? where are the students and workers who were on the street? Everything seems to be all right there, thanks to Seoul Olympic games!

Fifthly, martyrdom, in the antiquity, meant combat of faith. While others looked at it differently, for Christians combat meant struggle against the ultimate temptation. which was to live at the price of infidelity. So; Christians allowed themselves to be savaged and were ready to pay the price. For instance, in the amphitheater in Rome Ignatius of Antioch wrote thus:

May I benefit from the wild beasts prepared for me, and I pray that they will be found prompt with me, whom I shall even entice to devour me promptly-not as with some whom they were too timid to touch; and should they not consent voluntarily, I shall force them". (Christian Martyrs)

Sixthly, the death of Christians bore witness. It had a marvelous aura. Even without miracles; the remains of the heroes became objects of veneration. If there were no remains their stories spread, firing the neophytes with new zeal. They were encouraged by examples such as Tertullian who said: "The blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church". Days in the dungeon, journeys to their execution and imprisonment, -- all these were occasions for proclaiming the Gospel. Therefore, Christians needed to see, to hear, to touch these athletes who for them were the best proof of the power of God, so visible at work, and in such a way. Nothing could distract Christians and so the crowds began to think.

## **2. Reasons for martyrdom in the Classical Period**

The period from the end of Middle Age may be roughly described as the classical period. During this period, Christ's command: "Go and teach all nation" was implemented with vigor. His command was literally understood and therefore, attempts were made by Euro-Christians to put this command into practice. This coincided with the navigators' attempt to launch Christians onto new adventures. Thus, navigators looked for new lands and the Euro-Christians looked for new souls to convert -- in the Third World.

While this was the context in which Christianization of the Third World took place, it must be borne in mind that the Gospel was brought to us with great perils, to people who did not know of it. Christian Missions brought Christianity to our parts and the missionaries who brought the gospel were generally committed people. They confessed Christ; they

were blind to cruelty that awaited them in far off lands; they were patient and they suffered very much; when they had to die, they died murmuring His name. In spite of all these noble qualities, it must be remembered that missionary enterprise coincided with the colonization process in the Third World. We should not forget the fact that the theology of the Christian Missions served as handmaid in the colonization process on more than one occasion. In other words, the Christian theology that accompanied the missionaries justified the inhumanity heaped on the Third World people by the colonizers.

Therefore, the natives looked at them askance: where did these intruders derive the right to trample on our beliefs and reject our Gods ? Well, that was one of the consequences of Christianization of our parts. The same question raised by the Latin Americans as they "cautiously" celebrated the beginning of colonialism in their Continent this year is raised by all: who asked the white man to come? This question was and is raised even now in different countries in Asia, Africa, Caribbean Islands and Latin America. "Faith" did not 'take' well because cultures were different and penetration of Far East or Africa posed great many enigmas to the western conscience. Here Christ had the misfortune to arrive after the Spaniards or the Portuguese, -- in the context of two enterprises that went hand in hand: faith and trade. In other words, Christian mission seemed to be an instrument of Western covetousness. It is interesting and revealing to note the observation made by Guarani Indian to Pope John-Paul II in Manaus in 1980 thus: "Brazil was not discovered, Brazil was stolen". Any country in the present-day Southern Hemisphere will easily echo this sentiment is beyond doubt. During this period, martyrdom of Christians was accompanied by the shadow of the conquerors!

The Christian missionaries who brought Christianity to our parts thought that they were bringing true God to the people who did not know of him. But, for the natives, it meant ransacking the thick forest of legends in which the soul of people delighted. In this context, more difficult, enigmatic and embarrassing questions are being raised: were we robbed? If robbed, in what sense and terms? Was disrespect shown to our cultures, philosophies and ideologies? Were the Euro-North Americans destroyers or preservers?

Missionaries who came to our parts came knowing fully well the fate that awaited them. In the midst of wretchedness, sickness and revolts, they made the absolute gift of their persons; they dedicated themselves

not only to teaching but also to helping tribes and the depressed and deprived sections and loved them with all the power of the gospel.

The rise of clerical power during this period also brought about martyrdom. The Edict of Milan promulgated by Constantine, the Emperor, brought the State apparatus at the disposal of the Christian Church. With this edict, the Church and state, the spiritual and temporal powers aligned and gave each other mutual support. Both Christians and pagans considered the political institution as divine in origin. Is it? We need to reflect on it.

The Church, in aligning itself closely with the State, thought that by using the temporal power, it fulfilled the mission and collaborated in the advent of the Kingdom. In the process, the Church succumbed to political temptations. Church born in the catacombs, was unaware of the inner inertia of power. It thought that its duties were unlimited, so were its rights.

The Church was the sole interpreter of the sacred text it had. It read promise or judgement in it. According to her understanding, the salvation was to be achieved by bending the mind, gaining submission to the authorities which in turn meant that the faithful show them the faith due to God. It meant allegiance to the head to the Church, Pope, or Patriarch. This crude religion believed in punishment, again in good faith and thought that it could alleviate above by contributing to it here below. Thus, exposed to dubious alliances with politics, ensnared by the distortions of its own power, in the course of its history, the Church, as an institution, yielded to covetousness stirred up by material goods and the intoxication of being in charge. The Church assumed all authority, claimed to offer salvation and made itself absolute. Sadly enough, the theology was the problem!

There was also another problem during this time. The Church, as an Institution, did not like individual Christians who interpreted the defacto position of the Church in the light of the Gospel and set over against it a form of Christianity. Such attempts to interpret the sacred text was seen as a revolt. But at root, it was often fidelity. The wrath of the Church meant that Christians themselves became victims of other Christians who were the executioners. Thus a new race of martyrs was born because the Church was too strong or too weak to allow that it had faults, although this aspect was highlighted in abundance by some who became martyrs and met with a violent death. One supreme example

was John Huss.

Martyrs such as John Huss, Wycliff and others addressed the Church or the monarch, and became martyrs in telling them in what respects they thought these were in error or where they thought them right. This dissidence of the martyrs was personal to them; it was the fruit of an illumination, a revelation, a studious reflection and a voice speaking to them, as it was the case with Joan of Arc. In the process of becoming martyrs, they had to contend with indifferent faithful and the hostile clergy. They were assailed with dogmas, Bible, obedience, judgement and another salvation. They were also regarded as negative figures. People in general attributed the conflicts which broke out in the Mother Church to their piety. There was political and religious reasons behind the martyrdom of Joan of Arc. The Church as an Institution stood against the freedom of the individual and this warranted martyrdom. The martyrdom of John Huss and later the great massacres of the Reformation relate to the same conflict between the Institution and individual freedom.

There were yet one more reason for martyrdom during the classical period. The Church, as an Institution, opposed Inspiration. That is, the truth of the faith seemed guaranteed by the immobility of the false theological knowledge. So, during Reformation there were the prophetic form of a number of isolated protests.

### **3. Reason for martyrdom in the Twentieth Century**

In the 20th century, the Church had undergone political changes. She is stripped of political powers which she enjoyed in the previous centuries. The only power she has now is the power that emanates from the word. As for faith, she is brought back to the earth.

With regard to martyrdom in the 20th century we notice a shift: from the "heroic" to the "anonymous" martyrdoms; from the "individual" to the "collective" martyrdoms; from the "historical" to the "contemporary" reality. As for the content of faith, it can be said that faith in Christ works towards liberating people from the bondage, -- of all sorts. In other words, human beings have become the concern of the Church and Christian faith. Why did this shift take place and in what context?

Alarmed at the horrors of violence and threat to human life, the Church began to focus its attention on human beings. The Churches are studying

this vast human identity, so often denied, ridiculed, exploited, massacred. They oppose the coalition of interests, calculations, fears or ignorance, with a concern which subordinates every principle to human dignity, and which begins with basic respect for life as such. It is in this context, Pope John Paul II, for instance, is hailed as the Pope of human rights in the five continents.

Further, the Church and Society Conference of the World Council of Churches in 1966 and the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Latin America (CELAM) in 1968, both representing the Ecumenical Movement, proclaimed a message to the Christians at large in identical terms thus: they said:

If the Church wants to share its life with the world then it must put its weight on the side of the poor and the oppressed.

In other words, Iraeneus' observation that "the glory of God is the living human being" sums up the aspirations of contemporary faith. Well, then, is life superior to honor? Does faith at present dictate the duty of cowardice to the faithful, inviting them to sacrifice everything for their safety? In what does my honor consist?, one might ask.

The answer is that it consists in the life of others, which calls for freedom, security, and justice; and if necessary I must defend them at the price of my own life.

Martyrdom, in the twentieth century, became inevitable in the context of totalitarian orders which quench the spirit, sow death and scorch the earth. Until recently, two super powers namely, the U.S.A and the U.S.S.R. appealed to antithetical catechism. Now, there is only one power which pretends to act as the police man of the world. At the instance of USA, the worship of the Mammon continues. While this is the context in the North, in the South, the people are weakened by misery, allow themselves to be torn by fratricidal struggles and remain defenseless in the face of those who suck them to the marrow. East against West and North against South, this way hate crucifies the world. In the earlier part of 20th century we had Nazism, Fascism and Auschwitz. Now we have the threat from Chemical weapons, neutrons and, the bacteria, as well as giant multi-national and trans-national corporations. Thus there is violence to life, human life, animal life and plant life. Mass violence characterizes the present-day situation of the world. Because of this mass violence, the notion of martyrdom has

broadened out and become imprecise. Martyrdom today extends to groups sacrificed to the contemporary barbarism. Whole peoples become martyrs: Jews, Gypsies, the Cambodians, the Vietnamese, the tribals, the Dalits in India and women everywhere. In other words, torture and summary execution is the fate of many in the world today.

The second feature of martyrdom in the 20th century is that though nothing was willed, everything was accepted. A definitive choice guided the destiny of the martyrs. For example, Sister Alice Domon remarked to the Archbishop of Toulouse thus: "I have already made the sacrifice of my life".

The third feature of martyrdom in the 20th century is that it takes the side of the oppressed. That is, to give in or to accept death with patience is not enough. To merit the title, he or she should be entirely swallowed up by death. What merits them? Martyrs are those who suffer but their groans, far from being a disavowal of what they were, express the noble reason for their deaths and change the apparent fatality into an absolute proof of love. For this reason we can say that the last word which honors the martyr is not COMPASSION but EXAMPLE. That is to say, men and women, in the 20th century sacrifice their lives with a view to rescuing their brothers and sisters from scorn, from propaganda, from misery, from death and from all four at the same time. Witnesses are agreed here in spite of the fact that the circumstances and the issues are different:

Maximilian Kolbe took the place of another to perish slowly of hunger and thirst;

Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a children's game in which all races would hold hands;

Oscar Romero died calling on his compatriots for basic justice.

Thus, we see a claim which makes sense of all the martyrdoms of our time: Martyrs today no longer die explicitly for Jesus Christ nor for the freedom of the Spirit as was the case in the first two periods we had considered, but they die for human justice, i.e., an urgent new action is needed to defend those who are overwhelmed by the weight of totalitarianism. One may ask: what is this faith if it is not explicitly for faith in Jesus Christ or for the freedom of the spirit? The answer to that comes in the form of another question: Can faith serve God if it does not

FIRST serve humankind? In other words, the contemporary martyrs are involved in political matters and are more often concerned in action than speaking, like the first Christians, or thinking as at the end of the Middle Ages. Thus, the contemporary martyrs throw themselves into the combats of the world, they denounce its impostures, seek to reduce the atrocious inequality of fortunes and classes, to uproot the cult of Mammon, the bloodiest of the gods, and dismantle the systems of oppression. By involving themselves totally in the combats of the world, the contemporary martyrs make themselves the apostles of the human person. This is clear in what M.L. King, Jr. had said in 1961, in the context of threat to his life from the powers that were and in the context of strike by Garbage Collectors:

It may crucify me. I may die. But even if I die in the struggle I want people to say, "He died to make me free.

Thus, the faith of these martyrs is totally swallowed up in the absolute urgency embodied in the oppressed and their suffering. We give prominence to the martyrs of the yester years and yester centuries. They do deserve that. But we should not overlook those others who suffer besides the martyrs. I quote Theofried Baumester who says thus:

The prominence given to the martyrs should not be made retrospective. But those others who suffer besides the martyrs should not be overlooked. Today they need a different theological treatment than in early Christianity. (Concilium)

The fourth feature of martyrdom in the 20th century is that the end of these modern martyrs is very different from anything evident in former centuries. In the former centuries, the martyrs were arrested, judged, and delivered over to death; two theories were in conflict: Where is God, in an institution or in a conscience? Now there is no longer debate between a way of thinking and the supposed virtues of order. In the modern times, the persecuted person speaks in the name of his or her faith, deeply rooted in a cultural heritage. It is clear that the martyrs. embody the side of justice.

The fifth feature of martyrdom in our century is that the persecutor is often put to shame. Persecutor employs state violence, and horrible means to quench life. He or she refuses to acknowledge his or her motives in employing state violence and horrible means. The persecutor spreads lies, propagates myths and uses the media to reach the ends. For

instance, the Third World theologians are branded as Marxists, drunkards, womanizers, depressed, homosexuals, lesbians, Anti-nationals insurrectionists and so on, when they in fact, are trying to live out their faith in defense of the defenseless. Again, AIDS disease is highlighted as the most urgent and serious problem in the world today. No doubt about that for, the experts say so. What about malnutrition, undernourishment, hunger and poverty around the globe -- in Somalia, Ethiopia and the severe human rights violations in countries such as South Africa, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and so on?

In today's world, the persecutor adopts dubious means to silence the dissent voices and, silencing voice is the most atrocious crime. Therefore, there are no trials and the persecutor closes the mouth of the opponents. Public execution is avoided. Eg: Bhuto. No one may see the condemned person; no spectacle of death; his or her patience, voice or look many convey too much. Hence, the attempt to silence dissent or dissident voices who speak of freedom, truth, justice and humanity. Thus, in modern days, not only the victim but the entire judicial apparatus is concealed, That is why the mode of killing resembles an assassination. Eg: Aquino was killed in broad day light. Thus, there is no justice, no tribunal and no scaffold, -- a person is butchered! Victims fate is hidden, suppressed and in an uncertain trial, the victim remains behind the closed doors. Death perpetrated by paramilitary bands, hooligans, a militia which the state virtuously disowns after giving arms, sometimes to both parties in conflict. Assassination is concealed behind an abduction because a bullet could be too much of a noise! However, concealment confesses the innocence of the victims and it equally points a finger at the guilty under their masks. It also pronounces the stifled message which gives the martyr his or her full significance as a witness. For it is the face of Christ that it brings out in the very act in which it seeks to deny it. Did precautions of the persecutors prevent people like Romero and Jerzy Popeluszko from becoming legends? The committed speak even after their death, perhaps even while they live out the truth in their lives. How is this possible? This takes us to the next section.

Thus far, we had seen the diversity of martyrdom in three periods. Martyrdom arose for different reasons. In the antiquity it was the confession of the name of Christ which brought about martyrdom. In the second period, it was speaking on behalf of the freedom of the spirit or conscience. In the present day it is social justice which warrants martyrdom. But is there a unity in the concept of martyrdom? How fair are we in interpreting the meaning of martyrdom in three periods as we

had seen thus far? The distinction made here is for the sake of clarity and because of historical development. Thus, this distinction is an apparent one. But then, how are we to understand martyrdom with all its diversity and meanings? Is there a unity of purpose in martyrdom? yes, we will come to that shortly. But before that we should mention the two elements of constancy that we identify in the history of martyrdom in Christianity. The first element of constancy refers to the persecutors. They are the same even now, barbarians, and they expect people to call them Lords, say, the Caesar is Lord! The second element of constancy refers to the persecuted. Their faith and steadfastness is the same. They say even now: God is Lord. The different approaches adopted by the persecuted, the martyrs, stem from a single center, belief in Jesus Christ. But this faith in Jesus is understood differently today than it was in the earlier centuries. This faith or belief in Jesus Christ, therefore, needs to be interpreted, because:

Who would dare to confess Christ without concern for his or her impoverished brothers and sisters, and without holding his or her head high before Caesar?

Who can claim to be free if they do not allow their neighbors to be because they have no food, and if they do not invoke the supreme dispenser of freedom?

Who can believe themselves to be vehicles of justice if they do not attend to the perpetrators of slavery, and taking the side of humanity, do not stand up to the powers which take only its own side; or if they do not serve, in the person of the poor, the figure of one who made himself poor to crown them with his glory?

So, what is this faith or belief in Jesus? How are we to interpret it? We need to systematize our reflections.

#### **4. The Unity of Martyrdom: An Attempt at Interpretation and Systematization**

First of all, martyrdom should be understood in relation to the service of the humiliated. People do not die today to defend their cause as Christians. But the cause is certainly there. As Leonardo Boff says:

The martyr defends not his life, but his cause, which is his religious conviction, his fidelity to God or his brother. And he defends this cause

by dying.

Neither do they fight for heavenly thoughts. But for the person of Christ in the poor. Christ is present in each one of us, especially in the person of the poor. That is why:

Thomas More refused to take oath which dishonored his country and looked for the unity of the universal church. Behind the voices that Joan of Arc heard was the wounded honor of a nation.

The Apostolic Fathers who left writings before undergoing martyrdom bear witness that they too demanded the bread that was due to the poor. For example, Ignatius and Polycarp preached "help for the widow, the orphan, the afflicted, the captive, the freedman, the hungry and the thirsty". In other words, their presence is part of the design of God for whom they die.

These men and women accepted suffering because their conviction extended beyond themselves to serve the human community and to take its part on earth. In other words, their faith is focused downward, not upward, or heavenward. So, far from taking them aside into the heavens, faith nails them to these kingdoms of the earth, which are promised to the meek to inherit and the love of which they sometimes confess.

Secondly, martyrdom should be understood in relation to the freedom of the spirit. The freedom of the spirit is interior to faith. This freedom is not the monopoly of the wise or the powerful. All of us have this freedom. That is to say, the martyrdom of which it is the cause gives a hearing to the voices of people, without distinctions of class, fortune, education, age and something which is more rare, -- sex. Faith invests men and women born to shadow and silence with an authority. Old men such as Polycarp and frail women like Perpetua and Felicita show it to Caesar. But they are not rebels and there is nothing to hold against them. They are subject to those who govern them. But they are stubborn in opposing a power which glorifies itself and makes itself an end in itself. The race of freemen, the martyrs, professes political irreligion. Its slogan is: "Down with the cult of the emperors!" In other words, Christian martyrdom is based on opposition to the power which takes itself as an absolute point of reference. Christians still say that "Caesar is not Lord".

This Christian freedom, from outside, looks like rebellion within and it

is confused with an obedience made an absolute, which has a name because it has a master, Jesus Christ. That is why, Joan of Arc could confidently declare thus: "I look to my judge, who is the master of heaven; yes, I look to my creator. I love him with all my heart". Polycarp echoes the same thus: "I have served him for eighty-six years" or "He has been faithful to me for eighty-six years". In the 20th century the same obstinate voice of Romero is heard thus: "We obey the order of God before that of human beings". In a seminary in India, in the context of suppression of human rights and denial of participation in the decision-making processes, the voice of the former Moderator of Church of South of India, Bishop Anandara Samuel, was recently heard thus "It is better to obey God than the Moderators". The last example cited here makes me to observe that martyrs need not to be only those who met with violent death and are dead, but martyrs can be still living, facing death or opposing death in their day-to-day lives. Martyrs are still there, still living but ready to die for a cause. They are numerous. These modern day martyrs explain themselves. They do not depart from the general spinelessness through personal exhibitionism or in the pride of an elitist intelligence. Further their personal drama is lost in the vastness of an eternal design into which they throw themselves without fear and sometimes without displeasure. So, martyrdom is always a confession of faith, secret or expressed. It goes before God for wonder. The martyrs confront their persecutors, full of humanity, if not of humor. If they protest it is at the evil done by their brothers to the "least and the last" of the humanity. The cause of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized -- secularized -- is also a confession of Christ.

This broadening of the Christian vocation should not be treated as a break in the tradition of martyrdom. Karl Rahner, in making a plea for the broadening of the classical concept, asks: (with reference to Romero)

For example, why should not some one like Bishop Romero, who died while fighting for justice in society, a struggle he waged out of the depths of his conviction as a Christian why should he not be a martyr? Certainly he was prepared for his death (Concilium, p. 10.)

This question is legitimate and we will come to that later. The point to remember here is that the 20th century martyrs refuse to sacrifice men and women to Mammon, the new idol of our time. Their combat is also spiritual. To understand this otherwise would be to misunderstand and misrepresent the meaning of martyrdom. The martyrs of the present day

persist in confronting oppressive power; they stimulate independence of judgement, insensitive to the seductions of money and power, and they flourish above all the faithfulness to service of the most abandoned, where faith contemplates the form of Christ in the present. Boff brings home this point powerfully thus:

Today, more and more Christians, particularly in the Third World, are carrying out actions ... Which originate in faith and the Gospel. Not a few Christians ... because of the Gospel, make a preferential option for the poor, for their liberation, for the defense of their rights. In the name of this option they stand up and denounce the exercise of domination and all forms of social dehumanization. They may be persecuted, arrested, tortured and killed. They, too, are martyrs in the strict sense of the word (Concilium, p. 14)

Finally, martyrdom today should be understood in relation to the Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed. Martyrs of old confessed faith in the risen Christ. But the martyrs in our times confess their faith in the Kingdom which Jesus of his own historical context proclaimed. Jesus' ministry and mission was focused on the Kingdom (Mk.1:14-15). The martyrs or witnesses of the earlier centuries, particularly those in the antiquity; awaited judgement at the end of time, they patiently awaited divine justice. Whereas contemporary witnesses have turned their eyes away from the glory of the heavens, obscured by the infinite sorrow of the world. What is this Kingdom? When is it to be fulfilled or realized? At the end of time? Does it not have two dimensions: the "already" and the "not yet"? How right is the understanding that the divine justice is to be awaited and the Kingdom to be realized here and now in time and history? When one is engaged in theological niceties, the contemporary martyrs who are dead or who are alive, raise, the following questions with enough legitimacy and justification:

How do we talk of God in the midst of poverty, oppression, war and meaninglessness? Should not our God-talk be meaningful in and related to the context? Should we await God's power and justice only at the end of time? If God is active in history through the Incarnation of Jesus of his own historical context, then how do we celebrate God's presence and participation in our living situations, in our search for meaning, in our hopes and fears, and in our anguishes and aspirations? If God is powerful and Just, then should God not intervene instead of waiting? If God is just, then should not God help instead of judging? It was in such a situation of complexity, suffering and oppression and denial of basic

human rights and humanity that one martyr, our contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoffer, came up with the idea or faith reflection that "only a powerless God can help".

That is to say, faith today is oriented towards the kingdom, its value, life-style and it meditates on the scourged Christ, on the power of love bestowed, i.e., on passion and suffering. Faith seeks God in Christ among the humble, the scorned in whom God is embodied. In other words, the Lord of the 20th century is the suffering servant of Second Isaiah, with wounded face and hands, which also tend the unfortunate of whom he is so intimately the brother. The important thing to remember is that God, in Christ, has made himself known in history. God is where God's people are, -- especially among the least and the last, the unfortunate, the less privileged, the dehumanized, the suffering and the oppressed and the poor. Jesus did not ask his faithful to love elsewhere than on the earth where they have met him, nor otherwise than as he loved himself, dedicating himself to the liberation of our humiliated race. I close with John 12:24-25 which reads thus:

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears abundant fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 1: Martyrs of the Early Era**

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### **Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of Polycarp -- Bishop of Smyrna, By Priscilla Singh**

Christianity has always faced both external and internal problems at every period in history. Specially between A.D 100-313, it had to face persecution from the Roman Empire. Before 250 AD. persecutions were local, sporadic and often caused by mob action than the result of definite state policy Tertullian's idea that "the blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church" became a terrible reality in the life of many Christians during this period.

The causes of this persecution need to be identified for a better understanding. There were several, -- political, social, religious and economic reasons. Christianity earlier was looked at as a religio licita or legal seat of Judaism but soon it gained distinction as a 'religio illicita' and was considered a threat to the security of the Roman Empire. The rapidly growing group, on moral and spiritual grounds, claimed exclusive loyalty to Christ and opted when confronted with loyalty to the Emperor for the Heavenly king they worshiped. Their daily practice of meeting at nights was misconstrued as conspiracy against the State. Their refusal to burn incense on the altars confirmed their disloyalty.

Roman Religion was mechanical and external. It had its altars, priests, soothsayers, rites and practices which were visible symbols of their religion. But Christians had no idols, no objects and they closed their eyes in prayer, and had no visible object of worship and so they were branded as 'atheists'. Also there were misunderstandings about their sacraments which were taken to be rites of cannibalism.

Socially too, Christians had an appeal for the lower classes and slaves. They upheld equality of all people (Col. 3:11). The existing paganism insisted on a hierarchy of aristocracy being served by slaves. These slaves were very much influenced to leave their slavery for the liberation offered by Christ. Also their non-conformity to accepted social patterns earned the wrath of the Romans. Their puritanical living was an open rebuke to the scandalous living of the upper classes and thus were considered a danger to society and were called 'haters of mankind'.

Economically, the feelings of the vested interests were hurt and their livelihood threatened. Butchers, priests, idol-makers and soothsayers lost a lot of income because of the Christian non-conformity and so persecution followed and many Christians daily life of Christians. He exhorted the people to virtuous living, good works and steadfastness even to death, "if necessary because they had been saved by faith in Christ!"

As to the events that led him to martyrdom, there had been disastrous earthquakes in the lands around the Mediterranean as well as fires in Rome, Antioch, and Carthage. Pagans blamed these on the wrath of Gods made hostile by Christian refusal to sacrifice to them. Philip, the Governor of Asia, was goaded into action not only by the pagan residents but even by the Jews. Arrests were made and those affirming their faith were tortured to force recantation. They were torn open by metal combs or forced to lie on spikes. Those who survived were thrown to the lions if they still failed to deny their faith.

When a young man named Germanius defied the beasts to attack him, the crowds, thronging to watch his death began to shout, "death to the atheists", which somehow, turned into, "death to Polycarp". Christians persuaded the aged Bishop to hide in a farm house where he spent most of his time in prayer. Once he dreamt that his pillow caught fire which convinced him of his death by burning. There was an intense search and one of the farm hands was caught and tortured to reveal the hiding

place. The followers of Polycarp wanted him to move but the Bishop stood firm and insisted that his capture and death was inevitable and God's will! The Bishop surrendered voluntarily when the police came impressing them with his meek and gentle behavior. He bargained for an hour of prayer while his captors could dine and he prayed for everyone who came in after contact with him, "small and great famous and obscure and for the whole Catholic Church throughout the world." The police marched him to Smyrna on an ass and the chief Herod persuaded him to deny Christ to save his life. When he failed another knocked him down and he was marched to the stadium. It was the start of Jewish feast Purim. The Governor was attending games recently where many of the bishop's congregations had been thrown to the lions. A distinct voice was heard saying "Be strong, Polycarp".

The Governor also tried to persuade Polycarp to deny the charges leveled against him saying, "Respect your years, swear by Caesar's fortune! Change your attitude and say, away with the atheists, revile Christ." Polycarp replied, "Fourscore and six years I have been serving him and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who saved me."

He defied the governor to call the beasts and he in turn threatened him to be burned in the fire. The crowd echoed eagerly the Governor's threat. He was tied to the pyre and prayed. A Christian who witnessed the execution recounted that the fire took the shape of a vaulted room, and made a wall about the body of the martyr, which looked 'not like burning flesh but glowed like gold and silver refined in the furnace'. To make sure he was dead the convictor pierced him with sword, the blood was so profuse that it extinguished the smoldering fire.

The Christians in Smyrna claimed the remains and even afterwards, often the Christian community in Smyrna assembled in his grave "in gladness and joy to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, to commemorate those who have already fought and for the training and preparation of those who shall hereafter do the same."

Bishop Polycarp's martyrdom makes it clear that despite the intense hostility of an apparent majority the persecutions of Christians in that region was limited and selective. The Governor of Asia moved against individual believers only at the insistence of his constituents and he chose to punish those as a warning to others. It is clear from the events that Bishop Polycarp was unlike Ignatius who willingly awaited

martyrdom. He could be persuaded by his followers to go into hiding, perhaps his age made him more dependent on others' counsel. In spite of his counsel to people for 'steadfastness even unto death', and in spite of witnessing the eager anticipation of Ignatius' martyrdom and the influence he had over him, he seems to have wavered a bit and took to hiding than face the lions. The solitude and the hours of prayer perhaps of penitence must have strengthened his weak will, also the number of times he had to flee leaving places to hide from the search of the police like a coward must have worn him out. The dream of burning pillow seems to have further strengthened his resolve now to face the persons rather than flee like a coward. Once he had made the decision, he behaved in an exemplary manner of a man who is at peace with himself.

His later argument with the Governor before his sentence does not show him as a weak soul but a man firm in his faith- foundation.

It is a challenge to the Christians of today who might in a few more years perhaps may have to begin to face persecution, that a frail old man could defy the authorities and opt for fire instead of worldly security.

He had indeed been a seed of the Church through his bloodshed and proved an "iron man" than an 'old man'. It is commendable that he has lived to prove his "steadfastness even unto death."

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## **Chapter 2: The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, by By L.H. Lalpekhlua**

### **The Person**

Polycarp was one of the 'best known personages' among Christians of the early centuries. He was considered as a 'venerable figure' and a primary link between the sub-apostolic Church and the Church of a much later period. (Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers, a New Translation and Commentary, Vol.1*, [New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964], p. 64. See also: *The Fathers of the Church*, edited by Ludwig Schopp, Second Edition, [New York: Christian heritage. Inc., 1948], p. 131.) He was a bishop of Smyrna in about the first-half of the second century AD. According to Tertullian, Irenaeus and Eusebius, Polycarp had been a disciple of St. John the Apostle at Ephesus; and it was the Apostle himself who appointed him Bishop of Smyrna. (*The Fathers of the Church*, p. 131.) St. Ignatius, a contemporary bearer of the Apostles and bishop of Antioch, stayed with him on his way to his martyrdom at Rome in AD. 110 (*Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs*, edited by E.C.E. Owen, [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927], p.31.) and Polycarp was said to have collected letters of St. Ignatius and forwarded some to the Philippians at their request. (op. cit.) Grant says that Polycarp was a teacher of 'both Irenaeus and a valentine Gnostic

named Florinus'. (Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers.*, p.64.) In the year before his martyrdom in AD. 154 Polycarp visited Rome and met Pope Aricetus on matters concerning controversy on the date of Easter, and the latter was said to have treated him with 'high honor' although they made no agreement on the controversy. ( *Some Authentic Acts...*,p.31.)

Even though Polycarp was thought to have had written several letters, yet only the 'Letter to the Philippians' had been preserved. But concerning him are the sources like 'the letters of Ignatius addressed to Smyrna', the martyr act of Polycarp and several writings of Eusebius, etc. (op. cit., pp. 64, 70.) However, the most authentic account of his martyrdom has been 'The martyrdom of St. Polycarp' sent by the Smyrna church to the church of Philomelium and to 'all the dioceses of the Holy Catholic church in every place'. This letter has been considered as 'the earliest account of a martyrdom' that has been preserved. (The *Book of Christian Martyrdom*, Edited by Bruno Chenu., et.al., [London: SCM Press Ltd., 1990], p. 36.) The document has numerous parallels with the Gospels and there is a striking similarity between the martyrdom of Polycarp and that of Jesus Christ in the gospels. Eusebius the historian made use of it in his fourth century writings. (Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers...*, p. 69.) Most scholars believe that in the twenty two chapters of the letter, chapters 20-22 are supplementary documents of the later date. (Ibid., pp. 70-71. Also Ludwig Schopp, et.al. (ed.), *The Fathers of the Church*, pp. 148, 149 and others.)

### **The Date of Polycarp's Martyrdom**

Before we move on to the context, we shall first discuss the date, for the correct knowledge of the date will help us to understand the situation.

There is a dispute among the scholars concerning the date of Polycarp's martyrdom. According to Eusebius' 'chronicon', it happened in Olympiad year between July 166 to July 167. (Thomas Nicklin, *Gospel Meanings: Critical and Historical notes on the Gospels*, [London: Longmans, Green and co., 1950], p. 371.) Eusebius' dating is accepted by many scholars including von Campenhausen, Telfer, W.H.C.Frend, and others. (W.H.C.Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the early Church: A Study of Conflict from Maccabees to Donatus*, [New York: New York University Press, 1967], p. 197. See also his footnote p. 171.) Theofried Baumeister, in accordance with Pierre Brind 'Amour, also took up Eusebius dating and believed that the martyrdom occurred on

Sunday February 23, AD. 167. (Theofried Baumeister, 'Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity' in *Martyrdom Today*, Concilium, Edited by Johannes Baptist Metz ,et.al. [Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1983], pp. 3-4.) If this dating is to be accepted, it will mean that the martyrdom of Polycarp occurred during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, i.e. AD. 161-180. (Based on the chronology given by Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed are the persecuted: Christian life in Roman Empire AD. 64-313*. Translated by Robert R. Barr [New York Orbis Books, 1987]. p. xii.) Another different view on the date of Polycarp's martyrdom comes from Prof. C. Turner who felt that the true date must be 22 February AD. 156, the day of the Feast of Purim. (Thomas Nicklin, *The Gospel Meanings...*, p.371.) The same date is accepted by Prof. E. Schwartz, yet for Schwartz it should be on sabbath in the passover week. (Ibid.) Another date of Polycarp's martyrdom is suggested by Thomas Nicklin who held that the martyrdom occurred on Saturday 23 February AD. 155. (Ibid.) Nicklin argued the above other view points with the following:

(1) The Smyrna letter throughout makes the martyrdom echo the crucifixion. Hence need not be called a sabbath or rest day (2) 23 February is the day of the Terminalia festival. An error in Roman dating is less probable than one in our own computation of the month Xanthicos. (3) Eusebius' Olympiad 235 is explicable as a misreading of 232 (II for II). Although graffiti at Pompeii and the number of the Beast in the Apocalypse show the modern notation for numbers, there is evidence for the survival of the older system known to us from Athenian temple treasury accounts and the Purian marble) (Ibid.)

Polycarp's martyrdom in AD. 155 is also accepted by Lightfoot. (Ibid.) If we accept this viewpoint, it will mean that Polycarp's martyrdom happened during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius, i.e., AD. 138-161. (Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed are the Martyrs...*, p. xii.) In the light of the above discussions we may be inclined to believe that the martyrdom of St. Polycarp occurred during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius somewhere in the year between AD. 155-56. In accordance with the suggestion of this dating we shall turn to the context of Polycarp's martyrdom.

## **The Context**

The Christian persecution during Emperor Antoninus' reign, although it had started since the reign of Nero particularly after the burning of

Rome in AD. 64, was said to have been 'moderate' and the Church enjoyed a certain kind of 'quasi-tolerance'. (Bruno Chenu, et.al. eds., *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 36. Also W.H.C.Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, p. 174.) However, this tolerance does not imply 'any improvement in status' but only 'a lenient administration of the existing law', (W.H.C. Frend, *Ibid.*) based on the principle that 'every people, every city, had its own gods'; therefore, a minimal conformism' with Roman religion was still required of all the subjects. (Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed are the persecuted*, p.4.) Antoninus did not give any 'dispensations to unauthorized and suspect religious groups', in fact, his reign was described as 'the climax of a genuine loyalty to the empire and the person of the emperor.' (op.cit., p. 175) In this situation persecution was 'less the result of a systematic policy than of denunciation by pagans who spread damaging falsehood about the new forms of worship' (Bruno Chenu, et.al. eds, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 36) In the eyes of the Romans the 'new religion' with its 'universal mission of joining all human beings together in the same faith' was a threat both for the state religion and the empire itself. Ivo Lesbaupin, op.cit., pp. 3-4.) In their thought, the presence and increasing number of the Christians who refused to worship their gods but practiced 'separate or secret fellowship' could be a source of danger; that one day the gods may desert the cities that their vaunted prosperity would vanish overnight in the smoke of earthquake and the clamor of social evolution'. (Frend, op.cit., p. 174.) In other words, the Romans considered the Christians' refusal to recognize and worship the state gods was a refusal to acknowledge the Sovereignty of the emperor, and their increasing presence might bring social revolution to the empire. Thus, we may say that the Christian persecution in the early Roman empire, although it appeared as a religious matter, had in its background a political reason. This fits in with the reason why Polycarp was persecuted for he was charged as 'the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship' (*Martyrdom* 12:2). 'The martyrdom of Polycarp was, says *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, caused by popular pressure, and was carried out by local authorities wanting to please the masses and eager to make an example of him'. After having witnessed the martyrdom of Germanicus, the crowd demanded the search of Polycarp (3:2). Meanwhile Polycarp, though inwardly desired to remain in the city yet due to the pressure of fellow Christians, was hiding in the forest, spending time in prayer (5:1). At this time he saw in vision a pillow burned with which according to his interpretation was a symbol that he must be burned alive (5:2). After knowing that two of his slaves were arrested and one denied his faith, he could no longer hide in the forest but surrendered

himself to the soldiers who were looking for him (chs. 6-8).

### **The Trial and Manner of Martyrdom**

Polycarp was first brought for trial to Herod, the high sheriff, and then to Nicetes, the father of Herod; the latter put him into their carriage. Here he was persuaded to confess Caesar as Lord. But failing to convince him they hastily pushed him from the carriage and while getting down he hurt his skin, yet he paid no heed to it.(ch.8).

The second and last trial took place in the stadium where the crowd was waiting for him. Here the trial was conducted by a proconsul who was 'Philip the Asiarch' (Chapter 12:2). Several questions or persuasions and answers or defense took place and here are some of them:

Proconsul: 'Have respect for your age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Swear, I will set you free, curse Christ'.

Polycarp: 'I have served him for eighty-six years and he did me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me'?

Proconsul: 'Swear by the fortune of Caesar'.

Polycarp: 'If you vainly imagine that I shall swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you say, and suppose that I do not know what I am, here is a plain answer: 'I am a Christian. If you want to learn about Christianity, give me a day and listen.'

Proconsul: 'It is the people whom you must convince'.

Polycarp: 'I would have counted you worthy to be reasoned with; for we have been taught to give honor as it is fit, where we can without harm, to governments and powers ordained by God, but I do not think the people are worthy to hear any defense from me'.

Proconsul: 'I have beasts, and I will throw them to you unless you repent'.

Polycarp: 'Bring them in, for repentance from better to worse is not a change to be desired, but it is good to change from cruelty to justice'.

Proconsul: 'If you do not fear the beasts, I will have you consumed by fire. So repent'.

Polycarp: 'You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour and is speedily quenched; so you know nothing of the fire of the judgement to come and of the eternal punishment which is reserved for the wicked. Why delay? Give your orders, (chs.9-11).

The proconsul gave order to the herald and declared three times that 'Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian'. Then the multitude cried aloud, saying 'This is a teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship'. They demanded Philip, the Asiarch to let loose a lion on Polycarp. But when he told them that it was not lawful for him for the wild beast combat had ended, they again cried aloud demanding Polycarp to be burned alive (ch.12).

Just as he already foretold through his vision, Polycarp was burnt alive. It is said that the fire, 'forming a sort of arch like a ship's sail billowing in the wind, made a wall around the body of the martyr, which was in the midst, or like gold and silver burning in furnace' (15:2). Seeing that Polycarp's body could not be consumed by fire, the 'impious people' ordered an execution to thrust a dagger into him. When that was done, it is said that a dove and a gush of blood came out of it putting the fire out.(16:1). Later, the centurion 'put the body in the midst and burned it according to their custom' (18:1).

### **The Art of Defense: Theological Reason**

It was the faith in Jesus Christ, whom he believed as king and savior that challenged Polycarp to undergo suffering unto death. His captors persuaded him to curse Christ and to confess Caesar as Lord, but he never accepted it; for in his thought, Jesus Christ is faithful enough and had done 'no wrong' to him in his eighty-six years of life. Caesar is a man, therefore, he cannot be God. Loyalty to Jesus is always the first and central to Polycarp's thought. He also seemed to have had in mind that by suffering and death in the name of Christ, he was sharing the sufferings of Jesus for the salvation of humanity. He indeed, shared the reality of the kingdom of God, the presence of Jesus Christ, even in the midst of suffering. With the hope of victory in the final consummation of the kingdom, he rejoiced in suffering and could challenge death. For Polycarp. suffering is the way of the crucified Christ. He preferred total

rejection and suffering unto death rather than accepting the unjust religio-political structures of the Roman empire where people were forced to worship the king and the very God-gifted human rights were denied. In a situation where human rights were violated and minorities tortured in the name of gods, Polycarp stood as a champion of justice, identifying himself with the weak and the oppressed.

## **Reflection**

Polycarp had demonstrated in his life and martyrdom a great example of what it means to be a Christian. His rock-like faith in Jesus Christ and his faithfulness to Him unto death would reecho again and again for the churches throughout the ages. Particularly for the churches in India where the Christians often fail to practice what they preach, the martyrdom of Polycarp is a great challenge for us. In Polycarp's context, faith in Jesus Christ meant confessing Him as Lord and Savior and total submission and fidelity unto Him even to the extent of death. But in our context today where millions of people are in hunger and live in sub-human conditions on account of the unjust socioeconomic and political structures of our country, faith in Jesus Christ would mean to identify ourselves with the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for justice and liberation. Indeed, Polycarp identified himself with the sufferings of the Christian minority who were tortured and treated as animals. He fought against the oppression of the king and the ruling class in favor of the minority and helpless Christians. He had chances to escape death. He could have continued to be a bishop without martyrdom also, as fellow Christians were bidding him. But escapism is not the way of Jesus Christ for Polycarp. Here we see an example for us. In our country where thousands of people are tortured and are being killed physically, economically, socially, etc. the life of St. Polycarp challenges Christians not to continue to hide themselves in the Church compounds and the compounds of ritualism, exclusivism and self-centeredness. Polycarp followed Jesus Christ faithfully according to his understanding of Jesus; today to follow Jesus Christ with faith in Him is to do what Jesus did: "to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people". (Luke 4:18-19 TEV).

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 1: Martyrs of the Early Era**

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### **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of Prominent Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, by M. Reginold**

#### **Introduction and Historical background:**

In 177 AD. there existed a Christian community in Southern France in the two towns of Lyons and Vienne. This paper attempts to portray within its limitations the tragic story of the trials, sufferings and persecutions which have become a part of our history of the early church.

Most of the early Christians living in Lyons and Vienne were Greeks who had migrated from Asia. Although the persecution broke out in Lyons, most of the description and account of the persecutions was probably written in Vienne without which we could never have got a clear picture about what really happened. (Bruno, Chenu, *et. al.*, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 44.)

Shortly after the persecutions and the martyrdom of many great men and women, the surviving community of Lyons sent a letter to the churches of Asia, and this letter was preserved by Eusebius of Caesaria in his

writings of Ecclesiastical history. This documentary evidence is valuable because it is not only a story of heroism, but because it gives us an idea of how the Christian community then understood 'Martyrdom'. It also helps us to see what the official policy of the empire was towards the church, thus it provides a starting point for the study on the 'Clash of cultures' that divided the ancient world. (*Ibid.*, p. 44.)

### **The two churches:**

The two churches of Lyons and Vienne were founded just before the actual persecution started and it is possible that the founders may also have been involved in the actual persecution. But it is not very clear how the two churches were related to each other and how they organized themselves; for example, did the two churches form a single ecclesiastical diocese, under one bishop, or were they separate? Eusebius, however, mentions that 'Pothinus' and 'Ireneus' were both bishops of Lyons, but there are indications that say that Ireneus was bishop of a number of communities and it is possible that 'Vienne' which is twenty miles from Lyons may have been one of the these. But there is a serious objection to this because these two cities never got on well with each other and there was intense rivalry between these two cities. There was also a civil war between them. (Frend, W.H.C. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, p. 1.)

The two churches in Asia Minor, the letter written after persecution was sent to the churches in Asia minor and most of the martyrs mentioned by Eusebius and Jerome were Asiatics. All the names of the martyrs indicate Greek or Asiatic origins and the fact that they addressed themselves to the churches of the provinces of Asia and Phrygia in their hour of need strengthens the Assumption that most of the martyrs were from Asia. W.H.C Frend claims that the foreigners who came from Asia and Phrygia brought along with them their religions and one of them was Christianity

These foreigners came, settled and prospered in various avenues of life and so they became rich and influential, and in one way or the other, they aroused hatred and jealousy in the general population. (*Ibid.*, p. 2.)

**Reasons for persecution:** We do not know exactly how the trouble started but one reason that may have been a significant one is that the emperor Marcus Aurelius wanted to relieve the rich landlords of the high expenses involved in procuring professional gladiators who used to

fight and kill for their amusement. The emperor allowed the rich landlords to acquire victims in the form of condemned criminals at 1/10 of the price they actually had to pay for the gladiators. So the rich landlords quickly grabbed this opportunity and pounced on the Christians because, Christians were at that time already charged with murder, incest and cannibalism. The elite section of the society found this a great opportunity to save the money in their pockets, and at the same time could get rid of this alien and hateful group of people called 'Christians'.

**The persecutions** : Hatred against the Christians increased until it was at its peak in 177 AD. At first they were subjected to all kinds of social restrictions, they were heated as outcastes and polluted persons, they were banned from showing themselves at the baths and market places and finally they were excluded from all public places, essentially places where they worshipped their gods, because they believed that the very presence of these outcastes violated the place of their gods. At a time when the governor was away, the mob broke loose, Christians were hounded and attacked openly, they were treated as public enemies, and they were assaulted, beaten up and stoned. (*Ibid.*, p. 5.) Finally, on the orders of the city magistrates, there was a wholesale arrest of Christians in Lyons, they were flung into prison where they lay in their own filth and excrement, some died and some lived.

The Governor who came back ordered a public trial of the Christians. During this trial, they were tortured in every possible way. At the first hearing, an influential person called "Vetlius Epagathus" voiced out his protest. He claimed that the judgements that were pronounced were unjust and that there was nothing godless about Christians, but everyone shouted him down and the governor did not allow the just claim he put forward. Then they asked him whether he was also a Christian. He confessed and was also put into prison.

The public not having any solid charge, brought the non-Christian slaves of the Christian prisoners and tortured them. This was done to make the slaves confess that their masters indulged in incest, cannibalism and murder. Some of the slaves unable to bear the agony and pain of torture, confessed. But these charges were angrily denied by the Christians. But for most people the admissions of the slaves to the indulgence of their masters in incest, murder and cannibalism, confirmed their worst suspicions. The trials went on, though admitting that one is a Christian was sufficient to convict a person. The procedure

took many hours, every threat was employed and horrible tortures, were applied in order to break the will of the Christians. (*Ibid.*, p. 5,6.)

Some of the martyrs refused to give even their names to the torturers. For example, Sanctus, finally when there was nothing more that they could do to him, they applied metal plates that were burned till they were red hot, to the most tender parts of his body, his body became swollen and enflamed but he did not yield. For every question they put to him, he had only one answer 'I am a Christian'. (Bruno, Chenu, *op.cit.* p. 47.)

There was a woman named Biblias. Fellow Christians thought that since she was a frail and timid person, she would succumb when tortured, but she surprised them when she vehemently shouted against her torturers, saying "How can people like us eat children who are forbidden to drink the blood of brute beasts". (*Ibid.*, p. 48.)

Pothinus who was the bishop of Lyons was a very sick person and was over ninety years old, but still the enraged crowd dragged him to the tribunal, the governor asked him "who was the God of Christians", the bishop only replied 'If you are worthy, you shall know'. People kicked him and slapped him but he endured without saying anything, two days later he died. (*Ibid.*, pp. 48-39.)

Marturus, Sanctus, Blandina and Attalus were condemned to the beasts, but that did not satisfy the angry crowd, they were forced to sit on red hot chairs, the crowd wanted to break their resistance but finally realizing that they failed in doing so, they cut their throats. (*Ibid.*, p. 50.) Blandina was hung on a stake as food for wild beasts. But the beasts did not touch her at that time, she was taken down from the stake and was tortured. Attalus was a popular and well respected person in the society He was dragged into, the amphitheatre with a placard in front of him on which was written, "This is Attalus, the Christian'. But the Governor found out that he was a Roman citizen. So he sent a dispatch to Caesar asking for further instructions. Caesar ordered that he should be be-headed. But upon the demand of the crowd, he was placed on the red-hot chair. When they asked him what was the name of his God, he answered "God has no name as human beings have." (*Ibid.*, p. 52.) Again Blandina and a fifteen year old boy named Ponticus were thrown to the beasts, but Blandina encouraged Ponticus to be strong. He endured every kind of torture and expired. Blandina was whipped and cast before the beasts, was made to sit on the red-hot chair. She was at

last thrown into a net and cast before a bull, having no further sense of what was happening. She herself had her throat cut. Finally all the bodies of the martyrs were exposed for six days and then they were burnt and their ashes were thrown into the river Rhone.

**Reflection:** Reading about the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne has disturbed me more than I had expected. More than the gruesome tales of how they were tortured, it is more horrifying to imagine how mankind could create a burning hell on earth, that was what it must have been for the Christians of Lyons and Vienne; yet these primitive Christians suffered and endured just believing that a man called Jesus gave his life for many others.

The martyrs of Lyons and Vienne have special relevance to the oppressed and persecuted 'Dalits' in India. In a sense both of them are witnesses to the oppression and inhuman treatment of fellow beings. It is on the sweat and blood of these people that the kingdom of God will come to establish itself. We must often put our feet in the shoes of the martyrs but we must realize that we are not martyrs; we most often come closer to being the torturers and the persecutors, because we often fail to understand and what we do not understand we would like to hate and destroy.

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### **Chapter 4: The Martyrdom of Appollonius, by Hudson Christopher**

Persecution of Christians, as we know, started immediately after the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus Christ began to increase rapidly. The Christians were scattered due to the severe persecutions; wherever these Christians went, they started preaching the gospel about the Kingdom of God. The early Christians were martyred frequently. But there was a speedy growth of these Christians. The Roman government was threatened by the increase of this new movement.

The Roman government wanted to put an end to this movement. The Emperors ordered punishment and persecuted the Christians. Each emperor had different kinds of decree. Those Christians who disobeyed were massacred. Many became martyrs because of their new faith. Here we are going to see one of those periods, when one Blessed martyr APPOLLONIUS was martyred because of his faith.

#### **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

Place : Rome

Period :185 AD

Emperor :Commodus (Luctus Aelius Aurelius)

Commodus was born in Italy. He was the son of the emperor Marcus Aurelius . He was born on August 31,161 AD. In 176 AD Marcus Aurelius proclaimed that Commodus as a co-ruler with him will be a joint emperor. Marcus Aurelius died in 180 AD. Commodus became the sole emperor, and he put Crispina his wife to death on suspicion. He removed all the ministers who came to prominence during his father's rule. The emperor appointed one Tigidius Perennis as the proconsul. Although there were political disturbances, the emperor was very particular in keeping all under his control. The persecution was ordered and was carried out without any exception. Christians were tortured, massacred and were persecuted. In contrast, Commodus died as an insane, killed by Marcia, a concubine of a Christian believer.

**REASONS FOR PERSECUTION :** Although the Christians there continued to be persecuted and martyred under different emperors due to different kinds of reasons, the reason for the persecution during this period was this, that the decree of the Emperor had to be adhered to by all throughout the Roman world. The decree was: "Sacrifices should be made to the gods and to the statue of the emperor Commodus". All these who failed to follow the decree were brought to the senate and were tried. This decree was a forceful attempt to put down Christians completely. But the followers who believed in Jesus Christ refused to accept this and many were ready to face the trial out of which we have an account of one St. Appollonius who was martyred for refusing to accept the decree proclaimed by the emperor.

**APPOLLONIUS:**

We have very little information about Appollonius. Appollonius was from Alexandria. He was a pious follower, he feared the Lord. He was a champion of Christ. He was a philosopher and he was also a bold and courageous man. He led a good ascetic life. Apart from this we do not know much about Appollonius. Appollonius was arrested and was brought before the senate for the trial.

**THE TRIAL:**

The trial began with the question by the Proconsul Perennis:

PERRENNIS: ‘APPOLLONIUS, are you a Christian?’

APPOLLONIUS: ‘Yes, I am a Christian. I worship and fear the God who made heaven, earth, the sea and all that is in them.’

P: Take my advice, Appollonius abjure, take an oath by the fortune of our Lord, the emperor Commodus.’

A: ‘Listen carefully to me, Perennis. I shall plead my cause with seriousness and respect for the law. Anyone who forsakes the commandment of God which are full of truth, justice, and greatness is a criminal, and impious person, in short one who denies God. Anyone who renounces justice, disorder, idolatry and evil thoughts, who far from giving way to the slightest temptation, finally withdraws from their dominion is a just person. Believe me, Perennis, and yield to my reason. These commandments are good and great. We hold them to be the word of God which searches out all the thoughts of man. Among other things it is ordained that we should never swear and always speak the truth. A simple yes commits us just as much as a formal oath.’

P: ‘Appollonius retract and sacrifice to the Gods and to the nature of the Emperor Commodus.’

A: ‘I have given you my opinion on abjuring and sacrifice. All Christians and I offer a bloodless and pure sacrifice to Almighty God, Lord of heaven, earth and all that breathes: we offer this Sacrifice of prayer, above all, for those endowed with reason and intelligence made in the image of God. Moreover faithful to his just Commandment, we pray every day to the God of heaven for the emperor Commodus. But I repeat, we know that it is not by human will that the Emperor rules here below, but solely by the invincible decree of our God who governs all things.’

P: ‘I will give you a day to reflect on your fate’.

Three days later the session resumed. A crowd of Senators, members of the Council and philosophers managed the Tribunal. The acts of Appollonius was read and asked Appollonius about his decision.

P ‘I advise you to abjure, honor and worship our Gods like all of us here

and you will continue to live among us.

A: I serve my God, not idols made of human hands.... I resolutely reject these impieties.'

P: 'Appollonius the decree of the Senate prohibits people from being Christians.'

A : 'The decree of man does not prevail over the decree of God. The more you kill these innocent faithful, making justice and the laws, the more God will increase their number.

God destines all Kings, Senators, the powerful of the earth, rich, poor, free men, slaves, great and small, wise and foolish to death and after death to Judgment. Among us there is no pleasure. However slight, we avert our eyes from any doubtful spectacle and our ears from any sycophancy. In this way we keep a pure heart. We are ready to suffer all to escape an end without honor.'

P: 'Does death give you Pleasure?'

A: 'It is life that I love; Life that does not make me fear death, For the life which I prefer to all else is Eternal life, Which awaits those who have lived faithfully in this World.' Appollonius continued to explain incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and the revelation of God through Jesus Christ and his passion, victory over sin and went on to say that, " He has taught us to rein in our anger, to direct our desires, to restrain our instincts, to dissipate our sorrows. He has taught us to show solidarity to one another, to love increasingly, to reject vanity and not to take vengeance on those who have offended us. He has given the law to obey it and to respect the Emperor but to reserve our worship for the eternal God. To await our judgment after death, to hope that our efforts and our courage will be rewarded by God at the resurrection?

P: 'I thought that you would bid farewell to your whims and worship the Gods with us.'

A: 'I hoped that these few words which I have spoken about my faith would help you and that my plea would open the eyes of your soul. I hoped that your heart would bear fruit, that you would worship all your days the God who created the world, that you would lift up your prayer

only to him without forgetting alms or charity and that this would be the pure and bloodless sacrifice that you would offer to God.’

P: ‘I would like to release you but the decree of the Emperor Commodus forbids me. At least I would want your death to be gentle. And he commanded him to be beheaded with a sword.

A: "I GIVE THANKS TO MY GOD,PERENNIS, FOR THY SENTENCE"

#### REFLECTION:

1. APPOLLONIUS : Confessed that he is a Christian and that he feared the creator.
2. He believed the commandments of God as the word of God.
3. He believed in respecting and honoring the Emperor as the Scriptures taught him.
4. His understanding of sacrifice was the bloodless sacrifice of prayer.
5. He attains his faithfulness to God that he will not worship the idols or images made by human hands and that he will not worship the saints of nature nor animals nor human being for all are created by God.
6. He believed in the doctrine of Predestination which I personally do not agree with Appollonius, specially the concept of poor and rich, freemen and slaves, etc. All these are man-made. The evil structures prevail because of selfish power mongers.
7. He believed in asceticism -- disciples died everyday to please God. God did not intend that human beings should be out of the world. Then why did he create the human beings? why did he call the people to be united? -- why family of the society is instituted so that we would be involved in the world. It is a part of our life. I do not agree with Appollonius when he says in this way: "we keep a pure heart ." This is totally against the principle of Jesus Christ.

He believed in the Award of eternal life, which awaits those who have tried faithfully in this world. If this was the motive of Appollonius, I

feel it was a selfish motive, In what way was he helpful to his neighbor who was in need.

The incarnate word of God is well explained.

He speaks about the Judgment after death. Perhaps this is one of the factors that is instilled in the minds of the people about the concept of the eternal punishment. We need to throw more light on this in the present day context. Here I would like to mention that no one can claim that. " I am righteous and hence I would enjoy eternal life." We need to identify ourselves among people and do something about the present reality and work together to achieve the goal.

#### CONCLUSION:

The event of the trial of Appollonius was interesting to read and to reflect upon although the context was that the persecution was at the highest peak where Appollonius was martyred may be justifiable at that time. But in today's context, in our land, it is difficult for us to think of martyrdom of the 20th century. With all the Biblical basis what we arrive at is a conclusion that the present day caters to the martyrdom is not for the cause of our contention of faith, but for our action in fulfilling God's Commandment given by our Lord Jesus Christ. "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you are giving your life for the cause of the good of your fellow beings in the society where you live and that is martyrdom, a true Christian martyrdom.

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## **Chapter 5: Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas by Thomas John**

### **Background**

Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas lived in the end of second century AD in Carthage. North Africa. Carthage was a 'prosperous port through which flowed corn, oil, slaves and cattle from the fertile parts of Numidia and Mauretania'. (A.G. Weisford, *Life in the Early Church* [AD. 33 to 313], Connecticut: The Seabury Press, N.Y.) In Carthage 'Latin was the delight of all who had any pretention to literary skills -- the writers, rhetoricians and lawyers'. (*Ibid.*) Perpetua was from a prominent family in Thuburobo, (C.A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, Delaisore, USA: Michael Glazier Inc., 1983.) was 'liberally educated, honorably married, had father and mother and two brothers, one like herself, a Catechumen and an infant at the breast'. (Welsford, *op. cit.*, p. 295.) 'She was about 22 years old'. (Clark, *op. cit.*, p.98.) 'She was arrested along with certain young catechumens like Revolatus and his fellow slave Felicitas, Saturninus and Secondolos. They were still unbaptized catechumens at the moment of their arrests.

The source of information about their martyrdom is Tertullian's The passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas (Welsford, *op.cit.*) in his writings

‘AD martyrs, which is confirmed by another remarkable contemporary document ‘the Passio-Perpetuae’. (W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Oxford: Oxford Press, 1965, p. 363.) There is ‘an introduction very probably. by Tertullian himself, a narrative by Perpetua and another by Saturnas of their experiences in prison and finally an account of the actual martyrdom in the amphitheatre at Carthage’. (Welsford, *op.cit.*)

## Context

‘Though major empire wide persecution did not begin until 250 AD. ... accounts exist from as early as 112 AD. that indicate that Christians were being persecuted simply because they bore the name Christians ... Their refusal to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods and the pinch of incense to the emperor caused the Romans to suspect Christians of political disloyalty. In addition their suspicion of Christian rituals such as the Lord’s supper, and their annoyance at Christians refusal to conform to the mores and pleasures of the age may have also contributed to their zeal as persecutors’. (Clark, *op.cit.*, p. 97.)

In this context not only were men executed, but also women of high society like Perpetua and slaves like Felicitas. ‘Her father who was not a Christian was deeply distressed by her determination to die as martyr for the faith which she had so recently espoused. This family grief was her severest trial’. (Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church* Cambridge: University Press, 1957 p. 425.) While still under the Roman trial her father out of love for her, tried to persuade and shake her resolution.’ She replied to him, "Father, do you see this vase here for example or this water pot or whatever?". "Yes, I do" replied he. And I told him, "Could it be called by any other name other than what it is ?" And he said "No". "Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian."

On hearing the name Christian her father moved towards her as though he would pull out her eyes. (H. Mururilo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 159.) In prison the deacon Tertius and Pomponius came to minister unto them. Perpetua was much worried about her child and when she got permission for her baby to stay with her in prison so that she could feed her, not only did she recover her health but, "My prison suddenly became a palace so that I wanted to be there rather than any where else". (*Ibid.*, p. 111)

Her father tried to dissuade her many a times and she records, "was sorry for my father's sake because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer." (*Ibid.*, p. 113.) But Perpetua had only one thing to say to her father, "what happens on that platform will be God's choice, for you may be sure that we are not in our own power, but in the power of God". (Bruno Chenu, *et.al The Book of Christian Martyrs*. London: SCM Press. 1990, p. 64.) On the day of their trial the procurator Hilarian who had received his judicial powers (the power of life and death) instead of the late proconsul Minucius Timiniasnus said to me, "Spare your father's white hairs, spare the tender years of your child. Offer a sacrifice for the safety of the emperor". And I answered, "No !". "Are you a Christian?" asked Hilarian. I answered, "I am . ... The judge then passed sentence. We were condemned to the beasts. (Mururilo, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 115.)

While being in prison she was granted visions twice of her younger brother Dinocrates who had died at the early age of seven. She also knew before hand whether she was going to be freed or would be martyred. Through one of her final visions which she had the day before she was going to fight the beasts, she realized that it was 'not wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I will win the victory. (*Ibid.*, p. 119.) She also tells the experiences of Felicitas who was pregnant when she was arrested. "One month before her baby was due, she became concerned that her martyrdom would be delayed because it was not permitted to execute a pregnant woman". (R.A. Tueber and W. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987, p. 101.) "Thus she might have to shed her holy innocent blood afterwards along with others who were common criminals. Her comrades in martyrdom were also saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief. And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a good deal in her labor because of the natural difficulty of an eight month's delivery". (Mururilo, *op.cit.*, p. 123.)

The divine vision is distinguished from 'the satanic or hallucinatory by its effects, persistent light, divine love, peace of soul, inclination towards the things of God, the constant fruits of sanctity (c.f. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercise* "rules for the discernment of Spirits"); judged by these virtues the visions of Perpetua and Saturnus are clearly marked as Divine, for they encouraged and guided both the martyrs'. (E.C.C.

Owen, *Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrdom*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927. p. 77.)

### **Manner of Martyrdom (March 7, AD. 203)**

This has been recorded so beautifully by Tertullian himself. 'The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism. For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from child-birth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up, she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for pin to fasten untidy hair for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her hand, and lifted her up .... Then she called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through". All of them were thrown in the usual spot to have their throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out in the open that their eyes might be the guilty witnesses of the sword that pierced their flesh. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord as the people wanted them to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, ... Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling

hand of the young gladiator, and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing'. (Mururilo, *op.cit.*, pp. 125-131.)

## **Theological Reflections**

The following theological beliefs can be deduced from this brief account of the life and martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas.

1. The transforming power of God was so real to her that she could call herself nothing else, but a Christian.
2. She believed in the ministry of the Holy Spirit for she records that she was 'inspired by the Spirit not ask for any other favor ... but simply the perseverance of the flesh'. (*Ibid.*, p. 109.)
3. The constant visions that God gave her shows that she had an intimate relationship with God. Her own brother tells her, "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed. She promises to do so knowing that she 'speak with the Lord whose great blessing I had come to experience.'" (*Ibid.*, p. 111.)
4. When her father, fearing for her life, tells her to offer incense to the Emperor, she replied, "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power," and refused to offer incense. This shows that she believed in the sovereignty of God.
5. She not only believed in God but also in the Devil and the reality of Spiritual Warfare. For, after seeing one of the visions in which she fights with her opponent, she wakes up 'realizing that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil'.
6. She believed in the resurrection. In her very first vision she describes of climbing up a ladder, though hindered by the Devil in the form of dragon. She reaches on top and enters a garden where a grey haired man, in shepherd's clothing was milking sheep and who called her and gave, as it were, a mouth full of milk which she took and consumed. In one of her other visions she mentions of entering a place where the

elders and the angels before a throne chant endlessly, "Holy, holy, holy". Her belief in the continuance of life after death either as an Immortal soul or in the resurrected body form can be gathered.

7. She continually depended upon the grace of God to face her martyrdom in a way which would bring glory to Him. In the arena when she was fighting with heifer she fell down and her tunic was torn. Instead of thinking of her pain and sure death, she was more concerned about her modesty and so she covers herself up. When her hair was in disorder she asked for a pin to fasten it up so that she might not seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

### **Personal Reflections**

The martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas is, to speak the least, an inspiring one. Though they were in their early adolescence and that too females who are usually considered to be the weaker sex, yet because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their constant dependence on His sustaining grace and power they were able to face the discouraging pleas of a father, the sadistic mob and the wild animals in the amphitheatre at Carthage. Faith in Jesus Christ was to them, not just an emotional experience, but a gut level assurance in the person and the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross' of Calvary. Faith for these martyrs was not a matter of convenience but that of conviction. They were willing to seal their faith/testimony by their own blood as a proof of their whole hearted commitment. This world with all its relationships and material blessing considered to be at its best temporary for which they were not willing to give up their faith in Jesus and their accountability to God which was more precious and everlasting than anything else in the world.

In our own struggle today for the upliftment of the downtrodden, the oppressed and the so-called outcast, we need to be willing to give up our own selfish ambitions in life and go all the way out to work out for the betterment of the less fortunate in our society. This could mean even laying down our lives as people like Shanker Niyogi did, or living a crucified life like Mother Teresa, Ms. Medha Patkar, and others.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 1: Martyrs of the Early Era**

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## **Chapter 6: The Martyrdom of Cyprian of Carthage (Ad 200-258), by Vijoy T. Oommen**

### **Introduction**

"You shall be my witness ... to the ends of the earth". This was the basis of the early churches to accept the real meaning of witnessing in the act of dying for the faith. The secular meaning of the Greek word 'martyr' is a witness one who bears testimony. This is more than suffering death for the faith. According to the origin, a martyr is the one who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of religion. In the New testament it means giving testimony in words, preaching and also suffering death for Christian faith. In this write up I deal with one of the early Christian martyrs St. Cyprian of Carthage.

It is believed that Cyprian was born in Carthage into a family of some social standing and wealth around AD. 200. (Peter Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 20.) He was highly educated and well known in Carthage as a rhetoric and acquired friends of political power. Later he was converted to Christianity under the influence of the aging Carthaginian presbyter Caeceilius in 246 AD. He had been on the anti-Christian side

for a long time, but had gradually been converted by the agreements and frequent debates. It has been said that he was familiar with public affairs and was of senatorial rank. With his conversion, he resolved to lead a life of celibacy and, selling his considerable estate, he gave it to the needy. His dedication to the celibacy, poverty, scriptures and native ability quickly led to the presbyterate and within a year around AD 248 he was elected as the Bishop of Carthage. (*Ibid.*, p. 20) Though there was a strong opposition for electing him as Bishop he had the strong support of the Christian community. He was a great Bishop as well as an administrator. He was also a famous writer. With the exception of Tertullian, Cyprian was the first Latin Christian writer.

### **Historical Context -- Socio-economic & Political**

Cyprian lived during the time of Emperors Decius and Valerian in Carthage. This city grew and developed and through an expanding network of subordinate city colonies, sea trade and territorial expansion, it became one of the richest cities in the western Mediterranean by 3rd cent. BC. This growth resulted in bitter conflicts with other rivals for the control of Mediterranean trade routes. The greatest threat for Carthage came from Rome. This bloody conflict destroyed the city and Romans took over the control. However the geographical advantages and economic possibilities inherent in the location led to the re-establishment of Carthage as a Roman colony in 44 BC. (Donald Dubley, *Roman Society*, p. 115) Under the Roman rule Carthage experienced an economic bloom, becoming the largest city in the West after Rome. Mainly on account of its monopoly over the corn trade and control over the exports of marble, woods, precious stones, gold dust, etc.

These developments resulted in the Carthage of Cyprian's time being a vibrant metropolis, highly unbound in cross cultural outlook and behavior. This policy of colonization and territorial expansion resulted in the growth of flourishing centers of urban civilization all along the North African coastal belt by the 3rd cent. ND. Colonies were quickly inter-connected by road system and trade and commerce grew. ('Africa Roman' in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, pp. 22-23.)

Though Carthage was economically rich, the whole Roman empire went through a period of economic crisis. It was a time of short reigns and rival emperors, one man succeeded another with bewildering rapidity. (Peter Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 27.) The administration was

not so sound. Political events were very disastrous for Africa. In 235 Maximus, a Goth, made himself emperor. Roman culture and civilization, had little appeal for him and sheer naked force seems to have been his favorite political tool. There was a rebellion, and the rebels proclaimed the proconsul Gordia, joint emperor with his son. Maximus was defeated in this and lost his throne. So the public works were not properly maintained; taxes were high; Municipal office was avoided. (*Ibid.*, p. 28.) Politically there was a real crisis in Africa.

The natives of Carthage panicked. Due to the Roman invasion, Roman Latin ethnic element was added to Carthage. There was a widespread belief in the demonic powers among the people. Cyprian believed in a real literal and vivid hell and in the *de Idoloum*, he mentioned that Christ and Christian power over the forces of evil is the proof that the true God is the Lord of all things. Black magic seems to have been widely practiced. Cyprian therefore lived in a world when demonic forces, evil spirits and magic were considered as real things. Also in the Roman world dreams were counted as portentous, in the strict sense. (*Ibid.*, p. 25.) Before Cyprian's conversion, he practiced all these things. Cyprian's decision to become a Christian seems to have been the result of a disgust with the world in which he lived. It would certainly seem that Cyprian turned to Christianity in revulsion against a decline in the standard of the society.

So there was a strong cruelty to those who threatened to challenge these systems. So Decius who reigned at that time ruled with an unrelenting conservatism aimed at restoring the lost stability of an idealized Roman past. But the Christian church was rapidly expanding during this time.

## **Persecution Under Roman Government**

Before going into the details of the 3rd century persecution, I would like to present some of the general reasons for the persecution in the Early Church. One of the important reasons for the persecution of the early church was the universal claim of the Christians for their religion. It is true that Christians were intolerant to other religions. Roman history states that there were many pagan religions in Rome besides the state religion and Rome allowed other religions to persecute Christianity. It is true that other religions were absorbing and assimilating the best necessary elements from the state religion and introduced them into their religions. This attitude of syncretism saved them from Roman destruction, on the other hand the early Christians stood firm in their

faith in Jesus Christ alone. And they also mentioned that they alone had the truth, that all other religions were false. They said "we know that no idol is anything in the world, and there is no good but one." (H.B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church*, p. 86.) This claim of Christians aroused the anger of heathens and as a consequence of it they began to hate the Christians and persecute them. Another reason for the persecution is that Christians were called as atheists and charged with sacrilege because they did not worship the gods of the state. It was essential that all citizens of Rome worshipped their national gods as well as the imperial religion because only those who worshipped the national gods and emperor were patriots and the others were considered as traitors. For Christians, worshipping their national gods was against the Christian belief and they proclaimed that they will worship no other god except Jesus Christ. Christians not only refused to worship, they also mocked at other images "that the gods raised Apollo, the savior Aesculapius, even Jupiter Capitolinus himself -- were malignant 'demons' ensconced behind wood and stone." To quote Tertullian "that they might obtain their favorite food of flesh forms and blood". (*Ibid.*, p. 25.) They not only mocked at other gods as demons but also despised their temples as dead houses and mocked at the sacred things. So Christians were charged as atheists. This charge of atheism led the heathens to their unconquerable superstitious beliefs. They believed that if they won't worship properly, the wrath of gods will fall upon the people in the form of famine, flood etc. So Romans believed that Christians had no gods. This was one of the reasons for the persecution of Christians.

Another charge was against the practice of magic acts. Heathens believed that Christians were meeting secretly to use magic arts in order that they might undo the oracles which they used to consult often. They also believed that by their superior exorcism the Christians could reduce oracles to silence which hitherto had proved to be the fortune of the whole country. This was strengthened when emperor Valerian consulted the oracle before he went to war; he did not receive any reply. The chief priest told the emperor that this is because of the fact that some Christians showed the sign of cross and made the oracle a failure. So Christians were persecuted for this. Another reason, the Christians had to suffer under Roman government was because they thought Christianity was a denigrating factor upon family. Christians did not encourage inter-marriage with others especially heathens. This is simply to avoid tension in the family. For example, in some families, women were converted to Christianity and the husbands remained as heathens.

Being a heathen, he won't allow his Christian wife to go with her Christian friends. Moreover he won't permit her to be out all night for worship, nor to kiss with one of the brethren. Due to this, women asked for divorce. So Christians did not encourage inter-marriage with heathens. Also they encouraged divorce for the Christian wives in order to take part actively in the Christian ministry. This caused separation of many families. So heathens made up their mind to destroy Christianity.

Another reason was that Christians were always opposed to the Roman law. According to Roman law, every religion had to get permission to exercise its religion from the government and it should be recognized by the state. But Christianity was not. They met secretly in houses for meetings which was considered to be illegal. Also in the Roman law one has every freedom to practice his religion but one was not free either to change his/her religion or to attempt to persuade other people to change their religion. So in order to stop conversion the state adopted the policy of persecution. Another law was the emperor worship. Like other Roman subjects, Christians did not worship the image of Caesar; neither they were willing to sacrifice. So Romans thought that in their secret meetings they were planning to rebel against Caesar, and were disloyal to the emperor also. These were some of the reasons why Christians were persecuted.

### **Persecution during the time of St. Cyprian**

The second persecution started from the early years of the 3rd century. In this period, the Church was called upon to meet a real test of its faith and take a more cruel and terrible suffering. The persecution of the second period was different from the first. 1) In the 1st and 2nd centuries it was the people who took active part in the persecution of the Church, but now the state had determined to destroy the Church. The state saw that the Church was increasing enormously, numerically as well as in its power. As Ward says "The Christian society had become that terror of the state and empire within the empire." (J.W.C. Ward, *A History of the early Church*, p. 99) In this period the Church not only grew numerically, but also strengthened itself in its organization and power by creating a monarchical bishop who had the sole authority over the Church and who really became the emperor of the Church. So the Roman hierarchy feared the growth of the Church and they thought that if they would not control the growth, the supremacy of the Roman emperor would be no more and pope would become the monarch of the state as well as the Church. 2) The second difference is that this

persecution was more organized and systematic than that of the first. The state used all the resources to destroy the Church. It also called upon to her aid, able philosophers such as Celsus, Porphyry to defeat the Church with their criticism of the claim of new faith. 3) The state also passed several edicts to destroy the foundation of the Church such as conversions, worship, destroying Churches and bishops. 4) This persecution was universal, not confined to one particular province but throughout the whole Roman empire.

### **Persecution under Septimius Severus (193-211 AD)**

Septimius Severus was the emperor during the period of 193-211 AD. In the beginning he was lenient to Christianity but later when he saw the growth of Christianity, he thought it would be dangerous for his kingdom. Therefore to stop conversion he passed an edict in 202 AD. forbidding to be made Jews or Christians. So conversion was not possible according to this law. But Christians did not fear this because they knew that Christ called them to be the Ambassadors and to be witnesses for Christ. So they continued preaching the gospel. So a terrible persecution started in the East and North Africa. The two important Churches of Alexandria and of Carthage received severe blows. At Carthage great execution was done among the catechumens. Though the catechumens suffered severely, the sword could not stop conversion.

### **Persecution under Decius Trajan (249-251)**

After the death of Severus, Church enjoyed peace for some time. But by the coming of Decius this situation was changed. He wanted to revise and to enforce the observance of the National Religion in which all the citizens of the Roman Empire, including Christians, should worship the national gods as well as Caesar. Christians were rapidly growing during this period and they discussed the possibility of converting the whole Roman empire. So Decius started a most systematic, planned and deliberate attempt to stamp out the Church. His method of persecution was different from others. His aim was not to martyr Christians but to reconvert them into paganism, and to make them Apostates. For this he specially aimed at Bishops and leaders of the Church thinking that if those shepherds were destroyed the folk would abandon Christianity and would worship national religion. So he included Christians on a fixed day and see to it that they would sacrifice to the national gods and to the genius of the emperor. He also commanded to see that all should taste

the sacrifice and a special attention to be diverted to the bishop and Church leaders. This was really an inescapable test to detect sincere Christians and to punish them. The Christians had only two alternatives; either they had to sacrifice to the gods or to die. Many Christians fearing death denounced Christ and became apostates and worshipped national gods. But many good Christians who refused to sacrifice were tortured and put to death. The persecution was so severe in Carthage that the whole Church became apostatized and that even some of the bishops and clergy denied the faith. Bishop Dionysus says: "This edict is a new terror ensured sufficient to scandalize if it were possible over the elect". (Charles Bigg, *The Origin of Christianity*, 1909, p. 350.)

### **Persecution Under Valerian**

Though Valerian was favorable to Christians in the beginning later he turned against because of the constant calamities of the empire which were attributed to their atheism and also he was influenced by his governor who took vengeance upon Christians. Like Decius, he also aimed at Bishops and leaders and he added two more things for persecution: (1) Method of confiscation of property, (2) abolishing Church meetings and worship. He passed the first edict in 257 AD. specially directed against the bishops and priests to which he empowered the magistrates to seize and to compel them to sacrifice to gods, if they would not do that, they were to be punished. The second edict says that the Christians should not assemble together for worship nor hold meetings. They were also forbidden to enter the cemeteries where Christians used to celebrate the anniversaries of the dead, especially of the martyrs. The edict was passed mainly to destroy the worship system and meetings. The penalty for this edict was death. Many Christians were arrested and put to death or sent to the mines. Several others were exiled. When he saw that the first edict was not sufficient to torture Christians, he passed another edict in 258 AD. which says that all bishops, priests and deacons should be put to death. Many Christians lost their property and the Christian members of the emperor's domestic or official household were sent in chains to work as slaves on the imperial estates.

### **Cyprian and Persecution**

Cyprian lived during this time of persecution. During the Decian persecution, the Christian Church suffered a lot especially the Church in Carthage. Many fled from the city including the bishop Cyprian. This

was one of the Cyprians' actions which is very difficult to understand. Cyprian's stand was that the Church in Carthage would only survive if his hand remained at the helm, even if from a distance. Cyprian believed that Church needed a man with some considerable abilities. One of his main reasons for withdrawing had been to preserve the government of the Church. His letters of that period are full of instructions about all sorts of things. Cyprian devoted himself to the complex business of running his diocese from his hiding place. But he was not quite happy in his hiding place. He was so worried about the flock he left behind especially the poor Christians who depended on the bishop's charity. During the exile he found time to write, encouraging others suffering under the edict, by being made to undergo forced labor in the mines. He also sent them material/financial help. It is probable that during the exile, he wrote his treatise *Ad Fortunatum*, a collection of Biblical passages with commentary on martyrdom. Not only the persecution from outside, there was also a lot of problems inside the Church regarding the hierarchy during this time.

The slackening of the persecution allowed Cyprian to return home. Not only the persecution was less fierce but also the opposition within the Church was also much less active. He was so much concerned about the unity of the Church. *De Ecclesia Catholicae Unitate* was one of his famous writings. He says that this unity stems from God. He said the Church is one as the Trinity is one. Though there was some kind of peace for a short period, Valerian caused more persecutions to Christians. Many people lost their lives. Cyprian himself was waiting with certainty of his end. On August 258, Cyprian returned to his own estate to await trial under the power of the new edict promulgated by Valerian. According to Dontius, eminent and influential people visited him and urged him to escape and even offered him several hiding places. But this time he refused their offers and he was firmly set on the course of martyrdom. He thought he could serve God and the Church better by martyrdom than by going into hiding as he had gone during the first persecution. His last letter to the presbyters and deacons, to all other people, comes from this period explaining why he chose temporarily to withdraw from his estate to avoid being taken by agents of the imperial government to Utica for trial, since he lectured that it was proper for a bishop to confess his faith and suffer the consequences in his own city in the midst of his own people. (Peter Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 126.)

## **Trial of Cyprian**

On 13th Sept, 1258, Cyprian was arrested and brought before the proconsul Galerius Maximus who was trying to recover his wealth in the estate of Sixtus. The proconsul ordered that Cyprian be placed under house arrest that night at the home of one of his staff officers and fixed date of trial for morrow. That night mobs thronged the street before the gate of the officer's house and Cyprian issued instructions that no harm should come to the young girls who formed part of the crowd. (Mururilo Herbert, *Acts of Christian Martyrs*, P. 172.) The next day, 14th Sept, the trial proceeded as follows:

Are you Tharcius?

Bishop replied Yes, I am

Galarius: The revered emperors ordered you to perform the religious rites.

Bishop : I will not

Galarius : Take care

Bishop : Do as you have been ordered. There is no need for deliberation.

Then Galarius consulted with his colleagues and said: "Since you have set yourself as an enemy of the gods of Rome and of our religious practices, the emperors could not be able to bring you back to the observance of their sacred laws and also you are an instigator and leader for most atrocious crime. Tharsius Cyprian was sentenced to die by the sword."

Bishop Cyprian said: 'Thanks be to God'.

The large Christians gathered there said: 'Let us also be beheaded with him'.

Then Cyprian was let out to the grounds of Sextus' estate. After removing his outer cloak, he spread it on the ground so that he could kneel on it. When the executioner came, he told his friends to give the man twenty five gold pieces. (*Ibid.*, p. 173.) The blessed Cyprian then touched his eyes with his own hands, and he went to his death by the sword. His body was laid out nearby to satisfy the curiosity of the pagans. In the night it was taken from there by his friends with prayer in great triumph to the cemetery of Macrobius Caandidianus, the Procurator, which lies on the Mappalian way near the fish ponds, and was buried there.

## Cyprians' Theological Writings on Martyrdom

In his theological writings, we can see a clear awareness, rooted in experience and in the gospel. In one of his writings, he says "No wonder we suffer constant persecutions, for the Lord has foretold that this must occur". (Cyprian, *Preparation of Martyrdom*, pp. 637-85.) Persecution is seen as an opportunity to testify their faith and hope, a wellspring of the highest example of generous devotion, love and freedom. He says "the Lord has willed that we rejoice and exult in it. This is the path that the Lord himself had followed for the deliverance of all. What he has instructed us to do, this he has done before us, and what he had exhorted us to suffer, he has first suffered for us. (*Ibid.*) Cyprian says that righteous had suffered from the foundation of the world itself. "It has been ordained from the beginning of the world that this same justice should struggle in the worldly conflict, since indirectly in the very beginning, Abel, the just, was killed and therefore all the just men and prophets, apostles Who were sent forth"? (*Ibid.*) Cyprian in his treatise *De lapsis* calls for an act of repentance. "If you in this faithless and corrupt age are ashamed of me and my doctrine, the son of man will be ashamed of him" (Mk. 8.38), Cyprian reminds us -- How can you consider yourself a Christian when you are ashamed or afraid to be a Christian? How can you be with Christ if you fear; and feel it to be dishonorable, to belong to Christ? (*Ibid.*) For Cyprian, it is not enough to confess Christ before the authorities but one must have the faith not only in prison and in state but throughout one's life. "We are still in the world battle; we fight daily for our lives.. you have been an example to the rest of the brethren for whose living your life and action ought to be a stimulation". (Cyprian, *Letters* No. 2, p. 37)

### Reflection

"Martyrdom is a gift of god, not available to all; but God sees our inner thoughts and for those who have not had the opportunity of martyrdom, he nevertheless crowns the desire and happiness." (Henri Gonzel, p. 238) Early Christians believed that their death was a second baptism through which one was not yet "perfected in Jesus Christ" could at last become a true disciple. We can see from the history how much they were honest in their witnessing. Their boldness, firmness in the face of trial and how they answered to the judges in the name of their faith is very touching: Their well being is not the ultimate satisfaction but seeing others in painful situation caused them pain; they were willing to

undergo difficulties and were totally oriented to others. Even in the midst of calamities, such as plagues, it was Christians who went with help whereas the attitude of pagans was very negative. They had no fear of death and suffering. I do not think it was a fanaticism but it was an expression of their commitment, an act of love to their maker and savior. But today most of our mission is to safeguard our own position. It comes more from our well being than risking our life for others except in a few cases.

They also challenged the power structures in order to be freed. For that they were willing to lose their life. Christians challenged the idol worship. More than that they opposed the exploitation behind this, because that was a period where slave trade was prevalent. It was the temple they used for selling and buying the slaves. The story behind the conversion of St. Cyprian states that it was a revulsion against a decline in the standard of the society. Christianity stood as a corrective force in the midst of a demoralized society. This caused the death of many Christians.

It is true that Christians were intolerant to other religious traditions. Because, many a times, these religions were very exploitative in their nature. It was the temples they used for buying and selling the slave. The slave trade was very much prevalent in those times. To a certain extent, Christianity could resist these kinds of evil structures; so it was not a denial of other religions, but the denial of evil practices which were exploitative, oppressive and dehumanizing. Martyrdom of St. Cyprian is a model for us, calling us to renew our own faith.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 1: Martyrs of the Early Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

## **Chapter 7: The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian, by James Jacob**

### **Introduction**

St. Cyprian, an early Christian martyr of the third century is still living in the hearts of each and every Christian. As an inspired martyr and a zealous ecclesiologist and a theologian he very much influences the Christian world. His life time is not specifically mentioned in any book. The approximate life time is around AD. 200. After inspired by the teachings of Christ he became ready to accept the words of Christ.

I have done this by the help of secondary sources. I am not claiming that I could put forward tremendous materials in order to write this paper. Nevertheless I could give a portrayal of St. Cyprian through my words. I mainly depended upon the encyclopedia of the History of Christianity and the Christian Church.

### **CARTHAGE -- THE CHRISTIAN CITY**

Roman city in North Africa is Carthage. Carthage known to early Christianity originated as a Roman colony established on the ruins of the Phoenician city destroyed in 146 BC. by Scipio Africanus. The colony

was not successfully established until BC. 29 under Augustus, who named it Colonia Julia Carthage. It was a carefully planned city, the dwellings were set out on a good system and streets were remarkable in antiquity for their breath. Throughout the first and second centuries AD. the city grew steadily and eventually came to be recognized as the greatest city in the western part of the empire, after Rome.

Before the legalization of Christianity, Christians around burned grounds outside the city. After the peace established by the Emperor Constantine, Christians were able to build churches. Agrippanus is the first bishop to be attested. He summoned a Consul to Carthage ca. 220 to debate the issue of the rebaptism of heretics, on which he took a hardline. Indeed, Carthaginian Christianity was for centuries characterized by rigid political attitudes towards moral and doctrinal issues.

Cyprian was bishop from 248-258, he brings the Carthaginian church sharply into view through his considerable correspondence and his treatises. By mid-century, the church was not only popular but also relatively wealthy, and during the persecution of Decius (250 AD), which threatened loss of property, Carthage assumed a position of primacy among African churches in Council. Carthage was really a Christian country.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

It is probable that Cyprian was born in Carthage into a family of some social standing and wealth around AD. 200. He became a distinguished rhetorician widely known in the city, and acquired friends of political power. He was converted (ca. 245-246) under the influence of the aging Carthaginian presbyter Concilius. With his conversion, he resolved on a life of celibacy and, selling his considerable estates, he gave the proceeds (or most of the proceeds) to the needy. He was soon made a presbyter, and probably within a year -- sometime between May 248 and May 249 -- was elected bishop of Carthage, with the strong approbation of the Christian people but with opposition from at least five presbyters who apparently envied his rapid rise to ecclesiastical power. (Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem, *Sabha Christian Nijords* (Martyrs), Tiruvalla: CLS, 1986)

## **CYPRIAN AS BISHOP OF CARTHAGE**

In January 250, shortly after the edict of Becins demanding the universal

acknowledgement of the gods through sacrifice, Cyprian went into hiding in an unspecified place near Carthage, believing that as a man of distinction he would, if he remained in the city, provide a focus for pagan hostility to the Christians. He endeavored to rule his church from his hiding place by letters sent through faithful emissaries. In these letters, we witness the persecution waxing and waning over a few months. Within weeks apparently vast numbers of Christians had lapsed and soon began to seek reconciliation. At first Cyprian resolved that peace should not be extended to the lapsed until an appropriate response had been determined by the church in council. His position, however, was undermined by laxist presbyters who began to offer peace to those which procured certificates from confessors and martyrs, and further undermined by a letter from the Roman clergy to the church of Carthage highly critical of Cyprian as a 'hurling' who had abandoned the flocks. As Cyprian movement tried for control, he gradually modified his position on the lapsed. Probably by early June, he had agreed that those who became severely ill and had done penance, could be accepted provided they secured certificates from the confessors and martyrs, receive reconciliation from presbyters and deacons, and by midsummer he had accepted the Roman position that all who had done penance could in the face of sickness be reunited. By late summer he had received a letter of support from the Roman clergy, and began making supportive clerical appointments at Carthage.

During the fall and winter, however, positions hardened, excommunication of the lapsed followed, and feelings ran so high that Cyprian was unable to return to Carthage until after Easter 251. Shortly thereafter, the council of 251 adopted the position that peace should be granted only in severe illness to those who had by some means acquired certificates from the pagan authorities attesting that they had sacrificed, although in fact they might be admitted to communion at once.

Eventually, under the threat of a new persecution, Cyprian was prepared to grant reconciliation to all who sought it. Unfortunately, his efforts to make accommodation and at the same time maintain integrity resulted in the disruption of the unity of the Catholic Church. By 252, two splinter groups each had its own bishop in Carthage, the rigorists who took the position of Novation, the schismatic bishop of Rome, and the laxists, who chose the presbyter Fortunatus as bishop.

## **MARTYRDOM**

The persecution had tested Cyprian's relations with Rome. If in 250 the Roman clergy had been slow to support him, in 251 he was cautious in recognizing Cornelius as the legitimate bishop of Rome, and only after careful investigation did he support Cornelius in opposition to the claims of Novation. Cyprian's relations with Stephen I, elected bishop of Rome in 254 became strained. In the same year, Spanish bishops appealed to Cyprian from a decision of Stephen I and a Gaelic Bishop sought his help to secure from Stephen a judgement against Marcion, who as bishop, had declared himself as a Novationist. From 255, over the course of two years, Cyprian was engaged in a bitter quarrel with Stephen I concerning the rebaptism of heretics and schematics; Stephen accepted the baptism of heretics and schematics as valid. But Cyprian denied it any efficacy whatever. But the end was near. Caught by the edict of Valerian, requiring pagan sacrifice, Cyprian was exiled to Cumbis.

Under Valerian, the successor of Decius, the persecution ceased. This successor indirectly practiced a policy of tolerance, but this was abruptly interrupted in 257 under the influence of Marxian, minister of finance. A pagan mystic, he abhorred Christianity, and moreover he saw a resumption of persecution as a way of reflecting the finances of the empire, which were disastrous at the time. High ranking clergy were the object of his last pillaging.

The persecution was a bloody one. A first edict in 257 for the first time banned Christian worship. Cyprian was exiled, but that did not prevent him from still keeping watch on his church, by sending letters and material comforts. A year later, a second edict called for the death penalty for all clergy who refused to make Roman sacrifices. The measure immediately affected Cyprian.

Paternoster ordered the blessed Cyprian to be banished. Cyprian stayed a long time in exile. Paternoster was succeeded by Galeins Maximnon who ordered the holy bishop Cyprian to be recalled from banishment and brought before him. So Cyprian, the holy martyr chosen by God, returned from the city Cumbis which had been assigned as his place of banishment by command of Asparius their proconsul. A sacred command authorized him to live on his own land. There he daily expected a summons, as had been shown him in a dream. While he still awaited these, suddenly on 15 September, in the consulship of Tinans and Bassns, two high officials came to him. They put him in a carriage and Maximus ordered to bring him next day. Then he read the verdict

from his table. "It is our pleasure that Cyprian should be executed by the sword. (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London: SCM, 1990, p. 89.) Cyprian was happy after hearing this verdict. He was beheaded.

## **WRITINGS OF CYPRIAN**

Among the writings of Cyprian, the corpus of his letters must be ranked of primary significance as source for the history of a decade otherwise poorly documented. The majority of these writings find occasion in persecution and its aftermath, above all the persecution of Decius and Valerian and in an anticipated persecution by Trebonnans Gallus. Nine letters document the rebaptism controversy, and a handful offer a glimpse into other aspects of life in the mid-third century, such as scandals among virgins and the devastation caused by barbarous raids.

Of two apologetic works, one an appeal to Donatus is clearly early before 250; a second, to Quisninus a compendium of scrip-hire texts useful as testimonies, should also be dated before 250. The scandal among virgins apparently elicited the treatise on the dress of Virgins (before 250). Out of the problems arising from the Decian persecution, Cyprian in the course of 251 wrote the treatises: On the lapsed, on the unity of the church and probably also on the Lord's prayer, which stresses the importance of unity. (James Hardy, p. 248.) He had written a lot of things other than these.

## **REFLECTION**

When we learn about early martyrs, we can see their honesty, sincerity, zeal and courage to face persecution. They were loving God, human beings and the church. They were very much courageous and willing to face the persecution and death for the growth of the church. The blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church.

Cyprian lived on in memory for centuries as a figure of vital importance, especially to Christianity in Africa, which regarded him as a distinguished, it not always satisfactory, apologist both donatists and Catholics appealed to his authority. In the fourth century, at least three churches were built to his memory at Carthage. Under Demasus (368-384), Rome acknowledged his greatness by including him in its festal calendar.

Today St. Cyprian is living in our hearts. He was a well-known theologian and he had his own stand in the time of controversies. He was ready to give his life for the growth of the church. His martyrdom is enriching us and inspiring us to live like him.

His attitude and sympathetic approach towards the poor and needy is highly appreciable or considerable. In his earlier days he was criticizing Christianity and spoke against Christianity. But at his 46th year of age, as the result of the attempt of a presbyter, he took baptism and became a converted Christian. The teachings of Jesus Christ very much inspired him and he started to live accurately to the words of Christ. He has given all his properties to the poor and needy. This is a good lesson for us, especially those who are speaking about sharing. We are pseudo evangelicals and pseudo liberals. We should be real liberal evangelicals. It can be seen from the teachings of St. Cyprian. Cyprian took the side of the poor and the oppressed. So I feel that St. Cyprian is one of the most inspiring early church fathers especially in his martyrdom and theological knowledge.

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## **Chapter 8: The Martyrdom of Crispina, by Varneihthangi**

### **Introduction**

Christians have met with martyrdom throughout their long history. The regularity of martyrdom confirms a certainty that the earliest apostles had from Christ himself who warned them that the choice they make will expose them to death and this is how it would always be. And also it is not just because of an unfortunate combination and turn of events.

Martyrdom arose quite naturally out of the work of proclaiming Christ as the only Lord and Savior and none beside him. It is therefore, specifically for this reason that the Christians died and in turn imitated Christ's passion of suffering and through it teaching a lesson.

### **Historical Background**

The Martyrdom of Crispina occurred during the last persecution period of the Roman Empire, under the emperor- ship of Galerius Vaerius Maximianus, who was of humble stock and a native of Illyricum. Galerius was invested with the title Caesar in 293 AD. by Diocletian whose daughter he married and was given responsibility for the Danube

frontier. When Diocletian decided on measures against the Christians, the serenity with which this decision was implemented in the series of edicts after 303 AD. was due largely to the influence of Galerius. (J.D. Douglas, *et.al. The International Dictionary of the Christian Church* [revised Edition], Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, p. 399.) Galerius' power increased as the emperor's health failed and he persuaded both the Augusti to abdicate. He then became the Augustus of the East in 305 AD. and Constantine became Augustus in the West. While the Church in the West, under Constantine enjoyed comparative peace, the policy of persecution was continued in the east by Galerius and his Caesar, Maximian. There was remission only after 307 A.D. when Galerius' own health failed and moreover because he was under the threat of Constantine and Maxentius who were in alliance. It was also the same year that Galerius died, but not before he published the Edict of Toleration from Nicomedia.

This period of martyrdom was the last desperate attempt of the state against the new religion and therefore it was the most terrible of all the persecutions.

### **Reason for Persecution**

The reason for the persecution of Crispina is in no way different from that of the other martyrs of the early centuries, i.e. to renounce her faith in Christ and submit to the laws issued by the emperor of offering sacrifices to all their gods for their welfare to which she did not oblige, but instead firm in her faith in Christ in spite of all attempts made, to try and persuade her to renounce her faith. Moreover she showed no fear at all even to die, by being thrown to the wild beasts or be killed by the sword.

### **Crispina**

Crispina came from a noble family of Taura in North Africa. She was married and was the mother of several children. Her sincerity, her proud assurance and her repartee triumphed over the dryness of her judge. (Bruno Chenu, *et.al., The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1990, p. 91.)

### **The Trial and Manner of Martyrdom**

The trial took place on 5th December in the ninth consulate of

Diocletian Augustus and the eighth of Maximian Augustus. Sitting in judgement on the tribunal of his council-chamber was the proconsul Anullinus. The court clerk then announced that Crispina, a lady of Toura was to be tried at his good pleasure for she had spurned the law of their lords, the emperors.

After she was brought in, the proconsul asked her whether she was aware of what was commanded by the sacred decree. Crispina replied that she did not know what has been commanded.

Then Anullinus said that the decree was that she should offer sacrifice to all their gods for the welfare of their emperors. But Crispina replied, "I have never sacrificed and I shall not do so save to the one true God and to our Lord, Jesus Christ, his Son, who was born and died." (Herbert Mururilo, *The Acts of Christian Martyrs*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 303.)

Then Anullinus said to her to break with her superstition and to bow her head to the sacred rites of the gods of Rome. But again Crispina replied, "Every day I worship my God almighty. I know of no other God besides Him" (*Ibid.*, p. 303.)

Anullinus again then said, "You are a stubborn and insolent woman and you will begin to feel the force of our laws against your will." (*Ibid.*, p. 303.) But to this also, Crispina did not waver but replied, "Whatever happens I shall be glad to suffer it on behalf of the faith which I hold firm". (*Ibid.*, p. 303.)

Though Anullinus tried in various ways to force her to renounce her faith and offer sacrifice to their gods, Crispina was firm in her stand of faith in Jesus Christ and that she has never offered sacrifice to any other gods other than the one true God who has made the heaven and earth, the sea and all things that are in them and who alone is to be feared which is also said by Appollonius.

As she was not willing to give in to their laws of offering sacrifice to their gods and even prepared to undergo any torture, Anullinus then ordered that she be completely disfigured first before being killed. Her hair was cut and her head shaved with a razor in order to bring shame to her beauty. After this, even when the execution order was given she was still indifferent to their demand and moreover showed no fear. She instead said, "I shall thank my God if I obtained this. I should be very

happy to lose my head for the sake of my God. For I refuse to sacrifice to these ridiculous deaf and dumb statues. Thanks be to God !". (*Ibid.*, p. 307.) She then made a sign of the cross on her forehead and willingly put her neck out. She was then beheaded by the sword for the name and sake of the Lord Jesus Christ whom she refused to renounce despite many threats and persuasions.

## Reflection

One really feels touched in reading about the martyrdom of Crispina. Moreover because she was a woman, for women being the weaker sex are often considered to relapse faster to abuses and threats than men. But it is not so as we can clearly see from Crispina, who stood firmly to her belief and faith in Jesus Christ in spite of all threats and persuasion. Courage, as from Crispina's life is not mere physical strength, but firmness in standing for a just and right cause.

On the other aspect of Crispina that really touches one is that even when it was ordered that she first be disfigured before her execution by cutting her hair and shaving her head with a razor, she did not give in though it is really a shame and humiliation for a woman to have her hair cut, moreover her head shaved without one's consent for hair is considered as a woman's pride and beauty. Crispina was humiliated and put to shame first even before being executed, yet, as mentioned above, Crispina did not waver in her stand of faith in Jesus. Moreover when the time for her execution came, she without any hesitation willingly put her neck out as if she wanted everything to be done with quickly. Her boldness, I found noteworthy for it seems that she was clear of God whom she believed and knew where she was going, to heaven, which is the promise of God to all who believed in Him in and through Jesus Christ.

Crispina's strong stand in her faith also showed that God alone is to be feared and worshipped above all else. But who is this God ? According to the Christian belief and tradition, God is the father, to whom we can have access only by believing in faith through Jesus Christ, His Son, whom he sent to redeem the world from eternal death and sin. But in today's context of religious pluralism it can be argued that Christianity alone cannot be said as the one true religion and this is not what I mean to say Instead what I want to say is whether we like Crispina or not, her words are clear about the God whom we are worshipping, the God of Jesus Christ too and who can be reached only through faith in Jesus

Christ.

Also, Crispina in spite of being a mother did not give in to the attempts made in order to persuade her. It is not that she would have no love for her children, for a mother's love for her children cannot be measured and a mother is one who is willing to sacrifice her all for her children, but her love for Christ, comes above all else, that she was willing to even give up her life with her children for Christ's sake.

Above all these, I would like to go a little further and raise a question -- "Do we like Crispina, really know who our God and Savior is? Are we prepared to stand firm in our faith in working for the people in their struggle for justice, liberation and so on in spite of all accusations and threats? Leaving aside the physical death of martyrdom, are we ready to become living martyrs? For especially in our present-day context, in order to stand up against injustice, oppression and so on, one has to be prepared to be a living martyr, working for and with the people for the upliftment and betterment against all evil forces. And this is the task to which all are called. It is also the teaching of all religions. I would not like to limit the idea of martyrdom to the Christian circle alone, but to all who worship God. For me, anyone who stands up and suffers for the people in their struggle, whether dead or living, is a martyr.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 2: Martyrs of the Medieval and Reformation Era**

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### **Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of John Wycliff (1324-84), by Philip George**

#### **Political, Economic and the Ecclesiastical Context**

Wycliff was born in about 1324. The Pope was then living in Avignon, which placed him under the domination of the king of France. England being in a state of chronic hostility to France, Wycliff was naturally not unwilling to take an anti-papal attitude. The Avignon papacy created so much unrest in Ecclesiastical circles and in later years, the still more unsettling Great schism. Also at this time England suffered the ravages of the Black Death (1343-80). This was a kind of bubonic plague, brought from China and India along the trade route. It was extremely contagious. Those whom it attacked died within a matter of hours and there was no known remedy for it. Not a country of Europe escaped from it. The total effect of this sudden sweeping pestilence was, that in a matter of less than two years, it destroyed some four million people in western Europe. (Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church*, London [N.d], p.125.) This Black death had made labor scarce in England and the Serfs were demanding more and more from their lords. A period of unrest followed as the peasants strove often with great violence for their freedom. (Christopher O. Mahony, *Church History*, Alwaye: Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, p. 105.)

#### **His Life and Work**

Little is known of his early life except that he gained a reputation at Oxford of being a brilliant student and was even called 'the greatest scholar of his time'. He soon distinguished himself for his zeal for the welfare of the Church. He was distressed at the sad condition of the Church of his day, the money shown by so many of the clergy from the pope himself to parish priest and he had been influenced by Franciscan spirituals and similar groups. In 1374, he became Rector of Lutterworth

in England and from that time, until his death in 1384, he divided his time between his academic work and his parish.

There are two major factors that led England to rehearse Reformation. The first major irritant was the flow of wealth from English Church to Pope i.e. to France and this money was spent for the war against England. In 1333 Edward III refused to pay any longer the tributes that King John of England had pledged to Popes in 1213, in 1351 statute of provisions sought to end papal control over the personnel or revenues of English benefice. Wycliff supported this view. Thus he gained the support and the protection from John of Gaunt who was the fourth son of Edward III and became the most powerful man in the kingdom. The secondary cause of the reformation in England was the low moral life of the clergy. Wycliff became a noted teacher at Oxford, where he made a great reputation as a preacher and as a theologian. His teaching mainly consisted of three elements: first, the doctrine of lordship, secondly, the supreme authority of the scriptures, and thirdly his conception of the church and the Eucharist. (Will Durant, *The Reformation*, New York, Simon & Schuster 1957, p.30.)

### **The Doctrine of Lordship**

His doctrine of lordship was contained in two Latin treatises **De Domino Divine** (Concerning Divine Lordship) and **De Civili Domine** (Concerning Civil Lordship). His theory is all lordship, whether in the sense of political authority or of individual property, derives ultimately from God. It is a trust from God. (H.L. Lefever, *The History of Reformation*, Madras: CLS, 1954, p. 25.) Abuse and authority or possession is a breach and a divine trust. Obviously God's trustees must be honorable men and therefore he argues that the dishonor proves a man unworthy of God's trust.

The righteous man thus must be said to be the lord of all things which are to be held in common by those who are "in grace as in the case of Christ and His disciples and the early Church after his ascension. On the other hand, the unrighteous man who is in mortal sin has no right to possess anything. His lordship is invalidated by his sin, therefore can't be said to possess it. (James Mackinnon, *The Origins of the Reformation*, London: Longmans, 1939, p. 84.) However, Wycliff was not so careful in his remarks concerning the Church. He maintained that if Church misuses its property then it is left to the state to confiscate all its property, if necessary diverting them to the maintenance of the poor and to other good objects. (H.C. Lefever, p.26.) This teaching aroused bitter opposition of the clergy. Wycliff was sum-moned to appear before an ecclesiastical court and it was only due to the forceful protection of the Duke of Lanchester, he escaped condemnation. The Pope issued a number of bulls against him demanding his arrest and committal to prison. But John of Gaunt from motive of self interest, also the enemy of the hierarchy, was powerful enough to afford his protection to Wycliff. He was ready to do so in view of the fact that the persecutors of Wycliff were his political enemies.

### **Supreme Authority of the Scripture**

Wycliff's acceptance of the scriptures as the rule of life finds expression in nearly all his works but especially in his treatise **De Veritate Sacrae Scripturas** (on the truth of the Holy Scriptures)

published in 1378, the year in which the papacy ranked to its lowest ebb, with the 'Great schism', when a new pope was elected in Rome in opposition to the pope of Avignon. This event sharpened his antagonism to the papal system and led him still further to seek the basis of all authority in the Bible. 'Holy Scriptures' he said, is the highest authority for every Christian and the standard of faith and all human perfection. The Bible is unique above all the tradition, and decrees of the Church and it is absolutely and literally true, because it is divinely inspired knowledge of the word of God which alone was necessary to salvation and not to know scripture is not to know Christ. (*Ibid.*, p. 27) The reading and preaching of the word of God are therefore more important than any sacrament. The Bible needs the accessories such as masses, fasting, prayers to saints, tradition and papal decretals to make its message valid. (Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the middle ages, Vol. II*, [New York: Barnes and Nobles Inc. 1969], p. 519.) In this Wycliff stated clearly the later reformation principle of the supreme authority of scripture and as a consequence of this, he sought to make the knowledge of the scripture more general. Though ignorant himself of both Greek and Hebrew, he collected a number of Latin versions of the Bible and with the aid of commentaries by the Fathers and other scholars sought to prepare an accurate English version. This further alienated him from the papacy and he was accused of Vulgarizing the gospel which Christ gave only to clergy and doctors of the Church.

### **Church and the Sacraments**

His appeal to the scripture of the Holy authority led him to denounce all those sacraments and other institutions which had no scriptural warrant. On this basis, he disapproved of penance and confession (ear- whispering), but most of all, he denounced the mass, the doctrine of Transubstantiation.

Under the influence of Augustine, he disapproved the visible Church in the name of invisible Church. He said that Church as a body of predestined existed independently of space and time, it owed allegiance to no one except to Christ, who according to him is the chief Abbot. (Roysdale G. William, *History of Christianity in the Middle Ages, Vol. II*, [New York: Abingdon Press, 1960], p. 519.)

He created an alliance between individual and the apostolic tradition against present hierarchy with far reaching results. He said the first duty of the priest as Christ's disciple was to understand and to expound it. This was more important than sacrament or lord's prayer. (*Ibid.*) Since God eternally decided who was to be saved and who was to be damned, so nothing remained to agency of intermediaries over prayer. He charged against the authority of pope, cardinals, Church hierarchy and against the material wealth and corruption of the Church. He was even considered as a militant moralist who was prepared to use force to reform the Church. He rejected the pope as anti-Christ. He blamed Constantine for inaugurating the papacy. He exalted the supremacy of king over all mankind, His power fashioned in the image of Christ; the Pope also was subject to the royal power. He denounced the doctrine of Transubstantiation. According to this view, the bread and wine after the prayer of consecration became the body and blood of Christ. This doctrine was considered as the pillar of medieval priestly power and sacramental teaching.

Wycliff is not very clear in his explanation on Eucharist. In the year 1381 Wycliff published twelve conclusions against the doctrine of Transubstantiation. This doctrine is based on a distinction which the scholastic philosophers drew between the 'substance' of essence of a thing and its accident's, its material form and qualities which were not found in the bible; therefore he challenged them and it was at this period that the authorities began their serious attempts to suppress his teaching as heretical. (Margaret Dearnesty, *A History of the Medieval Church, 590-1800*, [London: Methu Ltd., 1973], p. 226.) The theological implication of the view would be to deny that it is not at all possible for the sacramental bread to lose its 'bread nature' (substance and yet for the qualities accident) shape, taste, color, etc. to remain. It would be impossible on this view for the substance to be transferred to a completely different group of qualities, as when the substance of the Lord's body is said to be transformed to the qualities of bread. (Lefever. *op.cit.* p. 28.) He argued that it is blasphemy of associating Christ's body with corruptibility of host's physical elements and so subject him to any physical indignities which it might undergo. (Lefever, *Ibid.*, p. 552.)

Wycliff denied that the accidents of the bread could remain without the substance or essence of bread and since the accidents manifestly do remain, he was positive that the bread remained bread. On the other hand, he hesitated to say that the consecrated bread was 'mere symbol' of the body of Christ. (*Ibid.*, p. 28.)

So he said that the bread and wine are 'active symbols', really conveying what their symbolism are, without losing their original material nature. In the consecrated elements, he said Christ is really present and, they really become that which they 'habitually represent'. So, he seems to have held a view very similar to that later view brought forward by Luther and generally known as 'Consubstantiation', the doctrine that Christ is present in, with and under the element. Luther, however, held that the body and blood of Christ are literally and materially present alone with the element, whereas Wycliff could get no further than rather ambiguous expression 'this sacrament is the body of Christ in the form of bread'. (*Ibid.*, p. 29.) The king and the university condemned this doctrine and requested him not in preach this doctrine, but he refused to comply and instead published a lengthy treatise in defense and amplification of his teaching. Thus he lost the support of the king and the noblemen.

### **The Lollards and the Peasants revolt**

Wycliff's teachings created much disturbance in England. From 1377 onward he began to send out itinerant preachers of his views all over the country These people known as Lollards, preached chiefly evangelical poverty against the rich, luxurious life of many churchmen. (Christopher O'Mahony, *op.cit.*, p.32.) Since it was a time of much unrest among the underprivileged, many thought that this preaching contributed to the peasant uprising of 1381. On the occasion of a new government tax, thousands of peasants marched on London from all over the country and burned the palace of the duke of Lancaster and also murdered the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Wycliff himself supported the peasants with a pamphlet called 'peasants and lords'. Since Wycliff had now lost the support of highly placed personages, the new Archbishop of Canterbury took

strong action against his doctrine in a special national synod in 1382. (*Ibid.*, p. 33.) However he was allowed to end his days in peaceful retirements at his Lutterworth presbytery. When Henry IV became the king of England, he suppressed the Lollards. So the Wyclifites had to transfer their activities to Bohemia where they were known as Hussites. (James Mackinnon, *op.cit.*, p. 184.)

## Reflection

Wycliff's life is a great lesson to us. Usually people treat Reformation as one of the past historical events. But it is not so. It is an ongoing process and has a constant impact upon the people of the present. Today's Church is almost packed with so many evils, like caste discrimination, poverty, racism, etc. In this situation we must rethink what is Reformation in relation to the existing unjust social order. So we need today people like Wycliff in our society.

Wycliff's life is very much an inspiration to people in our society. Reformation is a fact to be accepted, not a notion to be discussed. We should also restate what is theology and what is theologizing. If theology is to be vital, it has to be responsive to the social, political, economic and cultural realities which are 'real' to that society. In order to do so, we are expected even to reconstruct some of the theological concepts in relation to, but different from traditional understanding of theology as we have seen in the life of Wycliff. The chief subject of all our theological thinking and decision making are people for whom I believe, Jesus came to demonstrate his self-giving love over against the pentateuchal law.

Wycliff is considered as the morning star of Reformation. He initiated and shown forth a bright light of moral and doctrinal reform of the church and society in a time of darkness. Many of the ideas of the later Reformers were reflected in these predecessors. Their national consciousness and their preaching made a great impact among the common people who faithfully carried their reformers' work throughout the following centuries.

As in Wycliff's time in the present context, we have to reform the theology and theologizing. We have to make contextual Theology. As per the context, several theologies had emerged: Black theology, Liberation theology, Minjung theology, Feminist theology and Dalit theology are some of the emerging theologies.

In India we have inherited western theology which imposes white theology. How is the bible relevant to us in a pluralistic context of India? How is the church responding to caste system? These are some important issues to deal with.

The New Economic Policy of India has badly affected the poor people. In the New Economic Policy, only 10% of the elites are the real beneficiaries. Recent price hike in the petroleum goods hit the poor people very badly. So the church and the leaders have to conscientise common people about the bad effects of all these things. So we need to reform the present unjust social order. Since the members of the church are mostly the oppressed, marginalized dalits, the Church has to safeguard the interests of the poor and create an awareness among them of their rights and obligation.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 2: Martyrs of the Medieval and Reformation Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **Chapter 2: The Martyrdom of John Huss (1374-1415), by K.P. Thomas**

#### **Historical and Political Background**

Politically Bohemia was brought still closer to England, when King Richard II married a Bohemian princess in 1382. So, that is where the ideas of Wycliff emigrated. When persecuted in England, coupled with the nationalistic sentiments of Czechs, Wycliff's revolutionary ideas found an echo in the hearts of the people and took deep root in Bohemia. Moreover the Prague university had been founded in 1348 and has established cultural relations with Paris and Oxford.

On the basis of language and traditions, the people of Bohemia were sharply divided from their German neighbors. The movement which Hus initiated became a Bohemian movement. His first desire was to remove the scandal of the papal schism. King Wenceslas of Bohemia had sought the help of the University of Prague in getting neutrality between the claims of the rival popes at the forthcoming Council of Pisa. (C. Mahony, p. 32.)

#### **His Life**

He was a Bohemian reformer, born of a peasant family at Husina about 1374. He entered the university of Prague in 1390. His parents were poor. In spite of the humble origin, he was able to attend the university where he had distinction and he became the dean of philosophical faculty in 1401. Hus also came to be known as a popular preacher, especially in the Bethlehem chapel, where he preached against the corrupt life of many of the clergy. Though it is clear that he was influenced by the writings of Wycliff, he did not show any interest to become an imitator like Wycliff before him, Luther afterward, he began as a pillar of the Church, gradually moved towards an over heretical position.

Different movements and councils were held at Pisa in 1409, in Constance from 1414 till 1418 and in Basle from 1431 to 1449. During this whole period the questions of dominant authority was the important one.

The one main cause of the first council was the existence of schism.

The second cause was reform movement in Bohemia, from 1400 onwards by John Hus.

Three different movements emerged. The movement inspired by Wycliff in England, Gerard Grant in the Netherlands and by John Hus in Bohemia. The Council of Constance dealt with all three movements.

"Hus' character was strong on the morals rather than the intellectual sides." (H. Bainton, pp. 58-59.) Like Wycliff he denounced the claim of the papacy to the overlordship of the Church, the worldliness of the clergy, and the sin of simony. Hus declared that Church could not try heresy cases. Hus also emphasized the idea of Wycliff's doctrine. That dominion belonged only to those who kept God's laws, emerged at times into the position that dominion belonged only to God's elect. So, the Husites challenged, like the Lollards, all extra biblical rites, institutions and customs, and they laid special emphasis on the withdrawal of the cup from the laity as non-biblical. Hus became a nationalist leader of the Slav party in the empire.

The university of Paris urged on the French king that Christ had submitted to the authority of his mother and Joseph, and pope. No greater than Christ, might well submit to his mother, the Church. Let cardinals, archbishops, bishops, the heads of the monastic, mendicant and military orders be called, let factors of theology and law from the university and the representatives of the Civil power be summoned, and let such a council and the schism,

condemn heretics and reform the Church.

The Council met at Constance on 1 November 1414. It was presided over by an emperor called Sigismund and this meeting became a place for the national interest of Europe. The Council was divided ecclesiastically between reformers and conservatives. The latter wished merely to end the schism. Conservatives taught that the Council had authority superior to the pope, and should carry out reforms, but they feared the doctrines of Wycliff and Hus as much as the Conservatives. The Council achieved the ending of schism, the vindication of the Brethren of the common life, and the condemnation of Hus but it failed to reform the Church. (M. Dearnesty, pp. 232-34.)

After considering the whole question of Hus and heresy, they elected Cardinal odo Colonna as Pope V and Europe received the news of the ending schism with enthusiasm. The Council had hoped to proceed with reform after the election. They had already discussed such matters as the reorganization of the Curia, and the college of cardinals. Papal dispensations and indulgences, the suppression of provision and annates.

### **The Trial and Death of John Hus**

Hus' triumph earned popularity in Bohemia but also bitter dislike in clerical circles outside his own country, coupled with growing hostility in Germany. In spite of demonstrations in Hus' favor, the archbishop burned a large number of Wycliff's books in the courtyard of his own place and finally excommunicated Hus.

The attitude of John Hus to the fathers gathered at Constance was based on a common sense observation. How could they accept the authority of a council called by a pope John XXII who was immediately accused and finally deposed from his throne. When the papacy collapsed to the point that it was no longer possible to discern the legitimate pope, when the bishops and most prestigious abbots took contrary decisions, fidelity to Christ and surrender to the spirit became the only entailing refuge for the preservation of the faith. (*Ibid.* p. 235.)

### **A letter from John Hus to two of his friends**

"Christianity has remained faithful, without a pope who is only a man, but having Jesus Christ, its head, who guides it perfectly, the heart which gives it life by the life of grace the fountain which waters it with the seven gifts of the Holy spirit, the bosom from which torrents of grace flow, the unfailing and

sufficient refuge. It is to him, wretched I am, that I have resort in the firm hope that he will not deprive me of his guidance of the communication of his life and his help. I hope that he will deliver me from my sins and from my wretched present life, and that he will reward me with infinite joy"

John Hus realized that he had fallen into a trap and been condemned in advance. But he refused to compromise when the truth seemed to him to be at stake, and he found the meaning of his struggle in meditating on the passion of Christ.

"I have found great comfort in meditating on the word of the Savior. Blessed are you when men hate you and cast you out from society and torture you and reject your name as evil. For the son of man's sake rejoice and sing with joy, for your reward will be great in heaven. To rejoice in one's tribulations is a good, an excellent consolation not so much hard to understand as to realize folly". (*Ibid.*, pp. 135, 237-238.)

He quotes James from the Canonical epistle: "Happy the man who suffers temptation for when he has tried he will receive the crown of life.". "He firmly believed that God will grant him this crown, and grant it to you, most fervent zealots. For the truth, along with all those who love firmly and with perseverance the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered for us and has left us an example so that we may follow in his footsteps. He had to suffer, as he himself said, and he must suffer, so that as his members we may take part in the suffering of the head. For he has said if anyone would follow me, let him forsake himself, take up his cross and follow me. O most merciful Christ, lead us weak as we are, offer you, for unless you lead us we cannot follow you. Give us a courageous spirit, so that it may be ready, and if the flesh is weak, may the grace go before it, accompany it and follow it for without you we can do nothing and above all without you we cannot face cruel death. Give us a bold courage, and upright faith, a firm hope and perfect charity, that we may give our life for you in all patience and all joy."

From the depths of his prison, he drew the lessons of his experience; he made a host of recommendations to his friends to remain faithful to the gospel, and put it into practice in their daily life. (L.W. Spitz, p.34.)

"I ask and expect you to love God, to honor his word to bear it readily and to observe it. I ask you to hold to the Divine truth that I have explained in writing and that I have preached according to the holy scriptures and the discourses of the fathers. I also ask that if anyone has heard me say in private or in my preaching anything contrary to the divine truth, or if I have written

anything of this sort, that takes no account of it. I also asked that if anyone has noted any lightness in my words or my actions, he does not imitate that but prays God to pardon me. I ask you to love, praise and honor the priests of good morals, above all those who preach the word of God. I ask you to be benefactors of the poor and to treat them justly. Just servants should be faithful to their masters and their mistresses. I ask masters to lead an honest life and to educate their pupils with diligence. Above all they should love God, and should give themselves over to study For the increase of his glory, the service of the city and their own salvation and not to satisfy their cupidity or their thirst for human glory."

On the eve of his condemnation Hus expressed his determination to his friends for the last time.

Tomorrow at the sixth hour I have to declare: on whether I agree to say that as the articles derived from my writings are false and that I abjure them and proclaim the contrary (2) whether I am prepared to acknowledge that I have preached the articles that are held against me by witnesses. (3) whether I deny them and my reply wilt always be the same, I Jan Hus, servant of Jesus Christ. I hope so. I do not want to declare that any of the articles drawn from my writings are false, for fear of condemning the opinion of the holy doctors, St. Augustine in particular. Secondly I refuse to confess that I have affirmed, preached and accepted the articles which are attributed to me by false witnesses. Finally I do not want to abjure for fear of making myself a perjurer.

In his last letter to his closest companions to whom he makes individual recommendations and asks them to pray to God for him.

I have written this letter in the expectation of my condemnation to death, in prison, in the chains that I suffer. I hope for the divine law.

The last act was played out on 6 July 1415.

The bishop of Laoli gave a sermon heavy with allusions on the pretext of commenting on Paul's phrase, "may the body of sin be destroyed" (Rom. 6:6) since for the Council, Hus had become the cause and the, visible sign of the misfortunes of the church and its divisions, he had to die as an expiatory victim and to serve as an example to dissuade all the heretics. Another bishop

read out the charges. Several times the accused protested vainly and tried to make himself heard. The cardinal of Florence brutally made him keep silent. Hus cried out his innocence: "I beg you, for God's sake hear me, so that the people around us may not believe that I have professed these errors. Then you may do with me what you will". Unable to explain himself, the condemned man then began to pray publicly. Reciting the litany of accusations went on, regularly interrupted by his protests. When the reading was over, Hus made a short prayer: "Lord Jesus, pardon all my enemies, I pray you of your great mercy you know that they have accused me falsely that they have produced false witnesses and that they have made false articles. Pardon out of your great mercy". Then he was made to undergo the ceremony of public degradation. Having been dressed in his liturgical vestments as though he were about to celebrate the Eucharist, the condemned man had to watch the chalice and the ornaments removed one by one. Then it was the turn of the tonsure which was defaced with scissors. Finally they put on his head a paper crown with three demons on it and the explanation "This man is a heresiarch" (Bruno Chenu, p. 108.)

Hus then left the church dressed like this, passed close to a stake on which his books were burning and praying all the time, went through the crowd to his own stake, which was set up at the gates of the city. While he was being stripped and attached to a post, he continued to pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, it is for the sake of the gospel and the preaching of the word that I undergo with patience and humility their terrifying, ignorant and cruel death." To the two lay officers responsible for asking him to abjure before the fire was lit, Jan Hus replied: "God is my witness that I have never taught nor preached what is attributed to me by the depositors of false witnesses. I am ready to die with joy in the truth of the Gospel, which I have written, taught and preached according to the tradition of the holy doctors."

While the flames were mounting, Hus' voice rang out a last time. "Christ, son of the living God have mercy on us." (*Ibid.*, p. 109.)

When the pyre was entirely consumed and it was possible to see what remained of Hus' body suspended by the chain which was attached to his neck, the soldier pulled down the great post collected in a pile. What remained of the bones of their victim, they relit it, having added a new cartful of wood and straw. They seized the skull, broke it with their mattocks and threw it on the fire. One of them held the heart of Jan Hus in the fire at the end of a pointed stick. They even threw his tunic and his other vestments upon it. The incarceration was complete. His friends from Bohemia were not to be allowed to come and gather relics from the place of execution. When

only ashes were left, they carefully put them on a cart and dipped them into the Rhine. The will of the Council was that nothing should be left of poor Master Jan of Husiric. (*Ibid.*, pp. 110-111)

## **His Teaching**

It mainly consists of two elements: First regarding the indulgence controversy, secondly his teaching on the church.

**Indulgence controversy:** In this Hus found that papal agents seemed to sell forgiveness for money -- Hus and his supporter Jerome of Prague publicly preached against indulgences. They questioned the existence of purgatory and protested against church collecting money to spill the Christian blood. Hus called Pope as the money grabber and as an anti-Christ. Many others supported his views. (Lefever, p. 81.)

When Pope heard this, he excommunicated John Hus. This threat continued to John Hus. Finally, on the advice of the king, Hus left Prague and remained in rural seclusion for two years. During these years he wrote his major works; some in Latin and some in Czech, all inspired by Wycliff. His writing cited anticlericalism, he rejected image worship, he condemned priests for taking fees for baptism, confirmation, masses, marriages and for the burials. (Mahony, p. 33.)

**The Church:** During his retirement period (1412-1414) he wrote *De ecclesia* (concerning the Church). In this he applied Wycliff's teaching on the Church to the actual circumstance of the Church in Bohemia. He taught that head of the Church is Christ who is the rock on which the Church is built. Rome by its long history is the principal regional Church, but it is not by any means the whole or even the center of the Church. It is to be esteemed only so long as its Pope and the cardinals follow Christ. If they do not follow Christ then they belong to anti-Christ.

The Pope or priest cannot forgive sins. He can only declare God's forgiveness and real forgiveness depends partly on the penitence of the sinner and on the true Christian character of the priest. God's word is the standard of truth and the Pope and cardinals are to be obeyed only insofar as their decisions are in accordance with it. (Durant, pp. 104-5; Lefever, p. 35.)

## **Conclusions**

1. Hus had the national consciousness and the political involvement with the Reformers.
2. The reformation was not from the rich people but from the common people and peasants.
3. Following Hus as an example we may be able to live a faithful life.
4. One of the important teachings was his emphasis on the scripture. All through his time he was known as the "morning star of reformation".

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### **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of Joan of Arc (1412-1431), by Varneihthangi**

#### **Introduction**

Throughout history women and men have fought bravely for noble causes and Joan is one among them. Because of this, it can be said, without doubt, that Joan is among one of the richest personalities, and a representative of the end of the Middle Ages. She was promoted to be the heroine of French history for her bravery in leading the French army against the English like any modern general and driving the English away from the French territory. This she did in obedience to 'her voices' she received from St.Michael, St.Catherine and St.Margaret. But, as was exceptional, she was regarded by some of her contemporaries as a sorceress possessed by Satan and therefore put to death at the stake at a very young age.

#### **Historical Background**

It was the time when The Hundred Years War was going on and the English occupied Northern France. The War was continuing between

the French and English monarchs, Charles of France and Henry VI of England respectively. Because of this, the village of Domremy, where Joan lived was often exposed to the fighting between the French and the English, who freely looted the countryside. Also both French and English soldiers raided villages and carried away whatever they could lay their hands on, be it cattle or grain and this resulted in the poverty of the farmers who were not able to even enjoy the fruits of their hard labor and toiling.

Also, the English army was joined by the French Duke of Burgundy and this amalgamation posed a serious threat for the French king. The king's eldest son, known as the Dauphin was camping in the country at Vaucouleurs as they were still loyal to the king. It was Joan's mission to crown the Dauphin, Charles VII in Rheims' Cathedral after clearing the French territory from the English hand. But since Rheims was in the enemy's hand, the Dauphin could not be crowned even five years after his father's death.

## **Joan**

Joan, also called 'The Maid of Orleans' or 'The Girl Soldier' was born in 1412 to a poor farmer's family in the village of Domrey-lapucelle in Northern France. Joan was illiterate because there were no education facilities in the village. Moreover, her parents were unable to send her to a distant place just for the sake of schooling. Her father Jacques worked in his own small holding. Her mother, though uneducated was a deeply religious person and so brought up Joan in the Church's faith and taught her to say her prayers. Because of this, Joan had a special appeal towards the lives of holy men and women. As she did not go to school, Joan helped her parents in the home and in the field. Though they were poor there is no evidence to say that they lived in utter poverty or that Joan worked as a hired servant having no time to attend Church services regularly which she enjoyed very much. Also there is no evidence to say that she did not find time to go to confession or wait for vision and listen to the Church's bells when she wanted, in order to hear voices. Joan spent her childhood years in the open air and she was a strong and sturdy girl. Nature for her was her teacher. She liked listening to the birds sing and lambs bleating which she used to watch grazing on the hill-slopes. Her piety and faith were strengthened in the quietness of the farmlands in which she was able to feel the Unseen's power and presence. Joan was utterly honest, simple and straight forward, humble and earnest. (M.J.Sargunam, *A Galaxy of Heroes*, [Coimbatore,

Palaniandavar Printers, 1981], p. 23.)

## **Joan's Voices and Visions**

Joan's voices and visions and played many tricks with her reputation. They had been held to prove that she was sad, that she was a liar and imposter, that she was a sorceress for which she was burnt, and finally a saint. They do not prove any of these things; but the variety of the conclusions reached show how little our matter of fact historians know about other people's minds, or even about their own. (Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, (Calcutta: Orient Longman Ltd., 1979), p. 10.)

As Joan's village was frequently exposed to fighting between the French and the English, with her growth in age, Joan also grew more and more sensitive to her village community's suffering. She also came to understand that poverty was a result of the wars. She spent many a night in prayer for her people. Then at the age of 13 during her vigil and prayer, she heard voices. Her devotion and godliness grew stronger day by day as these voices taught her self-discipline. She was conscious in her prayer of the presence of St. Michael, St. Catherine and St. Margaret, the patron saints, whose voices directed and fashioned her life. She therefore without any word obeyed their word of guidance and was getting ready to obey the voices when the time came, voices of saints which spoke from heaven above. It was to the unseen world that her mind and spirit were tuned. She then received a message asking her to go to Charles, the heir to the throne of France and to help him in the war against the English. (M.J. Sargunam, *Ibid.*, p. 22.) Though being a simple, immature, peasant girl, never been trained in the art of fighting, never having ever learnt to ride a horse or wield a sword, yet she was called to serve France.

## **Joan's Response to Her Voices and Visions**

Joan, after receiving the call to save France, boldly set out to meet the French king. Even though she was not successful to have personal contact with the king in her first attempt, she did not lose hope but made another trip the following year when she was just 17 years of age. Though the captain did not take her seriously, Joan insisted and was successful after weeks to an interview with the king. It was her firmness and piety which helped her in the end. Although people scoffed at her claim to have received orders from heaven, she was resolved to fulfil her purpose, believing that God wanted her to drive the enemy from

France. She then dressed like a man, putting on the armor of a soldier and rode a horse. Though her unwomanly way drew much prejudice and opposition, she refused to give in, but instead said, "It is better to obey the voice of Heaven than that of man." (*Ibid.*, p. 23.) It was her passionate love for freedom that made her ready to even sacrifice her life.

Joan also sought to instill pride, self respect and the spirit to fight for the king in her fellowmen. Though mocked, rebuked and disbelieved by the army officers, priests and the king, she was firm in her stand to her mission and was determined to do or die. It was her childlike trust in Heavenly Vision and burning zeal which finally overcame the king's officers and she was allowed to meet the king. It is said that the king unwilling to meet a rustic teenager played a trick on her by dressing like one of his courtiers. But Joan, though never having ever met or seen the king or any of the nobles before, was not confused when she entered the big hall. She instead, to the surprise of all, went straight to the disguised king and said, "God grant you life, sire." (*Ibid.*, p. 23.) It can be said that it is the Spirit alone who could have guided her.

She then told the king that he should be crowned in Rheims' Cathedral after the English army was routed. (*Ibid.*, p. 23.) Joan became impatient in the delay, for the king took time to consult his officers and supporters. But after much hesitation, the king permitted her to lead the French army against the English.

### **Joan, The Girl Soldier**

Joan was then allowed by the king to lead the French army against the English as the city of Grisans held by the French was under heavy siege, on the point of losing the battle. A banner was made for her and she had her standard painted. She declared that a sword for her would be found in the church of St.Catherine and it was so. In spite of all the frightening inquiries of the church, Joan, like an experienced warrior boldly took to the battle field.

On May 4th she suddenly sprang up while resting. Being apparently inspired, she ordered an attack and took one fort and another the next day after which the French army crossed the river. The English army taken by surprise, with the view to reforming the ranks, evacuated the fort. The victory roused the French and the rallying point for the army now became Joan. Joan was acclaimed the victorious Maid of Orleans in

the battle. She moved ahead of the soldiers with great speed. Though she fought on tenaciously, she was wounded in the next encounter at Tuileries.

Joan then asked Charles, the king, to go to Rheims to be crowned, but he hesitated. Joan promised great victory for France when the two armies, the French and the English met at Rheims. When it was so, it brought great honor and renown for her. She then promised pardon to the citizens of Rheims if they surrendered, and a Friar was sent to meet her. (M. J. Sargunam, *op. cit.* p. 24) But her promise was not believed in spite of the Friar's positive report. Joan then ordered an attack and the city surrendered. The impossible, defeating the English army, took place and her mission was successful. Then on 17th July, 1429 the Dauphin was crowned Charles VII in the stately Cathedral at Rheims. (*Ibid.*, p. 24.) Joan then knelt before him and for the first time, called him "My Lord, the king." (*Ibid.*, p. 24.)

### **Her Capture**

Joan was alone and unhappy after the victory. Her advice to march against Paris was not heeded by the king and moreover her enemies were active. Also her request to the king to be allowed to retire to her village to lead a quiet life was not granted either. She had to instead stay around the king's court to face charges of the priests against her faith. (*Ibid.*, p. 25.) As the king did not pay heed to Joan's advice, he began to lose his power day by day. Then the English came back to fight. Joan once more bravely took to the battle field without enough support. She being fearless of danger or death led a small platoon against the English who had now surrounded Paris. Though wounded in the fight, she urged her followers not to give up. She then fell from her horse and taken prisoner, being led to the enemy's camp. There was no attempt made to get her exchanged. Her courage and sacrifice were in vain. (M.J. Sargunam, *op.cit.*, p. 25.) She had to suffer cruelty and shame for her love of her country and devotion to the king.

### **Reason for Persecution**

It was a view held by the priests and church leaders that none other than them could and must convey the Voice of God and God's will. But here was Joan, who was just a poor country girl, illiterate, defying the social norm by dressing up as a man and affirming that she had received orders from 'her voices' to fight against the English. These, they could not

tolerate for, they were certain that she was in touch with evil spirits and not with the Voice of God. Therefore, they wanted to defeat her. They felt that she was wrong. She was also accused of being an agent of Satan, possessing magical powers and must be put to death. The French and English joined together in their attack against her motives for action.

Another reason for Joan's persecution it can be said that the Church in the Middle Ages was narrow minded and burnt those who did not accept its way. (*Ibid.*, p. 24.) and here was Joan claiming to receive voices telling her to do things according to them, voices she believed to be directly coming from God.

## **The Trial**

After being captured by the English, Joan was taken to Beaurevoir, but her soul was at Campaign, still fighting with all her heart for the king who had abandoned her.

The English, after capturing Joan, were in for a sorry state, for they not only failed to recapture Louviers, but also lost Chateauguillard. They, therefore, tried all possible ways to check their rapid decline. It was then decided that the trial of Joan and the coronation of the king be held together, for they were regarded as one. Then Charles VII, the French king could be dishonored as being anointed by a witch and in his place Henry VI of England could be crowned, whose coronation would be the Lord's whereas Charles' of the devil.

Cauchon, who had only recently secured permission for persecution in its diocese from the chapter of Rouen Cathedral, was then called by an order issued by Winchester on January 3, 1431 to open the trial of Joan, who was only to be loaned for trial to the ecclesiastical judge "reserving the right to take her back again in case she was not convicted." (Jules Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, [The University of Michigan Press, 1974], p. 72.) The English took no risk in making sure that she did not escape death. They were firm to use the sword if fire failed.

Cauchon then opened the trial on January 9, 1431 at Rouen. He started with a sort of consultation with the eight doctors, licentiates and masters of arts of Rouen with information he had collected about Joan. Though this information which was gathered in advance by Joan's enemies appear insubstantial to Rouen legal expert's minds but they were so

adamant to put her to death that the flimsy accusation of witchcraft was changed to heresy.

But in order to proceed, the first step was to win over the monk who was representative of the inquisition. Though the monk argued and pleaded, saying that until he was absolutely sure and convinced that his powers were sufficient another be appointed. But all were in vain and he could not escape but be the judge. Also he was bribed by Winchester who gave him gold for all the trouble he had gone through.

Joan was then brought to trial before the judges on 21 February 1431. She was admonished with gentleness and charity by the bishop of Beauvais who urged her to answer any question truthfully in order that the trial would be shortened and her conscience be unburdened without subterfuges. Joan answered, "I do not know what you propose to question me about; you might ask me things which I would not tell you." (*Ibid.*, p. 74.) Questions about anything, which are not connected with her visions, she agreed to swear to tell the truth. But she said, regarding her visions, they would have to cut off her head first.

On the following day, 22nd February and once more on 24th February she was urged to pledge herself unconditionally. Yet she still resisted by saying. "Even little children repeat that often times people are hanged for having told the truth". (*Ibid.*, p. 74.) But due to weariness, she finally agreed that if it can have a bearing on her trial she would tell everything she knew.

They then questioned her about her age, name and so on. They then asked her about the term 'the Maid' by which she was called by the people. To this, she eluded the difficulty with a white lie which may be due to reluctancy of feminine modesty and instead said, "As to what they call me, I know nothing about it". (*Ibid.*, p. 75.) When she complained that she had been fettered, the bishop replied that it had been necessary to shackle her since she had repeatedly attempted to escape. She then said, "It is true, I have tried. Any prisoner has the right to do so. If I did escape, no one could accuse me of having broken faith, for I have promised nothing." (*Ibid.*, p. 75.)

May be because of superstition, they then ordered her to recite the prayers Pater Noster and the Ave Maria in order to catch her, for they believed that if she was a thrall of the devil she would not be able to do so and this would give them the chance to condemn her. But she replied

"I shall be glad to say them, if only my Lord the bishop of Beauvais consents to hear me in confession." (*Ibid.*, p. 75.) This was a clever and touching request, to take her judge, her enemy into her fullest confidence, for this would have compelled him to bear witness to her innocence and made him her spiritual father. But Cauchon refused, and instead adjourned the session for the next day and turned the task over to one of his successors.

A strange quickening of her spirit was manifested at the fourth session of her trial. She did not conceal the fact that she had heard 'her voices'. She instead said, "They woke me up. I folded my hands and begged of them to advise me; they said to me: Ask our Lord" -- "And what else did they say?" "That I should answer you without fear. (*Ibid.*, p. 75-76.)

When she told them that she was not free to speak everything out, not because of fear of answering them, but instead fear of offending 'her voices', the bishop insisted by saying. "But Joan it is then possible to offend God by telling what is true?" (*Ibid.*, p. 76.) But she answered, "My voices have told me certain things that are not meant for you, but for the king." (*Ibid.*, p. 76.) Her sayings were mingled with naive words, but at the same time with sublime meanings like, "I was sent by God, from whom I came ..." Her words, "You tell me you are my judge; ponder with great care over what you mean to do, for in very truth I was sent of God, and you are putting yourself in great jeopardy," (*Ibid.*, p. 76.) must have irritated the judges for they asked her, "Joan, do you believe that you are in a state of grace?" (*Ibid.*, p. 76.) Which is an insidious and perfidious question, sinful to ask any living human creature. Also because with this question they thought that they would catch her with a snare that could not be loosened by anything for if she said no, it would be confessing her unworthiness to be God's instrument. But if she said Yes, she would be labeled as proud and presumptuous, one among who are farthest from grace. But with heroic and Christian simplicity she cut the knot by saying, "If I am not, may it please God to bring me into it; If I am, may He preserve me in it." (*Ibid.*, p. 77.)

After all her heroism, according to Jules Michelet, Joan still being a woman relapsed, grew soft, even doubting her state and striving to reassure herself by saying, "Ah! If I knew I was not in God's grace, no one in the world could be more afflicted... But if I were in a state of sin, surely the voices could not come to me... I wish everyone could hear them as I do..." (*Ibid.*, p. 77.) These words became a weapon for the

judges against her who, after a long pause attacked her anew with fiercer hatred, asking her questions in quick succession. Questions like, "Did not the voices tell her to hate the Burgundians? Did she not go, as a child, to the tree of the fairies?" (*Ibid.*, p. 77.) With a hope to find out which might have led to her undoing for they wanted to burn her as a witch.

She was attacked on a delicate perilous point, that of the apparitions at the fifth session, where she was even asked whether St. Michael was naked when he appeared to her. But she answered this question with heavenly purity, not even aware of its nastiness by saying, "Do you think our Lord did not have the wherewithal to clothe him?" (*Ibid.*, p. 78.)

More bizarre questions like, "This St. Michael these sainted women, did they have a body, limbs?" (*Ibid.*, p. 78.) were asked on 3rd March in order to make Joan confess to some devil's work. She instead replied, "Yes, I believe it is firmly as I believe in God." (*Ibid.*, p. 78.) And this was carefully noted down.

As the trial was not progressing as expected, Cauchon thought it more prudent to proceed as quietly as possible with only a few men he could trust. The number of assessors also varied from session to session, for while some left, others came. There was also variation in the place of the trial, for Joan was on trial in the hall of Rouen's castle, but later in her prison, where Cauchon in order 'not to bother others', (*Ibid.*, p. 79.) went there on March 10-17 with only two assessors and two witnesses. This bold secret step taken by Cauchon may be due to the reason of knowing that the Inquisition was in support of him and due authority was received on March 12 by the vicar from the Inquisitor General for France, Winchester, to jointly judge with the bishops.

Joan was then pressed only with few points in these fresh examinations which was indicated by Cauchon in advance. With questions like -- "Do you believe you did rightly in leaving your parents without their permission? Should not one's father and mother be honored?" (*Ibid.*, p. 80.) But Joan answered all these questions with simplicity and honesty for which they could not find fault. The judges at last reached proper ground for their accusation to their question whether she will be saved or go to hell? Joan replied that 'her voices' told her to "accept everything with a willing heart; be not dismayed at the thought of martyrdom, for it will lead you at last to the Kingdom of heaven," (*Ibid.*,

p. 82.) and that she firmly believed that she was saved already.

They then closed their preliminary examination, asking her if she would let the church be the final judge. But to this she replied, "I love the church, and I want to uphold her with all my strength. As to the good works I have wrought, I must refer them to the king of Heaven, who sent me." (*Ibid.*, p. 83.) Even when the question was repeated, she gave no answer, but added, "the church and the Lord are one." (*Ibid.*, p. 83.)

### **Manner of Martyrdom**

It was nine o'clock in the morning of May 30, 1431. Joan was clothed in her woman's garb and put into a cart. Brother Martin I'Advenu, the confessor and Massieu, the usher stood on both her sides. She was carried in the cart through the street into the fish market in Rouen amidst a quivering multitude, under the guard of hundred Englishmen armed with swords and spears. Though she did not weep and mourn, she did not accuse her king nor her saints. She was only able to whisper, "O Rouen, Rouen is it here that I must die?" (*Ibid.*, p. 116.) Three platforms had been erected. The first was for the Episcopal and royal chair where the English cardinal and his prelates were to be seated. The second was meant for the preacher, judge, the bailiff who were the figure characters in the somber drama and for the condemned Joan. The third was a high platform heaped with firewood meant for pyre. This was meant in order that the executioner would not be able to reach its base and shorten Joan's torture and dispatch her as done usually, but instead that she would literally burn alive for everyone present in the market place to see, above the encircling spears and swords. (Jules Michelet, *op.cit.*, p. 117)

Master Nicholas Midy, one of the lights of the University of Paris began the horrible ceremony with a sermon on the edifying text, "when one limb of the church is sick, the whole church is sick", and the church could only be healed by cutting that sick limb. He concluded with the formula: "Joan, go you in peace, the church could no longer defend thee." (*Ibid.*, p. 117.) Then the bishop of Beauvais who was the ecclesiastical judge exhorted her with benignity to care for her soul and to remember all her transgressions so as to rouse herself to contrition. (*Ibid.*, p. 117.) The bishop omitted the reading of her abjuration of her which was according to the assessors law for fear that she would raise a protest by saying that he was lying. But Joan's mind was thus far from trying to save her life, but fixed on different things. Instead, she fell on

her knees, invoking God, the Virgin, St. Michael and St. Catherine to forgive all as she has forgiven them. She also begged the crowd to pray for her and entreated all the priests present to say a mass for her soul. All present were so moved by her humble gesture that some began weeping and others in tears, even those who had condemned her to the stake.

Then the bishop of Beauvais after wiping his eyes, began reading the sentence which he had rehearsed for the culprit all her crimes-schism, idolatry, invoking demons; how after being admitted to penitence, she was

seduced by the prince of lies and had relapsed, O grief:  
Like the dog returning to his vomit! Therefore, we  
pronounce you a rotten limb, and as such cut off from the  
church; we deliver you over to the secular power,  
beginning it however to be mild in dealing with you, and  
to spare you death and bodily mutilation. (*Ibid.*, p. 118-  
19.)

Thus Joan, the Maid, committed herself in full confidence to God after being rejected by the church. She asked for a cross and was given a wooden one made out of stick by an Englishman. Though she received it devoutly, placing it under her garments next to her skin, she wanted a regular church crucifix to be placed before her eyes. This was done only after such pleading by the kind usher Massieu and Brother Lambert and the cross was brought from the parish church of St. Saviour.

She was roughly handled and brought down from the platform by the English soldier and because of this rough handling, Joan cried anew, "O Rouen, so thou art to be my last abode! . . ." She said not more and did not sin with her lips, in this hour of terror and agony (*Ibid.*, p. 120.) She neither did accuse her king nor her saints.

She was tied under the placard of infamy: a miter placed on her head with the words "Heretic, backslider, apostate, idolater..." (*Ibid.*, p. 120.) Then the executioner lit the fire. As the flames rose and reached her she shivered and because of agony cried for holy "water; water". (*Ibid.*, p. 121.) But she soon conquered herself and had only the names of God, her angels and her saints on her lips. Finally, her head dropped, and she uttered a great cry: "Jesus!" (*Ibid.*, p. 122.) and surrendered her life to her God by being burnt at the stake, at a young age of just 19

years.

## Reflection

Though a number of articles and stories have been written about Joan, I could not help but write again on the life and martyrdom of Joan, so I am and continue to be inspired by her. A girl, who was still young, full of life and may be with plans for the future, but was willing to give her all, even her life for what she believed to be true and felt called to death.

I would not go into all the details of her history, but concentrate on the few realities which have time and again struck and inspired me.

Joan can be said as one who really believed in the fact of God speaking to human beings, directing our life from 'her voices' which she obeyed without any word. The voices can be questioned as to whether they were really genuine or not. Here I would like to mention that it can vary from person to person. For some it can be like the voices which Joan may have heard directly. But at the same time, it can also be said as the word which was heard in our hearts/minds directing our consciences in the wrong and right. But also in order to respond to the voice, one important factor necessary is faith in God. For without faith, we cannot hear or follow the voice of God. Joan obeyed the voice in action in going to the king to ask him to grant her permission to go to battle, which was possible because of her faith in God. This faith in Joan is what I feel very important in our response to the voice of God. It must also be like Joan's which was in action.

Joan's firmness is another aspect which really struck home in me. Though being just a poor, illiterate country girl, she was firm to the mission to which she was called, even though the officers and the king did not at first take her seriously. But because of her firmness to her mission, they also had to give in to what she wanted in the end -- leading the French army in battle in obedience to 'her voices'. Like Joan, we too, in our present day context need to be firm in our stand to work for humanity in response to what all are called by God.

Then comes Joan's "obedience to God alone" in spite of being condemned by all, even the church which is supposed to be the people of God. But as Joan was sure that what she was doing was in obedience to God, she did not go back on her word despite the fact of being rejected and condemned by all. She fully committed herself to the

mission to which she has been called against all the accusations and condemnations. She did not accuse anyone, her king who had abandoned her, the judges who had condemned her nor 'her voices' who guided her. Instead she forgave and prayed for all her accusers, giving up even her life to be burnt alive in the most humiliating and brutal manner in front of a large crowd in the market place. We too, like Joan, must not condemn anyone in our sufferings, but instead like Jesus Christ and Joan forgive and pray for them which is obedience to God.

Besides all these, it is clear enough without even mentioning what torture and degradation of her dignity, what Joan must have gone through during her imprisonment. Yet she did not react in the same manner, defending herself against false accusations in order to defend herself. Instead she underwent everything without going back on her commitment which I feel is very important for us in our everyday life. We must be true to our commitment against all false accusations and inhuman treatment.

One very strong argument I want to make is in relation to the view held by Jules Michelet where it is said that Joan relapsed, even, doubting her faith because she was still a woman though dressed in man's clothing and who fought bravely in the battle. What I want to say here is that, to me it is not a person's sex that makes one grow soft or passive, but one can relapse after much torture and psychological shock, that one is not even sure of what one is doing. So to me it seems that Joan also relapsed due to all torture and inhuman treatment she underwent, that she was not clear about what she was doing and not because she was a woman.

Lastly, I feel that like Joan, we too must be firm and be able to stand up against all forces that are against God's concern for human liberation and justice, even the church if we are to be in obedience to God, for though the church is God's many a times, the churches have and tend to practice things which are against God's idea of church, like possessing wealth. Also the church, as in the Middle Ages, tends to be narrow-minded, showing indifferent attitude to one who does not go along with it in its sway.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 2: Martyrs of the Medieval and Reformation Era**

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### **Chapter 4: The Martyrdom of Thomas More (1478-1535), by Mathew Kuruvilla**

#### **Introduction**

Thomas More was born in a solidly prospering London family in 1478, and educated at St. Antony's School and Oxford. In 1494 he began the study of law at New Inn. As More continued his legal studies in London, other interests engaged his attention. During this time he met Erasmus, a Dutch scholar and philosopher and became his life-long friend. It was during these years More firmly established himself as a leader among the group of humanists, whose activities were then centering in London. About Nov. 1504, he married Jane Colt and four children were born to them before Jane's death in 1511. In 1510 he became the Sheriff of London. And then his activities centered on the life of the King Henry's court. In 1523 he became the speaker of the House of Commons. Then in 1529 he was honored as the Lord Chancellor. Later in some religio-political developments, he disagreed with the King on his divorce issue and he refused to take the oath to the Act of Supremacy. Then More was sent to London Tower. He was tried

under a new act, the Act of Treason for refusing to the King his titles. He was tried on 1st July 1535 and executed -- five days later. The Roman Catholic church canonized him in 1935.

### **More's Political Life**

More's political life may be said to have begun almost at the same time as the reign of Henry VIII. (Hutton William Holden, *Sir Thomas More*, London: Matheun & Co., 1895, p. 143.)

More proved himself to be an extremely able member of the council, acting on occasion as a secretary who transmitted reports to or from Cardinal Wosley, the kings chancellor, and king. During the 1520s More participated in the campaign against Lutheran literature which was beginning to flood England.

In 1527 Henry VIII informed his wife that they were not truly husband and wife and could not continue to live together. Since the two had been married for seventeen years; this was astounding news for Catherine of Aragon. Henry's quest for a divorce was to overshadow for the next half a decade the foreign and domestic affairs of England and eventually led to the detachment of the English church from its Roman matrix.

Cardinal Wolsey, thought too self-confidently that Henry's request would encounter no complication in Rome. But after Henry realized that he could expect no help from that quarter, in Oct. 1529 Wolsey was indicted for violation of the law and he lost the chancelorship, to be succeeded by Thomas More. (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol.9, p. 1138.) Henry VIII had consulted More as early as 1527 with regard to his proposed divorce from Catherine of Argon; and after a long study of the problem More had told the King that he could not support this case.

Since More opposed the King's divorce, Henry permitted that he would not have to be involved. Thereby the King's highest official remained aloof from the major political issue of the day. In 1530 the attorney general filed charges against the English clergy for their recognition of foreign authority in the pope. The clergy were stunned, but in convocation they quickly regained their equilibrium. Subsidies were offered as grants to the king in gratitude for his defense of the faith. In plain language, these grants were meant as bribes. Henry wanted the clergy to acknowledge their guilt and the king's position as protector and the only supreme head of the English church and clergy This

acknowledgement of royal headship was in a way nothing more than the extension of existing trends involving the ever greater political control over the church. In 1532 when parliament passed the conditional restraint of Annates, which prohibited the payment of Annates to Rome, Henry meant to tighten the financial screw and deprive the people of his English revenue. When the clergy agreed to obtain royal assent for all new constitutions, canons and ordinances, Thomas More pleaded ill health and resigned from his office as Chancellor. (Hillerbrand J. Hans, *The World of the Reformation*, p.118.)

### **More's Religious Life and Theological Thinking**

During his legal studies, an intense spirituality emerged, in More that was later a fundamental feature of his personality. For about four years he lived with Carthusian monks at the London Charter house. (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 1136.) It was during More's time the Lutheranism and Tyndalism prevailed in England. And Thomas More was asked to respond to Luther's argument. More recognized that some of Luther's complaints were just, but an entirely different threat to the faith came when Luther went further and questioned the validity of sacraments and later developed his doctrine of justification by faith alone.

More had, three or four years earlier, predicted that Luther's teaching must result in a disruption of the church and later we find that it was true; when Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "one wonders how it was Luther's action led to consequences which were the direct opposite of what he intended. He decided a real unity for the church and for western Christendom, but the consequence was the ruin of both. He sought the freedom of Christians and the consequence was apathy and barbarism. He hoped to see the establishment of a genuine social order free from clerical privilege and the outcome was the peasant's war and soon afterwards the gradual dissolution of all cohesion and order in society." (*Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 112.) More argued against Luther that scripture and tradition cannot be opposed to each other He thought that without the authority of the church the Christian left to scripture alone would fall into error. More emphasized that the church was established before the Gospels were written and it was the church that fixed the Canon of the scripture without denying humanism and the rights of critical reason. More justified the authority of the church instituted around Pope by appealing to the tradition of universal Christianity. In his eyes the authority of the visible church was derived from the

authority of Christ to teach the meaning of scripture and demonstrate the doctrine. More was fearful of the private interpretations that the unlearned would read into the Bible. More says that all readers can find spiritual nourishment in the scriptures. His charge against Lutherans and Tyndalists was that in their pride of intellect, they had discarded the traditional teaching and interpretation of the church and had colored their translations to support their doctrines.

More declared that faith was before scripture chronologically as well as logically. More's criticism of the reformers translation is extremely bitter. He distrusted the spirit in which it was undertaken and pointed out many instances in which new readings of words had been adopted for the purpose of concealing the meaning of the original. Turning to argument with heretics, More cited a number of examples to prove that images were not forbidden to Christians. On the marriage of the clergy, More says that the church binds no man to chastity against his will, for men only take sacred orders by their own desires.

### **Thomas More, an Eminent Humanist**

More's ideologies and teachings are very clearly dug out from his literary work. Especially from his main work *Utopia*. (Paraphrase -- *Sir Thomas More -- Utopia a Critical Study*, M.A. English I Year Paper I, Modern Literature 1, Annamalai University, pp. 68-72.) More wrote many pamphlets against those who attacked the Catholic religion. In *Utopia* More discussed certain important social, political and religious questions, with great insight. He had dealt with various areas such as agriculture, old soldiers, public health, war treaties, capitalism, capital punishment, coinage, communism, land, old age pensions, divorce, artificial insemination, slaughter houses, reformation of criminals, tramps money, over population and others. *Utopia* is written in two parts. The first Book of *Utopia* is mainly introductory. More invents a sailor called Hytholoday who had visited the land of *Utopia*. The first book gives main emphasis to two topics.

Why do men become thieves and, would a philosopher take service under a prince. The first reflects More's experience as an Undersheriff or magistrate in London during the previous five years when he had to deal summarily with the rogues and vagabonds of the city. The second was an immediate problem as following More's success in an embassy to the low countries.

The discussion in the first book of *Utopia* probably reflected More's conversations with Erasmus who was strongly opposed to More concerning himself with the busy trifles of princes as this would interfere with his contributing to human knowledge as philosopher. In the first book he narrates the talk of cardinals' table; they discussed the problems of thieves and meaninglessness of giving death punishment for stealing. They went to the root of the problem and asked the question how people become thieves. Luxurious living of the rich produced a number of poor who become thieves. Instead of hanging these men for stealing, the state could benefit much by using them in war, because these men must by their very decision to become thieves, be brave men. Another reason for the increase in the number of thieves was the extension of pasture and promotion of wool trade much to the disadvantage of agriculture. Farm laborers out of work become thieves. In spite of the increase in the wool production the prices did not come down because much of the wool went into the hands of the rich who were not in a hurry to sell until the prices went up owing to scarcity.

Hanging of thieves was condemned by Hytholday and others even from a religious point of view. Loss of money should not cause loss of life. All the goods in the world would not equal to human life. Added to this was God's command against killing. Thieves could be condemned to do forced labor. They need not be locked up at all unless their crimes were very heinous. More asked Hytholday to become an adviser to some king and Hytholday spoke of the disadvantage in such a position. He said how kings often forget that for the sake of the kings, they often fought wars out of vanity and brought misery on the people with their own wars. Hytholday in the course of his talk stressed the need for abolishing private property. If it continued, a large number of people would be poor and wretched and, charity would not be the way to end poverty.

During the conversation Hytholday praised the Utopians and their form of government. More asked him to describe in detail those people's government, customs and manners. And he continued his narration: the Island of Utopia was named after its king Utopus. There were in the island fifty four cities all speaking the same language, having the same manners, institutions and laws. The Utopians chose their magistrate by secret election. The prince continued for life unless he was deposed for tyranny. Law suits were quickly disposed of. Almost every person knew farming and science. The Utopians were similarly dressed.

Animals were slaughtered at the outskirts of the city. There were

community kitchens where the food was prepared and given to families. But first the old and sick were attended to. They enjoyed harmless pleasures. The Utopians avoided war by all means. They did not consider hunting a sport at all. They wanted everyone to enjoy the gifts of nature.

The Utopians believed in one God for all called Mithea. They also welcomed Christianity. They condemned religious intolerance. The king gave his subjects full liberty to practice religion. There was a separation of politics and religion. There were women priests. Hytholday ended his narrative and More wished that many of our countries today would follow many of the good things found in Utopia.

### **Martyrdom of Thomas More: Trial and Execution**

A year after More's resignation as the chancellor, the king obtained divorce and married Anne Boleyn and he forced his subjects to take an oath recognizing the children to be born from the new union as the legitimate heirs. But Thomas More refused it, he abstained from the coronation of Anne Boleyn. For this reason he was summoned on 13 April 1534. He refused to take the oath, explaining that his opposition was not to the legitimacy of the succession but to the recognition of the king as the supreme head of the church of England. (*Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 116.) And he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

His real trial began in earnest, although the formal legal proceedings against him were not conducted until July 1535. The indictment opened with a recital of the relevant parts of the Acts of Supremacy and Treasons. Parliament had enacted that the King, his heirs and successors should be accepted as the only supreme Head of the church in England and to deprive him of this or of any of his other titles in word or writing was high treason.

In conclusion it is stated that the aforesaid Jurors declared Thomas More falsely, traitorously and maliciously by craft imagined, invented, practiced and attempted wholly to deprive our sovereign Lord and king of his dignity, supreme head in earth of the Church of England, to manifest contempt of the king and in derogation of his royal crown..

The charges were supported by four statements of evidence. It is called as counts: (E. Reynolds, *The Field is Won*, London,; Burn & Oates, p. 360.)

- i) The first count was that of 7th May 1535 Thomas More remained obstinately and maliciously silent when he was asked whether he accepted the king as supreme head.
- ii) The second count was that on 12 May, More sent a number of letters to John Fisher to encourage him in his refusal and to say that he himself kept silence. At his interrogation on that day he had said "the Act of Parliament is like a sword with two edges, for if a man answers one way: it will confound his soul and if he answers the other way it will confound his body".
- iii) The third count was really an extension of the second. Collaboration between the two prisoners was shown by the fact that both had declared that the statute is like two-edged sword.
- iv) The fourth count was the crucial one. Thomas More, it was claimed, had declared that the king could not be the supreme head, thus he maliciously persisted in his treason.

After the reading of the indictment, which More now had heard for the first time, Audley Lord Chancellor offered him the King's pardon. But it was not accepted. More was voicing his fundamental objection to being compelled to accept the king's new title of being the supreme head: it was an invasion of prerogative of conscience of that in part of the divine law of God since it applied man-made law to the deeply held religious conviction of the individual.

When the verdict was delivered More at last uttered his mind in a great speech, declaring that he had all the councils of Christendom, and not just the council of one realm to support him in the decision of his conscience. (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 1140.) He was returned to the Tower until July 6. On that day he was beheaded in the great square in front of the Tower and he had said before execution that the people there should pray to God for him and he would pray for them. Afterwards he exhorted them, earnestly beseeching them to pray to God for the king, so that he would give him good counsel, protesting that he died his good servant but God's first.

## Conclusion

The religio-socio-political life of Thomas More was the milestone of the history of the State as well as the Church of England. He was a man of real commitment and conviction towards his offices and personal beliefs. We have seen that on this commitment and conviction he simply gave up many respectful and worthy positions of his career. He was bold enough to reject the King's request and many a time More was very critical towards the king for his unethical and unjust ambitions. His work and words were always pointed towards the weakened and oppressed mass of the community, which is very much clear in his great work 'Utopia'. In short this personal commitment and conviction led Thomas More to his martyrdom.

In an immediate impression especially when one analyzed the trial and execution, one could see More's martyrdom in a narrow sense. In one sense he was a Catholic fanatic. His personal commitment and conviction were fully surrendered to the Catholic church. To a great extent, for the sake of upholding the customs, beliefs and traditions of the Catholic church he opposed the king's second marriage, which was the immediate reason for More's execution. More was not open to other Christian Churches. In his writing itself we can find out the inconsistency between what he wrote and the way he acted in real life. He wrote of the religious tolerance of the Utopians and their human treatment with Tyndale and Luther. But he vehemently criticized that new development in the Church of England. In other words, he was intolerant towards other Christian Churches.

But in fact the reason for his martyrdom cannot be confined only to the refusal of recognizing the king as the head of the Church of England. As a humanist his words and deed were the main reason for his martyrdom. More was always critical towards the King for his autocracy. For that matter he did not care for his positions and material benefits. He stood for the upliftment of the downtrodden and weakened section of the society. For this reason his word utopia has been very much appreciated by socialist propaganda. More protested against new economics of the enclosure of lands by great landlords. This led to the breakdown of the old law and customs and, earlier common field agriculture was destroyed. Many of the reform visualized as ideal by More have been either sincerely implemented or at least considered very much needed to be effected for human welfare. In this light we can see More's case as a protest against the increasing powers assumed by the King and

parliament to regulate people's inmost beliefs. When the States go beyond the limits, the Christian has a duty to follow his conscience in obedience to God and the Church. In short, Thomas More was a great man who always stood for his religion as well as his society and was martyred.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 2: Martyrs of the Medieval and Reformation Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **Chapter 5: The Martyrdom of Thomas Muentzer, by John George**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Thomas Muentzer was born on Dec 20 or 21, 1488 in Stolberg, a small town in Saxony He continued his elementary education in Quedlinburg. And he entered the University of Leipzig in 1506 at a time when humanism was the philosophy of the day. He entered the University of Frankfurt in 1512. Perhaps it was here that he learnt the classical Hebrew and Greek which he later used in the extensive study of the Bible. Between 1511-1521, Muentzer drew a stipend from a prebend in Halberstadt. He inherited also large legacies after 1520 and acquired expensive books. Thus, contrary to the claims of socialist communist historians, Muentzer did not come from a poor proletarian family nor did he have the financial struggles of a young revolutionary. He was ordained fully in 1513 or 1514. And he chose to go to Frohse, a small monastery outside Halle, a good place for study and meditation, Muentzer was a secular priest at the monastery of St. Cyriacus near Ascherleben. He took interest in improving liturgy Luther's publication of ninety five theses on Oct. 31, 1517 undoubtedly influenced Muentzer 's decision to leave Frohse, Probably in the Fall of 1518. After a brief

stay in Wittenberg he went on to Leipzig. He took the pulpit of St. Nicolai in the April of 1519 and attacked papal authority and called for a general assembly which he esteemed above the papacy. He did not stay there long. He went to Leipzig and learnt there more about Luther's movement. At Benditz, Muentzer studied church history. He was particularly attracted to the mysticism of Suso and Tauler. All these did not help resolve his religious uncertainty. From here Muentzer went to St. Mary's Church in Zwickau as substitute Pastor for John Egeron on the recommendation of Luther in May 1520. He was still a seeker, restless and curious, driven by the desire to meet divine reality in a direct and personal way. At this time in the early years, the relationship between Luther and Muentzer seemed to have been congenial. He was a supporter of the young movement of Luther in Zwickau but was not a student or disciple of Luther. Thomas Muentzer has been a controversial figure in the religious controversies of the 16th Century. His ideas and his historical significance have been debated and judged differently by different historians. Luther's view that Muentzer is a fanatic in religion and a rebel in politics seems to have been the verdict of practically all historians until recent times.

Luther regarded Muentzer as the incarnation of the devil; the oppressed peasants saw him as a prophet pointing to a new age of freedom. Communist historians claim him to be the forerunner of Marxist cause. In the midst of differing claims and assessments, Gritsch tries to fill a void in historical research, for the historical Muentzer has been buried too long in the grave of a legend. His assessment of Muentzer is in terms of the problem of the word and the spirit. The word means the Bible as an historical revelation, a source of religious truth.

**The Pastor of Zwickau:** Zwickau, because of its strategic geographic location with Leipzig, belonged to Germany's most important trade centers. Grain, beer and textiles were the major products of the city. Zwickau was famous for schools too. It had eight Churches, four hospitals and even a Printing Press. The last probably helped put Zwickau, on the verge of becoming a center of Humanism.

The Church usually took the side of the rich and the common people resented the rich citizens in town. When Muentzer arrived in Zwickau, he attacked the Franciscans. He was supported by members of the city council and, common people mostly weavers, sided with Muentzer. In this fight against monks, Muentzer sought support from Luther. Thus, by the end of the summer Muentzer emerged as the leader of a basically

'Lutheran' reform movement in Zwickau. He and Luther were now fighting the same enemy, the papal church with the same weapon, the word of God. Nevertheless Muentzer became more and more attracted to Storch and his followers. In the class struggle that ensued due to the introduction of ideas from Wittenberg, Muentzer emerged as a spokesman of the common people.

Since Muentzer found it difficult to share the pulpit at St. Mary's with Egranus, he moved to St. Catherine's church across the town. He was welcomed there with great enthusiasm by the weavers and miners who constituted the membership of St. Catherine Church. Thus he became the Pastor of the lower classes. After sometime Muentzer left for Bohemia probably due to some private reasons.

**The Prophet of Prague:** The kingdom of Bohemia was the right place where Muentzer expected support for reform program more radical than Luther. Muentzer undoubtedly felt that Bohemia might become the center of the Reformation. He returned to Saxony. In several letters written in June 1521 Muentzer began calling himself the "messenger of Christ" and servant of the elect and found called to a higher ministry than that of the Parish. On Nov 1, 1521, the All Saints day, Muentzer posted a manifesto later to be called "The Prague Manifesto" perhaps at the doors of various churches. The manifesto was written in German addressed to common people, in Latin, aimed at Bohemian intelligentsia, and Czech. The Prague manifesto contained as theological sketch Muentzer's revolutionary program. His words disclosed a Prophetic self consciousness.

Muentzer argued that the Holy Spirit is given directly to those who are of a simple mind undistorted by the burden of complicated reason. The highest authority for Christians was not the written word of the Bible nor the spoken word of the priest but the inner experiencing of the Holy Spirit. Such extreme spiritualism centered in the concept that there are no external media whereby the Holy Spirit is received, became the basis for Muentzer's reflections about the past. Muentzer warned the Bohemians of the coming day of Judgment, foreshadowed by the evils of the papacy, he advised them to elect their own Pastors who in turn should elect delegates to a General Council. The only practical suggestion Muentzer made in the Manifesto. Muentzer wrote the manifesto hoping to revive the Bohemian nationalism aroused a century earlier by John Hus. The Prague manifesto was more a radicalization of Lutheran theology.

Like Luther, Muentzer used the authority of the Bible to point at the Heresy of Clericalism. There is no longer a radical difference between Priest and laymen; both are equal before God. Muentzer insisted upon the inner certainty of salvation as the basis for his argument. The cross is no longer the experience of historical Jesus of Nazareth who effected salvation through his historical death but a spiritual experience, mediated through the Holy Spirit. Muentzer called upon the Bohemians to build a renewed Apostolic Church, a mirror reflecting the advent of the kingdom of God. Thus reformation movement was to become a political movement under Muentzer, designed to eliminate all evil particularly that of the old ecclesiastical and political order manifesting itself in clericalism and feudalism. Still Muentzer was not yet ready to identify his religious ideas with a definite political goal.

By March 1523 Muentzer was penniless. He was too proud to ask his friends for money. Instead he used his situation to propagate the idea that advent of the Holy Spirit must always be preceded by suffering and despair. Muentzer adopted a change in his tactics. He lived with growing conviction that he should offer himself as a living example of that which was to come. The transformation of human existence into a perfected, divine kingdom of God. Therefore he began to use a new approach. Instead of threatening his audience with the judgment of God, as he did in the Prague manifesto, Muentzer used the language of humility and personal experience to communicate his thoughts.

**The Reformer of Allstedt:** Allstedt was a small and insignificant town in electoral Saxony. On the Easter Sunday 1523, Muentzer descended on the town preaching the first of many fiery sermons that were to transform it from an obscure hinterland community into a launching site for a social revolution.

a) *Pastoral and liturgical reforms:* For six months Muentzer preached relentlessly attacking the old faith and demanding a radical form of ecclesiastical and social life. He did not stop with words. He wanted action. He introduced new forms of worship to replace the old ecclesiastical order and liturgy Muentzer 's musical sensitivity as well as his gift for practical ecclesiastical reform, represent one of the first "Protestant" efforts in the sixteenth century to reform the liturgy He also revised the entire order of Catholic worship which had been used for

centuries. He introduced also the public confession of sin before Holy Communion as well as the preaching of a sermon before the creed. Thus his liturgical reforms created an evangelical church order. This was however rejected, ironically because of Muentzer 's involvement in the peasant's war.

b) *Attempts to win friends:* While involved in liturgical reforms at Allstedt, Muentzer tried to win friends. He communicated his ideas to people of different social levels. He attempted to win over Karlstadt also but the estrangement could not be resolved. Finally Muentzer tried to convert Fredrick, the elector, to a 'Muentzerian' rather than a 'Lutheran' type of Protestantism but the elector was cautious as he had psychological and political insecurity

c) *League of the elect :* Muentzer was not certain as to what form the kingdom of God would take in Saxony In any case it became clear that he wanted political power to be transferred from the nobility to the common people. This was to be the first step forward, a purely theocratic form of Government: The reign of God's will as manifested in the Bible as well as in the pronouncements of the elect namely, Muentzer and his military league. Muentzer's program was as he made out in the Prague manifesto concerning the invented faith in order to cooperate with God in the establishment of a pure; apostolic church in the creation of an era in which only the Holy Spirit reigns, every individual must learn how to distinguish between "true spirituality" and that "invented" by the so called Christian intellectuals. He stressed identification with Christ. This identification with Christ of which many medieval mystics had spoken is experienced, Muentzer said, in fear and trembling deep down in the soul, cleansing the believer's faith First Muentzer argued against infant baptism. His argument was; no small child was baptized by Christ and in his messages there is no command to baptize children. Muentzer argued on the basis of Biblical foundation that man's relationship with God begins not with the an external act, such as the rite of baptism but with the

internal experience of the Holy Spirit. This baptism by the Holy Spirit marked by internal suffering and turmoil is the only way in which God reaches man.

d) *Muentzer, the new Daniel*: On July 13 Muentzer preached a sermon to the princes before Duke John, crown prince John Fredrich chancellor Eugany Bruech, Hans Von Grefendorf, Commissioner Hans Zeiss, Mayor Rueckert, and the town council of Allstedt. Basing on the second chapter of the Book of Daniel. Muentzer preached the sermon disclosing his self understanding within the framework of a biblical story tailor made for the occasion. In the sermon Muentzer likened himself to be a new Daniel in a new age of prophecy and invited the dukes of Saxony to accept and to advance the revolutionary program already being realized in Allstedt. The uniqueness of Muentzer's proclamation was his insistence that the community of the faithful must prepare the world for the rule of Christ by establishing a theocracy in which princes renounced their titles and power for the sake of a visible equality before God. In other words, Muentzer demanded that the prince and common man be reborn by the Holy Spirit in order to create a political force which would cleanse the world of all evil through the sword of the elect. All the ideas with which Muentzer had become acquainted in his search for inner certainty had now become the ammunition for his war against a godless world. There were many odds against him. So he left Allstedt on the night of August 7.

**The Rebel of Muehlhausen:** The peasants war (1524-25) was the culmination of the persistent tensions between the prince and the common man. Muehlhausen, the place Muentzer reached from Allstedt, was to become one of the centers of the peasants war. There, rich merchants were exploiting the weavers and farmers in the best fashion of medieval capitalism. The Common man had no opportunity to participate in the local Government. Nepotism, unfair employment practices and political corruption, the traditional immorality of the priesthood were the order of the day. Muentzer arrived in the midst of such a situation on or before August 15. Muentzer saw in the rebellion the dawn of a new age in which God would rule through the sword of the elect. There Muentzer with Pfeiffer supported the rebellion and they

presented eleven additional articles. Muentzer and Pfeiffer were banned from the city. Muentzer turned next to Swiss border. There were reasons to go there. A movement later known as "Ana baptism" has begun to spread throughout the Northern part of the country. It stressed adult baptism. Muentzer returned to Muehlhausen in February 1525 and before that he was arrested and held in Fulda for sometime. When he returned, he was made a preacher of St. Mary's church and took a leading role in the development of a military program for the peasants and helped in the election of an "eternal council." When the peasants war's reached its apex, Muentzer was ready for it. On Apr. 26 Muentzer and Pfeiffer led about 6000 Muehlhausen citizens to Langensalza. The battle of Frankenhausen turned into a meaningless blood bath, 5000 were killed and 600 captured. Muentzer disappeared only to be found in bed, pretending to be sick. He was arrested by Mansfeld. He was tortured and made to admit. On May 26 Muentzer received the host, without wine according to Catholic rites and on Sat. May 27, Muentzer with Pfeiffer was beheaded and their heads were exhibited on stakes as a warning to the living

### **The Defender of the Lost Cause**

a) *Revolt against Wittenberg*: Muentzer 's theological reflection culminating in a theology of society and political action received its first impetus from Luther's opposition to medieval ecclesiastical authority. The problem of the interpretation of biblical authenticity became a primary concern, Muentzer pursued in this direction. He supported Luther's denunciation of Rome. He was the first who tried to come to grips with the relationship between that inner faith Luther had referred to and the external norms especially the authority of the Bible. Muentzer came to insist that the consciousness of the Holy Spirit in the believer rather than the Bible constituted the ultimate authority for Christian faith and life. Muentzer argued that the Bible is only the historical record of those who had this "spiritual consciousness" and that any post-Biblical man can have the same experience as Biblical man. What Muentzer attacked was faith in the "outer word" of the Bible and called it invented, historical, sophistic and external. Muentzer, although he quoted often Bible to justify his reasoning, maintained that the Bible is not a witness to the revelation of God given once and for all in the historical Jesus. The Bible itself neither generates faith nor causes the rebirth of a sinful man. The Bible therefore has only pedagogical value. It makes the children of God fear and tremble in the face of God's radical demand for obedience.

b) *Theology of social and political action*: Muentzer was led not only to a new concept of religious authority, the prophetic proclamation of the elect but also to a new understanding of man's nature and destiny. Luther saw man utterly sinful and can be saved only through complete trust in the grace of God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whereas Muentzer saw the process of salvation as cooperation between human nature and divine spirit.

c) *The measure of man*: Muentzer's significance, according to Gritsch, for the Protestant reformation, lies in the theological reflection upon the relationship between the Christian faith and the plight of the common man in the 16th century. Muentzer created a theology of social and political action. That is, the dynamic vitality of religious experiences, changing and transforming not only the personal life of the believer, but also existing order of the society. But what Luther stressed was personal aspect of faith. He was never fully concerned with the question of how the personal witness of God's revelation affects the growth of personality and social order. On the other hand, Muentzer tried to answer the question of how the historical revelation in Christ was related to individual religious experiences and social change. Muentzer became aware of the needs of the walls around him. Words of faith had to become deeds. It was out of his pastoral concern for the plight of the common man in the context of his evaluation of history that Muentzer's personal faith developed into a revolutionary zeal. Muentzer reminds that the world is often intolerant of those whose vision will stay fixed within narrow confines. He was a victim of such a world, a "Christian world".

### **Evaluation:**

The work done by Gritsch was published in 1967. He has tried to do a good job by giving us a lot of details about the life and work of Thomas Muentzer. And it is written with eminent scholarship and available historical data. Muentzer's theological convictions are well highlighted. But socialistic, communistic claims are rejected by the author to a greater extent. Muentzer was a theologian and revolutionary. After reading about the life and work of Muentzer I was deeply moved by the way he really worked for the peasants and the others who were exploited. His faith was built not only upon words but was strongly reflected through action. He was a person who lived for the cause of the society where people were being deprived of their basic needs. Muentzer's life has been an inspiration to millions of people, though he

is not present physically, his words call us to remember him. As I was reflecting deeply, I was thinking when my day comes, would I be able to give my life for the upliftment of the poor; the marginalized and the oppressed? Would I be able to fight against the social evils of the society which still prevail in my country?

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

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### **Chapter 1: The Martyrdom of Paul Ni Tsiong-Hoi of Korea, by F. Pachhunga**

#### **Introduction**

Paul Ni Tsiong-Hoi was one of the leading martyrs of the 19th century. Not only he sacrificed his life because of Christ, but his brother and Sisters also, who were the victims of the first persecution in 1801. Still, his family, even though a high class in its origin, lost all its possessions, and he had to do manual work to survive. His lifestyle, behavior and piety acquired considerable influence over the small number of Christians in Seoul, now the capital-city of South Korea.

Paul Ni rendered his tireless efforts to train catechists to copy books and pictures and to collect the funds needed for sending messengers to the Bishops of Peking. While he was enjoying his life with those of his personal works, a new persecution broke out in 1827, and he was one of the first to be denounced and brought before the tribunals.

Unfortunately, we have very less account of Paul Ni. Most of the sources we can get are from his own letters written from prison, where

he died at the age of 36. His letters allow us to follow him into the last moments of his life and to hear the words with which he confessed his faith.

## **The Context**

The Koreans had their first contact with Christianity in 1777 through two little books written in Chinese. One of these two books was written by Father Ricci and was about the *Existence of God*, and the second one by another community formed in Seoul and in the country essentially among the literate. That community was completely isolated and faced fierce opposition both internally and externally under the leadership of Peter Hoon.

As various small autonomous communities were established around some lay people, men and women, which maintained links through their authorities and their catechists, at the end of 1800, the growth of Christianity was enough to disturb the political authorities and in 1801, provoked the first persecution. This caused the death of 300 people, mostly among the nobility and the literate. The families concerned lost their goods and were exiled. By seeing these, many intellectual people melted away into society, became artisans and instructors and spread Christianity through the villages by instructing ordinary people. Interestingly, the Korean Christianity invented the ministry of the Copyists within each community. The Copyists produced books, guaranteed evangelization and put Christians in contact with one another. So, because of their central role, the Copyists became the chief targets of the persecution.

## **Martyrdom of Paul Ni**

Paul Ni's regular words to himself was "Could I hope to offer satisfaction for all my sins, at least by Martyrdom".

On the twenty-first day of April, 1827 the fourth moon, at dusk, Kim Seng-tsip-i and a dozen retainers from the province and the capital, came and seized Paul Ni and put him in one of the police stations. They asked him if it was true that he had drawn religious pictures. Paul Ni said, "It is true". The next day, the great criminal judge called him and said to him, "Is it true that you follow the religion of the Master of heaven?" Paul Ni said, "Yes".

Judge "By whom have you been instructed?"

Paul Ni: "My older brother died for this religion, and from childhood I had heard it talked of a little. But then I was associated with Tsio-siuk-i, who was also killed for the same doctrine: I spent several years with him, and my heart is full".

Judge : "Now if you are willing to desist, I will save your life".

Paul Ni: "I cannot".

Judge : "Is what you have stated here true ?"

Paul Ni : "Yes, it is true".

From the following day, he was sent to six retainers for 28 day-journey. Everyday they journeyed 100 lys, (10 leagues) and on the evening of the 28th day of their journey, he was taken to the police station of Tsien-tsiu, where after some moments of rest, he was brought before the judge who asked only his name. In the prison, they put his feet and his hand between two iron bars and fixed great hoop around his neck, and he spent a sleepless night.

The next morning, he was taken to the tribunal and judge asked different questions:

Judge : "How many pictures have you painted ? How many books do you have and who are your accomplices ?"

Paul Ni : "Several pictures. As to accomplices, I have none. I have been abandoned by my kinsfolk and all my friends. Even the common folk scorn me and spit in my face. As to books, I received only oral instruction, and my books are written only in my heart. I have no others."

Judge : "You are deceiving me. Among you, even the common and ignorant folk have thirty or forty volumes. Do you not have any ?"

Paul Ni : "Even though I die under the blows,

I have neither accomplices nor books".

The Judge then went to the Governor, and after a while, he was taken to a room next to the court. While he was waiting, the thought of his sister who was judged and martyred in 1801, in the same city, came to his mind. So he told himself, "I shall follow her and truly is it not she who is drawing me after her ?" At the same time, joy mingled with sadness arose in his heart. Soon he was taken to the Governor again who put several questions to him to which he answered as on the previous day.

Governor : "So have you decided to remain a Christian?" Paul Ni "I have"

Governor : "What is God ?"

Paul Ni : "He is the king and supreme Father of all the universe. He alone has created heaven, earth, the spirits, men and all that is."

Governor : "How do you know ?"

Paul Ni : "On the one hand, by looking at our body, and on the other, by considering all creatures, can one say that there is not a creator of these things ?"

Governor: "Have you seen him ?"

Paul Ni: "Can one believe only after seeing ? Did the mandarin see the workman who made this court? What we call the five senses only make us perceive sounds, colors, smell, tastes and the like, but it is the spirit which makes them distinguish the principles, reason and all immaterial things".

Governor: "Do you not fear death ?"

Paul Ni: "Why should I not fear it ?"

Governor: "If that is so, why do you not abandon this religion?"

Paul Ni : "I have just given you the reason, please do not interrogate me again. I AM READY TO DIE."

The next morning, the mandarin took Paul Ni right up to the bar and he

said to him in a very gentle voice, "You are the child of a noble man, you are not like others. Besides, you are a fine man. So, how can you persevere in following this evil religion?" Paul Ni said, "When it came to matters of principles, no one is superior or inferior, noble or commoner, with a more or less advantageous appearance, only the soul can draw a distinction".

After that the mandarin of Tong-pak asked him to say what the dogmas of Christianity were. Paul Ni told him briefly. Then, while Paul Ni was outlining the Decalogue, the mandarin of Tsien-tsiu asked some questions.

Mandarin: "These are all follies. There is no soul, there is neither heaven nor hell, there is not even God. And then you do not offer sacrifices to ancestors. Among you, goods and women are held in common. Can there be a more degenerate and impious doctrine?"

Paul Ni : "It is true that among us, we do not offer sacrifices. But it is not true that among us, goods and women are held in common. Sacrifices to ancestors are a vain thing, which a right doctrine rightly prohibits. At the moment of death, the souls of the good go to heaven and the souls of the bad to go to hell. As for goods which are said to be held in common among us, if there were no sharing of riches in the world, how would the poor live ? And regarding women, what is imputed to us is formally prohibited in the commandments and is repugnant to all natural feelings. We are forbidden even to covert our neighbor's wife".

Mandarin : "They say that you still have a mother, and moreover a wife and children, now say just one word, and you can go out and regain your mother, your wife and children. Would that not be pleasant ?"

Paul Ni : "Do you want me to aspotasize to regain my mother? But since God is the great king and the creator, and my mother herself was created by him, how could I deny the Creator for one of his creatures?"

After numberless attempts, having nothing else to try, they made him sign his condemnation. Day and night, they continued to torment him singularly. He thanked God and realized that how great was that grace. He did not know how to thank God and how to respond to it except by giving his life.

On the sixth day of the fifth moon, he was taken to the criminal tribunal where they tempted him to deny his faith so that they could spare his life. But they failed and each one said to another, "It is useless to go on talking to him". Again he was put on the plank where he suffered several blows. At every blow, he said that he invoked Jesus and Mary. After about twenty blows, he felt that he was losing his consciousness and said, "My God, into your hands, I commend my spirit". When he regained his consciousness, he found his limbs in bandages and blood flowing from all the parts where the blows had fallen. He thought of Jesus who underwent scourging, carried his cross and walked more than a thousand paces, up to the summit of a high mountain, and so on. The more he went forward, the more divine grace and favor increased. Hardly had the meal time passed than his pains had disappeared. It is true that he could not use his limbs, and a heavy hoop weighed him down, yet he took some food and his heart was very calm. He asked himself a question, "If that is not the help of God and Mary, how can my strength alone achieve this, I, who cannot even bear an insect bite?"

On the fifteenth day, they sent express to the King of which they expected the reply around the twentieth. According to Paul Ni's words, "I await it anxiously, I have put all my trust in God alone, but I am without merit and covered in sin. What will be the order about me? The nearer the end, the more I fear death and the more I tremble at being rejected". To conclude his letter, Paul Ni wrote the following lines:

ALL YOU CHRISTIANS, PLEASE IN MY STEAD THANK THE LORD, AGAIN AND AGAIN. I HAVE A THOUSAND OTHER THINGS TO SAY, BUT TIME FAILS ME. WE SHALL MEET AGAIN IN ETERNITY.

### **Theological Reflection**

Paul Ni's story is very challenging. It is very beneficial both for personal knowledge and for strengthening faith. Time and again, it reminds one of the mighty salvific act of Christ. Unlike Paul Ni, many a time one never thinks of Jesus who underwent scourging who carried his cross and walked more than a thousand paces to the summit of a high mountain. But the study of this story reminds one to recollect again and again about Jesus' suffering.

Secondly, Paul Ni does not deny that he really feared death, yet he said, "I am ready to die". He was ready to die for his Savior. This is very

challenging. Are we ready to die for our Savior like Paul Ni, is the question that all of us have to ask ourselves. **We may be ready to follow Jesus as a priest, as a pastor, as a bishop, as a teacher and so on, but are we ready to follow Jesus till death?’**

Thirdly, Paul Ni’s honesty to his Master is wonderful. Different means had been employed to him so that he might deny his Master. He was tormented, he was threatened, he was encountered with a gentle voice and soon. But all attempts failed to make him recant. WHAT IS THE CONDITION OF OUR HONESTY TO Christ in our daily life, among our friends, among our relatives more than the Creator God ? De we hate our fellow human beings whom God loves?

### **Observation**

Going through Paul Ni’s story is a very happy experience for one. But since there is very limited source, it is unpleasant to say that we do not know the exact date, month and year of his birth. Moreover, the source does not tell us in which year he died. All we know about this is that he died in prison at the age of 36. We do not know how he died. Was not his death a martyr’s death?

The second thing we would like to point out is about Paul Ni’s sentence, "... the souls of the good go to heaven and the souls of the bad go to hell". Who are the good and who are the bad in today’s context?

### **Questions for discussion**

1. If goods are held in common among those who are staying in the same hostel, will it create a better relationship among them?
2. Is it true to say for a good Christian, "I fear death".

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### **Chapter 2: The Martyrs of Madagascar (1835-1861), by Alex P. John**

#### **HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

1. The attempt of Catholic Caiarist Missionaries did not survive the attempt at French colonization at Fort Dauphin, in the extreme south of Madagascar in the seventeenth century (1642-1674). The Christianization of the island really began again in the 19th century. The London missionary society sent two missionaries in 1817. In 1820 these decided to settle at Tananarive on the high central plateau, the seat of Radama I, who consolidated the merina Monarchy, at that time in the full flood of expansion, but became involved in the Franco-English rivalry to control Madagascar more or less directly. At first they seem to have come to terms easily with delicate political situation and obtained the protection of Radama I. (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 143.)

#### **MISSIONARIES WORK**

2. King Radama introduced European culture and welcomed missionaries who opened schools and churches and developed a written form of the Malagasy language. The first act of the Missionaries was to open the schools needed to teach writing, so that the Bible could be read and circulated . But these schools also served to train the modern officers which the King needed to form an army capable of conquering the island and reinforcing the instruments of a state whose authority was subject to much opposition. Part of the population began to be disturbed by the hostile attitude of the missionaries towards ancient customs. The school itself did not avoid criticism, and there were some who cast an increasingly suspicious eye on the recruitment of officers or agents of the royal power from among its former pupils. (Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, p. 466.)

## **REASON FOR PERSECUTION**

The occasion of Ranavalona I, who succeeded Radama I in 1828, soon brought out the ambiguities produced by the situation. The Queen was put on the throne by a conspiracy of the commoners who in this way were able to join forces with the Andriana aristocracy more favorable to Christianity and very sensitive to the possibilities of modernization which it offered. The Queen was led to maintain the royal protection of the missionaries but exercised stricter control over their activities because she was afraid of seeing Christianity become the focus of opposition. To obtain popular support and to make people forget the doubtful origins, of her power, the Queen relied on the soothsayers (ombiasy), and restored to power the sacred foundation of the Monarchy

## **MANNER OF PERSECUTION AND DEATH OF CHRISTIANS**

After several years, the fragile balance was broken, and Ranava lona chose to follow a strict policy of limiting Christianity. She forbade missionaries to preach, and then banned the baptism of soldiers and children. Finally in 1835 March 1st the Queen proclaimed:

"I have to tell you that I will not pray to the ancestors of the Europeans but to God and my ancestors. It is thanks to this custom that the twelve kings reigned and that I have reigned myself. Your own ancestors respected this custom. My people, I shall put to death anyone who

practiced the new religion, because I am the heiress of twelve kings."

She applied to the missionaries the rule laid down by Radama I limiting the presence of Europeans to ten years. Reduced to inactivity, in 1836 the missionaries decided to leave the kingdom and took refuge on the East coast, at Tamatave. They left behind them a small group of about fifty Christians. The Christians went on to make a permanent reappraisal of their situation on the basis of the OT and NT in the conviction that they were believing the history of the Hebrews and the first Christians. They also kept in contact with the missionaries by letter and today this correspondence gives us direct evidence of this first wave of persecution and the way in which it was experienced. The correspondence shows the central place occupied in the community, outside the Bible by the **pilgrims progress**. This story became the guideline by which those who were being persecuted understood their trial as a painful but victorious journey. The Christians after the persecutions were almost 3000 of them. Some went into exile beyond Madagascar when the threat became too strong like Mary Rafaravary, daughter of a court dignitary, the first to organize prayer meetings in her home. Arrested in July 1836 and condemned to death, she escaped execution thanks to a providential fire which caused panic among the soldiers and allowed her to get to Tamatave. There she took a ship for Mauritius with a group of Christians. The whole adventure was immediately likened to the adventures of the 'pilgrim' with whom Mary is identified. She thought of Christians crossing the valley of the shadow of death, but recalled that it is through numerous tribulations they must enter the kingdom of heaven. During the same year, 1837, the martyrdom of another woman, Rafavavy Rasalana, became the symbol of answering and edifying determination. But it was in 1849 that the persecution reached its height.

On one occasion and in one place thirty-seven Christians, guilty of having explained the word of God to those around them, were condemned to slavery with their wives and children. Elsewhere, forty-two convicted of having a bible in their possession, saw all their goods confiscated...2,055 people had to pay a fine of around 5 francs, others were condemned, some to be burned, others to be cast down from the summit of a rock 300 feet high to the level of the plain. This last collective martyrdom held a special place in the memory of the protestant churches of Madagascar. They still consider that the martyrs are their ancestors in the faith, and in a way the real founders of the church.

## THE 1849 MARTYRS

On March 1849, the officer, before whom the Christians were being examined, put to them this question: 'Do you worship the sun, the moon or the earth?'

One of the Christians replied: 'I do not pray to them, because the hand of God made them'. "Do you worship the twelve sacred mountains?" 'I do not worship them, because they are only mountains'. "Do you pray to the idols which preside over the consecration of kings?" 'I do not pray to them, because the hand of man made them'. "Do you pray to the ancestors of the rulers?" 'Kings and governors are given to us by God so that we obey them and pay them homage, but they are only men like us. When we pray, it is God alone whom we address'. "Do you distinguish other days and do you observe the sabbath?" 'It is the day of the great God, for in six days the Lord made all his works, then he rested on the seventh day and declared that day holy. That is why we rest and keep that day holy.' (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 148.)

All the other Christians replied in the same way. One man, who hitherto had stood apart, seeing a woman confess God and recalling that those who denied him would regret it, came forward and spoke in turn as the other's had done. And when these brothers and sisters had been bound, the husband of one of them who had heard their confession approached them and said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for it will be a good thing for you to die for such a cause'. This man was a soldier who lived in quite a remote place, and he was not among the number of the accused, but then he was interrogated, and as he made the same confession, he was bound like the rest. Then they fastened the bonds of these brothers and sisters very tightly, led them off and shut each one of them in a separate house. On 22 March 1849, when one of the Christians said, 'Yahweh alone is God above any other's name that can be named, and Jesus Christ is also God', the people who were there uttered great cries and mocked at them. Then the officer said to another. "Rabodonampoinimerina (that is the sacred name of the queen) is our God and not yours." Thereupon the Christian replied, 'the God who made me is my God, but Rabodo is my queen and my sovereign. And when he would not make any other response but that, the people who were there said, 'perhaps this is an idiot or a lunatic. But he cried out 'No, I am not an idiot and I have not lost my mind.' Then there was great tumult among the people, and they cried out 'Take him away' and he was led away to prison.

The following day, before daybreak, the people gathered at Analakely. They took the eighteen brothers, and sisters who had chosen for their part to confess God and inherit eternal life by becoming his sons and daughters, they bound their hands and feet, they attached them to posts surrounded with mats and they put them with the other prisoners. Ten of these eight brothers and eight sisters were united by the faith. When the officers, the soldiers and the Judges arrived, they read out the names of each of the prisoners. Set them apart all together, put soldiers aimed with spears and muskets around them, and then read out the sentences pronounced on them. Some were condemned to fines and the confiscation of their goods, others to be flogged, and eighteen to be put to death, four to be burned and fourteen to be hurled from a great rock and then burned to ashes. The eighteen condemned to death, sitting on the ground and surrounded by soldiers, began to chant hymn 137 (according to the Malagasy hymn book then in use).

When I die, when I leave my  
friends  
When these friends lament  
over me  
When my life has departed  
from me  
then I shall be truly happy

When the sentences had been pronounced, and at the moment when the officer was preparing to return to the superior authorities, the four Christians condemned to be burned begged him, asking to be put to death before being burned, but this request was not granted.

When the officers had left, they took the eighteen condemned to death and led them to the place of execution. The fourteen who were to be hurled down were tied by hands and feet to long poles which men put on their shoulders. And as they were carried in this way, these brothers prayed and spoke to the people, and those who saw them close by said that their faces were like the faces of angels. When they arrived at the summit of Amapamarinana they were hurled down and their bodies were then dragged from the other side of the capital to be burned with the bodies of those who were to perish at the stake.

While the four Christians who were condemned to be burnt alive were on their way to the place of execution, they sang the hymn which begins, 'when our hearts are troubled', and of which all the verses end with the

words 'Remember'. All along the road they sang like this. When they arrived at Taravhitra, firewood was fastened to the posts to burn them. And at that moment there was a rainbow in the clouds, not far from the place of their execution. Then they sang hymn 158.

There is a blessed land  
Where we shall be happy  
Our rest will never be  
disturbed  
They know no sorrow here.

They were still singing this hymn when they were in the fire. Then they prayed, saying 'Lord receive our spirits. it is because of your love that this is happening to us. Lord, lay not this sin to their charge'. (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 149-51.)

And they prayed like this as long as life remained in them. Then they died gently and in peace.

## **REFLECTION**

The missionaries' work and life are appreciable. Because of the Christian missionaries work, the Madagascar people turned against the Monarchy rule of Madagascar. They introduced a lot of development work for the upliftment of the people of Madagascar. They introduced education system in Madagascar; through these schools also served to train the modern officers which King needed to form an army, capable officers for conquering the island and reinforcing the instruments of state whose authority was subject to much opposition. In the name of missionary work, the missionaries produced capable leaders for conquering. Another important criticism about missionaries is that the Madagascar people were disturbed by the hostile attitude of the missionaries towards their ancient religious customs. In a pluralistic society like India how can we neglect other faiths and religious customs?

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### **Chapter 3: The Martyrdom of David Livingstone, by Philip George**

The whole world is indebted, grateful and obliged to missionaries, who having left their families, prestigious positions, wealth and status, went overseas in spite of the hostile environment that prevailed there, determined to labor for the sake of the Gospel and for the upliftment of human condition. It is in this remarkable heritage comes David Livingstone who was not only a great missionary of Africa but also an outstanding explorer, geographer, doctor, anthropologist and scientist. "He was a man of an extraordinarily firm, already wholesome temperament, a marvel of saintliness, but equally a marvel of efficiency and common sense," (D.C. Somerwell, *Livingstone* [London: 1936], p. 10.) He, through his tireless and utterly dedicated labor opened up the interior of the then concealed African continent to the world, paving way for the progress of the gospel and commercial track. His remarkable contribution was his endeavor to abolish slave trade, which had kept the African people under bondage. His entire mission was centered on the wholistic well being of the people - physical, social and spiritual and the humanization of people who were not considered human beings. The contribution that Livingstone has made not only to Christianity but to the whole world is immense and his life speaks more

than his words.

## Early Life

Livingstone had a very humble origin of being born to poor but religious parents in Blantyre, Scotland, on March 19, 1813. At a time when he had to go to school and play with his friends, his family's financial condition forced him to work as a 'piecer boy' in a cotton factory, where he worked from six in the morning to eight in the night. He made the best use of time while working in the factory, by learning Latin. After coming back from the factory he used to attend night school from eight to twelve where he learnt Greek, Botany and Geology.

His parents played a vital role in his childhood by nurturing him in Christian faith. Livingstone himself recapitulated, the factor that motivated him to lead a life of commitment: 'In the glow of love which Christianity inspires, I was resolved to devote my life to the alleviation of human misery'. (David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, [London: 1987], p. 2.)

At the age of 19, having been challenged by a missionary, Robert Moffat, he resolved to become a medical missionary in China. With this life objective in mind and preparing himself for what he was to be, he studied medicine at Glasgow University during winter with the money he earned by working during summer. He also studied theology, classics and science with hardly any money for his own subsistence. Looking back at his own early life, Livingstone remarks, "Looking back now on that life of toil I cannot but feel thankful that it formed such a material part of my early education and were it possible. I should like to begin life over again in the same lowly style and to pass through the same hard training." (*Ibid.*, p. 6.)

## Missionary Life

With the zeal of becoming a missionary burning within him, he joined the London Missionary Society in 1838. He also took his degree in medicine from the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons and was made Licentiate of the Faculty. To him, his profession as a doctor was one which was "'permanently' devoted to practical benevolence." (*Ibid.*, p. 7)

His desire to go to China went unfulfilled because of the opium war that

was raging but instead sailed to Africa. He set out to the African coast on December 8, 1840 and arrived at Kuruman, the station of Moffat and Hamilton on July 31, 1841. He traveled extensively in the Bechuana country and visited the Bakawains. In 1843, he went in further north to the interior and established a mission station at Mabatsa, among the Bakhatala tribe. It was here that he had an encounter with a lion, in which he miraculously escaped but had his left arm permanently damaged.

In May 1844, Livingstone married Mary, daughter of Robert Moffat. Mary had been brought up in the mission field at Kuruman and she did realize beforehand the risk of marrying a missionary and the hardships she had to encounter in the mission field. Yet she was whole-heartedly willing to marry Livingstone and she proved herself to be a worthy companion, a fine wife and a gentle mother in the years to come.

At the close of 1845 he moved back again to Bakwains where he witnessed the conversion of Sechele, chief of the Bakwains. But severe drought forced him to move to Kolenberg, within two years.

At Kolenberg he met the much feared Boers who were slave trading the natives. They used to capture men and women in large numbers and sell them mostly to be domestic slaves. This inhuman practice pained Livingstone and he determined to put an end to this barbarous degrading custom. He held a number of talks with the Boers persuading them to stop slave trading. The Boers retaliated by stopping all trade by expelling missionaries from that region. After much persuasion a treaty was made with the Boers to permit English treaty also. Livingstone's primary concern was to open up this great land in promotion of commercial trade and missionary endeavors, thereby putting an end both to the cultural isolation and alienation and making civilization and the gospel accessible to the people of Africa. A major step towards this end was abolishing slave trade which presumed the natives of Africa to be lower than beasts.

"Livingstone intended to be no ordinary missionary, a pioneer a filler in of the empty and mythical map of interior Africa." (*Ibid.*, p. 6.) One of the major contributions of Livingstone made as an explorer and navigator was the discovery of Lake Ngami.

Setting out on June 1894 along with Oswell and Murray they crossed over the once-dreaded Kahori desert in their attempt to discover Lake

Ngami. On Aug. 1, 1849 they spotted Ngami's marvelous spread of water but could not proceed further to meet the chief Sebituane because some of the local chiefs declined to offer assistance so they had to return to Kolenberg. However, in 1850 he made a second attempt along with his family to meet Sebituane and also establish a mission station further north, but this too failed because of the severe illness of children.

In June, Livingstone along with Oswell discovered river Zambesi in the heart of the African continent, a river thus far unknown to the outside world. Livingstone did not want to expose his already tired family to the hostility of the Boers at Kolenberg and hence returned to Cape Town. When they came back to Cape in June, 1852, he was having 'a black coat eleven years out of fashion and without a penny and salary to draw, half naked children'. (David Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p. 76.) He also heard that his mission station at Kolenberg was utterly devastated by the Boers. But none of these could deter him in his mission. He was resolute to face these challenges all alone.

Having sent his family back to England, he embarked on his fourth great journey of exploration through Linyanti and Zambesi to Loanda. At Linyanti, he met Sekeletu, the son and successor of Sebituane. However he had to endure tremendous hardships. During this hazardous expedition he traced Lake Dilola but 'suffered extreme hunger and thirst, fever, dysentery, attacks of wild beasts, robbers and hostile tribes.' (Henry, Orbis, Dwight, *et.al* [eds.], *The encyclopedia Missions, New York and London*, 1904, p. 339.). He arrived at St. Paul de Loanda, the capital of Angola on the west coast of Africa on May 31, 1854. From Loanda, he traversed right across the continent to the eastern coasts, making yet another magnificent discovery on the way -- the Victoria Falls. He finally reached Quillmone on May 20, 1856. It was during this perilous journey that he was conferred upon the degree of L.L.D. by the University of Glasgow and was awarded the Queen's Gold medal, the highest honor of the Royal Geographical society.

In December 1856, he went to England for the first time after a period of sixteen long years in Africa. Though he had gone through mental agony, depression, sickness and poverty during this long period, he never once thought of going back to England. Even this visit was a short one and he was determined to come back as early as possible. When he went to England, he was received with great honor by the London Missionary Society, Royal Geographical Society, universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and by all classes of society. (*Ibid.*, p. 400) He addressed

various distinguished audiences at prestigious universities during his stay in England. Moreover, it was during this time that he published his remarkable masterpiece, the first of its kind to portray his adventurous exploration in Africa and the richness of the continent. The world knew hardly anything about Africa prior to Livingstone's book **Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa** where he exposed the slave trade and impairments to missionary activity.

Before returning to Africa in 1858, with great pain he resigned from the London Missionary Society. It was because the L.M.S. and his narrow minded critics had felt that Livingstone was doing more as a geographic than as a pioneer missionary. Perhaps in their opinion, Livingstone's mission in Africa was only to be a missionary, converting the 'heathens' and not to travel around exploring the country. But the British government appointed Livingstone as the British consul for East Africa, 'for the promotion of commerce and civilization with a view to the extinction of the slave trade'. (George Shepperson, *David Livingstone and Ravumem*, Edinburgh, 1965, p. 10.) He, along with his team, explored Lake Nyopsa and was personally pained to see the extent of slave trafficking widespread in the regions around the lake. "This by all counts was Livingstone's most dismal and frustrating period. He failed in his main objects, and he also failed personally as the leader of expedition of white men" (187 Cecil Northcott, *Livingstone in Africa*. London, 1857, p.20.) It was during this time that a tragic incident occurred in his life. His wife, who put up with him all adverse situations, toiling with him tirelessly, died on April 27, 1862 at Shapunga in the Zambia region. Though he was shattered because of the terrible loss, even this could not restrain him in his mission.

Even after returning to Africa he was getting a number of letters and criticism because many felt that Livingstone's book contained more information on geography, flora and fauna rather than his works, as a missionary. But Livingstone regarded himself as but a pioneer in missionary enterprise. During the sixteen years he had done much to bring the knowledge of Christ to the tribes that had never heard of him -- "probably no missionary in Africa had ever preached to so many blacks".

His team members unable to withstand the severe physical conditions were forced to return home but Livingstone was determined to carry on his mission alone. (William Garden Blaikie, *The Personal Life of David Livingstone*, New York, 1980, p.231.) In 1864, he proceeded to

Zanzibar. But his financial...condition forced him to sell the ship in which he sailed and buy a smaller craft. With this he traveled extensively in water-ways exploring possibilities and opening up motorways, for exploration. Sir Roderic Murchison urged Livingstone to become a full-time explorer abandoning his vocation as a missionary. But Livingstone's remarkable reply was "I would not consent to go simply as a geographer, but as a missionary, and to do geography by the way". (William Garden Blaikie, *The Personal Life of David Livingstone*, New York, 1980, p.231.) In spite of being honored for his magnificent and unequalled achievements in the field of explorations, Livingstone did not forget his call and commitment to be a missionary. Though he traveled to unexplored region, he never lacked the zeal of preaching the good news to the people of those distant regions. Had he opted to be a professional geographer, he could have obtained financial aid from his government, comfort and sophistication. But he made a professional option to suffer and to endure affliction in this land which he published in his book **The Sambeis and its Tributaries: A Real Eye Opener for the Western World.**

After returning to England, he resolved to trace the source of the Nile. Though this was to be a tedious risky journey, Livingstone undertook it as a challenge. But his spirit was quenched often by the treacherousness of his own assistants and the continuous threats from the slave hunters. The slave hunters viewed Livingstone as a threat to their profession so they were posing constant intimidations and were continuing their aggressive atrocities on the natives in a massive scale. Livingstone was also deceived by his own attendants. Once when he was in Tanganika, two of his assistants ran away with his medicine chest, which served 'the primary purpose of treating fever and dysentery'. Now without the medicine, it was impossible to treat himself or others. Another time, the person who was in-charge of Livingstone's store used up everything when Livingstone was not there. In spite of all these disappointments he pressed on toward his goal, but his mobility was curtailed because of severe illness. The person who had once shown tremendous potential to walk any distance had to be carried for the first time in thirty years. Such was his physical condition because he could not treat his fever, dysentery and ulcer in the feet. Undeterred, he moved forward and finally located what he believed to be was the cause of source of the river Nile.

The news of his ailment reached the outside world but his whereabouts were unknown. In order to find Livingstone and urge him to return to

his home country the traveling correspondent of the New York Herald M. Stanley was sent to Africa. After initial failure, and disappointments, he finally managed to reach the place where Livingstone was. He, along with Livingstone, made some further explorations and discoveries but could not succeed in persuading Livingstone to return to England. Livingstone's firm conviction was:

I am a missionary, heart and soul. God had a only son and He was a missionary and physician. A *poor*, poor imitation I am or which to be. In this service I hope to live, in it I wish to die. (George Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters*, London, 1957, p. 631.)

So Stanley bade a sad and painful farewell to Livingstone on March 15, 1892 and returned to New York. But he carried with him a wealth of information about countries and people hitherto unexplored and unknown. (*Ibid.*, p. 632.)

After Stanley had left, Livingstone continued his explorations with revitalized strength and increased vigor and on August 25, 1872, he proceeded to explore the Chambeze region. He moved on with unwavering zeal and no physical hardship or illness could hinder his determination. But soon he came to a point where he could not proceed any further. "Dysentery in aggravated form renewed it's exhausting attacks and his constitution could no longer withstand it. He had to be carried in a litter by turns suffering excruciating pain and for hours insensible or fainting from loss of blood. (192 Henry Orbis Dwight, *op.cit.*, p. 193 )

As death spares no human, good or bad, the life of this great noble character had to come to an end. While he was in Ilala, in the early hours of May 1, 1874, his attendants Susi Chuna found him dead by his bed in the kneeling position. The world had lost an outstanding missionary, a determined and dedicated explorer and a fine, noble man. He had lived a life of self-sacrifice in the continent which was so dear to him and now he had laid his life for the people whom he loved so much. His heart was buried in the land where his heart was, before embalming his body and taking it to England. The mortal remains of Livingstone, accompanied by his attendant, reached England on April 15, 1874 and was laid to rest in the Westminster abbey.

Livingstone made remarkable contribution to both missionary activity

and to the field of astronomy and geography. His objective was the upliftment of the people of Africa - spiritually and socially. He writes "As far as I am myself concerned, the opening of the new central country is a matter for congratulations, only in so far as it opens, up to prospect for the elevation of the inhabitants". (David Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p. 673.) He through his astronomical observation, made the task of other explorers and missionaries much easier as the astronomer Royal once remarked:

What that man had done is unprecedented ... You could not go to any point across the entire continent along with Livingstone's track and feel certain of your position ... His are the finest specimens of sound geographical observation that I have ever met with. (Sommerwell, *op.cit.*, p. 27)

Blaikie, in his preface to the first edition of his splendid **Bibliography of Livingstone**, observes:

As a man, a Christian, a missionary, a philanthropist, and a scientist, Livingstone ranks with the greatest of our race, and shows the minimum of infirmity in connection with the maximum of goodness. Nothing can be more telling than his life as an evidence of the truth and power of Christianity. (William Gordon Blaikie, *op.cit.*, p. 111.)

Livingstone exercised such a great influence on people around him that they marveled at his extraordinary life and character. What more can a man ask for than the testimony given by his companion and friend as well:

He was pre-eminently a Man, patient, attending under hardships, content to win his way by inches, but never swerving from it; gentle, kindly, brotherly, to the children of the land; absolutely unruffled amidst danger and difficulty and well satisfied to see but the one step in advance. (T. Banks Maclachlan, *David Livingstone*, Edinburgh and London, year of publication not given, p. 187.)

## Reflection

The Christian world will remember David Livingstone forever as a pioneer missionary, who risked his life and family to go and serve the dark continent of Africa to places where none had dared to set their feet and as one who opened up the continent of Africa. For, missionary enterprise and missionary activity in Africa would not have been possible if this man had not taken the risk, to enter central Africa. Before his first journey to England, he writes, " I view the end of the geographical feat as the beginning of missionary enterprise". (David Livingstone, *op. cit.*, p.673.) Livingstone showed the way for many more humanists and missionaries to step into Africa and serve the people of Africa. The entire world will remember him for much more than just his missionary work. He labored for the advancement of trade and commerce into the inland of Africa, elevation and humanization of the natives and the abolition of slave trafficking. He paved the way for the permanent abolition of slave trade in Africa in the years ahead. He traveled extensively and filled up the blank spaces in the globe. The fruits of Livingstone's hard labor is seen now when so many of the people in Africa are Christians through the toil of subsequent missions to this great land.

In today's context, there are so many oppressive and suppressive elements in our society. The Apartheid system in Africa; the African liberation leader Nelson Mandela is trying to liberate the black people who are greatly repressed by the white people.

Today the so called Christian countries like America are oppressing other poor countries. The recent Gulf war with Iraq is a clear indication of claiming American supremacy over against weaker countries.

Though slavery is abolished by law, in India many kinds of slavery are continuing in different parts.

Women are greatly discriminated against in our society The Church has the duty to create awareness among women to come out from their oppression.

In the Church as well as in society, men are decision-makers. Women are aloof in society. The Church of South India has given ordination to some women. But these women are also discriminated against. In Bangalore city itself, in one church, a woman pastor is working. But very less number of men are going for Church service. So, the men are not concerned about women.

The patriarchal society oppresses women. High caste people oppress lower caste people. For example, in Andhra Pradesh the high caste people killed the Dalits.

Sankar Guha Nyagi died because he stood for the laborers and workers. So we have to construct a new ethics for the Church. But we have to work for these people who are living in utter poverty and are oppressed by other people. Jesus Christ, David Livingstone and Nyagi all worked for others. Bonhoeffer said when Christ calls a person because he has to die for others. We have to rededicate ourselves for the cause of oppressed people and participate in their struggles so that the marginalized feel that the Church is in solidarity with them. Only by doing so the Church may become relevant to them.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **Chapter 4: The Martyrs of Uganda (1885-1887) by R. Sashikaba**

#### **Introduction**

The work of the martyrs of Uganda interests me because, firstly, Christian witness in Uganda is a typical example for the Africans who uphold and keep their faith for God. Secondly, it is the very place where, in 1976, the Idi Amin Government was recognized internationally as a lawless regime, where Christians were killed in large numbers, since 1971 figuring around 400,000. They were killed on charge of plotting against the country without any truth or basis. This paper concentrates on the martyrs during the period 1885-1887.

#### **Social and Political Background**

Uganda is a British protectorate in Central Africa, lying at the northern end of lake Victoria in Wyomza region of Kenya. A hundred years ago, Uganda was known as Buganda. The country was first visited by Henry M. Stanley, who in 1875, sent word to England that king Mtisa of Uganda was anxious to have missionaries sent there. In 1877 the

mission in Uganda was started by CMS and, in 1879, the Roman Catholics arrived in the land.

However, when the Christian missions were being planted in Uganda the colonial division in Africa occurred at the same time identifying missionaries as White conquerors.

Persecutions began during the time of king Mwanga the son of Mtisa who in the beginning loved the missionaries. King Mwanga was addressed as 'Lebo Kabaka' -- 'my Lord, the king' and the king's minister was called katikiro.

In 1878 five missionaries came to Uganda. After their arrival they ransomed slave children and started an orphanage which was to be the nucleus of future Christianity but they were disappointed by the poor response from the people. At the same time the children were very difficult to handle. So, in October 1882 the fathers left the field but in spite of that a few converts left behind did not abandon their faith but instead won other young people over to Christianity.

When Mwanga became king he asked the fathers to return but it was only after three years that they had returned and there was great joy for the praying ones as they were called to return.

### **Reasons for Persecution**

The Christians increased in number and were staunch in their faith. They refused to accept all their traditional customs and so they were accused of destroying their traditional order. They refused to offer sacrifices to the tribal gods. They even refused to kill their enemies and take them as prisoners of war. They led an upright and honest life. Mwanga felt threatened that the Christian faith might bring down the wrath of the ancestors on the kingdom. However, the Christians though faithful to Mwanga did not obey him in one area, that was when the king commanded them to commit acts contrary to the law of God, they refused and instead prayed and listened to the Word of God. Mwanga had the habit of homosexuality and his subjects and servants were his victims but the Christians resisted him courageously.

The more serious plan of Mwanga was when he learned from the local traditional forecast about the arrival of an invader from the East who would 'devour' Buganda. To this he reacted with force by treating the

Protestant native Christians with great cruelty He murdered the Anglican Bishop Harrington and he shifted his target to his pages.

### **The Cause of Martyrdom**

Joseph Mukasa was the first person to be martyred. He was the chief katikiro and he was called the 'Balikuddembe' -- a man of peace. Joseph Mukasa was martyred as he was against the evil works of Mwanga in spite of being aware of the fact that the consequences would be the death penalty. He tried to save his colleagues from the practice of homosexuality and further he intervened when Mwanga ordered the missionaries, who were coming to Uganda to be killed. Mwanga thought that he would no longer find any obedient servant if Joseph Mukasa continued to teach his religion. Therefore he wanted to suppress him and his minister was also of the same opinion.

One day the king became sick and Joseph Mukasa gave him a dose of opium but the king became worse and he thought that Joseph was trying to poison him.

On the fateful day Joseph Mukasa was very calm and he knew what was going to happen since that morning Mwanga had sent him the body of a child. Mwanga's minister had ordered the executioner to seize Joseph Mukasa. When Joseph Mukasa was brought before the king he was mocked by the king 'now there will no longer be two kings' and Joseph replied 'I am going to die for God'. The king had ordered the executioner to burn Joseph, but Mukjanga, the executioner, loved Joseph and so he went about the execution slowly hoping that the king would change his mind.

### **The Manner of his Martyrdom**

Joseph Mukasa went to his death like a free man. He refused to be bound. He said, 'Why bind me? Do you think I shall flee? Flee where, to God? A Christian who gives his life for God is not afraid to die.' The executioner took pity on him and before he was burnt alive, he cut off Joseph's head. But before he died Joseph said to the executioner 'tell Mwanga this -- I forgive him for killing me without cause, but he must change his life. Otherwise I shall speak against him at God's tribunal.' On hearing this, Mwanga killed a servant and mixed his ashes with Joseph's so that he would not be recognized by anybody and talk against the king at God's tribunal. Joseph was martyred on November 15, 1885,

at the age of 26. He was the first Catholic to be martyred.

## **The Collective Martyrdom**

On May 27 the martyrs arrived in Wamugengo. They were bound very tightly and shut up in huts in small groups. Forks were put around their necks and they were attached to the posts of the huts. But even in that situation, the eldest in the group encouraged them to be courageous saying, 'do not be afraid, hold fast! We shall not die twice; our friends are already with our Lord, we shall soon be with them.' When they were in prison they recalled the death of Jesus, His resurrection and ascension. They prayed without ceasing and called God our Father.

On June 2, 1886. in the evening they heard the sounds of tam-tam and the death chants but even then they were not scared but instead prayed for strength. Early in the morning when they were released of their bonds and brought out, everybody was happy welcoming each other with joy, saying 'how are you? The day of combat has at last arrived!' This amazed the executioner who had said; 'they are crazy, they seem to be going to a festival.'

Mbaga Tuzinde, the seventeen year old, son of the chief executioner, remained faithful to God, repeating the words 'I am a Christian' when his kinsfolk wanted to save him. On the day of the execution he arrived at the place at a run and joined the other martyrs. He was welcomed by his friends who said, 'Bravo! Mbaga, you are brave. Thanks be to God' Mbaga replied, 'you have prayed for me, thank you.'

## **The Manner of the Martyrs**

The hundred executioners had their faces painted black and red and with animal skin and martial head-dress, they danced and sang 'today the kinsfolk of these children will weep', but the praying ones were not afraid, saying 'this is the place whence we shall go to see Jesus Christ. In one moment we shall see Him.' The executioners were perplexed. They thought that these Christians were crazy.

The chief executioner gave a small gourd of banana to each person as was the custom, but no one would take it because they remembered Jesus. Their hands were tied behind their backs and their feet tied together and wrapped in bundles of reeds; they were put on a great pile of wood. Mukayanga tried to save Dani his kinsman but he refused to

abandon his God. So he had him killed before rolling him in a bundle. And he went to Mbaga his son and Dani; "brother, my son, abandon your religion. The king will pardon you.' Mbaga replied. 'I want to die for God.' 'I will hide you.' 'No, they will find me. Kill me." Then his father said to him 'go and be foolish elsewhere.' He was killed before being put on the pile of wood. Mukayanga hid his face with a piece of cloth and wept because he had killed his son.

Among the praying ones three persons were pardoned by the king and so they were removed from the pile of wood before it was set on fire. The executioner placed one more heap of wood on top of them and lit the wood all around. The flame rose in a circle as over a burning hut but they only heard the mourning prayer of the martyrs who prayed till their last breath.

On January 27, 1887, Jean-Marie was beheaded in secret by the katikiro and his body was thrown into a pond. Jean-Marie was a friend of Joseph Mukasa and the page of king Mutha.

## **Reflection**

Firstly, unlike other martyrs we see that no trials were given to the Christian martyrs by the court, as in the case of Joseph Mukasa who was straight away ordered to be killed.

Secondly, the eschatological dimension of life was very prominent. The Christian hope after death was very strong in the mind of the martyrs.

Thirdly, can we justify the work of king Mwanga? Just because the colonizer had done wrong, the innocent missionaries were condemned to die.

Fourthly, here we see Christianity versus traditional religion. How can we interpret the gospel in such a situation without destroying their norms and ethos in the given situation?

Fifthly, their martyrdom was mainly because of the political threat to the king.

Sixthly, we see that the Christians stopped worshipping their ancestors which led to enmity between them and the Mwanga regime. But in my

opinion, ancestor worship is still practiced in Christianity too. This was mainly because of the wrong teachings implanted by the missionaries.

Seventhly, the Uganda people and king Mwanga feared the wrath of God as they had an animistic philosophical idea of wrath from God if they displeased their pagan and tribal gods.

Finally, in the case of Joseph Mukasa and the martyrs -- their belief in God removed all fears. Thus their understanding of God was the ultimate.

## **Conclusion**

The martyrs were crazy, indeed, they were crazy for God. Their faithfulness to God was so strong that they did not give in to human weaknesses. They never showed even the slightest sign of weakness but with courage and prayer on their lips they died. Their conviction in God was beyond explanation.

## **For our own Reflection**

What motivated the martyrs to pray and sing even at the time of their martyrdom? What strength did they have ? Is their faith conviction reflective of their hope of life after death?

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### **Chapter 5: The Martyrdom of Marie Skobtsova (1891 -- 1945), by Chanda Sahi**

#### **Introduction**

Marie Skobtsova was married twice. She had three children. She became an orthodox religious at the age of forty one. She was a victim of Ravensbruck concentration camp. Gassed on Easter eve 1945, mother Marie Skobtsova had a strange career. She was an intellectual, a poet and a politician.

Born in Russia, she emigrated to France with her second husband. It was a time when the émigrés had to face hardship and poverty. She was a witness to the world war II. She risked her life to help the Jews when they were threatened.

The martyrs of the first part of the 20th century witnessed to the freedom of heart and spirit, and they were and defenders of human dignity. In the affirmation of their faith, they are no longer just defenders of authentic faith but defenders of life. This is portrayed beautifully in the life of

Marie Skobtsova.

## **Life and Work of Marie Skobtsova**

The maiden name of mother Marie Skobtsova was Elizabeth (Lisa) Vurienne Pilenko. She was born in the south of Russia, not far from the Black sea. Her family were landowners. She lost her father during her adolescence and this affected her deeply, so much so, that in her rebellion she rejected all religious faith.

Lisa was a brilliant student. She participated actively in the political discussion which filled the evenings of the University and wanted to dedicate herself to the service of the poor and the needy. At the age of eighteen, she married the student president, Dimitri Kuzmin-Karavayev, it is said, more out of pity than out of love. At that time she was involved in avant-garde literary circles in St. Petersburg. She joined the Revolutionary socialist party after being separated from her husband, who 'converted' to Catholicism and became a Jesuit. She did not because of her strong conviction but more so because she really wanted to be at the service of the poor. But the Bolshevik victory in 1917 eliminated the Moderate socialists.

In Feb. 1917, Lisa became the first woman Mayor of her birthplace in Anapa at the age of 26 years. But sharing power with the local Soviets was not easy, and she found herself joining tribunal of the White Army. She defended herself so well that a few weeks later she married the President of the tribunal, Daniel Skobtsova. By him, she had a son Yuri, and a second, daughter Anastasia.

In 1922, the family decided to leave Russia and settle in France. At that time Russian émigrés lived in utmost poverty. Lisa did embroidery and Daniel worked as a taxi driver. But the second marriage was happier than the first. The couple separated when Anastasia, Lisa's younger daughter, died in March 1926.

That was the turning point in Lisa's life. The long agony of little Anastasis was, by her own confession 'a visitation from the Lord.' She rediscovered faith in God, that faith and mutual love which alone allows the understanding and acceptance of death. She then decided to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. From then on Lisa had found her vocation. She began to devote herself to the Christian movement of orthodox Russian students. In fact the movement was concerned not only with students but

also with Russian émigrés working in the factories of the suburbs of Paris, and in the mines and steel works in the North and East of France. Many were sunk in alcohol and drugs. It was to their service that Lisa felt herself called. The drunk, the desperate, the wretched brought out her motherly affection. And she said, "They have no need of sermons, they need the most basic thing of all -- compassion."

She composed poems which illuminate the meaning which gave to her life:

### Consolation

What is the use of clever brain  
What is the use of words in books  
When everywhere I see the dead face  
of despair, nostalgia and suicide?

O God, why is there no refuge anywhere?  
Why are so many orphaned and alone?  
Why do your people wander bitterly  
in the vast endless desert of the world?

The joy of giving is all I seek  
With all my being to console the sorrow of  
the world  
O may the fire, the cry of blood dams  
be drowned in the tears of compassion.

In March 1932, when she obtained the marital separation authorized by the Church, Lisa made her monastic profession in the Church of the Institution of St. Sergius in Paris. Metropolitan Eulogius gave her a new name, Marie, "In memory of St. Mary of Egypt. Like this Mary, who lived a life of penitence in the desert, go and sit and speak in the desert of human hearts".

Mother Marie's monastery, she decided would be in the outside world, close to human sufferings. It was by these wounds of the world that she would go to God. She expressed it in an article which she wrote on 'the commandment of the Gospel' on the eve of the second world war.

"So let us bear witness of the love of these poor -- for in reality, in this

form they are none other than the heavenly king who does not squander our gifts but returns them to us a hundredfold. No, the poor, the unfortunate are truly him in 'the reality of his poverty and wretchedness, and equally truly, Christ is present in them and suffers in them. We welcome the poor in the very name of the love of Christ, not because this will bring us a reward but because the sacrificial love of Christ embraces us, because we are united with Christ in this love, with Christ in his suffering on the cross, and we do not suffer for our purification and our salvation, but truly for the other, for the poor, the unfortunate so that our suffering may alleviate theirs. It is not in one's own name that one can love sacrificially but only in the name of Christ, in the name of the image of God which reveals itself to us in human beings."

In 1935, a group of orthodox concerned about social involvement founded 'Orthodox Action' and Marie became the first President. Its aim was always to serve men and women as the image and likeness of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the incorruptible ikon of God. Mother Marie's house was also an intellectual and spiritual center.

In 1936, Mother Marie learned of the death of her older daughter Gaina, at the age of 23. At that time Marie wrote a meditation entitled 'Birth through death'. Here is an extract:

I look for the resurrection of the life of the world to come. Yes, I look for the resurrection of my well-beloved who are already born for eternity I look for the birth for eternity of all humanity, of those who are called to eternal life with the death of my earthly body and the agony of my soul, attached to this earth ... my theodicy is smile: I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. In this faith I die to the life of the present world!

But then came the World War II. Mother Marie had a very harsh opinion of Hitler, whom she called a mad man and a paranoiac. When the Jews were threatened, she did all in her power to protect them. She hid a dozen of them in her house.

However, Mother Marie's turn soon arrived. On 8th Feb. 1943, the SS broke into the house in the rue de Lourmel. Failing to find Marie, they took away her son Yuri and a priest called Klepinin.

Mother Marie too was arrested soon after and taken to Ronainville, then to Compiègne, and finally to Ravensbrück concentration camp. 16,000 French women were interned in this camp, but only 2000 returned.

Marie continued her Christian mission of service and compassion with the same zeal. Shortly after her arrest she had written 'I am your message Lord. Throw me the blazing torch into the night, that all may see and understand what it means to be your disciple.'

The strength of her faith gave courage to all her companions. A woman who escaped relates: 'In the evening, gathered round her wretched bed, we would listen to her. She would tell us of her work in Paris, of her hope of seeing union come about between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Her words gave us courage when we grew weak under the constantly growing insights of terror.'

However, the terrible conditions of detention took toll of her robust constitution. She had increasing difficulty in walking and she was racked by suffering, though she never complained.

### **Manner of Death**

No one has precise knowledge about the last hours of Mother Marie. According to the first version, she could not pass the physical walking tests required and therefore was condemned to death. According to another version, she took the place of a detainee who was going to be gassed. All that is known is that when the Red cross entered Ravensbrück camp on Easter day 1945, it was too late for Mother Marie.

### **Reflection**

There has been a shift in the 20th century regarding the course of martyrdom. Human beings have become by and large the main concern, respect for human beings, their identity, so often denied, ridiculed and exploited. This can be seen very clearly in the life, work and death of Mother Marie Skobtsova. As she said, "it is not in one's own name one can love sacrificially, but only in the name of Christ, in the name of the image of God which reveals itself to me in human beings'. Here life was an ongoing service of love. She took the problems of others who were persecuted and were poor and desperate. Her personal fulfillment was not in her individual satisfaction but in the service of others. It was to their service she felt herself called. As she wrote:

go and live amidst vagabonds and the poor. Between them and yourself, between the world and me. Forge a link that nothing can break.

This is the very thing that we talk about in our class and preach in the chapel. But the question that we ought to ask ourselves today is 'are we ready to put it into practice? or is it just for the sake of others that we are preaching? One thing that spoke volumes to me is her word.

'They have no need of sermons; they need the most basic thing of all, compassion': And that is one thing that I find lacking in the world today. When we look into the life of Jesus Christ we find that many times He did things because he was moved by compassion. But most of the time we remain passive and are unmoved even in the face of pain and suffering in others. Therefore, even though we preach and shout at the top of our voice about justice, exploitation, oppression and so on which we are very fond of doing here, if we do not put it into practice it has no meaning. This is put very beautifully by Marie and her poem 'Consolation':

What is the use of a clever brain  
What is the use of words in books  
When everywhere I see the dead face  
of despair, nostalgia and suicide?

Another thing that touched me very deeply was her word 'I am your message Lord ...' How many of us can say this with confidence. Personally, in this regard I find myself failing in many ways. But it has been a great eye-opener for me and made me realize that as a follower of Christ, our life as a whole should be the message to others.

In conclusion, I would like to quote from the book 'Blessed are the Persecuted' by Ivo Lesboupin: 'Here is a trial, a test, that places the Christian squarely before two options'. Submit and survive or refuse to submit, maintain your freedom, and live a life full of risk and insecurity. To take the first live a life full of risk and insecurity To take the first option is mediocrity enslavement to the whims of an inhuman option means following Christ in his tribulations, holding fast to his mission, resisting the forces of destruction, sharing in the building of a new world, in which all human beings will actually be free.'

These options are placed before us today. It is for us to decide which one to choose. The choice is ours.

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### **Chapter 6: The Martyrdom of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe (1941), by Manas Ranjan James**

#### **Introduction**

The unique characteristics of Maximilian Kolbe is that he deliberately offered himself up to death, *to die in the place of another person* in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz. Another thing is that in the twentieth century the cause of death is changed or shifted. Persons became martyrs because they had a concern for human beings.

#### **Historical Background**

#### **The Present**

Poland is the largest of the West Slavic states, it exercised a marked influence in the past on the history of Eastern Europe. The Polish state occupied an area of 120,359 square miles. It had a mixed population of Poles, Germans, Liberians, Ukrainians, Russians and White Russians. But, after the formation of the Polish Republic in 1965, the inhabitants

today are overwhelmingly of Polish origin. Poland's census during the twentieth century indicates that the Roman Catholics comprised 75% of the population, the Orthodox and Jews 10% each and Protestants 3%. Moreover due to the large percentage of Catholics, Catholicism is acknowledged as the religion of the Polish population. Furthermore, Catholicism constituted the strongest effective spiritual force in all that is regarded as characteristic of Polish life and culture.

## **The Past**

First of all, the Polish Catholics came under the *Russian rule*. The oppression of the Poles and of the Catholics was especially severe. During this time the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical administration was reduced to a condition of severe dependence under the Russian rule. Cooperation with the Church was based purely on considerations of public policy and also the Government refused to give official approval to the Episcopal candidates. When the Poles rose in revolution against the Russian terror in 1863 -1864, they were crushed with much bloodshed. Almost all the monasteries and Catholic societies were abolished and processions outside the Churches and collection of donations were forbidden. Moreover the Russians introduced their language in divine worship and punished numerous bishops and clerics who opposed the new regulation.

Secondly, the Poles came under the *Austrian rule* during the early part of the nineteenth century. Though it was ruled by Austria but, during this period it was given autonomy, especially in the area of education, that is, education at all levels was conducted in Polish. Even the Poles enjoyed religious freedom to some extent, that is, bishops were active as ecclesiastical statesmen.

During the middle of the nineteenth century Poland came under the *German rule*. In the beginning, Poland enjoyed religious freedom. "The numerous pilgrimages to the shrines of the Blessed Virgin at Czestochowa, Piekany and Ostra Brama in Vilna and the increasing participation in the foreign missions and in religious congresses bore witness to the flourishing religious life". (John P. Whalen, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Maximilian Kolbe" [Poland], New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967, Vol. II, p. 481.) Examples of flourishing religious life can be seen in the following:

- a) The Church intensified the care of souls by the

multiplication of parishes, by the development of its social work and providing charity and introducing adult education programs.

b) The religious orders also exhibited marked zeal in the field of the Catholic press, that is, they published more than 250 Catholic periodicals. Every diocese had its own Sunday paper. This scholarly activity was reflected in a series of important theological journals.

"Until the end of World War I Polish Catholicism led a different kind of existence in the eastern province of Prussia, in the Russian vistula area and in Austrian Galicia, but within two decades an abrupt standardization was put into effect. The German-Soviet pact and the German-Polish campaign of September 1939 created a new political situation for the Church, the result of which was the incorporation of the eastern Polish territory into the Soviet Union which entailed the prohibition of religious propaganda, persecutions and deportations of clergy and laity." (*Ibid.*, p. 481.)

After that Poland came under the National Socialist Regime and the German Nationalist Socialist Regime seized the territory of the ecclesiastical province and established a General Government that included the main part of the ecclesiastical provinces. Then the German authorities started to harass the people and the first step they took was the persecution of the Jews by which they threatened the Church.

In the Warta district members of the hierarchy were brutally beaten, the clergy were decimated in a frightful manner, seminars, numerous establishments of religious orders and all Catholic schools and associations were abolished, ecclesiastical property was expropriated, sisters were driven-from their convents, churches in large part were closed, wayside crosses and shrines were destroyed, Polish inscriptions on gravestones were effaced and loyalty to religion was made extremely difficult and was ridiculed in every conceivable manner and more than three million Polish Catholics were left completely outside the pale of the law and were at the mercy of the despotic whims of the National Socialists.

The Archbishop of Cracow, named Adam Sapieha, served as a spokesman for all the Polish bishops and made repeated representations to the administration of the General Government in order to obtain

alleviations. But the German officials did not pay any attention to it. On the other hand their anti ecclesiastical attack paralyzed Catholic life and widely destroyed it.

Moreover the Polish bishops and priests were exiled or arrested and put in concentration camps. Among them was Maximilian Kolbe, a priest. He offered his life in substitution for that of a father of a family who had been condemned to die in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz.

### **His Life History**

Maximilian Kolbe whose real name was Raymond came from Zdienskawala in Poland. He was born on January 08, 1894, into a humble family. At sixteen he chose to become a Franciscan. "Very soon his life took an extraordinary turn. With very reduced financial means, but with a simple faith and the overflowing energy of a man of action and an peerless organizer, he started a publishing network which circulated books by the million". (Bruno Chenu, *et.al*, *The book of Christian Martyrs, Maximilian Kolbe*", London: SCM, 1988, pp. 168-171.)

One example will indicate the extent of his amazing creative capacity. In 1930 he left for Japan and it is here in little less than a month he created and published a Japanese edition of the Journal. The first printing was ten thousand copies and it was published in Nagasaki.

He returned to Europe in 1936. Well known in Poland, he was arrested for the first time during the German offensive of 1939 and sent to the concentration camp. Then he was freed but once again he was arrested for the second time on February 17, 1941, and was deported to Auschwitz. He arrived there on May 28, 1941, and it was here that he met with his death. Even though he lived for 47 years we do not have enough material to substantiate it.

### **Francis' Version of Martyrdom**

"The story goes: A prisoner had succeeded in escaping. How, will always remain a mystery, for the surveillance was such as to discourage any attempt at escape. The news made us fear the worst. We all knew the custom of the camps: for each escape ten of his companions had to die of hunger in a camp cellar. I remember that day minute by minute, without knowing the exact date, because at Auschwitz there was no

calendar and we had lost all sense of time. I think it was at the beginning of August. That evening, one of us did not reply to the roll-call. The alarm was raised immediately, and in Block 14 we were kept under guard for three hours. Then we were left alone, but by way of punishment we were deprived of food, and our rations were thrown into a nearby gutter. But that was only a beginning. The next day, after roll-call, instead of being sent to work we were made to stand in the yard until three in the afternoon. The sun was very strong and many of us fainted, collapsing one after another. Finally we were given something to eat and we continued to wait, still standing until evening. The drama erupted after the evening roll-call. Colonel Fritsch, the Camp Commandant accompanied by Officer Palitsch, brought me to attention. I remember his words very clearly: The prisoner who escaped yesterday has not been found. Ten of you will die. Then he walked in front of us, looking at us one after another and from time to time shouting out a number. When he stopped in front of me, I realized that my fate was settled. He simply said '5659'. I was in the same file as Maximilian. I was the last or one of the last to be designated. It was the final good-bye. One of the ten cried out, farewell, friends, we shall see you where true justice reigns. Another found strength to say, long live Poland, I am dying for my country. My thoughts flew to Helen, my wife, and my two children. I cried, I think I said, I am sorry for them: I shall never see them again. But I do not remember the exact words."

Several seconds passed. It all seemed over when a number '116670' suddenly broke ranks. His head was slightly bent; spectacles gave him a lively and penetrating look. He had a strong smile. He stood before the Camp Commandant at attention and identified himself. I heard a conversation in German. Later I learned from Dr. Viodarki, who was standing nearby, the content of the conversation. What does this Polish pig want asked Fritsch, very angry. Kolbe replied, "I am a fairly old Catholic priest and I would like to take his place, and the finger was pointed in my direction. He has a wife and children". Stupefied, the Commandant could only reply, "here's a crazy priest." And he simply added, "alright".

I was put back into my place without having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe to him the fact that I could tell you all this. The news quickly spread all round the camp. It was the first and the last time that such an incident happened in the whole history of Auschwitz.

Speaking of his savior, D'Xy concluded. "For a long time I felt remorse when I thought of Maxmilian. By allowing myself to be saved, I had signed his death warrant. But now, on reflection, I understood that a man like him could not have done otherwise. Besides, he did it freely. Perhaps he thought that as a priest his place was beside the condemned man to help them keep hope. In fact he was with them to the last."

Francis has lived with his wife Helen in their little house in Crzeb, where a picture of Maxmilian Kolbe has a place of honor. Their two children died young during the war. A niece with heart problems has taken their place. Helen says 'we only live by memories'. (*Ibid.*, pp. 168-170.)

### **The Manner of his Death**

The way Maxmilian Kolbe met death is also a personal testimony given by Bruno Borgowiec, who told it to his parish priest before he died in 1947. He narrates the incident:

"The ten condemned to death went through terrible days. From the underground cell in which they were shut up there continually arose the echo of prayers and canticles. As the days went by, the number of survivors lessened. The man in-charge of emptying the buckets of urine found them always empty. Thirst drove the prisoners to drink the contents. Father Kolbe never asked for anything and did not complain, rather he encouraged the others, saying that the fugitive might be found and then they would all be freed. He was always on his knees or sitting, propped up against the wall. One of the guards remarked, this priest is really a great man. We have never seen anyone like him'.

On August 14, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, four prisoners were still alive but only Father Kolbe could speak. The cell had to be used for other prisoners; a German gave each of them an injection and they died immediately. Fr. Kolbe was the last: Borgowiec saw him propped up against the wall, eyes open, face serene, head inclined to the left, the death certificate, as always made out with precision indicates the hour of death 12.30." (*Ibid.*, p. 170.)

### **Reflection**

What categorically distinguishes the life of Maxmilian Kolbe from others is the way he decided to die on behalf of some one else so that

person may be able to live. All the events are not necessarily fact and experience. Few events can only be viewed as facts as they do not influence or may not make any impact on people to experience. Few events can only be viewed as experience as it may be proved substantially.

But this event has both fact and experience. If only a fact it may not affect us much because it may be one among many other facts of life in the universe. It might be a divine fact affecting divine life vertically between God and a few without affecting others very much. It may be a human fact which *does not* seem to make an impact upon others but the determination to die on behalf of others is seen in the life of Kolbe. It is both a divine and human fact and besides that an experience available for any one of us that is different altogether. Thus it became an event in which our life and hope and destiny are at stake.

It is a human fact because it expressed the real responsibility for others in the history of martyrdom.

It is a divine fact because it portrayed the supreme and selfless love offered by Jesus Christ who was an embodiment of God's love.

Another that we see from the life of Maxmilian Kolbe is his bright future and the example we get from this is his amazing creativity but yet he did not care for his future but looked ahead for the future of others.

## **Conclusion**

The greatest lesson that we learn from the life of Maxmilian Kolbe is to decide for whom we are called upon to live and die for. This context raises an important question -- what determines my being a Christian? The lesson demands from us a solid answer, our being a Christian may not be and cannot be constituted by any of our religious relationships to God but by our social involvement, a new life in our being there only for others, in participating in the being of Jesus.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

## **Chapter 7: The Martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, by Biji C. Markos**

### **Introduction**

We must not be surprised if once again times return for our church when the blood of martyrs will be required. But even if we have the courage and faith to spill it this blood will not be as innocent or as clear as that of the first martyrs. Much of our own guilt will lie in our blood. The guilt of the useless servant who is thrown into the darkness. (Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, London: Collins St. James Place, 1975, p. 155.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer uttered these words in a sermon in the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial church in Berlin on June 15, 1932. Today he is incontestably called a martyr theologian. His death was the ultimate witness to a life of faith. (Georges Casales "Theology under the sign of martyrdom: Dietrich Bonhoeffer", *Concilium* 163, March 1983, T & T Clark, p. 8.) Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor, a theologian and a great realist. He appeared as one who steadfastly opposed Nazi inhumanity and who offered a possibility of moving in the direction of Christian

humanism inspired by the vision of Jesus as "the man for others" (D.H. Hopper, *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, p. 17.) Today he is at the focal point of all important theological issues. His valued contributions in the fields of religion, church, community, anthropology like 'cheap grace', 'world come of age', 'religionless Christianity' and 'man for others' stand out in the theological realm. His contributions in the field of ecumenism also are remarkable. He still exercises a considerable influence in the contemporary protestant theology. Finally, he was truly committed to the cause for which he stood and fought unto death.

## **His Life and Martyrdom**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer along with a twin sister was born in Breslau on Feb. 4, 1906 as one of the 8 children of Karl Ludwig and Paula Bonhoeffer. His father was a university professor and a scholar on psychiatry and neurology. Lutheran in background, Bonhoeffer was a member of the Prussian church in which Lutheran and Reformed elements had interfused during 19th century. He inherited self control, ability and nobility from his father and sound human understanding, compassion, empathy, concern for the oppressed and consistent will power for the cause of the marginalized from his mother. In 1921 the family moved to Berlin to live in the residential districts of Grunewald. "He loved the mountains, the flowers, the animals, the greatest and simplest things of life. His geniality and inborn chivalry, his love of music, art and literature, and firmness of his character, the personal charm and openness to listen to others made him friends everywhere. He was always ready to take any risk." (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, U.S. Macmillan, 1969 [revised edition], p.9.)

To the astonishment of his family, he took the decision to study theology at the age of 14. His father was of opinion that traditional ministry was an out of date and redundant profession though he had to change his view later. (Eberhard Bethge, *op. cit.* "Bonhoeffer Exile...", p. 43.) When he was 17, he entered Tübingen university and sat at the feet of Adolf Von Harnack, R. Seeberg, Lietzmann and others. In 1927, when only 21 years old, he completed his doctoral dissertation entitled "Santum Communio", which was a perspective theological enquiry into the Sociology of the church. By 1930 after his one year internship, his second dissertation "Act and Being" won him the privilege of lecturing in the field of systematic theology at the university of Berlin. (*Ibid.*) Before beginning the task, he took advantage of an opportunity to

spend the 1930-31 academic year in the U.S. at the Union Theological Seminary.

In Berlin he was also a chaplain to student leaders of a confirmation class for slum boys and Secretary of the Youth commission of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the churches and of the universal Christian Council for Life and Work. In 1932 he experienced a conversion. Often when he preached the gospel, he had the impression of discovering it anew. He realized the demands of an authentic Christian life. Christianity is not only to be thought about but also to be lived. (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 179.)

During 1930s events came to a head in Germany. On February 1 Bonhoeffer took a stand against Hitler in an address which was broadcast by Berlin Radio and was cut off. In it, he criticized the people's aspiration to find a 'Fuehrer' i.e., a leader. There was a risk that this Fuehrer would turn to be a Verfuehrer -- a misleader, an idol Bonhoeffer had chosen to be on the side of the opposition and he took part in all struggles of the confessing church at Finkenwalde. (*Ibid.*, p. 180) And, he was noted for his activities.

His book **Creation and Fall** was published in 1933. He left Berlin in October 1933 for London and ministered to the congregations there and tried to explain the true character of German church struggle against Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. In 1935 the leaders of the Confessing Church who took a firm stand against the Nazi influenced Reich church asked him to return to Germany for establishing a seminary for their ministerial candidates. This seminary was first closed down by the Gestapo in 1937, but managed to continue on a makeshift basis until its final disruption in 1940. He published two of his important books, **The Cost of Discipleship** (1937) and **Life Together** (1939) during this time.

With the outbreak of war, he took on clandestine political responsibilities. "Treason had become the true love of country and the new love of the country (as exhibited by Hitler) had become treason". (*Ibid.*) His friends abroad forced him to leave the country to save his life. He did not like to serve in the army in an aggressive war. In June 1939 his close friends got him out of the country. But he felt that it was not right for him to stay out of his own country. His heart was throbbing for the oppressed and persecuted fellow Christians in Germany. He was not willing to take his choice in security. He never regretted his

decision, not even in prison, from where he wrote:

I am sure of God's hand and guidance .... You must never doubt that I am thankful and glad to go the way which I'm being led. My past life is abundantly full of God's mercy and above all sin stands the forgiving love of the crucified. (Bonhoeffer, *op.cit.* Cost of, p. 13.)

On the 17th of March 1940. the Seminary for preachers was finally and definitely forbidden by the Gestapo. On 9th September, Bonhoeffer was forbidden to publish or speak in Germany. 25 young pastors were killed at the front. On 5th April 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo on suspicion that he was involved in the attempt on the life of Hitler at Smolensk. On 23 July he was indicted on the charge of subversion by the armed forces. (Andre Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*,. London: SCM Press. 1971, p. 67.)

He spent 18 months in prison, till 8th October 1944. This is where he wrote his famous *Letters from Prison*. In them, he dealt with great themes which were to bring him theological fame: 'The world came of age', 'non-religious Christianity' and 'God as weak and powerless in the world'. (Bruno Chenu, *op.cit.*, p. 81.) Later he was transferred to the Gestapo prisons at Berlin and Buchenwald. He was finally taken to the concentration camp at Flossenburg, and was hanged on the morning of 9 April 1945.

The only account of his death has been given by the prison doctor who wrote that after the sentence had been read out to Bonhoeffer and those to be hanged with him, he saw pastor Bonhoeffer before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor, praying fervently to his God. "I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed. So devout and so certain that God heard his prayer". He added.

At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed ... In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God. (G.B. Kelly, *Liberating Faith*,, Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984, p. 31.)

The day before, it seems, Bonhoeffer had confided: "This is the end for me, the beginning of life".

## His Context and Concepts

For a better understanding of the worth of Bonhoeffer's martyrdom we need to have a glance at the Germany of his time and his concepts. On Jan 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was installed as Chancellor of the Third German Reich. The Jews were severely accused for the degraded and chaotic situation in Germany Hitler introduced "Aryan clause" which demanded liquidation of all Jews from Germany. When the war broke out, Bonhoeffer decided to involve himself and returned from America immediately. He wanted to participate fully in the national struggle as a dedicated son of the German soil in protesting against Hitler's policies and oppression.

During Hitler's reign the Church was divided. He wanted to interfere in the affairs of the Church and influence the leaders. Bonhoeffer was deeply related to the whole German liberal tradition. The great liberal atmosphere gave young Bonhoeffer freedom of life. He was also influenced by Karl Barth. He and his confessing Church well used the opportunity of Berlin Olympics to inform the maximum number of people about the situation of the Church in Germany. He was the first one to denounce on the radio the fatal consequences of the cult of the Fuehrer. He was also the first to take a stand against the anti-Semitic laws from April 1933 to 3 April. (Casalis Casdes, *op. cit.*, *Concilium*, p.33.)

In 1933's Church elections Hitler tried to pack the German Church with the Nazi followers. The resistance of German pastors reached its climax in the two synods of Barman and Dablem in 1934 to the membership of the Ecumenical Christian Council in Denmark marks the beginning of his career in the ecumenical circles. "Bonhoeffer was a liaison between the resistance movement and the free world, particularly Britain. Those in the Abwehr, the German military, and intelligence service, went forward in their plan to eliminate Hitler." (Roark Dallas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Texas 76703, Word incorporated, Waco, 1973, p. 22.) He cooperated with them without ever losing the sense of his specific Christian identity. Rather it was because he was profoundly and totally mated in Christ who identified fully with him, that he could himself effect the same renunciation, join in total solidarity with others in their distress, without losing what is the very heart of the existence of the disciple following the steps of and in imitation of his master. (Georges Casales, *op.cit.* p. 33.) He criticized the metaphysical aspects of religion and introduced a "secular God who is against all religions". Thus, the

political ecclesiastical and theological aspects of the time greatly influenced the life and thought of Bonhoeffer.

### **His Significance for Today: Some reflections**

The significance of Bonhoeffer and his concepts are much debated even today. Bonhoeffer's ideas evident in his life, his participation in the political resistance and Church struggles, his prison life, his theology especially his christology, ecclesiology and his understanding of the world as such are reactions to peculiar situations. It is these reactions that made him significant. He deserves to be enrolled among the greater adventurers of faith. From the beginning itself he set his face against the tyranny in Germany. He was the first to raise his voice against the monstrous persecution of the Jews when they were forbidden to hold public office or to enter in the ministry of the Church. (Roark Dallas. *op.cit.*, Dietrich... p. 123.) Unlike other theologians of his Church, he did not do it against the prohibition placed on Judeo-Christians to remain members of the Christian community, but against the marginalization and degradation of the Jewish minority within the national community. (George Casales, *op.cit.*, *Concilium*. p. 33.)

Protestantism does not have its roll of saints. But Bonhoeffer deserves to be enrolled in the memory as a hero of faith. "Awareness of the price of Jesus, prophetic reading of the contemporary corresponding in daily practice to the least details of theological conviction, such are the characteristics of the given life of Bonhoeffer... he was one of those saints whose whole existence consists of communicating around them the overflowing of eternal life already manifested in them today." (George Casales, *op.cit.*, p .83.) Other great theologians of his time -- Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann are interesting for their theologies. But Bonhoeffer was a rare soul who had many interests, a rare being who came to grips with theology and the kind of person who would die for his convictions.

Bonhoeffer recalls the Church to discipleship. He defines the Church as Christ "existing as a commentary" and he understood it to be "a community and fellowship of faithful persons who live according to the principle of vicarious actions, i.e., an active "being for one another". Bonhoeffer says that the Church will be true when it stands for the humanity. He is concerned about the recovery of the Church by its true being and the message it has to proclaim to the world today. (Godsey John, *op.cit.*, "preface" p. 17.)

The most important thing regarding Bonhoeffer is that his life gave power to his words. William Hamilton says: "Bonhoeffer is forcing us to shift our center of attention from theology to apologetics, criticism of culture, the problem of communication, and even from hermeneutics to shape and qualify our lives." (Lockley Harold, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Thinker and Man of Action*, The Church quarterly, p. 292.) Hamilton suggests the intimate connection between Bonhoeffer's life and thought. Bonhoeffer lived his theology. It is a truth that the respect paid to Bonhoeffer's words is due to the overall witness of his life.

Finally he represents the shift in the emphasis of martyrdom over the centuries. Formerly martyrdom was the result of bearing testimony to the name of Jesus Christ in a hostile world. But Bonhoeffer projects a martyrdom that is the result of bearing testimony on behalf of a threatened humanity. Martyrdom which is a sacrifice for the sake of humanity. It is not for the sake of an idea or idol but for the sake of a justified humanity. (Eberhard Bethge, *op.cit.*, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 162.)

He joined the conspiracy because he felt that "It is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motorcar in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all". (D. Bonhoeffer, *op.cit.*, *Cost of Discipleship*, p. 22.) The martyrdom of Bonhoeffer and others who died like him came to pass in the twilight of political conspiracy and with the shifting feeling that their effort had come too late. Certainly it did not lead to a public confession in the market place or the coliseum nor any obviously heroic notion. Everything took place in the silent incognito of concentration camps and dark cellars. (Eberhard Bethge, *op cit.*, p. 163.)

Bonhoeffer is not the holy heroic martyr but one who is a dishonored witness on behalf of humanity. He does not distance himself from the world as an example of purity, but stays and shares with those who are involved in the hopes and wrong doings of this world.

Today's martyrs like Bonhoeffer need to be honored for the sake of their new life. And new life in Christ's name as they have shown is possible today in new humanity, interpreting Christ's presence as a crying out and acting on behalf of the humanity of men and women. Their death reminds the Church that the resurrected Lord in agony, is in the world and lives for it. It is for the Christian community to receive the testimony of blood and to give glory because it is living, surrounded by

such a great host of witnesses. (George Casales, *op.cit.*, in *Concilium*, p. 83.)

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### **Chapter 9: The Martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, by Moses Billygraham Raj**

#### **The Historical Context of El Salvador**

**Introduction:** When we go back to the history of El Salvador we can notice its origin and culture. Socially and economically it was deprived by colonialism. History says that around 500 BC. an advanced civilization arose and flourished in parts of El Salvador but after AD. 900 this civilization declined. From AD. 300 to AD. 900 the ‘Maya’ civilization was in existence. During colonization, Columbus’ fourth voyage found this island.

**Resources of the Country (Natural):** El Salvador is small in size with San Salvador as its capital. Honduras, and Guatemala are in the east and west of El Salvador. Coffee, sugar, cotton and bananas are produced in El Salvador. Around the seventeenth century the Jesuit priests came to El Salvador and educated its people. Moreover they helped the native Indians to improve their agricultural products.

**The Political Context:** The political disputes began during the closing years of the colonial period. There are everywhere two prominent groups known to everybody -- the Conservatives and the Liberals. Around 1826-29 disputes arose between the two groups in El Salvador. The Liberals could not hold together Central America, so they split this area into five Republics. The goals of the Liberals was to have control over coffee production and export, take over all the lands from the poor peasants and to eliminate the native landers. Most of these Liberals were elites also. President Barrlos invited the Presbyterians to El Salvador for evangelization and the Liberals supported the protestant groups. Thus the Church was involved in politics. Since the protestants were 'modern' the Liberals were attracted. From 1912 onwards a number of US marines occupied these regions whereas the Catholics were with the native landers. Some of the priests returned from the Medellin Conference and viewed the whole situation of El Salvador from a liberationist perspective.

**U.S. Trade and El Salvador's Bondage:** In the late 1950s the Central American Common Market (CACM) introduced industrialization, centralized planning etc. American tariffs exploited, forced and speeded up the growth of El Salvador for their vested interest in an unethical way. Meanwhile the strong political control of the U.S. over El Salvador started also economic control and as such the latter came into the hands of the Americans rather than into the hands of the native landers.

This situation aggravated the peasants. In 1918 the first labor union was formed. In 1920 the railroad workers went on strike. In 1932 the Regional Foundation of Workers of El Salvador was formed. In the same year there was a mass slaughter (mataza). This became the pivotal event for the peasants to revolt against the Government. In 1960 the U.S. showed its concern for the Salvadoran peasant's problems and struggles. The American Institute for Free Labor Development concentrated on the urban workers and encouraged the Indians to adapt themselves to "bread and butter".

**Liberation Against Power:** President Molina reinvigorated the political repression especially directed against the rural and urban masses. The El Salvadorans had become accustomed to paying with their blood and life in the feudal system of exploitation. Molina ordered, for the first time, the lashing out against the Catholic Church, since the priests sided with the poor. This campaign destroyed the radio, the television station, because they were used by the priests. The priests reflected on the Latin

American Episcopal Conference in Medellin in 1968. This approach implied an understanding of the Church as the people of God and identification with the sufferings and the hopes of the poor and the oppressed people.

**Arrival of Archbishop Romero:** It was in this situation that Archbishop Romero was chosen to succeed the Archbishop Cha'vez. The Salvadoran Government and the oligarchy were jubilant, because they thought (even the Vatican) that Romero would maintain good relationship with the Government as well as the oligarchy and, Rome was convinced about this. But unfortunately Romero sided with the aspirations of the poor Christian communities in El Salvador.

**Archbishop Romero -- Life Sketch:** Romero was born on August 15, 1917, in the town of Ciudad Barrios, in the district of San Miguel; El Salvador. His father was a postman and telegraphist. After his seminary training Romero became an ordained priest in 1942. On February 14 Georgetown University honored him by awarding the doctorate for his resolute defense of human rights. Meanwhile General Romero determined the fate of El Salvador by his ruthless dictatorship. At the outset of his bishopric one of bishop Romero's closest friends and a priest, Father Grandes' assassination made a tremendous impact on him. President Molina called bishop Romero to express his condolences on the death of Father Grandes. But this gesture was only a superficial one as it was an attempt to attract Romero to be on the side of the Government. But Romero did not yield.

After this, gradually, Romero began to change. With General Romero in power as President there were massacres, killings, cryings and sufferings everywhere and day after day a number of people disappeared. Guerillas, Government troops and armed people plundered the lives of innocent people. Thus the Government tried to debunk the Archbishop by propagating corruption. But Romero's moral courage and unbeatable honesty had a hold on the poor masses who had great respect for him. His sermons strengthened the people in their faith and motivated them for liberation-oriented action. Thus the people, the priests and the religious people came to the streets of El Salvador carrying placards and slogans condemning the 'National Security Policy' adopted by the Salvadoran Government. At the end of the protest, the army fired at them. Thousands were killed and many wounded. As a result of this the image of the Salvadoran Government went on the decline as respect for human life was neither shown nor

regarded. Out of these events two events received world wide coverage. On May eighth the troops mercilessly shot the people at the door of the Cathedral with machine guns and secondly the national security forces machine-gunned a group of students in front of the Venezuelan Embassy. This macabre incident was telecast world wide.

**The Prophet of the Poor:** Romero raised his prophetic voice not only to denounce the acts of outrage and injustice but also to point the way to conversion, for a change of and reorganization of the country. He faced the country's crises with great honesty and criticized the National Security Policy, a Policy that was anti-people and anti-Christian. He declared "the Church cannot simply state that it condemns every kind of violence," for there are situations such as that of legitimate defense, in which the use of violence is both necessary and justified. Archbishop Romero's stance was one of critical hopefulness and unshakeable demands. He called together all the groups and unified them.

The amount of repression that continued caused Archbishop Romero real heartache. The non-cooperation from the priestly circle increased his mental tension. Moreover, everyday he started to receive a number of persons who had been harassed by the violence carried out by the military or paramilitary forces. They came to him looking for help or protection. As the Bishop noticed the increased torrent of pain, and the shedding of innocent blood, his prophetic vocation took an angrier tone. In his famous letter addressed to President Carter of the United States, he asked, in the name of the rights of the people of El Salvador, not to send armaments or support any kind of repressive action by the armed forces. This indeed was a symbol of his courageous attitude. This letter he had addressed to Carter gained worldwide publicity, and this action by Romero embarrassed, the Government of El Salvador, the United States and the Vatican also.

**Manner of Romero's Martyrdom:** His opposition to the repressive violence came to a climax in his Sunday homily on March 23. He called firmly upon the troops and the national guards to obey the law of God and not to obey the orders of the officers who might instruct them to kill their own brothers and sisters. "In the name of God and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise daily more loudly to heaven, I plead you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God : Put an end to this repression".

This was the last straw. His enemies anger could not tolerate any more.

On Monday, March 24, Romero fell victim of an assassin as he was standing at the Altar. He had just preached that a life offered for others is a sure token of resurrection and of victory. Archbishop Romero's funeral service was held on March 30. It took place in the Square known as Barrios of San Salvador, in front of the Cathedral doors. Some hundred fifty thousand people attended the service. There were dozens of Prelates, Bishops, Priests, Religious and other dignitaries from around the world. During this service, the papal Representative, Cardinal Corripio of Mexico was preaching. Suddenly, soldiers opened fire and many of them got killed. Thus, the profound moral ignominy of the Salvadoran Government got manifested to the whole world. In the midst of bombs, shooting, bloodshed and horror, the Archbishop was hurriedly buried. He was buried as he had lived. The seeds of liberation, the only path toward the God of Jesus Christ, were sown by the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero.

### **The Theology of Romero:**

God is the prime source of all life, justice, love and truth and the ultimate horizon to which all these reach out. Romero placed no limit to God's will; his cry was a cry for justice and life and the proclamation of hope for the society and for the oppressed. Poverty and desolation is denial of God's will, a perverted creation in which God's glory is mocked at and scorned. Faith in God begins with defense of life here and now. To be absolutely accurate, the living poor man or woman is God's glory. Sin is indeed something that causes death.

Archbishop Romero believed in the God of the Exodus who, today as yesterday, looks upon the captive and exploited people, hears their cries and then himself comes to free them, and to promise them a new land. Romero did not rely purely on political considerations, but on his faith in God. His sermons were listened to because in them the real situation of the country found expression. Romero's love for truth was rooted in his faith in God.

Because of that faith, Archbishop Romero encountered God in the midst of the poor, the sure way to belief in God. And, he encountered God from the perspective of the poor. Here I am able to see that the "poor" preached (or became!) the Gospel to the Archbishop Romero.

Archbishop Romero was not only a believer, in addition to having been an Archbishop. Throughout his episcopal ministry, he proved his

concrete faith in the God of the poor. He brought faith and episcopacy-personal charisma and the institution -- together.

Romero made the defense of the poor and the oppressed a specific and basic function of his episcopal ministry. He identified himself with them, and the poor came to him as a protector who was duty bound to put the full weight of his episcopal authority at their service. He succeeded in "institutionalizing" the preferential option for the poor. He saw toward the end that to humanize this liberative process, the Church must be present within it. It ought not ignore it or judge it merely from outside. He regarded the Church's presence in this process as being of the highest importance both for the process itself and for the future of the Church.

### **Conclusion and Reflection:**

Romero's profound faith in God made him to play a vital role in the Church and in the Society. He saw the struggle of the Church in the society as well as the struggle of the society within the Church. He considered martyrdom as the final service that he could render to the Church and to his country. He said: " If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador". He said this with great humility. He believed that martyrdom was a grace from God, and he did not believe that he had earned it. He offered his blood as the seed of liberation and a sign of hope that was soon to become a reality. At last, he affirmed the fact "... that a Bishop may die, but the Church of God, the people, will never die".

Through this write-up, I understand that the struggle of the people will never go in vain. It is not the authority, but the commitment of one's faith for the sake of humanity is very important. I also learnt that one's commitment for the sake of the poor will go beyond the barriers of caste, religion and ethnicity. God's perspective is the perspective of the poor and marginalized people. In our own context, the Dalit's perspective is God's perspective, and Dalit consciousness is God's consciousness. Thus, liberation is the key-note of the Gospel of Jesus. Serving selflessly is one's commitment to the society. It is my faith and here I stand. Where one oppressed soul goes without food, clothes or human dignity, I will fight and I will fight to the very end.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **Chapter 10: The Martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, by M. Reginold**

#### **I. Introduction**

In the violent and tragic struggle for justice In El Salvador, the name of one man stands out as a symbol of Christian commitment and unusual courage. There were many who died for the cause of justice and many who became victims of injustice and exploitation. We remember all these martyrs as faithful witnesses to the gospel who sealed their witness with their blood.

The assassination of Archbishop Romero in March 1980 shocked the world. Oscar Romero lived all his life in the midst of poverty and injustice in Latin America. As the archbishop of San Salvador, he became the leader of the church, and he also became a man who stood for the poor, he became their voice when they were voiceless. He suffered and gave his life for them.

The situation and historical set up of Central America and El Salvador may be entirely different from our context and situation in India. Yet

there are certain similarities which need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the poor, voiceless ones everywhere. Secondly, injustice and oppression present in India, also may be in different forms. In this context the life and witness of Archbishop Romero is important for us to remind us of the price that we, as Christians, are called to pay. It is a price we must pay for our vision of the kingdom of justice.

## II. Social and Political background

1) There had been agitations and rising tensions between the poor peasants and the land owning business class of El Salvador for generations. (James, R. Brochman, *Romero: A Life*, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989, pp. 1-3.)

2) The government of Colonel Arturo Armando Molino passed a land reform law in 1975, but the landowning business class made sure that its implementation was slow when the congress finally distributed 150,000 acres to 12,000 families, the ruling class started a campaign against it through the newspapers, radio and television stations owned by them. (*Ibid.*, p. 4.)

3) This disappointed the peasants who had formed peasants' Unions which were in themselves against the law in El Salvador. This is because the government was totally in the hands of the rich landowning business class. (*Ibid.*)

4) The poor peasants unions were a symbol of hope for a decent piece of land to live on, but to the landowning rich, these unions were 'communist' and satanic'. (*Ibid.*)

5) The Church of San Salvador supported the peasants right to organize themselves and exert political pressure. Many rural pastors and Jesuit priests joined the peasant's struggle for social justice. This stand has brought upon them the anger of the rich ruling class. Since the peasants unions lacked legal approval, they were considered to be illegal and subversive. (*Ibid.*, p. 33.)

4) Another incident which gave rise to the anger and uprising of the Salvadoran peasants was the 'presidential elections'. (*Ibid.*, pp, 35, 36) The election was to be held on February 20th, 1977, two days before Romero was to become the Archbishop of San Salvador.

One candidate represented the government party, General Carlos Numberto Romero. He was a former minister of defense and public security. He represented the rich landowning business class who did not want the distribution of land to the poor peasants. The other candidate was colonel Arnesto Claremount, a retired cavalry officer. He was sympathetic to the peasants cause and Salvadorans had some hope that if he won the elections he could change some things that were not right. But the government tried to stop the peasants from going to the elections. People who were working for the government added and duplicated names in the voters lists, the police threatened, arrested and assaulted the voters. (*Ibid.*, p. 38.) In the midst of such a situation, Oscar Romero was to become the Archbishop of San Salvador, it was two days after the election that Romero was appointed as Archbishop. (*Ibid.*, p. 47) On February 26th the Government declared General Romero as the winner of the presidential elections on a two to one margin. After this announcement many protested against the injustice of the manner in which the elections were conducted. Many priests who supported the poor peasants were arrested and tortured.

### **III. Main Incidents of Romero's Life**

Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdamez was born in Ciudad Bornios, in the department of San Miguel, at 3:00 A.M. on August 15, 1917. (Bruno Chenu, *et.al.*, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 202.) The village in which he was born was very remote and could be reached only on foot or by horseback.

When Romero was about two years old he was baptized by father Cecilio Morales on May 11, 1919. His father was a telegrapher, so Romero spent most of his childhood delivering letters and telegrams in the village. Romero also did his schooling in the local public schools, later his parents sent him to study under a teacher named Anita Iglesias. In his spare time he learnt to play the bamboo flute, piano and harmonium.

Since his father did not want him to duty any further, he got him to learn carpentry under an old man.

When Oscar was thirteen years old, he met a certain Father Monnoy to whom he expressed his desire to go to the seminary. Romero's father was reluctant to let him go, but Oscar left to study in a seminary in San Miguel. In 1937 Oscar went on to study in the National Seminary in San

Salvador which was run by the Jesuits. For some reason Oscar Romero had to stop his studies in midyear and go to Rome to study in the Gregorian University. These were the instructions of his Bishops. (*Ibid.*, pp. 205, 206.)

Although Romero completed his degree in theology in 1940/ 41, he had to wait because he was not yet twenty four years old, to be ordained. He was finally ordained on April 4th 1942. He left Rome in 1943 to El Salvador. (*Ibid.*, p. 201.)

He was appointed as Parish priest to a small town called Anamoros. A few months later, he was called back to be the secretary of the diocese. He held this post for twenty three years. Later he became the editor of the diocesan weekly called 'Chaparrastique'. In June 21, 1970 Romero was ordained as bishop. (*Ibid.*) In May 1971, Archbishop church appointed Romero as editor of the Archdiocesan newspaper, 'Orientacion'. On June 21st, 1975, a serious incident took place in Romero's diocese. Guardsmen raided a village called Treseallus and killed five confesinos. This incident instilled in Romero anger and pain towards the ghastly incidents that were happening in the country. Romero gradually began to see that the country was controlled by a repressive military government. He also realized that a few in the society had everything and that rest lived in destitution.

On February 21st, 1977 Oscar Romero was appointed as the Archbishop of San Salvador.

#### **IV. Romero's death and martyrdom**

When Romero was appointed as Archbishop, many people saw him as a conservative churchman. (*Ibid.*) But Romero was going through a stage of transition, the grim realities of the struggles of the common people for justice had a profound impact on him. (*Ibid.*) On the eve of his assassination, his sermon was being broadcast on the radio, in which he condemned the attack on human rights and the violence done to the men, women and children. He made a special appeal to the army to stop the killings.

On the evening of March 24th, 1980 Romero was celebrating mass in a hospital near his house. While preaching his sermon, Oscar Romero was shot in the stomach by an explosive bullet, he collapsed on the altar and

was later taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. The person who was the assassin was presumed to be a paramilitary commando. (*Ibid.*)

## **Conclusion and Reflection**

The message that we receive from the bloody and inhuman deaths of Latin America is a controversial message. My first reactions were amazement and shock. The most important aspects to me were that the martyrs including Archbishop Romero were Catholics. Yet they were killed in a country which was and is culturally Catholic. There is also a blind belief that the era of dictatorial and fanatic governments has ended in the West. But Latin America reemphasizes the struggles for power and domination by vested interests.

The martyrdoms in Latin America are perfect examples of the struggle for justice against an unjust system. This is the clear difference between martyrdoms of early Christianity and present day martyrdoms. In the early Christian resistance, martyrdom did not directly involve opposition to the social or power structures.

When I saw the movie on Archbishop Romero I was struggling with the issue of "violence" which has become a part of the daily life of the oppressed in Latin America. To see so many Jesuits and Catholic priests taking up arms and pledging that they will not lay down arms, until justice is done invokes an inward struggle within me. This testimony in the face of failure asserts that victory when it is achieved by the oppressed is God's gift even if it is won by taking control of history through resistance. The martyrs in their resistance proclaim a hope for the poor, it is the proclamation of the dawning of the kingdom of God which is a gift to the exploited, marginalised and the oppressed.

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### **Chapter 11. The Martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr., by Sunny, P.**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

"The Blood of the Martyr will be seed of the tabernacle of freedom"

-- M.L. King Jr.

The United States became a world power after the second world war. The Americans condemned racism abroad but practiced segregation at home. In the U.S.A. the Black community was neglected completely by the Whites even from civil rights. In such a strange situation there was born a man with a dream, a dream which had shaken the whole world. A man with the conviction to put an end to such dehumanizing factors. M.L.King Jr. had even paid his own life and blood for this cause, the cause of the people.

The primary concern here is to share his Christian faith and its socio-political dimensional roots. The question is to find out

whether those means and methods are rightly used to bring about social change in our context today. In short, the aim of this write-up is to highlight the significance of his martyrdom today for the Christendom.

## **BACKGROUND: SOCIO POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS**

The Blacks in the United States constitute a sizeable minority, numbering approximately 22 million. It is nearly 95 percent of the non-White population. This is the 11 percent of the total population in America. (T. Edmund, *Martin Luther King and the Black Americans Protest Movement in the USA* [Delhi: New Heights, 1975], p. vii.) The Blacks have been on the soil of America for a very long time, yet they are fighting for their legitimate place in the American society even today. After the second world war, this struggle got accelerated.

During this period Asia, Africa and other suppressed regions of the world were moving forward. The American society itself was passing through a technological revolution there and life expectations were rising rapidly. The American democratic capitalism had never granted equal civil rights to the Blacks. Blacks were considered as slaves and inferior to the White community. Whites based their reasoning on an old Testament legend stating that Noah had placed a curse on the black people of Ham condemning them forever. The Blacks were in mental as well as in physical slavery because they were even denied the chance of education.

Most of the good jobs were held by White citizens while the Blacks worked as domestic servants and farm hands. Even among the Churches, there was no mutual aid, even the Blacks themselves were scattered without a common voice. The White people called the Blacks -- as 'Niggers' 'black cows' 'black apes' etc. Discrimination in each and every area of life in the society was expressed, bus seats were reserved for the Whites, Blacks had to stand, only minor jobs were allowed to Blacks, separate churches for Blacks etc. A long history of injustice, discrimination, domination etc, were spiritualized and structuralized. In such a social situation a man came on the scene and it was none other than Martin Luther King Jr.

## **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. Family, Education, Marriage, Profession, Dream etc.**

King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in a modest home on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia. Auburn Avenue was a famous street in Atlanta where middle and upper middle class Blacks lived. (Robert Morril Bartlett, *The Sixth Race* Bombay, D.R. Bhagi for Blackie & Son [India Ltd. 1969], pp. 175-77.) His father Martin Luther King Sr. came to Georgia and became a preacher and married the daughter of the founder of the Ebenezer Baptist church which is in Atlanta and became its pastor. He was active in the National Association for the Advancement of colored people (NAACP) and was a leading figure in the international council of Atlanta which played a significant part in keeping peace between the races. (T. Edmund, *op.cit.*, p. 46.)

The King family lived a simple life and they were free from want. The children were given sufficient money for their expenses. All the children in the Kings family were healthy, happy and well behaved. Time was set apart for serious study, prayer and play during the day. Their father being a pastor carefully brought up his children in a religious atmosphere. From childhood King Jr. was physically strong, fun-loving and he loved games.

King Jr. began early education at an Elementary school in the nearby Auburn Avenue and then was transferred to Atlanta University's private laboratory school. Then he entered Morehouse College, an excellent Blacks institution in Atlanta for his higher studies. While working hard at theology, he found time to attend lectures on philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and to specialize on the life and work of Gandhi. (M.J. Sargunam, *A Galaxy of Heroes* (Palaniandavar Printers, Coimbatore, 1991), p.76.) He graduated from Morehouse with distinction and gained a scholarship to an integrated theological college in the North. This was Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania.

His distinction at Crozer led to the award of a two year scholarship for further study at the college of his choice. Martin was in favor of Boston University to begin his studies for doctorate in philosophy. (Kenneth Slask, *Martin Luther King*

(London: SCM Press, 1970). p.27.)

Boston was to give him more than the opportunity of advanced study under outstanding teachers. Here he met the girl who was to become his wife. She was doing her studies in music in Boston, her name Coretta Scott. She came from a Black rural poor background. Her father, Obediah Scott struggled for a decent livelihood and his children demanded education. Coretta remembers joining her brother and sister in hoeing the crops on their bit of land when she was six or seven. (*Ibid.*, p. 28) That land gave food for themselves and for their animals. The young Coretta lived very close to economic realities.

Her father's hard work and innate gifts in industry made him a rich man. He gradually achieved ownership of a truck, then he achieved a new mill etc. But his White enemies burned it down in suspicious circumstance. But this cruel act remained unpunished. (*Ibid.*, p. 29) Coretta Scott had already studied at Antioch college and came to Boston for further studies. This college opened its doors to Black students for the first time in 1943, and Coretta Scott's sister Edytta was the first Black to enter it.

On June 18th 1963, Martin Luther King Sr. officiated at the marriage of his son to Coretta Scott on the lawn of her parent's home. The bridegroom was twenty four and the bride twenty six years old. Only 16 years of marriage lay ahead of the young pair.

After their marriage, they stayed at Boston. After the completion of his studies King Jr. reached Montgomery with family and started his priestly office. He very much liked South because of two reasons: he was born and brought up in the South and also the extreme severity of racialism existed in Southern parts. He thought his service would be a healing to his own people. In January 1954 on the invitation of Dexter Congregation he preached a very powerful sermon titled 'the three dimensions of a complete life'. In September 1954, he settled his family in Montgomery and officially took up his pastorate. (T. Edmund, *op.cit.*, p.71.) His sermon adumbrated both social and religious message. He showed that the minister must also be a leader of social progress.

**Dream:** Luther King Jr. had a dream for the future and that dream had a historical background. Hundreds of years after the Emancipation proclamation, still Blacks were not free. The life of the Blacks was still sadly crippled by the menaces of segregation and the chains of discrimination. The Blacks lived on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. Blacks were considered only in the corners of American Society and found themselves exiles in their own land. In this background King addressed his colleagues: "So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. it is a dream deeply rooted in American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal". (Nissim Ezekiel (ed), *A Martin Luther King Reader*, " [Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969], p. 107.)

He continued to speak about his dream on all occasions. "One day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

"One day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. (*Ibid.*)

"This is our hope, with this faith we will be able to tear out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, pray together to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day." (*Ibid.*, p. 158.)

## **KING JR.'S IDEOLOGICAL FORMATION**

How did Martin Luther King Jr. develop his political and theological perspective? He kept his dream inside his heart even from childhood. When he started his studies, he was inspired by philosophers and scholars. In his own words: "During my student days at Morehouse I read Thoreau's **Essay on Civil Disobedience** for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was deeply moved that I re-read the work several times. This was my intellectual

contact with the theory of non-violent resistance" (*Ibid.*, p. 3)

M.L.King Jr. further continued to develop his perspective by putting all his interest in the study of philosophy and theology. "I spent a great deal of time reading the works of the great social philosophers. I came early into contact with Walter Rauschenbaush's, **Christianity and the social crisis**. (*Ibid.* p. 4.) This book gave him the theological basis for his social concern.

Then he turned into a serious study of the social and ethical theories of -the great philosophers -- Plato, Aristotle, Bobber, Bentham, Mill and Locke: all of these masters stimulated his thinking much more sharply. Gradually Luther King Jr. felt an interest to study Karl Marx, to find out as to how communism appealed to many people. He says: " for the first time, I carefully scrutinized **Das Capital** and the Communist Manifesto.. .such communist writings, I drew certain conclusions that have remained with me as convictions to this day." (*Ibid.*, p. 4.)

Further M.L.King Jr. says that war could never be a positive or absolute good. It could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread of evil force. Then, very interestingly, his interest went into the study of Gandhi. He went to hear a sermon from Mordesi Johnson, President of Howard University, who spoke about the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He was highly impressed by Gandhi's campaign of non-violent resistance. "I was particularly moved by the salt march to tie Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of Satyagraha profoundly became significant to me." (*Ibid.*, p. 8)

It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that he discovered the method for social reform that he had been seeking for so many months.

The next stage of his intellectual pilgrimage to non-violence came during his doctoral studies in philosophy, and theology at Boston University under Bigar S.Brightman and L.Harold Dewolf, "both men greatly stimulated my thinking". (*Ibid.*, p. 11.) In 1954 he ended his formal training with all of these intellectual forces converging into a social philosophy. The conviction that non-violent resistance was one of the most potent weapons available to the oppressed people in their quest for

social justice came to him.

## **KING'S LEADERSHIP OF THE MOVEMENT**

In the mid-fifties American Blacks started to support the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This association was dissatisfied because of the neglect of the authority over the Blacks. In such a background King Jr. propagated the doctrine of non-violent direct action to achieve the social, economic and political institutionalization of freedom for the Americans Blacks.

Meanwhile Mrs. Roas Parks was arrested from a bus for her refusal to stand to a White man who entered the bus. She was arrested on charge of violating the city's segregation ordinances. This opportunity was used by M. L. King Jr. With the support of NAACP and also some members of the women's political council (Blacks), he adopted the bus boycott. This was a success and M. L. King Jr. become famous soon.

Then he formed Blacks protest movement for civil rights. M.L.King Jr. thereafterwards was asked to co-ordinate all churches and Christians in the South to make a community spirit and thus he gave form to Southern Christian leadership Conference in 1957. (Kenneth L. Smith, *Search for the Beloved Community. The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr* [Valley Forge, Judson Press, 1974] p.120.)

The ultimate aim of the formation of all movements were to create a beloved community in America, an integrated society wherein brotherhood would be an actuality in every aspect of social life. He viewed the civil rights movement as a microcosm of the beloved community. His books **chaos or community and why can t we wait**, speak about his conviction of a beloved community.

### **His Action Strategy:**

M.L.King Jr. and his colleagues protested with the weapons of bus boycott, Dharna, Processions etc. and used them as main strategy to fight against racial discrimination. 5th December 1955 was an important date in the annals of the history of the

Blacks protest movement in the U.S.A. On that day, the Blacks of Montgomery began their boycott of the city buses. This was to register their protest against the segregation in the buses. This bus boycott continued till 20th December, 1956. He had arranged well and several committees were formed to conduct the prolonged boycott, a finance committee was constituted to look after the finance. Representatives of all sections of Black community were included in the Executive Board. A car pool of nearly 300 automobiles were created and at various places in the city 'dispatch' and 'pick up' stations were set up to transport people to and from the place of their work. (Edmund, *op.cit.* p. 81.) This bus boycott shook the whole world, press brought out the attention of the whole world. Here many Blacks were arrested including King Jr. Then mass arrests took place in Montgomery. At last, the Federal Government ordered bus integration based on mutual respect. From December 21, 1956 onwards Blacks and Whites of Montgomery traveled together in buses. (*Ibid.* p. 106, 107)

Thus the Blacks in Montgomery found in non-violent direct action, a militant method which avoided violence and electrified the whole nation. This experience at Montgomery made King Jr. to write his book **Stride Towards Freedom**.

Secondly, King began to feel that immediate and most important issue confronting the Blacks was to secure the right to vote and he started planning action. He conferred with other Black leaders and it was planned to call for a 'prayer' pilgrimage of freedom to be held in Washington on 17th may, 1957. In this pilgrimage 37000 marchers met at Lincoln Memorial in Washington. There he delivered his first of inspiring political speeches to a national audience.

The Third in M.L.King Jr's strategy in between 1957 and 1960 was that he tried to present a new posture. "After his political oriented plea made on the pilgrimage, he endeavored to organize a 'crusade for citizenship.' Thus his experience in the pilgrimage proved "a turning point in his life". (*Ibid.* p. 122.) King's fame rose up as an excellent pulpit orator.

Then in the following year 1958 King Jr and delegates of Black people had negotiation with the President in the White House

conference hall. King Jr. demanded a clear national policy against racial discrimination.

On 3rd September 1958, King Jr. was arrested, later he was released but underwent prison life which led him to a deeper commitment. After his complete recovery of health, he accepted the invitation of the Indian Prime Minister, Jawarlal Nehru. During his visit in India he emphasized the influence of Gandhi on him.

In the year 1959, Elijah Muhammed, the leader of the Black Muslim Movement and the self-styled spiritual head of Muslims in the west, opposed King's directions and philosophy. They began to plead for the establishment of a Black state. (*Ibid.* p. 135.) This was the first new voice of separation and militancy that emerged.

King Jr. on February 1, 1960, started a student "sit in" in Greensboro North Carolina, when Joseph Moveill, a Frenchman at the agricultural college of North Carolina, was refused service at the bus terminal lunch counter. As the sit-ins, freedom rides, and other demonstrations moved across the South, the White resistance stiffened. People from Albany called King Jr. to join with them for a social protest. But Albany protest for integration was a failure.

Thus M.L.King Jr. gave out his plan for a Blacks revolution. "In the summer of 1963, a need and time circumstances and the mood of the people came together". (M.L. King Jr., *Why can't we wait* (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1964). p. 15, 16.) In order to understand the seriousness of economic and political deprivation, "we are going to make Birmingham the center of anti-discrimination activity in the nation. object of breaking racial barriers in Birmingham". (Edmund, *op.cit.* p. 158.) At the beginning small groups organized 'sit ins' at lunch counters in department and drug stores.

Thus on 7th April 1963, started street demonstrations and as a second phase of it, 12th April 1963 on the Good-Friday, they were arrested. In the prison, King drafted a nine thousand word letter from Birmingham jail. This letter expressed very much his concern towards Blacks.

The next move was a March on Washington. On 28th August, 1963, 2 lakh citizens marched to Washington to highlight their grievances. M.L.King Jr stressed their richness of freedom and security of Justice to all the people in U.S.A.

Similar kind of March and protest have been continued in different parts of USA by the Blacks power. King was one of those rare politicians who opposed the involvement of America in the Vietnam war and vehemently criticized American interest to kill people.

The influence of King Jr was not limited to America alone. He was called by African leaders to speak there. In 1964, he visited East Germany; in Rome, Pope gave him a private audience to speak. He was invited to preach in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. And on the way, he arrived at Oslo to receive the Noble Prize in 1964.

In his last days King Jr. received personal threats. He went to Memphis and addressed a gathering of his supporters on April 3, 1968. He said, 'I see the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. I am happy tonight that I am not worried about anything. I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'" (Edmund, *op.cit.* p. 158.)

On the 4th April, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed by a sniper in Memphis, Tennessee, as he stood below the balcony with friends. Before reaching the hospital... the end had come! He died at the age of 39.

**Significance of M.L.King's Martyrdom** : Martyrs are generally those who undergo violent death in witness to a religious truth. I would like to evaluate the original significance of martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr. in the light of Jesus's Martyrdom.

First of all, the death that Jesus endured was the consequence of the struggle he waged against those who wielded religious and political power. He died, because he fought. His death must not be seen in isolation from his life. So someone who dies while fighting actively for justice and righteousness of a community or

for a group of people has to be considered a real martyr today. Those who lay down their lives for those values of the kingdom such as truth, justice, love of God and love to the poor can be considered as martyrs. M.L.King Jr. belongs to such a tradition.

The task of building the Black minority into an unified entity to struggle unitedly under a single leader was virtually a super human task. His faith in the total integration of Black minorities in the American society was so strong that he always opposed the idea of people going back to Africa.

The Martyrdom of M.L.King Jr challenges Indian Christianity today. The Black community in the U.S. can be considered as equal to the Indian Dalit community. How long would upper castes exploit and prevent justice to the dalits? In India we need to have two kinds of liberation struggles : first, to liberate dalits from upper castes domination; second, to mobilize the minority strength to fight against injustice, oppression and discrimination by the majority. His life inspires me to stand firm for the betterment of the other and see God and God's love in the struggles of the poor for true humanity.

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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Part 3: Martyrs of the Modern and Post-Modern Era**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **Chapter 12: The Martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr., by John Roberts**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The Blacks in the United States of America constitute about 11% of the total population. Though they were on the American soil right from the beginning of their Republic, they are still fighting for their legitimate right in the American society. The Blacks responded to the moral challenge posed by the Institution of slavery in a variety of ways. These were in the form of uprisings and revolts mainly in the Southern part of U.S. For instance in 1817, 3000 Blacks met in Philadelphia at a Convention to protest at colorization. This movement was a significant early attempt on the part of the Blacks to organize themselves and petition to the legislature to redress their grievances.

Gradually, a civil war emerged in 1852 with the Blacks emphasizing on their liberation from slavery. When the war was finally won, nearly four million slaves got freedom.

After the civil war, there followed a period in the history of America

known as reconstruction. The economic life of the South which was based on free slave labor had to be restored. President Lincoln helped them by issuing rations, establishing hospitals, etc. The most striking aspect of the post-war was that the US. Congress passed the fourteenth amendment in 1866, which made the former slaves, citizens, and extended to them equal protection under the law and protection against state interference with their life, liberty and property. A fifteenth amendment was also passed in 1869 which prohibited the states from denying the Blacks the right to vote. However, these two amendments were weak compared to the civil and political equality demanded by the radicals.

These amendments made the white community more furious and their exploitation became more ruthless. These were dealt with more ruthlessly and were terrorized particularly by the Klu Klux Klan and the white leaguers. Due to this violence and terrorist activities, the black's participation in politics declined sharply particularly in the South.

During the post resurrection period, the Blacks carried on their struggle against segregation, expressing their strong resentment against the continued inequalities. They resented against segregation in the transport system, schools, theaters and other walks of life. As a result, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed in 1900. The dominant feature of this organization was legal democratic action for the attainment of equality thus, all laws supporting segregation were declared unconstitutional.

**II.** It is in this socio political context that Martin Luther King Jr. was born on the 15th January 1929 at Georgia in Atlanta. He began his early education in schools that were segregated. The Blacks could not go to white schools and vice-versa. The author recalls -- "His love for big words, choice expressions, and persuasive eloquence continued throughout his adolescent period which enabled him later in life to shine as a great orator and an eloquent preacher.

After his schooling, King shifted to a leading college in Morehouse. This college has the reputation the Blacks have, just as the white have for Harvard. It was here that King had his first frank discussion on the racial issue with his colleagues, his friends, and Professors. At Morehouse, King enjoyed a sense of academic freedom. His concern for racial and economic justice was significant during his stay at Morehouse. It was here, he happened to read Henry David Thoreau's

**Essay on civil disobedience.** He was considerably influenced by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system. In his book **Stride for Freedom**, King wrote "I am so deeply moved that I re-read the book several times. This was the first intellectual contact with the theory of non-violent resistance". King went on to complete his doctoral requirement by writing his thesis on "A comparison of the conception of God in the thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman".

With increased social consciousness, King was eager to experience the life of the undervalued people. He was anxious to identify himself with the masses- to know, learn and understand from their sufferings and feelings. He noted with concern how the Blacks were paid less than the Whites -- performing the same job. He also observed that money was the root -- not only of evil but also of race.

At seventeen King finished his Junior College and took a momentous decision to join the ministry. In 1947, King was ordained. He read extensively from Karl Marx, R. Niebuhr etc. with the sole desire of eliminating social evil. It was at this time that King became fascinated by Gandhi's campaign of nonviolent ways of resistance. The whole concept of **satyagraha** became significantly meaningful to him. "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to live the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force in a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation, it was in this Gandhian emphasis of love and non-violence that I discovered the method for social reform I had been seeking for so many months."

The black people believed that freedom because a foretaste of that which is given in the Sermon event itself. When King spoke of dream at the 1963 'March on Washington,' and when he spoke of his hope that "he will reach the promised land," the night before his assassination in Memphis (April 1968), Black people believed him not because of the cogency of his logic but rather because of the spirit of empowerment generated by the style of his sermon oration. They believed him because they contended that they experienced in their hearts the spirit of God's liberating presence.

In addition to the spoken and written style of King's theology, parting towards freedom and hope, the same then is also found in the context of his message. The central themes of freedom and hope do define the context of King's life and message. It is summarized in his 'march on

Washington speech'. "I have a dream that one day ... the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave holders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood .. with this faith we will be able to transfer the jangling discords of our nations into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

In the Black church, King knew that the people had a hope that stretched back to beginnings of the Black Christian community in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. All he had to do was to restore that hope for freedom in the songs and language of the people, and the people would respond to the content of the message. That was why King used the language of the so called negro spirituals' in his sermons in black churches. King's sermons always contained the hope for freedom and he always related it to his current struggles to attain freedom in this world. But when it seemed that freedom was difficult to realize in this world, Martin King did not despair but moved its meaning to an eschatological realm as defined by the Black church's claim that 'The world will make a way somehow'. The night before he was assassinated (3 April 1968), King, in a Black church worship service, restated that hope with the passion and certainty so typical of the Black preacher.

"I don't know what will happen now. We have got difficult days ahead but it is divine matter with me, because I've been on the mountain top. Like anyone else, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned with that. I just want to do God's will and he has allowed me to go up the mountain."

**III.** King's emphasis on the eschatological hope for freedom, as defined by "the mountain top", was not derived from White theologians and philosophers, but rather from his own religious traditions. These words of faith and hope were derived from the Black people's struggle to overcome their pain and suffering. People who have lived in the context of nearly 400 years of slavery and suffering are not likely to express an eschatological freedom. Hope in God's coming eschatological freedom is always derived from the suffering people who are seeking to establish freedom on earth but have failed to achieve it to their perception of their humanity. In Martin King's failure to establish freedom in his existing present, he prevented despair from becoming the defining characteristic of his life by looking forward to God's coming, eschatological freedom.

Although he had to face the threat of death daily, King denied that it had the last word, for he said in the previously quoted sermon: "I see the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. I am happy tonight that I am not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord". It was with this accomplishment that he courageously fell to an assassin's bullet.

#### **IV. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE INDIAN CONTEXT.**

The Black's situation can be easily analyzed in par with the age old caste system that has riddled India. Earlier, I held a view that problems of the Blacks differed with that of Indian situation, on biological grounds. But I have come to understand that the caste problem in India is not merely hierarchical in nature but also racial. The Dalits were the original inhabitants of this country but were forced to be branded as 'outcastes' by the Invading Aryans. However, the Dalit movement is not so intense as that of the Black Liberation movements, mainly because of the tribal oppressive, namely caste (hierarchy) creed (language) and race. Moreover, the Indian administrative system has its interest in the Western model of economic development rather than social development.

I am also critical of Martin King's approach towards liberation namely non-violence. However, it must be understood that the very act of non-violence was "violence" in that particular time and context. Violence will make worthy approach in liberating the Dalits of our country. Martin King was inspired by the Gandhian approach of Satyagraha (the soul force).

Like the Blacks of the U.S.A. 'Low' caste people in India have been subjected to many of the evils of the caste system and are thus unable to progress along with the 'high' caste people. Unless the Indian Independence laws are passed against the caste system and the Indian constitution provides for equal opportunities to all people in India, that the depressed class movements can be further solidified and strengthened.

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### **Chapter 13: The Martyrdom of Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko, by G.J.B. Theophilus**

#### **Introduction**

After the Second World War several countries in eastern Europe came under the communist league. As communism showed antagonism to religion, Church as an institution almost has been suppressed barring Poland. The Catholic Church in Poland continued to survive amidst strong opposition from the government and it bore a strong witness by opposing the oppressive regimes. The Church stood for the rights and dignity of human beings and therefore got back people into its fold who at one time abandoned it Also that the present Pope Paul II comes from Poland, it has given the Church a boost in its activities in the 20th century. For the Church to be alive in Poland several priests had to lose their lives. Among them the most prominent was Father Jerzy Popieluszko. He died as a martyr for the cause of human dignity and freedom.

#### **General Background**

After the Second World War, Poland was placed within the communist sphere as a result of the **Yalta agreement** and the Church found itself in constant confrontation with the communist system imposed upon the country. Poland grew into a totalitarian state and the ruling group tried to gain and maintain absolute power with itself, power over all people and all spheres of life. To achieve this power, it never hesitated to destroy all structures and forces which opposed it. All socially significant positions were occupied by members of the ruling group to ensure total control over all spheres of life. Through lies and a reign of terror established by an extensive security system, it enslaved people. In these circumstances the problem of freedom, of human rights and dignity became the primary problem for the individual and the nation. (Balchwickif, *A Theology of Liberation -- in the Spirit*. pp. 161-162, *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 12, No. 2 Summer 1984, pp. 157-167.)

The Church as an institution survived in Poland unlike other countries of the communist block where it has been successfully marginalized. The Catholic Church with 95% of total population of Poland had played an important role in the struggle for freedom and human dignity against the oppressive system. Throughout its struggle, since the end of the war, the Church has drawn attention to and has made the people sensitive to the values of human dignity and freedom. (*Ibid.*, p. 162.)

### **The Emergence of Solidarity**

The conflict between the Church and State since the communist takeover in 1947 can be divided into three periods, 1947-1956, 1956-1970, and 1970 to the present. The first period witnessed to the struggle of the Church for its survival as an institution against government's attempts to gain control over it. At the outset of the second period of 1956-1970, Khrushchev's attack on Stalinism at the 20th party congress of the Soviet Union in February 1956 shocked the whole of Eastern Europe including Poland. In Poland Lalladyslow Gomulka became the new party secretary. But the change in party leadership did not lead to any major reform. Whereas during the first period, naked terror was used to break the autonomy of the church, now administrative pressure was applied. The government hoped that the Church would slowly die, but it survived. By the late 60s many people were frustrated with Gomulka's socialism which in fact was an oppressive regime. Young poles began to be attracted by "the pageantry, national traditions,

patriotism and the sincerity and friendship which they found in the Church". (A. Tomsky, *Poland Church on the Road to Gdansk*, pp. 30-31, *Religion in Communist Land*. Vol.9, Nos.1-2, Sept. 81, pp. 28-29.) The second period also saw the decline of belief in official ideology and Christianity as the only "alternative ideology" which could unite the people against the state. In 1970, the beginning of third period, military men fired at striking workers on the Baltic Coast in December and this incident made Gomulka to step down from power. The new regime led by Edward Cerek also saw, from the beginning a collision between the Church and the state. Since 1972 a movement of religious renewal had developed. This later came to be known as Light of Life movement. Churches began to be built by peasants without state permission and this development received the support of some bishops. (*Ibid.*, pp. 31-34.) In 1975 constitution amendments were announced which further strengthened the power of the Party to which the Church protested. (*Ibid.*, p. 35.) This also led to many protests by intellectuals in 1975 and 1976. (Balchwickif, *op.cit.* p. 162.) The condition of economy worsened in Poland. Employers controlled the unions and workers were not allowed to strike. Yet June 1976 witnessed strikes at Radom, Plock and Umus which forced the government to withdraw increase on food prices. In all this the Church supported the striking workers. The emergence of the opposition movement in Poland had introduced a third force in Church-state relations. The alliance between the Church and the opposition movement forced the government to try to woo the Church and as a result eased some of the restrictions on the Church. But it was too late. In 1977 a protest fast was organized in the Warsaw Church of St. Martin on behalf of those workers imprisoned after the 1976 strikes. The Church continued to attack the government. (Balchwickif, *op.cit.* p. 163.) On 16 October 1978 Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow was elected Pope and with this the church once excluded from public life, was now in everyone's thoughts and people began returning to its fold. The Pope visited Poland in 1979 and his message reflected Church's responsibility to human's moral, religious, economic and political life. His message also called upon people not to be afraid of fighting for their rights and suffering with Christ. The Pope's visit gave a sense of confidence and unity as a nation and the strikes in the Gdansk shipyards and organization of forced trade unions was a consequence of this visit. (A. Thomsy, *op.cit.*, p. 37.)

Solidarity, the first free trade union after the War was born in August 1980 as a result of strikes by workers in shipyards in Gdansk. (Bruno Chenu, *et al.*, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London: SCM, 1985, p.

208.) "For the first time under a communist regime, all levels of the population were united in a free trade union which numbered around ten million members and which confronted the existing powers". (I. Krzeminski, "Solidarity the Meaning of the Experience: A Sociological Survey", p. 4; *Religions in Communist Lands*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 4-16.) Solidarity can be properly understood only in the context of the role of the Church and religion in the history and life of Poland. The solidarity movement was in essence a "spiritual revolution" started above all in response to the violation of human dignity and rights. (*Ibid.*, p.12.) It aimed at long term social change without resorting to violence. Its leader was Lech Walesa.

### **Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko**

Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko was born in 1947 in Bialystok. He joined the Warsaw seminary in 1966, the year in which the Church of Poland celebrated its first Millennium, but which also was a period of heightened anti-Church campaign and worst church-state relations since the early 1950s. (Grazyan Sikorska, *To Kneel only before God: Father Jerzy Popieluszko, Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 12. No.2, Summer 1984, pp. 149-146.) After a year at the seminary, Popieluszko did two years of military service in a special unit in Bartoszyce. It was here that Popieluszko had his first taste of difficulties which he would be facing later as a Catholic priest in a communist country. After two years in the army, he returned to the seminary and was ordained by Cardinal Wyszyuski in 1972. (*Ibid.*, p. 149)

By this time Popieluszko had some experience of political reality. He, with his friends in the seminary had attended to their wounded student comrades who were beaten up by the police in the riots of 1968 and had begun to be open to political reality when Gomulka had given orders to open fire at striking workers in 1970. (Bruno Chenu, *et.al, op.cit.* p. 208.)

After his ordination in 1972, Popieluszko served as curate to various Churches in and around Warsaw and neighboring villages. Due to his ill health he did not have a parish of his own and as a result, he was sent to work within the medical community of Warsaw, as a priest attached to the Warsaw curia. It was during this time he became a resident priest of St. Stanislaw Kostka church in the Zoliborz district of Warsaw. (G. Sikorska, *op. cit.*)

In August 1980 strikes broke out at Gdansk and almost throughout Poland. On Sunday 15 August 10,000 striking workers at Huta Warszawa demanded that the mass should be held inside the iron and steel making complex. Popieluszko was chosen both by the archbishop and the strikers to celebrate this mass. (B. Chenu. *op.cit.* p. 209.) He said masses and heard confessions and this involvement made an everlasting influence upon him. It was here that the bond between Popieluszko and workers was born. Later, he was chosen by the workers as their chaplain at the plant, and St. Stanislaw Kostka Church became an official 'parish' church for the steel workers in Warsaw. (*Ibid.*, p. 150.) In the following months, Popieluszko became involved in trade union meetings as an observer without taking part in any decisions. He began to feel a profound sympathy for solidarity. (Bruno Chenu, *et.al*, *op.cit.*, p. 150.)

From April 1981 he started conducting religious services and these were related to the problems of the time. As a result, thousands of workers took part in them. (*Ibid.* p. 210.)

He became increasingly involved in the activities of the steel workers and 'remained a source of moral and spiritual support to them throughout the solidarity era', which came to an end with the announcement of martial law on 13 December 1981. (J. Luxmoore, "The Polish Church Under Martial Law", p. 124. *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 15, No.2, Summer 1987. pp. 124-166.) Solidarity was banned and thousands of its members and supporters were detained. But Popieluszko continued to be very close to the workers and he believed this to be his duty as a priest. (G. Sikorska, *op.cit.*, p. 150) He attended several political trials connected with action taken by steel workers during 1981. It was in the courtroom that he got the idea of conducting 'special service for those in prison or under pressure and for their families'. In February 1982 in St. Stanislaw Kostka Church, the first mass for Poland was conducted. Thereafter masses came to be known as the 'masses for the nation and they attracted people from all walks of life in several thousands'. (*Ibid.*) The masses started by reciting poetry by Polish actors and singing of national songs and ended with the same. (*Ibid.*)

During the masses, Popieluszko's sermon expressed the desire "to include God in the difficult and powerful problems of the country" and repeatedly attacked 'the abuse of human rights and freedom of conscience' in Poland. (*Ibid.*)

He compared the sufferings of Poland with those of Christ on the cross:

The trial of Jesus goes on forever. It continues through his brothers. Only their names, their faces, their dates, and their birth places change." (Bruno Chenu, *et.al, op.cit.*, p. 210.)

His was the conviction that the Church cannot be neutral in the face of injustice but the defender of all the oppressed. He pointed to the authorities a long and detailed list of all factors that prevented reconciliation. According to him, "the bitter helpless and humiliation which many people suffer daily does not assist reconciliation." (G. Sikorska, *op.cit.*, p. 151.)

Concentrating on current problem, Popieluszko always took note of the largest issues involved such as the nature of authority and government, justice and the fundamental human right to freedom and believed that the root cause of the problems of Poland was the exclusion of God from its socio-political life and in the governing process. The basic Christian truth is that the authorities should serve the people whom they govern. Popieluszko's sermon frequently mentioned that freedom to humans is given by God and therefore any enslavement of freedom is to work against God. (*Ibid.*, p. 152.)

Popieluszko's sermons express his stand against revenge and use of violence and a desire to pray not only for those who are oppressed but also for those who oppress people. As a staunch supporter of solidarity he referred to it as the 'patriotic struggle to reinstate human dignity'. (*Ibid.*, p. 152.)

He believed that witnessing to the truth leads to freedom and constantly encouraged his hearers to witness to truth over against the lies. It is by witnessing to the truth that one overcomes fear which is the root cause for enslavement. In one of his sermons he says, "If truth becomes for us a value, worthy of suffering and risk, then we shall overcome fear -- the direct reason for our enslavement". (*Ibid.*, p. 154.)

The essence of Popieluszko's vision of freedom is the concept of solidarity of hearts, which was first introduced to the Poles by Pope Paul II. He strongly challenged his hearers to show care and love for those who suffer innocently. He says, "let us pray to God to fill us with the power of his spirit, to reawaken the spirit of true solidarity in our

hearts." (*Ibid.*, p. 154.)

Fr. Popieluszko's vision of liberation made no appeal for the Polish authorities who dubbed the "masses for the nation" as "rallies hostile to the Polish state and accused Fr. Popieluszko of abusing the Church and his position as a priest." (*Ibid.*, p. 155.)

Since 1982, when the first mass for Poland was organized Fr. Popieluszko had been under surveillance by the security police. In December 1982 his parish house was broken and vandalized. He had been detained on a number of occasions as on 28 August 1983 on the charge of 'abusing religion for political purposes' and was required to face interrogations. (Irena Korba, Father Jerzy Popieluszko, p. 89; Religion in Communist Lands, Vol. 13, No.1 Spring 1985, pp. 89-90.) Four months later he had been detained on charges that large quantities of explosives and leaflets calling for a national armed uprising were found in his house. Fr. Popieluszko denied any knowledge of the material and was released on bail after the intervention of Archbishop Bronislaw Dabrowski, the secretary of the Polish episcopate. (*Ibid.* p. 89.) He returned to his work as usual and in May 1984 preached a sermon which implicitly supported the election boycott sponsored by solidarity. (*Ibid.*, p. 89) Again he was summoned for interrogation in June. In August general amnesty was granted and as a result 625 political prisoners and 35,000 allegedly ordinary criminals were released. Also, under the amnesty, charges against Fr. Popieluszko were suspended on the condition that he would not give any cause for complaint for a period of two and half years. However on August 26 he preached at a mass for the prisoners freed under the amnesty and demanded the authorities to follow up the amnesty by lifting the ban on solidarity, allowing freedom of expression, releasing underground solidarity leader Bogdanlis and restoring the right to erect crucifixes in class rooms, factories and other places. (A. Tomsy, *op.cit.*, p. 32.)

Various strategies were attempted to remove him from the public including the possibility of transferring him to another parish in exchange for the release of solidarity activist Bogdanlis and Piotr Mierzejewski. Also the church hierarchy was suggested to send him abroad for an unspecified period of study leave. Fr. Popieluszko underwent enormous pressure and had received a number of threats. (Irena Korba, *op.cit.*, pp. 89-90.)

Fr. Popieluszko and his driver, Waldemar Chrostowski were kidnapped

near Torun on 19 October 1984 by three men, one in the guise of a policeman, as they were on their way back to Warsaw from Bydgoszez where Fr. Popieluszko had been preaching. Waldamar Chrostowski managed to escape and reported the incident to the local priest and to the state authorities. An intensive search was done but after 11 days, on 30 October, Fr. Popieluszko's body, beaten up and tied with ropes, was found in a reservoir on the river Vistula. (*Ibid.*, p. 90.)

Fr. Popieluszko freely admitted that he had reason to fear for his life and on one occasion he had said, "if we must die suddenly, it is surely better to meet death defending a worthwhile cause than sitting back and letting injustice win." (*Ibid.*, p. 90.)

## **Reflection**

Fr. Popieluszko was an ordinary Catholic priest but who sacrificed his life for the cause of human dignity and freedom. He was with the people when they were degraded, ill-treated and repressed. He was the voice of those who longed for freedom. He did not limit his duty as a priest to conduct worship services or in reducing faith into a purely private matter for the individual. Faith in God for him does not try to escape from the reality. His faith in God made him identify himself with the struggling masses. He recognized that the way to liberation is through courageously witnessing to the truth and through overcoming fear. It was his conviction that there is meaning in suffering for truth and even sacrificing one's life for it. This conviction was a result of his understanding of God that God is a suffering God who suffers along with his suffering people and who works for their liberation. Fr. Popieluszko strived for human liberation in a given existential situation. In him, we see the ability to relate the gospel with the problem of freedom of people here and now.

The key value for which Fr. Popieluszko stood was for human dignity. His passion for human dignity was rooted in faith in God who makes no social discrimination and that love of God is love of one's neighbor. He had a vision of national liberation through non-violent resistance and a spirit of solidarity He had become the symbol of non-violent resistance. Jerry's sermons offer an insight into the longings of the polish people to live in a Polish way, in a Christian tradition and freedom. The life and death of Fr. Popieluszko makes him a powerful witness of a suffering and liberating God and challenges us to live likewise.

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### **Chapter 14 The Martyrs of Karamchedu and Tsundur, by K.L. Richardson**

Traditionally, the Reddys and Kammas are the two high caste communities in Andhra Pradesh who have been enjoying the supremacy in the societal order. Particularly in the village life, their authority is final. The oppressive character of theirs is unique in terms of socio-economic, religio-cultural and political spheres of dalit life, we can see the oppressive strategies of these communities in the last fifteen years to counter the progress and transformation of the scheduled caste, now commonly called dalits.

According to 1991 census, the total population of A.P. is 66.3 million. The caste composition in A.P. is as follows:

S.C 15.5%

S.T 75

B.C. 44.

Minorities 17

Reddy 6.5

Kamma 3

Brahmin 3.5

Others 3

Let us examine the two historic atrocities on Dalits that took place in Karamchedu and Tsundur in 1985 and 1991 respectively.

### *KARAMCHEDU, JULY 17, 1985*

Karamchedu village has its own significance right from the time of British Raj because of its zamindars and other influential personalities. In later days, it became one of the dominant forces in the economic and political fields of the state with the emergence of neo-rich due to trade benefits. The hegemonic process is well established by controlling not only the local society but various sectors like educational institutions and industrial firms etc. The kamma community is about 8,000 out of the total village population of 11,000. Madiga children were made child labor. So, illiteracy rate is high. The 'Paleru' system, i.e. understanding between the landlords and the dalit on work and wage, exists. This means the madiga has to work for his master for few hours morning and evening other than his routine daily labor. No dalit is allowed to sit in the local hotel or even at the side seat of a high Caste man traveling in state or private bus. The two sub-castes (dalits) madigas and malas are around 1,000. The denominational attachment of madigas is to Baptist and R.C.M churches whereas the malas are with the Lutheran church. Both of them have cordial relation. The neighboring town Chirala is having numerous strength of mala where the kammias have to go daily on their educational and commercial enterprises. Traditionally, dalits are strong supporters of congress and communism whereas the kammias are non-congress.

The event took place on July 17, 1985 morning at 7 a.m. The genuine reason is a protest claimed by dalits when a high caste man washed his animal in the madiga tank where whole village use to drink the same

water during water crisis. High castes did not tolerate the growing awareness among the dalits. Various reasons are there for this new awareness building. For example the mass media programs on hygiene, adult education programs and dalit upliftment schemes from Indira Gandhi times, etc. The martyrs of Karamchedu are:

Tella Yehoshuva

Tella Muttaiah

Tella Moses

Duddu China Vandanam

Duddu Abraham

Duddu Ramesh

It is interesting to note that the response came from various sections of the people in and around Karamchedu and Chirala. The malas in the village helped the madigas by giving secret shelter. The role played by the Lutheran Church in Chirala is commendable. Dalit leaders Katti Padama Rao and Bojja Tarakam had mobilized the masses to protest against this evil. Above all, Mr. Mukiri Samson, an activist, played an important role till the court's final Judgment on 31.9.1994. Ambedkar Youth association is not active since majority of madigas and malas are associated with their respective churches. 800 members were rehabilitated in Chirala with pucca houses by the government. Self employment schemes were introduced for their new life.

### ***Evaluation***

The simple exercise of the worth of the caste people on the dalits in the form of breaking Indira Gandhi and Jesus Christ. Photos in one of the victims house, clearly shows that the symbolic political identity and socio-ethnic identity of dalits is not good in the eyes of high castes. In the whole movement we can see the value of human expression in Christian faith. Further, Mr. Samson's few recommendations were taken into consideration into Justice Desai's commission and later S.C/S.T. Act in 1989. Therefore, it is very clear that Christian church-oriented movement succeeded in its fight against oppression with its clear

positivism. Now S.C/ S.T Act of 1989 benefits the rights of dalits in 5 lakh villages in India.

## **TSUNDURU**

Tsunduru is a panchayat mandal in Guntur district consisting of 3,500 malas. Major group is Reddys. Malas are educated and well employed mostly in Indian Railways. Self-dignity and identity are there in Malas' life-style which is not foimd to be good in the eyes of the Reddy community.

The brutal killing of dalits by Reddys took place on August 6, 1991. The dalits, who were killed, were most of them young men. These young men were chased from place to place, were wounded and were beaten up with cycle chains and iron rods and were kicked to death in broad day light. They became, thus, victims of an inhuman society, a society which believes in caste stratification which is worse than racism. Dalits who ran away from the village were accommodated in the Salvation Army Church at Ithanagaram and Tenali because of its accessibility to all for meeting, accommodating and protecting. Lutherans in Tenali town and surrounding places had come forward and helped in various ways:

The following were the Martyrs of Tsunduru:

Mandru Ramesh -21 yr. Studied BA. Unemployed

Angalakuduru Rajamohan -22 yr. Ag. Laborer

Jaladi Mattaiah -42 yr. Married. Ag. Laborer

Jaladi Immanuel -45 yr. Married. Ag. Laborer

Devarapalli Jayaraj -28 yr. Married. Attender in Gov. Office

Mallela Subba Rao -35 yr. Married. Ag. Laborer

Sunhuru Samson -30 yr. Married. Ag. Laborer

Jaladi Issaku -30 yr. Married. Ag. Laborer

Kommerla Anil Kumar -25 yr. BA. (Shot dead in police firing)

Later, state government provided them with good housing programs, employment and distribution of land to each family. Residential high school is established in the colony Special court is also established in Tsundur itself.

### *Evaluation*

Ambedkar youth association is active in spite of local Christian church influence. Emergence of youth leadership led to mobilize the masses against the evils of the society. Education and self-reliance are the two predominant characters or forces of the movement.

### *Comparison of Karamchedu and Tsundur*

In Karamchedu the oppressors are Kammas who are politically affiliated to Telugu Desam Party a regional party. Madigas are illiterates and traditional vote bank for Congress. But the growing awareness of self expression of human values among madigas is the main cause for the suppression. But politically the Reddys and Malas in Tsundur are generally for Congress. The literacy rate and the economic development of dalits are the reasons for the suppression. The critical observation of these two events clearly vindicated that the movements led by the dalits are successful only when it is organized and controlled by the Christian church. For example, until the victims are transferred to Guntur Mangalamandiram which is wholly controlled the church itself, there were negative thoughts in the minds of the police and revenue officials with regard to the movement. When church became the symbol of protection and liberation, some people in Chirala tried to veil the face of the church building with big shopping complex buildings. That was strongly protested by the local church youth and succeeded in stopping the game-plan of the oppressors.

\* The Rev. L. K. Richardson had worked as AELC pastor at Tsundur before he joined Bishop's College, Calcutta, where he taught History of Christianity. Now he is working as a student pastor in Guntur. This write-up was attempted by him after he conducted an extensive field research.



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# **Martyrs in the History of Christianity** **by Franklyn J. Balasundaram (ed.)**

## **Appendix: Non-Christian Martyrs**

Rev. Dr. Franklyn J. Balasundaram was Professor in the Department of the History of Christianity , United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, India 1997, for The United Theological College. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### **1: The Martyrs of Punnappra Vayalar Struggle, by Saji, K.V.**

#### **Introduction**

The Punnappra Vayalar struggle is a chapter which was written by blood in the history of the independence struggle of Kerala and India. If the blood of the early Christian martyrs was the seed of the Christian Church, then the blood of the martyrs of Punnappra and Vayalar was shed to control the autocratic reign of a ruler and to begin the process of humanizing people, the people who were once *no people!*

Let me say this at the outset. It may seem difficult to call the 'people' who were killed in the struggle as martyrs. But my faith demands me to do so as my eyes were a witness to the scattered bones of those heroes who died on the sands of Punnappra and Vayalar. "They were the people who sacrificed their lives against the cruel rule, inhuman laws, oppression and exploitation". (Prof. K. Vijayan Nair "*The Bones Will Blossom and the Sun Will Rise*", an article from ORA, p.61.) So let me say that they were the people who shed their blood not in order to be praised as freedom fighters or to become historic heroes but for a movement, a manifesto that is the 'human manifesto'.

## Background

Punnappra and Vayalar were included in the Ambalappuzha and Shertallai taluks of the famous Travancore state. Travancore in those days was a subsidiary ally of the paramount British power. Dewan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer administered the state on behalf of the Raja. He was a despot and his overbearing traits were disliked very much by the people. Dewan Ramaswamy Iyer insisted on a free Travancore state as he wanted to stay in power. In order to consolidate his position, he suggested a new system of administration according to which the position of Dewanship was un-changeable. It was called the 'American model'. (N. K. Jose, *"Punnappra Vayalar Struggle and the Dalits"*, an article in *"Dalit Desiyata"*, p. 37.) Punnappra village is very near to Alleppey town. It was and still is a center of the fisherfolk. Alleppey, which is the first industrial town of Travancore, is also a harbor town. There were many coir factories and 'copras' owned by the Europeans as well as Indians. A number of industrial laborers at Alleppey belonged to the 'Ezhava' community. At the same time, the fishermen who lived in the coastal areas were very poor. They used ordinary hired nets for fishing, because they were not able to own them. They had to borrow money and boats from the money lenders. The money lenders and boat owners charged heavy interest and they determined the price of the fish. So, the fishermen had to return home with sad faces and empty pockets. "The exploitation of the poor by the rich was severe. If anybody objected either he will be finished or denied the privilege of borrowing". (Dalit Desiyata, p. 40.) Interestingly, the entire coastal area was owned by the land lords. The wives of the poor tenants and fishermen were supposed to do manual or bonded labor in the landlords houses. These people were given a small piece of land to make a hut and a coconut tree and the right to pluck coconuts from that tree only. If anybody plucked a coconut from any other coconut tree, he or she was chased out of the land.

## Vayalar

Vayalar, which comes under the Shertallai taluk is blessed with sandy soil, which is good for coconut cultivation. Most of the land there was owned by the feudal chieftains. The agricultural laborers were forced to lead a life of slavery and most of these laborers were dalits.

## Laborer Association

In 1904, the coir workers formed themselves into an association. They started to protest against the illegal alliance of police with the landlords and the factory owners. This organization extended its attempt to organize the workers in Punnappra and other parts. In 1938, some of the leaders like R. Suganthan and P.K. Kunju were arrested. The workers protested against this. And this encouraged the laborers to unite further.

The awakening of the coir workers and fisher people made a lot of impact in that region. The Union, along with the A.T.T.U.C (All Travancore Trade Union Congress) submitted a memorandum to the Government, raising 27 demands. Some of the demands were:

1. End the Dewan rule
2. Right to franchise
3. Job security
4. Bonus
5. End illegal action against workers
6. Minimum wages, etc.

In this issue both fishermen and agricultural workers joined together. (Variam Parambil Krishnan, "Punnappra Samaram", an article from ORA, p. 47.)

### **Immediate Reasons for the Struggle**

In Vayalar, the mobilized laborers gradually began to disrespect the landowners and sometimes ventured to question them about their evil deeds. This indeed was a fundamental change. This upsurge on the part of the laborers made the landlords furious. They lowered the wage of the poor laborers and evicted their poor tenants.

This was the time of Second World War. The after effect of that terrible war affected Travancore. The people of Shertallai could not survive and many people fled to other places in search of food. (N.K. Jose, *Dalit Desiyata*, p. 43.) The landlords and factory owners made use of this opportunity. They formed an Union of their own and took a decision

which was detrimental to the cause of the laborers. They also appointed their own people to various jobs. As a result, there was tension between those who had and those who did not have.

The police and goondas began to attack the laborers wherever they were found. They were tortured cruelly in their huts and work spots. Their women folk were brutally raped. (Pallipparambil Joseph, A Hero of Punnappra struggle".)

In this situation, the involvement of the Communist Party is worth mentioning. They made a plan for the collective living of the laborers so that they may avoid the troubles caused by the hooligans and the police.

One day, a notorious rowdy of a landlord named Naluketil Raman picked up a Pulaya laborer and tied him to a coconut tree, and tortured the poor man till he died. This roused the working class people in Vayalar.

In Punnappra, one day after the fishing, four fishermen went to the employer to ask for their wage. They demanded just wages for their fish. That irritated the employer and so he tortured them with the illegal help of the police, the fishermen were arrested. When the people came to know this, they reacted. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the laborers demanded the release of these four men. Meanwhile, the landlords and the influential people started hooliganism and tortured the laborers with the help of the police. The laborers' women were raped. Because of this, the workers started to attack the landlord's houses. But their houses were used as police camping centers.

At one particular time when the laborers realized that their entire life was being threatened and there was no other way, they decided to attack the police camp. They gave information to all camps including Vayalar. *In October 1946*, they gathered in a camp called 'Vattayar". From there they moved to Punnappra, with wooden spears. The police tried to block them and later, without any warning started to fire. The people used their spears. But before 303 guns, their wooden spears were nothing. A lot of blood was shed on that day.

### **Toll of the Martyrs**

It is believed that there had been at least 15 camps connected with the struggle. The volunteers in the Vayalar camp were about 1300. And,

other camps consisted approximately 450 people each. So, the total number of participants could have been about 6300. According to N.K. Jose the total number of people killed or injured was about 6000. And 90% of them were Dalits. (H.K. Chakrapani, "The Background of Punnappa Vayalar struggle", N.K. Jose, Punnappa Vayalar Struggle, p. 50.) During my visit to Punnappa, an eye witness of the incident told me that twenty nine natives of Punnappa were killed.

Some of the surviving martyrs recollected the misfortune. Chakrapani was arrested after the struggle was over. In the Jail, he was tortured brutally. His back bone was broken. Even the flesh came away due to beating. His back got infected. Now he is living as a dead body.

Another living martyr is Dominic, a Christian. Even now he is unable to turn his neck. It was a presentation made to him by the police. He was asked to take bath in a pond which was filled with filth. He objected and in the process, warranted the breaking of the back bone.

Yet another is Sukumaren. He was put into the prison for twenty years. Because of the heavy battering on his head, he lost his eye sight.

### **Some Results of the Struggle**

Many had to sacrifice their lives in the struggle. However, struggle itself helped. Some of the achievements are:

It helped reduce the power of the landowners and exploiters. The struggle paved the way for India's Independence struggle. A situation in which an employee could demand his wage came into existence. The landless people were able to get the land and adult franchise was won. (Dominic Vellappinadu, "Punnappa Samaram", ORA, pp. 39-44.)

### **Evaluation and Reflection**

The uprising at Punnappa-Vayalar is the most important of all. the struggles which took place in Travancore in the 20th century. The Dalit force was in the forefront of the struggle. Thus, the majority of the martyrs who were shot down by the garrison of Dewan Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer belonged to the Dalit communities. It is a great pity that there is no record to substantiate this statement because those who praise the heroic deeds of the martyrs are hesitant to admit that those

who were gunned down that day were mostly dalits. (N.K. Jose, *Dalit Desiyata*, p. 34.)

I strongly feel that the motivating factors which pushed those people to participate in that struggle was a quest for freedom to travel, to live and work and obtain just wages for their labors, and protection for their women from the landowners and their henchmen. That was why they preferred death rather than to live without meaning.

As a student of history, I am able to say that the tragedy of Punnappa-Vayalar struggle is a outcome of the inhuman power of the power-mongers and dehumanizing little powers. The struggle speaks a lot about the suffering that the downtrodden underwent there. What was achieved by this struggle in which thousands of people had to lose their lives? This is a challenging question. The right to work for eight hours and, not more, is an important outcome of the struggle. The way in which people involved reacted is debated now. Their struggle is labeled as violent. The use of violence as a last resort is justified. Even Jesus adopted that means in the course of his life at least once. Non-violence is possible only when the enemy is 'human'. People in this struggle sacrificed their lives because they had no option and their struggle was aimed at overcoming their age-long slavery and suffering. Punnappa-Vayalar struggle was a struggle for liberation and humanization.

In the Punnappa-Vayalar struggle, thousands sacrificed their lives for the sake of others. Even after Independence, Government after Government had praised the martyrs. But it is appropriate to ask: how much the Dalits are accepted in the society? As one of the living martyrs told me: "Even now I am estranged. My pain and sickness because of the torture are my only friends"!

## **Conclusion**

It is a fact that thousands were killed in the Punnappa-Vayalar struggle, including Christians. Can we call all of them "Christian" martyrs? For me, the criterion to define 'Christian' is 'human'. There is no 'Christian concern' without 'human concern'. A Christian, after Jesus Christ, is a 'man (person) for others'. A martyr is a victim-witness who gives life for the just cause of others. Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm here. He was a man for others -- a martyr for the poor, oppressed and exploited. I deem the Punnappa-Vayalar people as martyrs because they died for a just cause, to enhance the lives of others, and to give meaning in the

lives of others. Such of these deserve to be called 'Christian' martyrs.

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Personal interview with some of the participants of the struggle.

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## **Appendix: Non-Christian Martyrs**

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## **2: The Martyrdom of a Working Class Hero: Sankar Guha Niyogi, by Vijoy T. Oommen**

### A Life Sketch

Sankar Guha Niyogi was born in the year 1943. But later he moved from his native Bengal to Bhilai in 1961. He sought employment in the Bhilai Steel Plant. He studied for and obtained a B.Sc. Degree while working as a skilled worker in the Bhilai Steel Plant. By 1964-65, he had become a Union Organizer and was the Secretary of the Black Furnace Action Committee. In the next few years, Niyogi was associated with the Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries, the Precursor of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). (Sankar Guha Niyogi: His Work and Thinking, published by Jan Vikas Andolan, p.2.) The growing intensity of his political activity caused him to lose his job. He then left Bhilai and moved to the far-flung areas of Chattisgarh -- the vast cultural entity which includes the districts of Bastar, Bilaspur, Durg, Raipur, Rajnandgaon and Sangujei. (Ibid., p. 3.) After a brief period of his working with the C.P.I. (M-L), he left the party on his own.

Niyogi started the work on his own in the year 1962. It was during this

time that his whole life took the shape of an activist. His nomadic existence took him to many occupations and struggles, all within the Chattisgarh region. He worked as a Forest worker in Bastar, catching and selling fish, as an agricultural laborer and shepherding goats. Everywhere he was involved in local struggles. The struggle of Adivasis in Bastar against Mongra Reservoir and the Daihard people's struggle for water were some of the struggles from which he learnt his early lessons in mass organization. Gradually, he had become a part and a parcel of that community and started working in mines where his long interaction with mining and mines began.

It was in 1975, he found his life-partner, Asha, and married her. By 1975, his activities as an organizer of the mines were sufficiently irksome to the establishment which led to his arrest during the emergency. He spent 13 months in jail under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). On returning from the jail, he shifted to Dalli Rajhara and soon founded the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS). (Ibid.) Later he formed the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) to take up the wider problems of the region, especially those of the Adivasis. A subsequent struggle to free bonded laborers in the region led to the formation of the Chattisgarh Gamin Shramik Sangh (CGSS). Over the years, these three had worked in tandem.

Since 1991 his activities had shifted to organizing workers in the Industries of Bhilai. The earlier struggles had been primarily in interior areas. Now the movement came into direct, sharp and sustained conflict with the wealthiest and most powerful industrialists in that area.

Niyogi was not just a leader of the workers in Chattisgarh, but he had also become a synonym for the search for alternate politics. He was a trade Union Leader, not of the variety that one is used to. His concerns reached far beyond economic demands, enveloping all aspects of the People's lives -- their health, education, and the enhancement of women's status in the family through their empowerment. He had built up a status in the family through their empowerment. He had built up a powerful movement in Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh with great enthusiasm. This struggle was not just against private industrialists but all those forces who joined hard to keep the down-trodden.

Historical Context: Socio-Economic and Political

The exploitative nature of the industrialists, the upper class, the

Government and the politicians were the factors that motivated Niyogi to take part in the struggles of the oppressed. The origin of CMSS had to do very much with exploitation. The Chattisgarh iron-ore mines had become the captive mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant. At that time, the workers slogged in these mines for Rs.3/-a day with no job security and other facilities, (Deccan Herald, Oct. 6, 1991.) in violation of several labor laws. There was not a single labor law that was being honored in these industries. Instead of the statutory eight hours work, here the work stretched up to twelve hours without minimum wages prescribed for an eight hour per day. Women were made to do night shifts. Industrialists did not seem to have heard of maternity benefits. Women had to take unpaid leave precisely when they needed more money. In some hazardous industries, the safety precautions were unheard of, placing the workers' lives and limbs at risk.

For about nine months, thousands of workers in about 104 industrial units of the Chattisgarh region had been engaged in a heroic struggle under the leadership of Mukti Morcha. (Update Collective, Aug. 16, 1991.) Because, flouting all labor laws, these industrial units were exploiting the workers to the hilt. Majority of the workers were kept temporary and contractual. In one of the companies, out of the 2000 workers, only 105 were permanent. Workers were made to do long hours of work while the wages were kept very low. In another company the contract workers had to work twelve hours a day for a paltry monthly wage of Rs. 300 - 500.

In the entire Durg-Bhilai Industrial Belt, on an average not more than 10% of the worker force was employed on a permanent basis and the rest were all contract workers. A recent study in major Industrial units showed the proportion of permanent workers to range between 6 and 8 per cent of the total work force. The wages of an average contract worker was not more than 12/- per day. (Economic and Political Weekly, Oct. 5, 1991, p. 2272.)

The nexus of the Industrialists and the Government paved the way for massive arrests and attacks by hired goondas. Once the workers of the Chattisgarh district were heavily lathi-charged by the police, because one day the workers went to the nearby city to attend a rally. When they resumed duty on the next day, the management and the police physically prevented them from entering the factory. A recently published People's Union reports that the police then resorted to a lathi charge on 150 workers which was totally unprovoked as the workers were completely

peaceful. It also reported that the lathi-charge was carried out at the insistence of the Excise Officer, who proclaimed that "they want to make a union, we will teach them a lesson, hit them". (Update Collective, Aug. 8, 1991, p. 3.) Another day, some of the CMSS workers were not allowed to work. They protested against this and staged a demonstration in front of the factory gate. But later they were invited for discussion by the management. But when the workers entered the factory premises, they were lathicharged by the police, tear-gas shells were hurled on them, and fired. The police followed them to their houses, dragged them out and beat them up. Many were wounded and several others were arrested.

The worst brutality happened in June 1991. After a peaceful Dharna at the factory gate, the retrenched workers were returning to the trade union office. When the procession was passing beside the nearby police station, the Inspector crossed the procession in his motorbike and kicked a woman worker. But the people were very quiet. Suddenly, without any provocation, some police men pounced on the workers, beating and kicking them mercilessly. They pulled down the union flag and had beaten many. Many were arrested and kept in jail. But the Government in Madhya Pradesh did nothing to assuage the feelings of the workers. On the contrary, they had openly sided with the industrialists. The Government allowed its police and the administrative machinery to be bought over by the industrialists.

Niyogi was not only concerned about the exploitation of human resources, but he was also concerned about the environmental issues. The rivers nearby the factories turned blood red in color due to the high iron-ore content in the water. Effluents from the distillery, the steel factory and the fertilizer plants had poisoned the waters of the Kharon and Shivanath rivers. The Chattisgarh mines are an example of the worst havoc wreaked by destruction on the environment. The forests were cut down. One day one lakh of trees were cut and carted away in the name of modernization. In those places sprang up scores of saw mills. Finally, a day came when no trace of the green canopy was left. Instead of that, grand palaces of the sawmill owners and traders came up. Then the cement plant was installed and the powder dust shower of cement which spread over the fields destroyed the agriculture of lakhs of farmers. Meanwhile the putrifying molasses at the newly opened distillery created an all pervasive odor. Eventually all the rivers were polluted. A vile itching spread among the people who lived beside these rivers. The mortality rate of cattle became unnaturally high.

This was the historical context of Chattisgarh region during the time of Niyogi.

### **The Witness of Niyogi**

The above factors forced Niyogi to work for the upliftment of the exploited and to protect the environment. Under the leadership of Niyogi, CMSS fought for statutory minimum wages and eradication of contract labor. The Chattisgarh movement led by Niyogi transcended the question whether industrial workers and peasants or agricultural laborers have the major political or historical precedence in terms of political organization. By organizing labor in iron ore and other mines drawing largely upon Adivasis from the surrounding districts, Niyogi had struck at the center of the economic process. They could make a better life for the miners and their families. It spearheaded a successful anti-alcohol campaign which closely involved women and led them to their growing participation in the functioning of the CMSS. The union began running a dispensary with modern facilities. They built a hospital with the savings and labors of the Union members. They also built schools.

### **The Martyrdom of Niyogi**

Niyogi formed the Prajati Steel Engineering Shramik Sangh to fight for the workers rights. The industrialists retaliated by throwing out 700 workers. The police came down heavily on the workers. Scores of workers were injured and Niyogi was arrested. The Administration had decided that he was the root cause of the continuing law and order problem in Bhilai. He was a thorn in the flesh of some of the industrialists because he was campaigning against the labor laws. So, they influenced officials in a bid to bar him from the area. The B.J.P. Government issued an exilement notice on Sankar Guha Niyogi, the militant and widely respected leader of Chattisgarh. In a twenty-page show-cause notice, the collector of the District brought ninety one charges against Niyogi. These charges were related to labor struggles which stated that he was to be externed from the five districts for a period of one year.

Later he was arrested but it was during the time of elections and some of his dedicated comrades, along with the workers, ran a campaign for his release. And he was released from the jail about a fortnight before his

murder. He visited Delhi and met both the President and the Prime Minister to appraise them of the conditions in Bhilai. He was leading a perfectly legal and constitutional struggle for workers rights, he pointed out. In the early hours of September 20th, 1991, an assassin reached in through an open window of the CMSS Office in Bhilai and fired six bullets into Niyogi, who was perfectly asleep then.

The B.J.P. Government had condemned the murder of Niyogi. But the same Government treated him as though he were a major don when he was alive. The administration was trying to throw him out of the area where he lived and worked with such zeal. As tensions mounted and when physical attacks on union workers increased, Niyogi himself anticipated his death. Before he died, he spoke on how the industrialists of the Bhilai area would make their final assault on the movement in the form of a conspiracy to kill him.

## **Reflection and Conclusion**

"This is not just the murder of an individual, it is an assault on a Movement". These were the words of one of his close associates. It is very interesting to see that till the very end of his life, Niyogi remained steadfast in using non-violent struggle, exploiting every legal avenue for redressal of workers' and people's demands. In one of the reports by the Citizen's Committee, it is stated that:

"Niyogi was killed because he was an odd man out in an area where none had dared to challenge the network that some industrialists operated to deny their workers even basic amenities and living wages ... Niyogi's murder assumes sinister proportions when seen in the context of the rapidly changing industrial scenario in the country under pressure from World Bank and the IMF. A person like Niyogi, with a vision of self-reliance and alternative development of the Indian society, will then be missed more than ever before."

Niyogi's politics was a politics of struggle and creativity. Struggle for creation and creation for struggle. In one of his last speeches. he says: "This world is beautiful and I certainly love this beautiful world, but my work and my duty are important to me. I have to fulfil the responsibility that I have taken up. These people will kill me, but I know that by killing me none can finish our movement". Niyogi stressed very much that struggle against injustice and exploitation is our basic task. It has to be combined as much as possible with constructive work.

Some may ask whether we can consider Niyogi as a Christian martyr. For me whoever gave their life like Niyogi, for the poor and the oppressed, is a Christian martyr. Because the concern was to uplift the people. It is for their sake, he gave his life. He was the one who searched for new developmental paths and a new society based on justice, equality and human values. He struggled relentlessly in this direction till the end of his life. In Niyogi we see a magnificent gift of God. He died for our sake and for the sake of the coming generation. Bishop Romero said: "If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador ... A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die."

The issue posed by Niyogi will cast its shadows on further struggles in the remaining part of this and in the next century. Niyogi's is one of the more prominent images that will cast shadow over India's struggle in the next century Niyogi has started something that is quite unstoppable to work for the poor and the downtrodden. Let us also dedicate ourselves anew to the struggle for the liberation of these people.

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Mr. Thomas John belongs to the Church of North India Bombay Diocese.

Rev. Vijoy. T. Oommen is an ordained minister in the Mar Tnoma Church and he is now working in the Christava Sahitya Samithy, Tiruvalla.

Rev. James Jacob is an ordained minister in the Knanaya Syrian Church.

Ms. Varneihthangi hails from the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram.

Rev. Philip George is an ordained minister in the Marthoma Church.

Mr. KR Thomas hails from an Independent Church in Kerala and he is involved in Teaching at the A.M.M. Bible Institute near Tiruvalla.

Rev. Mathew Kuruvilla is an ordained minister in the Knanaya Syrian Church and he is working in Kalyan, Thane.

Rev. John George is an ordained minister in the Church of North India Nagpur Diocese and he is ministering in the St. Andrew's Church, Chandrapur.

Rev. F. Pachhunga is working as a Probationary Pastor in Tuipuibari, Mizoram.

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Mr. Billygraham Raj hails from the Salvation Army, Kanyakumari

Rev. Sunny, P. is a minister in the Pentecostal Church in Kerala

Mr. John Roberts is involved in the ministry of the CASA as the

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Mr. G.J.B. Theophilus working in Prajwala, Chittoor is doing doctoral studies now and he hails from Kakinada,

Rev. K.L. Richardson is an ordained minister in the AELC and he was working as a Student Pastor in Guntur. Earlier, he taught at the Bishop's College, Calcutta and is now doing his doctoral research under SATHRI

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