

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL MARTYRDOM: THE BLURRING OF DISTINCTION

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This article questions the notion of odium fidei as a condition before someone can be considered a martyr. The notion works under the assumption that the ones responsible for the death of a martyr did so out of hatred. Moreover, the notion implies that the condition for canonization is actually in the victimizer, not in the victim. But more importantly, it excludes from canonization those martyrs who died for their political convictions, even if they were inspired by faith. Appropriating the notion of political holiness in the thought of Jon Sobrino, the article proposes "inspired by faith" as much more appropriate condition for someone to be considered a martyr.

INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to tackle one aspect of the canonization of saints in the Roman Catholic Church. The issue is not the laxity of the process. Indeed, no unbiased observer can call the process lax. A candidate can be canonized only after a long and tedious process. It requires a miracle attributed to the prayers addressed to the candidate for canonization. Such miracles must be authenticated by experts as having no scientific explanation in the current state of knowledge. Furthermore, we allow the devil to have a say, in a manner of speaking, in the person of the *advocatus diaboli*, whose task is to argue against canonization. The advocate may uncover some character flaws in the candidate that would question his or her sanctity.

Neither does this paper address the politics of the choices. We can readily admit that the choices of the Church on who are to be canonized and included in the long list of saints is not neutral or value free. The same is true with hagiography or how their lives are presented to the faithful. The choices reflect prevailing ideologies in the Church. They tell us which values are being

promoted or condemned. We thus agree with the following statement:

To read the lives of the saints literally is to misunderstand the polemics and politics of sainthood. Ecclesiastical polemics about saints are shaped with a purpose in mind: to promote as moral one set of values and behavior and to condemn others as immoral. Canonization is, by its nature, political.¹

The author of the above statement, Eileen J. Stenzel, then presents the canonization of St. Maria Goretti as a case in point. In an age that was allegedly becoming loose in its sexual morality, St. Maria Goretti is presented as a model of chaste person who was willing to offer her life in defense of her chastity. Thus, the way St. Maria Goretti is presented would imply that a woman is better dead than raped. But though the message is seemingly absurd, we need to understand that the Church then was reacting to what she saw as inroads of feminism and political liberalism into society.

Another example is Pedro Calungsod. He is seen as a model for the youth. The aim of the Church was to show how someone young can do something great in the mission of evangelization. Thus, he is presented as someone still a boy when he went to the Marianas, even if it is doubtful that the Jesuit mission would include young boys.

But this brief paper will not raise the issue of the politics of the choices for canonization. It is not a critique of some choices. Rather, it tries to treat the very categorization of saints. In this conference about faith and patriotism, the question this paper wants to raise is: what if the categorization itself promotes a separation between patriotism and faith? Can there be a political holiness that may lead to martyrdom?

Before the principle of the separation of church and state became the norm in many modern societies, there was no clear-cut distinction between political and religious martyrs, more especially

¹ Eileen J. Stenzel, "Rape and the Politics of Sainthood," in *The Power of Naming, a Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 226.

in the Jewish tradition. The same could be said of political and religious persecution, or political or religious patriotism. Since Judaism as a religion was intimately linked to the Jewish nation, many of the patriots or martyrs were such in both political and religious senses. Often, they were prophets in both religious and political senses, and they were persecuted and martyred arising from the issues they raised which were both political and religious.

A case in point is the stories of heroism in the Books of Maccabees. The political and religious issues were so entangled that it is practically impossible to separate them. For the patriots who died for the faith, belief in Yahweh cannot survive in the presence of politically imposed Hellenistic culture.² They were willing to fight, even using military means, to stave off the looming loss of national identity brought about by Hellenism.

This was also true of many early Christian martyrs. While those executions under the reign of Nero and of Domitian were whimsical acts of tyrants, most cases of martyrdom in the second century were based on Roman Law. In many cases, they could not worship the Gods as prescribed by the Roman Empire. Many of them underwent trials and faced secular courts for charges that were both political and religious. Indeed, in a letter to Emperor Trajan, Pliny recounted his practice that those accused of being Christians are asked to deny the charge. If ever they did so, they were asked to invoke the Roman gods, and offer adoration, “with wine and incense, to your (the emperor’s – my addition) image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose...”³

For the sake of brevity, let us briefly mention a single case of martyrdom in the second century, the trial of St. Justin, a record of which is extant. He was martyred for his refusal to sacrifice to

² I am following the traditional interpretation. I am aware that some contemporary scholars make qualifications to the traditional consensus that the Maccabees were protesting against a politically imposed Hellenistic culture. See Robert Dorran, “1 and 2 Maccabees” in *The New Jerome Biblical commentary for the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2020).

³ This is often cited in standard textbooks in early Church history. See August Franzen and John Dolan, *A History of the Church*, trans. Peter Becker (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1965), 49.

the Gods and *to obey the emperor*.⁴ Clearly, it was both religious and political.

THE MARTYRDOM OF JESUS

The absence of clear-cut distinction between political and religious martyrdom can be seen no less in the execution of Jesus himself.

Christian faith professes that Jesus died and rose again to save humanity from sin. It is sinful humanity that brought Jesus to his violent and ignominious death. Furthermore, his death was part of God's plan and not simply the result of contingent historical factors.⁵ Jesus willingly submitted himself to this divine plan and his obedience is contrasted with the disobedience of Adam. But if we put into brackets these tenets of our faith, what were the historical reasons that led to his death on the cross?

We cannot possibly explain all the nuances of the issue in this brief research paper. What we can do is simply give a broad outline of the problem.

It is traditionally held that Jesus died because of his claim to be the long-awaited messiah. This view usually goes with the deletion of the political connotations of a messiah. Thus, if we follow this explanation, the martyrdom of Jesus comes from his religious claims. This view is still held today.⁶ Indeed, in the trial

⁴ The prefect Rusticus who tried Justin is recorded to have pronounced this sentence, "Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods *and to obey the command of the emperor* be scourged and led away to suffer capital punishment according to the ruling of the laws." See "Acts of the Martyrdom of Saint Justin and his Companion Saints" in the Second Reading of the Office of Readings of the feast day of the said saint. (My italics).

⁵ See Catechism of the Catholic Church 599.

⁶ See James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making: Vol. I: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 817-818. Among the possible reasons for Jesus' death that are related to his self-identity are: a. He understood his death as part of God's will, as other righteous persons have died before Him, b. He believed himself as the one chosen to call Israel to conversion in the midst of the imminent eschatological crisis c. He believed that he had to go through the cup of suffering as prophesied by the Baptist d. He offered himself as a sacrifice for the new covenant with God.

before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was specifically asked whether he was, “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed.”

However, most contemporary historians and exegetes would point to what Jesus did in the temple during the last week of his life as the proximate reason for the subsequent execution. But even if near unanimity is achieved on this point, they still interpret the temple event in various ways. The problem is made clearer to contemporary readers of the Gospel by pointing out to the fact that selling animals and money changing were legitimate activities within the vicinity of the temple. After all, there were pilgrims from foreign lands with different currencies and who would be extremely inconvenienced if they brought animals from their places of origin. The presence of moneychangers and sellers of animals was a matter of practicality. Thus, what was the action of Jesus, which led to his death, all about?

Joseph Ratzinger, clearly stating from the outset that he is writing not as the Supreme Pontiff but as a professional theologian, relates the temple to the eschatological vision of Jesus. Commenting on Jesus’ pronouncements on the temple, the German theologian and Pope writes,

Inasmuch as it belonged to the Father, Jesus loved the Temple (see Lk. 2:40) and taught there gladly. He defended it as a house of prayer for all peoples and tried to prepare it for that function. Yet, he knew that the age of this Temple was over and that something new was to come, linked to his death and Resurrection.⁷

Although writing from a different perspective, E.P Sanders offers a somewhat similar view. Referring specifically to the so-called violence in the temple, he argues that it was Jesus’ symbolic action that prophesied the emergence of the new temple, who is his very person. In *Jesus and Judaism*, E. P Sanders argues that Jesus intended his gesture “to indicate that the end was at hand and that

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance to Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. by Vatican Secretariat of State, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 35.

the temple would be destroyed, so that a new and perfect temple might arise.”⁸

But there are also contemporary scholars who assert that the temple incident was Jesus’ prophetic denunciation of the Temple, as a religious and political establishment, being co-opted by the powerful Roman Empire. In other words, it was a condemnation of the practical alliance between the Temple Establishment and the representative of the Roman Empire in Galilee, Pontius Pilate.⁹ John Dominic Crossan writes that what Jesus did was a “protest against any collaboration between religious authority and imperial violence.”¹⁰ Crossan recalls the prophet Jeremiah who centuries before Jesus also denounced the Israelites for worshipping in the temple yet failing to do justice to the widows and the orphans. By doing so, they have transformed the temple into a den of thieves, (Jer 7:11).

It is worth noting here that Borg and Crossan do not follow the now largely discredited thesis of S.G.F Brandon¹¹ who affirmed that the violence in the temple indicated Jesus’ sympathy to the revolutionary cause. But still, even without resorting to armed struggle, Jesus’ action was full of religious and political implications. After all, the temple was not just an edifice for spiritual purposes. It was also a part of Jewish imagined identity.

At any rate, even if the religious question could not be discounted, the political implications of the passion are still evident. Even if we grant, for the sake of discourse, that his self-identity was the issue, still we cannot eliminate the political dimensions of his claims. When the ideological foundation of the Empire is premised on its divine seal of approval, any claims involving relationship with God can have political ramifications.

That there was a political dimension can be seen from the account that he was tried by Pilate. Pilate could not have been

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus, and Judaism*, 75.

⁹ See Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-to-Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 39-52.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire* (New York: Harper, 2007), 134.

¹¹ S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967).

concerned about a purely religious issue within Judaism. Moreover, crucifixion was a punishment for political crimes.

This is not to state that Jesus wanted to wrest political power from the Romans. The absurdity of this thesis could be pointed out from the fact that no disciple of his is recorded to have continued to wage an armed struggle after the crucifixion and resurrection. But just because political power was not on his agenda does not mean that his message was apolitical and was interpreted as such by the establishment whose task was to preserve the status quo.

Before we close this section, we need to address one question which may be in the mind of the reader: What has the death of Jesus got to do with the contemporary idea of martyrdom? The answer can be twofold: First, in Christian theology, a martyr is one who dies like Christ, “convinced that he is dedicating his life to God.”¹² Secondly, “the death of the martyr shares in the sacrificial character of the death of Christ and its redemptive power.”¹³ Thus, the historical issues of the causes of Jesus’ death, the charges against him, the values he was willing to die for, can be extremely significant for a Christian understanding of martyrdom. In the words of Jon Sobrino, “a martyr is defined not only, or principally, as someone who dies *for* Christ but someone who dies *like* Christ.”¹⁴

ODIUM FIDEI

The Period of the Enlightenment created a strict separation between faith politics. This divorce between what is spiritual, personal, and private on the one hand and what is worldly and social on the other hand has somehow made us forget that most martyrdoms in our religious tradition contained elements of politics.

¹² “Martyrdom” *S.v. Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. 3 (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968), 419.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 266.

This separation has resulted into a prescribed norm, *odium fidei*, as a *conditio sine qua non* before someone can be considered a martyr. Thus, the early Christian martyrs are considered victims of this hatred of the Christian faith. They were martyred as part of the persecution of the Christian faith. Nearer to home, Filipino saints like Pedro Calungsod and Lorenzo Ruiz and companions, are considered martyrs because those who killed them hated the faith that these two were helping to propagate. Others who belonged to this category include saints Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brebeuf who were brutally tortured and killed by Mohawks in North America.

The case of Edith Stein (Benedicta of the Cross) can be invoked to further explain and criticize the notion of *odium fidei*. There is no question about the sanctity of this Jewish philosopher who converted to the Catholic faith and became a Carmelite nun. But can she be rightly called a martyr? Was she not martyred by the Nazis because of her Jewish roots? To be called a martyr and to be consistent with the notion of *odium fidei*, it was demonstrated that her execution was part of the Nazis' retaliation against the Dutch Catholic Church for speaking against the deportation of Jews.¹⁵

But this notion of *odium fidei* is not without some problems. First, the term suggests that those responsible for the killing of martyrs were motivated by animosity. The implication is that Christianity, which has truth on its side, is victimized by the purveyors of falsehood. To put it in other words, the impious murder the pious. However, there may be numerous cases when it was not hatred that drove the executioner to put the victim to death. We must be open to the possibility that the executioner was sincere in his view that the martyr had to die for some higher ends.

Oodium Fidei seems to be a remnant of a past theology that negatively sees cultures other than the Christian culture. It does not admit even the possibility that those who killed missionary martyrs were also defending their own culture, not unlike the Maccabees of the Hebrew Bible. From their own perspective, they believed that Christian missionaries deserved their fate.

¹⁵ See <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view/cfn?d-804>; <https://www.catholicthing.org/2022/08/14/martyred-in-odium-fidei>

Even though there are undoubtedly notable exceptions, the missionaries of the past worked along the paradigm that they were bringing God into a native population that has been in the dark for a long period of time. In general, there was the failure to appropriate the theology that non-Christian cultures already contained in them the seeds of the word. Thus, their zeal was admirable, but we fail to admire the natives' militant but equally heroic defense of their culture.

The second problem is the criterion is not consistently applied. Sometimes, to be consistent, some theological distinctions must be introduced which do not give any more clarity. Let us mention some cases.

Take the case of St. Maximilian Kolbe. He was a Polish Franciscan who offered himself in exchange for a fellow prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Clearly, there should be no doubt about his heroism but if the criterion of *odium fidei* is to be applied, then he could not have been considered a martyr. Indeed, it is possible that the Nazis who killed him were fellow Christians. But Pope John Paul II labeled him a martyr. Another case in point is St. Maria Goretti, who at the age of 12 was martyred for her defense of chastity. A neighbor, Allesandro Serenelli, tried to rape her. She did not give in to his sexual desires. In retaliation, the frustrated rapist stabbed her several times which led to her death. But clearly, it is not that the Allesandro hated the Catholic faith of Maria. Rather, he simply could not control himself and take no for an answer.

In this regard, there is now a new model of sanctity which is probably more appropriate for the above two saints. In his apostolic letter *Majorem Hac Dilectionem*,¹⁶ Pope Francis has introduced a new model of sanctity: heroic offering of life. Accordingly, a person can be considered a candidate for beatification if it can be shown that:

- a. The offering of life is free and voluntary.

¹⁶ See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost/letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20170711-majorem-hac-dilectioneenm.html de

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- b. There is a connection between the offering of life and premature death.
- c. There has been a consistent exercise of Christian virtue.
- d. There is a reputation for holiness.
- e. There is a miracle attributed to the intercession of the saint.

This category, rather than martyrdom, would be more appropriate for Saints Maximilian Kolbe and Maria Goretti. But this category was not yet available during their time of canonization. Incidentally, this category may facilitate the canonization of a Filipino Jesuit Richie Fernando who died protecting students in Cambodia from a hand grenade.

The third difficulty with the notion of *odium fidei* is that the characteristic trait that makes a martyr a Catholic martyr is not actually found in the victim. The irony is that it is found in the victimizer. There is no doubt that those who propagate the cause of the sainthood of martyrs do examine the life of the candidate for canonization. But strictly speaking, the idea of *odium fidei* is found not in the martyr but in the powerful establishment that gave a negative judgment on the martyrs.

This brings us to a fourth difficulty with the notion of *odium fidei*. If we limit ourselves to the traditional understanding of this notion, there is no room for people who are killed for their defense of environment, of human rights, and other issues which are usually deemed to be more political than religious. A journalist gunned down for exposing anomalies or a human rights lawyer killed in broad daylight for defending the poor cannot be considered martyrs. If the notion is rigidly applied, then the likes of Jose Burgos, Godofredo Alingal, Neri Satur, Bobby de la Paz, although heroic and faith inspired, cannot be considered martyrs. Yet, these politically and socially committed martyrs were inspired by their faith. In fact, Jon Sobrino would raise the question regarding those unnamed people who died of political persecution. He writes,

There have been noteworthy martyrs in Latin America, but mostly there have been thousands of men and women, children and old people, innocent and defenseless victims of persecution and repression, massively and cruelly massacred. In several places there has been a powerful effort to keep and honor their names; ...But as whole, the institutional Church does not know what to do with them.¹⁷

To drive home this point, let us cite an example that is related to the theme of faith and patriotism, the case of the martyrdom of St. Oscar Romero. He denounced the abuses of the military dictatorship in El Salvador. In the eucharist he celebrated a day before he was gunned down, he appealed, "In the name of God, stop the repression." He was eventually shot to death by fellow Catholics who were members of a terror squad. His beatification was delayed to a large part because his martyrdom was more political. Thus, the notion of odium fidei cannot be invoked. As an argument for his canonization, Gustavo Gutierrez had to reason out that his killers were not real Christians. In the end, Oscar Romero is labeled a martyr. What we now need is a conceptual framework that would justify calling him a Christian martyr.

In contemporary Catholic theology, one Catholic theologian who has notably questioned the traditional understanding of martyrdom is Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit who did missionary work in El Salvador at a time when military dictatorship killed some priests and Church workers, among them Archbishop Romero, Fathers Ignacio Ellacuria, and Rutilo Grande. He believes that current understanding has dehistoricized the notion of the innocent suffering servant as someone who lived only in the past. But the truth is that in history, there are many who died as innocent victims of repression, whose only crime is to oppose the powerful establishment. In *Jesus the Liberator*, this Jesuit theologian writes,

I think the Latin American martyrs have forced a rethinking of martyrdom and brought out the basic

¹⁷ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic and Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 20087), 29.

limitation of the official definition: martyrdom is not thought of in terms of Jesus' life and death. The Latin American martyrs did die to defend the same cause of Jesus, God's kingdom for the poor, and they were threatened, persecuted, and put death by the anti-Kingdom.¹⁸

Though Sobrino was thinking of Latin American martyrs,¹⁹ surely this question can also be raised of many Filipinos, or of any other nationality for that matter, who died opposing the values of the anti-kingdom, like militarism and power.

INSPIRATI FIDE

We have raised the question of the *odium fidei*. The next question is "What is to be done?" The notion of political holiness, as explained by Jon Sobrino, can be extremely helpful at this point. In his view, there is a holiness that requires political action. It is that faith that leads to the conviction that the destitution of many is contrary to the will of God. It is this deep experience of contrast between the fullness of life that God wills and the actual situation of dehumanizing poverty. The believer tries to effectively bring about change. According to Sobrino, such praxis leads "almost *ex opera operato*, to persecution"²⁰ and possibly to death. This death is martyrdom, even in the religious sense. He approvingly quotes Archbishop Oscar Romero,

To my mind, they are truly martyrs in the popular sense. They are people who went all the way in their preaching of solidarity with poverty. They are real person who went to the most dangerous limits to say what they wanted to tell someone, and they ended up being killed as Christ was killed.²¹

¹⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator...*, 267.

¹⁹ See a long list of those "persecuted and assassinated for the reign of God in Central America" in Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert Barr, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 87-88.

²⁰ Ibid, 82.

²¹ Cited in Ibid, 83, (inclusive language supplied).

But as there is holiness that requires politics, there is also its inseparable partner which is politics that require holiness. Such holiness is necessary in order not to reduce political activism into a mere quest for power. Such a quest for power is always motivated by self-interest. Instead, political activism if it is to be holy, must be moved by faith and love.

Let us now concretize this idea of political holiness leading to martyrdom by suggesting some criteria by which a martyrdom can be evaluated. After all, the Church cannot possibly canonize all martyrs. These can be the criteria with which we can choose candidates for canonization.

1. The risk to one's life that a candidate took, and the subsequent self-surrender are inspired by faith. The church can investigate some prior writings and utterances from the candidate to determine whether one knowingly put oneself in danger after prayerful discernment.
2. The value that a candidate for canonization fought for is a Christian value. It is possible that a candidate is subjectively certain that what one is willing to die for is a Christian ideal. But objectively, the values a candidate was willing to die for is contrary to the values of the reign of God. For instance, a person may be willing to die for the establishment of fascist rule, believing that it is a Christian duty to do so. In such an instance, the candidate for canonization would fail in this second criterion. Another candidate who may not pass this criterion is someone whose violent death can be a retaliation against the prior violence done by the so-called martyr.
3. The candidate for canonization has fought for this Christian value consistently for a considerable period. In other words, it is better that the fight for such ideals was not a rare flash in a person's life. The candidate must have longed to suffer for the cause.
4. The candidate is killed for the cause he is willing to give one's life for. After all, it is possible that a candidate has been consistently battling for some ideals and was killed

for it. But upon investigation, it could be found out that the reason for his death has nothing to do with his life-long struggle. To illustrate: a journalist who has consistently fought for truth and good governance is killed. It must be ascertained that the death is related to what the journalist has stood for.

It is beyond the intention of this essay to investigate who among Filipinos are worthy of being canonized as martyrs using the above criteria. Such a project would require a thorough study of a candidate's life. But we can mention some possible candidates: Bobby de la Paz, a medical doctor who was gunned down as a suspected subversive while he served the medical needs of poor people in Samar; Godofredo Alingal, a Jesuit who was brutally killed inside his rectory for offering "real news" which was contrasted with government propaganda during the Marcos regime; Jose Burgos, who fought for the rights of Filipinos, especially the native clergy even if he could have gone higher in the hierarchy if he chose to be silent and passive; Ninoy Aquino who could have lived a comfortable life in Boston but chose to return home to confront a dictator but was killed in the tarmac of what is now named Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

It may be asked what the significance of the possibility of the Church canonizing faith-inspired political martyrs is. The answer is that Christian involvement in political affairs need concrete stories of heroism. Heroes are necessary as embodiment of the ideal. It is said that the blood of the martyrs became the seeds of Christianity. May it also be said that the blood of these faith inspired political martyrs became the seeds of a living Christianity that confronts the powerful in this world. May their canonization be a way to speak truth to power.

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