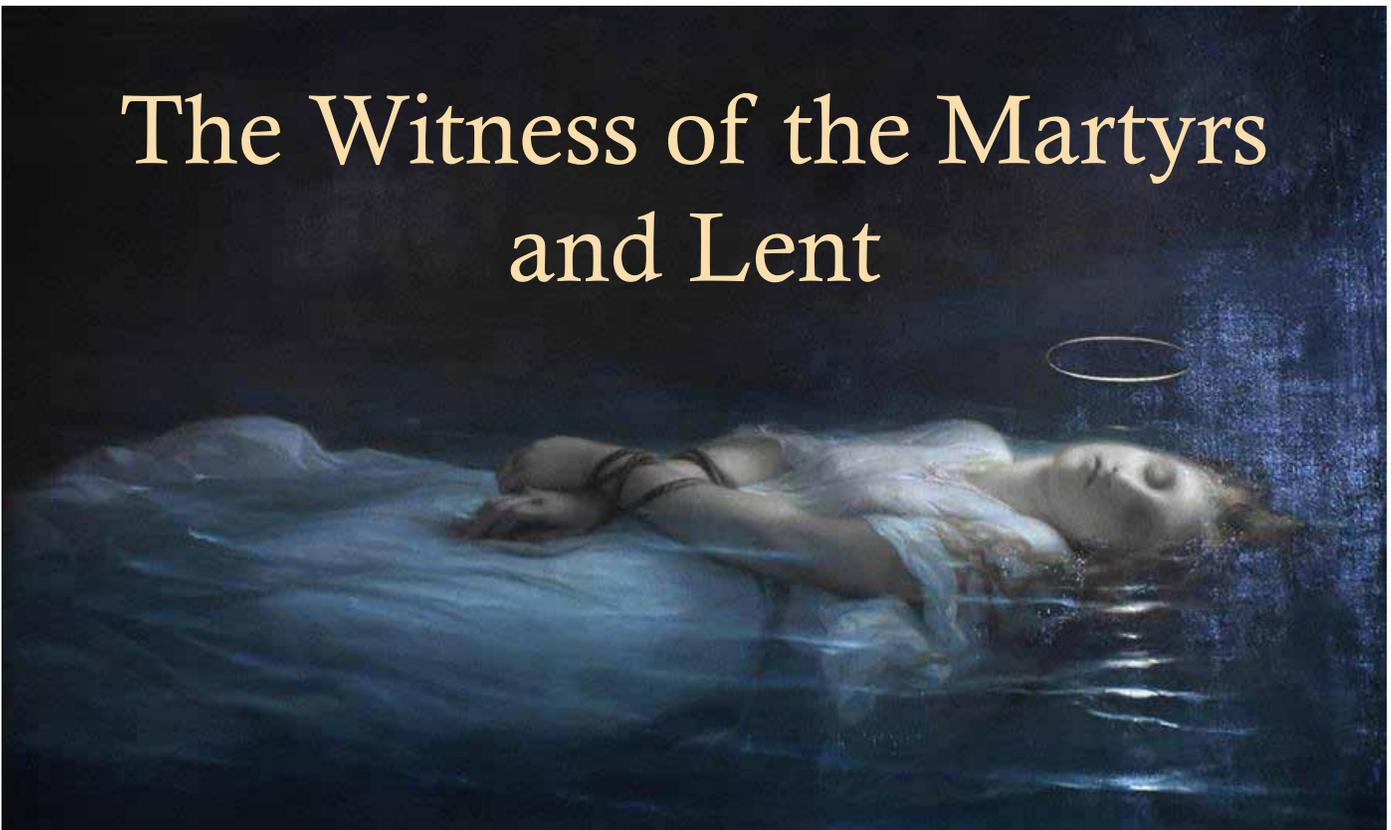


The Witness of the Martyrs and Lent



Paul Delaroche, *The Young Martyr*, 1855

THE CHURCH FATHER TERTULLIAN stated, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word meaning “witness.” The witness of the martyrs made the Church triumph over pagan Rome and ushered in the era known as Christendom. The season of Great Lent affords us the opportunity to avail ourselves of this great witness so that as the witness of our fore-bearers overcame the paganism of ancient Rome, our “witness” (martyrdom) may overcome our modern-day paganism that threatens us. To do this we will look, first, at the person of St. John the Baptist, and second, at the martyrdom of a small Christian community during the Roman persecution.

St. John the Baptist holds a great place of honor in the Church. In the Western Church and the Churches of the East, only the Blessed Mother has more feast days in the liturgical calendar. As he prepared the way for the Lord, he stands as a great example to begin the holy season of Lent. All the saints, Church Fathers,

and mystics tell us that the “spiritual combat” must be an essential part of our Christian life. We are a union of body and soul (we are not pure spirits like the angels) and, hence, asceticism must be part of our life. You see this especially in John.

The man was the message. He lived it and people noticed. In the desert, where he lived, you are stripped down to the bare essentials. His dwelling was probably a cave. No comfortable furniture, nor satellite dish with its hundreds of channels and corresponding flat screen. John knew that many of these superfluities, which we consider so essential, could easily become idols and turn us away from God. Want to give up something for Lent and make a true sacrifice in John’s spirit? Try giving up television

His clothing likewise showed his witness. He wore camel’s hair and a leather belt: the same outfit as the prophet Elijah. Today many men obsess over having an Aramis suit, Rolex watch and Gucci shoes: some of our modern-day idols. For food, he partook of locusts

and wild honey. Again, the basic bare essentials. Making idols of the above can easily turn us away from God. John's living arrangements and physical appearance witness to what was primary in his life.

Ultimately, his witness to the primacy of God would win him the crown of martyrdom. His preaching anticipated what Pope St. Pius X would tell priests: *"When you teach in the Church you must not seek for the applause of the crowd but that they should weep: the tears of your listeners should be your praise."* The season of Lent should cause us to weep for our sins and do what is necessary to return to the Lord through faithfulness.

John's fidelity to God's teachings on marriage cost him his life. King Herod Antipas had taken Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, as his own. John could have ignored it by using one or more of the many sophisms employed today in rejecting the Church's marriage teachings, such as: (1) "What consenting adults do is none of my business" or (2) "Those marriage teachings are 'impossible teachings' for the great majority of people; We should accept their 'concrete lived experience.'" Had John used one of them, he would have kept his head. Apparently, he believed that fidelity to God and saving his soul trumped keeping his head on. Are we willing to live that fidelity? When a Catholic abandons the Church, in the vast majority of cases, it involves a rejection of the Church's teachings on sexual morality. You cannot have both the Sexual Revolution and the Christian faith. John's martyrdom gives witness to the primacy of faithfulness to God. Today especially, a big price will be paid for fidelity to God. The witness of John and the season of Lent invite us to consider, what is most important in my life: my career/lifestyle or my soul?

Now we turn to the martyrdom of a small Christian community during the persecution of the Roman emperor, Diocletian (late 200s early 300s AD). The following account is not a pious tale or legend but comes from Roman court records that have been preserved.

Of all the Roman persecutions, that of Diocletian was perhaps the worst and would be the last. Determined to stamp out Christianity, Diocletian ordered that all people were to obtain a "certificate of good citizenship." You could obtain one by going to a Roman proconsul (judge) and burning incense before some

idols. If you were Christian clergy (deacon, priest, or bishop) you were required to hand over the sacred writings (scriptures) to be burned. Upon doing these things you would receive a certificate which you would have to produce upon the request of any official. Refuse, and you were sent directly to execution.

The persecution came to the city of Abitenae (modern-day Tunisia). The Romans knew that the Christians always worshiped early in the morning on Sunday. By arresting them at Holy Mass they could bag the whole lot. The Christian congregation of Abitenae and its priest, Saturnius, were arrested and brought before the Roman proconsul, Anulinus. The priest Saturnius said to the proconsul: *"We Christians cannot live without the Sunday Eucharist. We celebrated the Last Supper of the Lord without any fear whatsoever, because we cannot renounce it; it is our law."* Father Saturnius was then condemned.

Because of the persecutions, Christians could not have the church buildings or chapels that we have today; they worshiped in private homes. The owner of this house, Emertius, was asked by the proconsul why he did not forbid Mass from taking place in his home. Emertius answered: *"I could not do that, because without the Last Supper of the Lord, we cannot live."* He, too, was condemned.

Since this was a congregation, it also had children. The youngest member of this congregation was a six year-old boy named Hilarion. The following interchange took place:

Proconsul Anulinus: "Why did you come to Mass?"

Hilarion: "Because I am a Christian."

Proconsul Anulinus: "We'll cut off your ears and nose."

Hilarion: "Do what you want, I am a Christian."

Hilarion had a sister who answered the proconsul in the same fashion. Both were condemned. As they were being led to their execution, passing them in the opposite direction was the local bishop, Fundanus. He had just apostatized by burning incense to the idols and handing over the sacred books to be burned. The contrast could not be greater.

These martyrs could have employed one of the many

sophisms used by many in the Church today and saved their lives: “As long as you don’t have the **direct intention** of worshiping the idol as a deity, you can burn incense to it.” Or, “We have to be sensitive to those who don’t hold our values.”

The witness (martyrdom) described above both in the person of St. John the Baptist and the Christian community of Abitenae are what is sorely lacking today.

Can all of us follow these examples? Lent is the perfect time to start again in fidelity. It is never too late to return to the Lord with our whole heart. As C.S. Lewis said: *“We cannot go back and change the beginning, but we can start now and change the ending.”* May the witness of St. John the Baptist, the Christian community of Abitenae, and six year-old Hilarion inspire us to do so. ❖