

Away with the Atheists - Learning Civil Disobedience from the Martyrs
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Introduction

The mystery of the doctrine of the Incarnation, recently celebrated with the Nativity of our Lord, does not *only* confess that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Word, took up flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was made Man, but *also* teaches that all humanity is assumed into the divine essence of the Son of God. For that which Christ did not assume, He did not redeem. On account of the Incarnation of the only Son of the Father, your flesh and blood together with the flesh and blood of all the saints, shall participate in the resurrection unto eternal life.

As in all cases, doctrine influences practice, and that which is believed is exemplified in the very manner and mode of how one worships. In this particular case, the divine joy of the Feast of the Nativity is observed in conjunction with the earthly shedding of blood. For the humility which the Christ Child suffers already in His conception and birth, the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem bear in their infant bodies. As the collect of the day for 28 December prays, “the martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Your praise not by speaking but by dying.” Their senseless deaths precede the brutal martyrdom of the Christ Child as a Man, whose death gives their deaths meaning. It is also fitting, then, that the Church remembers the proto-martyr, St Stephen, in closest connection with the Cross and Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus. For on account of the Incarnation, “intertwined with the Lord’s story are the stories of those who are His” (Weedon, *Celebrating the Saints*).

Thus the observance and beneficial use of the saints’ days, both Old and New Testaments. For the lives of the saints, not only the martyrs and apostles, but also the confessors, the patriarchs and prophets, show forth the glorious light of Christ who is the Light of world. Their lives of faith and good works are a reflection unto us here below of the radiance of He who is the Holy One, the Saint, even Jesus Christ whose holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death has reconciled you to His Father. Among the numerous abuses addressed by the Augsburg Confession, a practice retained was the commemoration, though not worship, of the saints. “Our churches teach that the remembrance of the saints is to be commended in order that we may imitate their faith and good works according to our calling” (AC XXI).

This pastorally doctrinal statement is echoed in the Church’s liturgy each Lord’s Day, “Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and saying.” As the saints are models to us of the lives of faith and love, thus do they lead and join with us in adoration around the throne of the Lamb who

was slain, yet behold He lives. The exhortation of Hebrews 12 is poetically captured in hymnody,

*Saints, see the cloud of witnesses surround us;
Their lives of faith encourage and astound us.
Hear how the Master praised their faith so fervent:
“Well done, My servant!”*

*These saints of old received God’s commendation;
They lived as pilgrim heirs of His salvation.
Through faith they conquered flame and sword and gallows,
God’s name to hallow.*

*They call to us, “Your timid footsteps lengthen;
Throw off sin’s weight, your halting weakness strengthen,
We kept the faith, we shed our blood, were martyred;
Our loves we bartered.” (LSB 667:1-3)*

So we are called to remember the saints and give thanks to God for giving such faithful servant to His Church. Also, through such remembrance your faith is strengthened as you behold the mercy that our Lord extended to His saints of old. Finally, the saints (particularly those commemorated in the LSB) are examples by which you may imitate both their faith and their holy living according to your vocation.

But you know the well-worn saying about being condemned to repeat the history we don’t know? Well, that applies to church history as to any other kind. We agree the remembrance of the saints and their historical settings is good, right, and salutary. The question, I suppose, is how are you, or any Christians, supposed to discern what lessons from church history and the martyrologies need to be learned?

In a helpful introduction to the religio-political worldview of the Roman Empire in the first three centuries, known as *Caesar and the Lamb*, George Kalantzis writes, “To do history well we have to find a balance between difference and continuity. As we look at the world of the Christians of the first three centuries we recognize that that world is not obvious to us, their concerns do not seem native to the world we think we inhabit. For the most part we do not face the beasts of the arena or the magistrate’s knock at the door of our churches demanding the surrender of our sacred books and object, on penalty of death. Can their concerns be ours?”

Historical Context

“The Roman world was a bloody world. Unforgiving. After two centuries of expansionism and the celebrated *pax Romana* was achieved at the point of the *gladius* and was protected by Rome’s twenty-eight legions and the gods who superintended it. By the time of Constantine, in the fourth century, the massive military apparatus has greatly surpassed the [previous] ideals of the early Empire and expanded to over half-a-million troops” (Kalantzis, 12-13). Whereas we tend

to think of the political-governmental order in post-Enlightenment concepts of de-personalized, secular machinery devoid of any final purpose or divine intent, such a view was wholly unknown to ancient Rome. Brent notes, “Political order consisted in the exercise of legitimate authority within a space that had been sacralized, and therefore under the control of the gods who willed order and therefore peace (*pax*)” (*Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 29).

Following his defeat of Marc Antony in 31 BC, after a decade long civil war, Octavius assumed the role of Emperor and took to himself the title *Augustus*, meaning “great” or “venerable.” All subsequent emperors bore the name until the final, Romulus Augustus was defeated by the Goths in 476 AD. As pretentious as this moniker may be, it was a step down from that of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, who claimed descent from the goddess Venus. It was believed that upon his assassination in 44 AD, Julius Caesar ascended immediately to heaven. He was declared a god by the Roman people. Therefore, four years into his consolidation of power, Octavius also took the title, *diui filius*, son of the divine, or son of a god. The Roman people looked to him to be the restorer of peace and savior of the ideals and customs of Rome.

By 12 BC he assumed the title of High Priest of Rome and three years later, with the blessing of the Senate, consecrated the Altar of Augustan Peace. During the consecration celebration, Augustus Caesar was given the triune mantle of *Augustus Soter Eleutherius*, that is, Revered, Savior, Liberator of Rome. The subsequent title of Father of the State completed the Roman deification of her rulers. By the end of the First Century AD - so during the time of the Apostolic Church - the Caesars had assumed their place among the pantheon of Roman deities; Emperor Domitian having taken the title not only of Son of a God, but *Dominos et Deus*, Lord and God. Perhaps this is the impetus for Sean Hannity’s infamous 2009 labeling of Barack Obama as “the Anointed One.”

For Rome the State and her rulers were sacred. Worship of the gods was essential to maintaining the delicate balance of peace that was allowed the Great City by the gods. The sacred geographical border established by Romulus upon a vision from Jupiter was extended to the behavior and conduct of all imperial inhabitants. And if the co-founder of Rome killed his own brother, Remus, for trespassing the sacred border, how would the god-kings of Rome treat the adherents of an opposing worldview?

To be sure, persecution of Christians and other minorities during the first centuries were sporadic and local. Kooks such as Nero were rare. Domitian had his share of violence and Trajan stepped up the game, but overall, at least initially, governors and magistrates preferred the Christians recant and profess loyalty to the Emperor and the gods by burning the incense to the genius of Caesar. The pagan-philosopher Cicero had said, “Religion is a way of honoring the gods.” And while Rome built massive temples to their deities, had a keen understanding of sacred space and sacrifice, Roman religion was not all that concerned with distinguishing true from false beliefs, but was only worried about the proper behavior that characterized the life of a good Roman citizen. They did not separate religion from politics. Sacred and secular, religious and political were intertwined. By the time of the first Pentecost and within the first centuries of the Church

the *pax Romana* could not be separated from the *pax deorum*, the peace established and allowed by the gods. And this peace was based on and sustained by sacrifice. Burn the pinch of incense. Christians refused to do so. This was an act of sedition. Therefore Christians were called “atheists,” because they refused to worship the Roman gods. They were known as “subverters” to the State because they refused to sacrifice. And they were known as “traitors” because they would not acknowledge the genius of Caesar. To confess Jesus is Lord was an act of political treason.

“Yet the Christians insisted that their refusal to acquiesce to the simulacra of justice and worship ought not be interpreted as subversion or disloyalty, but as a call to the state to repent and acknowledge its proper place under the authority of God. [For the Christian] it was civil disobedience. A first principle of civil disobedience is the proposition that one cannot act contrary to conscience, even under compulsion. One acts or refuses to act based on a higher condition which, in the case of the Christian martyrs, was divine law” (Kalantzis, 38).

The witness of the new Testament and of the confusion and lives of the early Christians was not one of an autonomous political order, but a wholly new kingdom and economy. Christians honored the emperor - as both St Paul (Rm 13) and St Peter (1 Pt 2) make plain - and his appointed representatives imbued with his authority, by following the example of Christ (1 Pt 2:21) in refusing their consent and by submitting themselves to the consequences of their rejection, even scourging, torture, and death.

The issue was one of sacrifice - either to the gods as benefactors of Rome and the Caesar as their vicar, or to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has ransomed us in love (Rm 12:1-2). The locus of this clash between Roman and Christian sacrifice, came, just as St Paul exhorts, the very body of the men and women hauled before the magistrates: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect* (Rm 12:1-2).

This is what “rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” looks like in the new, divine economy. This is a simultaneous ‘yes’ that *submits* to the authority of the emperor as put in place by God and ‘no’ that renders higher *obedience* to the Christ the Lord as supreme. Within this Scriptural worldview, orientated around Christ the Lamb as the Suffering Servant who *willingly* goes to His death in obedience to the Father, testifying that those who order and orchestrate His crucifixion have no authority over Him, but that given by the Father, the Christian’s martyrdom was not seen as the fate of the powerless, but as a witness, a true *marturia*, before the State, of the eschatological reality of Christ Jesus’ return from the right hand of Power to judge both the living and the death and deliver to each according to what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor 5:10).

Therefore, “to the sacrifice of incense and grain demanded by the state as signs of the loyalty expected from those living under the protection of the goods who promised *Roma aeterna* the Christian martyrs offered an alternative sacrifice that rejected these illusory claims and guaranteed eternal life: they offered themselves. In imitation of Christ” (Kalantzis, 25).

St Polycarp of Smyrna, Pastor and Martyr (23 February)

As an example of such faith and good works, consider St Polycarp of Smyrna. There are numerous unnamed and unknown Christian martyrs. More so, in fact, in the 20th Century than all previous centuries combined! However, an early account of the beloved Polycarp holds special appeal for several reasons. First is his proximity to the Apostles, the very men chosen by Christ, who witnessed His baptism, life and ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is reported by Papias, a contemporary of Polycarp, that as a young man, the Apostolic Father was a hearer of St John the Evangelist. This possibly means that he was a disciple of the beloved disciple when he was in Asia Minor. Or it simply means that Polycarp heard St John speak publicly. In either case, his connection to the one given charge over the Virgin Mary is remarkable. Second, not only is the account of his martyrdom extant, but it is preceded by a letter from his hand to the Church in Philippi, in which he both exhorts them to reread the epistle sent to them by St Paul and *not* to seek martyrdom. That was always stressed. Whether one was to be a martyr or not, to give a witness to Christ by the shedding of blood, was a gift given only by Christ Himself, and not to be sought after as Eve sought the forbidden fruit. For the results were as equally, if only individually, disastrous. In fact, before the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom is the record of a guy who sought out martyrdom, turned himself in, and in the heat of the moment chickened out, denying the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Thirdly, and perhaps most important for our purposes today, a reason to consider the martyrdom of St Polycarp before all others, is his thoroughly pastoral approach not only to the flock under his care as an under shepherd in Christ and to all Christians, but even to his enemies and detractors. As we’ll hear in a moment, here is an old, pious Christian man who goes to his death with some panache and whose *marturia* and confession served to galvanize and encourage Christians throughout the Roman Empire to *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all* (Phil 2:14-17).

READ THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP (Highlighted Portions - 3:2; 5-16, 19, 21)

Thoroughly stepped in the Word of Christ and nearly dripping with His own sacrificial blood, you hear in the martyrdom of Polycarp the almost sacramental character of the martyrology. Polycarp goes to his imminent death as one who knows what lies in the ultimate, therefore the penultimate is not so deathly terrifying to him. Martyrdom was seen as a “baptism in blood,” or a “eucharist,” in which one drank the cup of sufferings in fellowship with Christ. As Jesus said

to the Sons of Thunder: *You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*” And they said to him, “*We are able.*” And Jesus said to them, “*The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.*” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “*You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Mk 10:38-45).

Polycarp and the early Christian martyrs honored Caesar by disobeying his commands and receiving in their bodies the only responses that a state based on the power of the powerful could mete out - death. But they feared not those who could kill the body, but the One who could destroy both body and soul in hell (Mt 10:28). Therefore the encounter between magistrate and the martyr was to encounter the forces of Satan. The martyr was identified with Christ, as Origen wrote: “As we behold the martyrs coming forth from every church to be brought before the tribunal, we see in each the Lord Himself condemned.” This is in keeping with Jesus’ own identification with the persecution of the Church by Saul (Acts 9:4-5). In being hauled before kings and courts and by the grace of Christ, remaining steadfast in the faith, the martyr was appropriating the victory of the Master Martyr, even Jesus Christ, trampling the head of Satan and beating down his demons underfoot.

This type of stance and courage is born out by a Love (1 Jn 4) that leads to peace (Jn 20). Not a *pax Romana* ensured by the sword, but by the *pax Domini*, instantiated by the Incarnation and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is truly a peace that the world cannot give, but neither can it take it away. It is peace grounded firmly upon the all sufficient martyrdom of Christ the Lord, by whose sacrifice and blood you are ransomed and redeemed to live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

You will each take away what you’ll take away, but before you run out and start drawing direct correlations between the beasts of the coliseum and the auditing monsters of the IRS, between burning the pinch of incense and baking a wedding cake for a gay couple, between the sporadic persecutions in North Africa and the localized harassment of clerks in small Kentucky counties, here are a few things to consider and make good use of within your particular vocations in whatever forms of persecution you may be called upon to endure.

First, nearly simultaneous with the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna was work of a man aptly named, Justin Martyr. His and other Christo-centric apologetic arguments were prevalent in an period when an small, but articulate minority was challenging the secular-pagan worldview of the Empire. Know what you believe and why you believe it. Be ready to give a defense.

Second, the Church Fathers, the martyrs, saw a direct connection between doctrine and practice, that is, between faith and love. What was believed was not only lived in worship but in life, even to the death. Their stories, intertwined with our Lord's story, are an inspiration to our faith, an encouragement to turn away from the world, to deny ourselves in everyday life and cling to Christ alone. For you share in their faith, the self-same faith in which Polycarp was willing to go to his death confessing and not denying, but confessing. Even when we are faithless, Christ is faithful. Cling to Him.

Third,, the martyrs understood the desperate need for the Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the sacramental presence of Christ in His Word and gifts. Cyprian (who we didn't get to) famously said, "No one can call God Father who cannot call the Church his Mother." For the Fathers the congregation was the flock of Christ gathered under His bishop, His overseer in the place. He gives them His Word and Sacraments. The Christian cannot exist apart from the Church of God in Christ Jesus.

Lastly, prayer. Pray for your enemies and persecutors. Pray for your fellow Christians here and around the world. Pray for your leaders, even those you didn't vote for. For there is not authority except that which is from God. Pray for steadfastness and courage. Pray for peace and quietness. Pray for the return of Christ.

I close with the final stanzas of Pr Starke's hymn referenced earlier,

*Lord, give us faith to walk where You are sending,
On path unmarked, eyes blind as to their ending;
Not knowing where we go, but that You lead us -
With grace precede us.*

*You, Jesus, You alone deserve all glory!
Our lives unfold, embraced within Your story;
Past, present, future - You, the same forever -
You fail us never! (LSB 667:5-6).*

In the Name of the Father + and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.