

# Role Models of Faith: Freely Offering their Lives out of Christian Love

## Understanding of Christian Martyrdom Sharpened through Apostolic Letter

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The free offering of one's life out of Christian love has been declared a new possible way of discerning the exemplary character of deceased Christians by the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis has addressed the issue in a recent Apostolic Letter entitled "*Maiorem hac dilectionem* ('There is no greater love') – on the offer of life".

From the perspective of understanding Christian martyrdom, the promulgated clarification can be welcomed in several respects, despite fundamental differences concerning the veneration of saints. The question whether deceased Christians who lived holy lives or died as martyrs should be invoked for help, and further questions connected to these issues, have divided Catholics and Protestants for 500 years and are not the topic here. However, the Catholic definitions for the recognition of martyrs and Christians who lived exemplary holy lives have always substantially influenced Protestant theology; in turn the new Apostolic Letter shows noticeable Protestant influence.

- 1. The concern to identify exemplary role models of faith is commendable.** According to the Bible, Christians during their "race" of faith are to look up to Jesus "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). At the same time, they are encouraged by "a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) that have already reached the destination. This offers a Christian standard in a world where some of the living and deceased are idolized by mere human standards. We need proven role models that have authentically and in the best possible and exemplary way followed Jesus. The pre-reformation churches – not only the Catholic Church – have laid down fixed procedures to determine the exemplary character of deceased Christians in their canonical laws. The different Churches that grew out of the branches of the Reformation lost these means when they legitimately tried to distance themselves from perceived aberrations. In the process they frequently failed to maintain a reasonable appreciation of the great witnesses of faith and martyrs. While popular role models do exist, they are exalted by influential speakers, authors and panels in a contest of personal opinions. It can be debated whether this actually is better.
- 2. The Apostolic Letter is grounded in Jesus' saying from the Gospel of John (15:13): "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (ESV).** The Letter thereby declares: Jesus made the offering of life out of love the norm, which therefore should also be a criterion for discerning exemplary lives in the Church. Likewise the Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in 2011 developed a mission theology from the perspective of love. The commitment includes passages

unfolding this theme under headings like “The love of Christ calls us to suffer and sometimes to die for the gospel” or “Love in action embodies and commends the gospel of grace”.

- 3. The introduction of a third way – making the free offering of life a criterion – fills a gap in the process of beatification and canonization within the Roman Catholic Church.** So far there have only been two ways of determining the blessedness or sainthood by the church. Either a Christian succumbed to a violent death through human agency motivated by hatred against the Christian faith or persecution, or the local church acknowledged the exceeding virtue of a believer and attests him/her at least one miracle. The new, third way, such as the free offering of one’s life in nursing of the sick with a highly contagious and dangerous disease, falls in between the other two: Dedication and loss of one’s life is shared with martyrdom, whilst it does not come about by persecution in this case. A virtuous life is required by all three ways. But giving one’s life is a clearly defined act that leads to shortening this life by an unnatural death.

The Apostolic Letter offers five criteria for the recognition of the “offering of life”. (1) The free and voluntary offering of one’s life, and heroic acceptance of a certain and soon-to-come death out of love for others; (2) A close relation between the offering of one’s life and the premature death; (3) The exercise, at least to an ordinary degree, of the Christian virtues before the subject’s offering of his or her life and, afterward, perseverance in those virtues unto death. The other two criteria (4; 5) cover the reputation of holiness as well as signs or miracles of which at least one has to occur after the death of the believer by his/her said intercession. At this stage the churches of the Reformation disagree. Nevertheless, they can surely affirm that Christians who embodied Jesus’ saying in John 15:13 have suitably modeled “a true, complete and exemplary imitation of Christ” and are therefore “worthy of special consideration and honor” as role models.

- 4. By the recognition of this third category, exemplary role models of faith from the past no longer have to be squeezed into the former two categories, even if they do not fit.** The Christian understanding of martyrdom indeed is strengthened. Martyrdom is a violent death related to the Christian witness because of enmity towards the Christian faith or persecution (*odium fidei*). The repeated broadening of martyrdom terminology to include a “martyrdom of charity” becomes unnecessary. Maximilian Kolbe, to name an example, was thus declared a “martyr of charity” because he took the place of a family father, his fellow prisoner in a concentration camp, who was sentenced to be shot in a reprisal action. Another example is the priest P. Henkes who was voluntarily nursing people infected with typhus in the Dachau concentration camp and eventually became a victim of his profession. Another example is the Belgian missionary Father Damian de Veuster who is venerated as a Saint. He became famous as the “Apostle of the Lepers” on Hawaii. After years of dedicated service he also got infected and died of the disease himself. All such Christians can now be recognized because of their “offer of life” without having to be labeled martyrs. There are however cases where the term “martyr of charity” is still appropriate, such as for the Catholic medical missionary Dr. Johanna Decker who remained at a church hospital in Zimbabwe during the civil war. She continued to serve in “quiet devotion of her life” and was shot dead in the course of a raid in 1977. In this case the motive of enmity towards the Christian faith can be assumed which originally constitutes martyrdom.

- 5. Why are these differentiations important? Potentially the Apostolic Letter might help to stop the trend of continuously broadening the term “martyrdom” – at least for the Christian usage.** Looking at church terminology, the broadened usage emerged in the context of beatification and canonization due to the fact that no differentiated category existed and martyrdom terminology had to be overstretched to also include the death of Christians that was not caused by enmity towards Christianity. The need for a clarification of Christian martyrdom terminology is further evoked by the secular broadening of the term. In popular usage martyrdom can designate severe suffering of any kind even without lethal consequences and totally unrelated to Christian witness. However at its origins the Christian martyrdom terminology indicated a “witness for Christ” and due to developments increasingly implicated the lethal consequences of that witness.
- 6. Additionally, the Apostolic Letter strengthens a genuinely Christian interpretation of martyrdom *from the perspective of love*.** The Christian definition of martyrdom is therefore strongly opposed to labeling terroristic assailants “martyrs”, who – motivated by hatred – are seeking to sweep as many people as possible to their death. Christians, who put their lives on the line for the well-being of others, and in the course lose their lives by human enmity or due to health risks, are motivated differently and therefore belong to a fundamentally different category: They are inspired by the love towards Christ and the neighbor.