

Lesson

Martyrdom, a constitutive element of the Church

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We propose some extracts from Zeuge der Wahrheit's essay (Witnesses of Truth), which the theologian Erik Peterson (1890-1960) wrote in 1937 in his critique of Karl Schmitt's political theology. These are useful reflections that can help to shake us out of the torpor of a 'disciplined' faith at the service of a public power that wants to domesticate Christian Revelation and place it at its service, in support of ideologies that, with increasing insistence, want to impose themselves as the sole and definitive perspective of mankind. The texts quoted are extracts from Témoin de la vérité (Ad solem, Geneva, 2007, pp. 78-91).

In His address to the Twelve at the time of sending them on mission, Jesus speaks as follows: "Behold, I send you out as sheep among wolves; be therefore prudent as serpents and simple as doves. Beware of men, for they will hand you over to their courts and scourge you in their synagogues; and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness to them and to the Gentiles" (Mt 10:16-18) [Peterson quotes almost in full the remaining verses of chapter 10, to which we refer the reader, ed.]

It must be emphasised that, firstly, according to the words of Jesus, the apostles are not sent to a humanity that has a neutral attitude and that, full of religious inspiration, will be ready to welcome with open arms the apostolic preaching of the kingdom of God. No: they are sent as sheep among wolves, which presupposes, as St Augustine points out in one of his homilies, that the wolves outnumber the sheep. And the sheep are sent to the wolves (...). The apostles therefore have everything to gain by being wary of men, that is, specifically, of Jews and pagans. The teaching that warns them against such hostility is alarming. And it is determined by the fact that, with the manifestation of Christ, the last times - these critical times in which it is no longer a matter of appeasement but of judgement, not of peace but of the sword - have broken in.

In these critical times, which usher in the manifestation of Christ, in which all the natural orders fall apart, in which men no longer even know how to avoid shedding blood - Jesus even says that brother will put brother to death, and children their parents -, in these times therefore which herald the end of the present age of the world, Jesus formulates such a demand: 'Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. It is clear that he who has come to bear the sword can promise nothing more to his disciples than that they will be hated by all because of him. He knows that they will be reviled, scourged and put to death, he knows that they will be hunted down,

that they will have to flee from one city to another. If they endure to the end, the end of their life or of this world, they will then receive their deliverance and their happiness, as promised (...).

Jesus' ultimate demand is therefore this: his disciples must publicly, openly bear witness to him and confess his Name. He who openly declares himself for Jesus on earth, he, Jesus, will openly declare himself for him before his Father who is in heaven. For in the time of judgement, in the eschatological time, there will be no other option: confess Jesus or deny him. Trying to get by by isolating oneself in an anonymous piety, or remaining in obscurity, is now ruled out, not by human choice, but by the very One who bore the sword and whose name - or sweet Name of Jesus - causes a division that does not even spare the private sphere of the family, but separates son from father and daughter from mother (Mt 10:35). (...)

The second aspect that can be gleaned from Jesus' words is that martyrdom belongs in a necessary and constitutive way to the Church. A certain number of conciliatory spirits are inclined to believe that everything bad that happens in this world can be attributed to simple misunderstandings. To hear them, one would have to conclude that the crucifixion of Christ and the martyrdom of the apostles were the consequence of such misunderstandings; and when the hour of martyrdom rings again for the Church, they still think that there must have been a misunderstanding. The words of Jesus show on the contrary that it is not a human misunderstanding that creates the martyr, but a divine necessity. The word of Jesus, "was it not necessary that Christ should bear these sufferings?" dominates all suffering in the Church. For as long as the Gospel is proclaimed in this world - that is, until the end of time - the Church will have martyrs. If the message of Jesus were reduced to a mere philosophy to be discussed at will over the years or centuries, there would be no martyrs. And even if men were to die for this kind of philosophy of Christ, they would not be martyrs in the Christian sense of the term. Because, let us emphasise it clearly once again, it is not human convictions or opinions, or even more decisively, it is not religious fanaticism that makes the martyr, it is Christ who calls to martyrdom and who consequently makes it a special grace, this Christ who is preached by the Church in the Gospel, who is offered as a sacrifice on the altar, and whom all those who are baptised into Him are obliged, in conscience, to publicly confess His Name. (...)

The third point that emerges from the words of Jesus is that martyrdom expresses the claim of the Church of Jesus Christ to go to the public square. If the martyr must give account before public authorities - in synagogues and sanhedrums, before governors

and kings -, must be subject to public trials and incur the penalties provided by law, it is essentially to publicly confess the Name of Jesus. But by bearing witness before the courts, i.e. in public, before the authorities of the state, of the One who will come in the glory of the Father to judge the world, i.e. Jews and pagans, the martyr overturns the conception of the order of this world to announce that of a future, other, new world. Whoever publicly confesses Jesus on earth will, in the same instant of his confession, be publicly recognised in heaven by Jesus. The importance of the act of confession on earth is matched by the solemnity of Jesus' proclamation of the confessor's name before God and the angels (cf. Lk 12:8).

Since it is a confession and not the mere admission of a fact, the martyr's words before the public authority are no longer human words, but those that the Spirit of the Father pronounces from above, through the voice of the confessor of Jesus Christ. Even if the world is unable to see in these words anything other than the admission of guilt, the Church knows that in the simplest confession, 'I am a Christian', pronounced before the representatives of public power, it is the Holy Spirit who speaks and it is the kingdom of Jesus Christ that is proclaimed. The Church knows that when the martyr bears witness to Christ, the heavens open, as at the moment of the stoning of Stephen, and the Son of Man appears, who not only solemnly declares himself before the angels on behalf of the one who confessed him on earth, but, holding himself at the right hand of God, also announces the future tribunal before which the judges of this world, whether Jews or pagans, will receive the sentence of their condemnation.

The last aspect we can draw from Jesus' words is that the martyr suffers with Christ as a member of the mystical body. When we say that the martyr suffers with Christ, this means that his suffering is not limited to the simple fact that he suffers for Christ. Many soldiers have accepted to die for their king, but what differentiates the martyrs' death from their own is that the martyr does not merely suffer for Christ, but that he participates in Christ's own death. The characteristic of Christ's Passion - due to the fact that the One who suffered it is the 'Son of Man', who became incarnate - is that it embraces the whole Church, his mystical body. Therefore, whoever has become through Baptism a member of his body, belongs to it even in Christ's death. And it is because, he who in the Eucharist gives thanks to God for sending us his Son, is made a sharer of Jesus' Passion in eating his immolated body and drinking the cup of the new covenant. Since we are baptised into Christ's death and nourished by his blood, it is inevitable that everyone who belongs to the Church has a share in Christ's sufferings. (...)

He knows that we tremble at the idea of following him, that we are weak and do not want to take up the cross, that we are afraid of poverty, defamation, outrages,

beatings and death. But He who bore this hesitant flesh casts out our pusillanimity when He has overcome His own, as St Athanasius wrote. For all that is accomplished in the Church rests on this foundation: Christ did not only die, he also rose again, so that it is not only the Passion that embraces the Church, his mystical body, but also the power of his Resurrection (...). This is why the physical torments, sufferings and death of the martyrs are not the last word. The last word is the victory that they bring, in the glory of Christ, over this world, and that leads them directly to Paradise.