

## **“If I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the colors of the court” - Martin Luther on Martyrdom<sup>1</sup>**

By Jochen Teuffel

“A new song here shall be begun – / The Lord God help our singing! / Of what our God himself hath done, / Praise, honour to him bringing. / At Brussels in the Netherlands / By two boys, martyrs youthful / He showed the wonders of his hands / Whom he with favour truthful / So richly hath adorned.” (LW 53, 214-216)<sup>2</sup> Thus begins what is probably Martin Luther’s oldest hymn, which was printed in 1524 in the so-called *Erfurt Enchiridion*, one of the first Reformation hymnals.<sup>3</sup> In a total of twelve stanzas of this song, Luther sings of the death of the two Antwerp Augustinian monks Hendrik Vos and Jan van Essen with his own melody. They were imprisoned by order of the Habsburg governor Margaret of Austria in October 1522 and refused to recant their Reformation teachings in an inquisition trial. Hence they were executed at the stake in Brussels on 1 July 1523. In the second stanza, Luther highlights this death at the stake as a martyrdom: “The first right fitly John was named, / So rich he in God’s favour; / His brother, Henry – one unblamed, / Whose salt lost not its savour. / From this world they are gone away, / The diadem they’ve gained; / Honest, like God’s good children, they / For his word life disdained, / And have become his martyrs.”

Luther sees the Gospel at work in this execution when he writes to his confidant Georg Spalatin on 22 July 1523: “Thanks be to Christ, who has at last begun to bring forth a fruit of my, rather of his preaching, by creating new martyrs, for that region probably the first ever.” (WA.Br 3, 115,14-16)<sup>4</sup> And in his *Letter to the Christians in the Netherlands*, printed in August 1523, Luther euphorically praises the execution of the two friars as a sign of divine activity:

“It has been given unto you before all the world not only to hear the Gospel and to know Christ, but to be the first to suffer, for Christ’s sake, shame and injury, wrong and dis-tress, imprisonment and death. Now you have become full of fruit and so strong that you have watered the cause with your blood. For among you those two precious jewels of Christ, Hendrik and Jann, have held their lives of no account for Christ’s Word. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kolb, Robert. 1995. “God’s Gift of Martyrdom. The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith”. *Church History*, 64: 399-411.

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. 1955-1986. *Luther’s Works*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. (henceforth LW)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. McDonald, Grantley. 2017. “A New Song We Raise” (“Ein neues Lied wir heben an”). In *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, edited by Mark A. Lampert, 553-555. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

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<sup>4</sup> Luther Martin. 1883. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau. (henceforth WA.Br = Briefwechsel, WA = Schriften, WA.Tr = Tischreden): Gratia Christo, qui tandem cepit fructum aliquem verbi nostri, imo sui ostendere, & novos martyres, forte primos in ista regione, creare.

God be praised and blessed forever that we, who have canonized and worshiped so many false saints, have lived to see and hear real saints and true martyrs. We in Upper Germany have not yet been worthy to become so precious and worthy an offering to Christ, though many of our members have not been, and still are not, without persecution. Therefore, my dearly beloved, be of good cheer and be glad in Christ, and let us thank Him for the great signs and wonders that He has begun to do among us. He has given us a fresh illustration of His own life, and now it is time that the kingdom of God shall not be in word, but in power. [...]  
Because, then, we see our present tribulation and have such strong and comfortable promises, let us renew our hearts and be of good courage and joyfully allow the Lord to slay us. He has said, and He will not lie” (Luther, 1918, 195f; WA 12, 78,2-79,3).

Luther sees himself challenged by the martyrdom of others. According to the report of Johann Kessler, who studied in Wittenberg at that time, Luther wept in 1523 after receiving the news of the deaths of Vos and van Essen and said, “I suppose I should be the first to be martyred for the sake of the holy gospel; but I have not been able to do it” (Kessler, 1902, 131,27-31). After Leonhard Kaiser was executed in Schaerding in Upper Austria in 1527, Luther wrote: “When I read this story, how ashamed I am that I did not suffer the same already (as I deserved it ten times more for the world). My God, if it be so, so be it, thy will be done” (WA 23, 474,16-19).

After the killing of a third friar, Hendrik van Zutphen, in December 1524 in Dithmarschen, Luther published in 1525 a letter of consolation *The Burning of Brother Henry* with a detailed account of his dying process, reminiscent of early church acts of the martyrs (LW 32, 261-286). “To die for God’s Word and faith is a priceless, precious, and noble death, fit only for the Spirit and children of God” (LW 32, 267). He writes similarly about the death of the former friar Robert Barnes, who was burned as a heretic in London in 1540:

“It is a special joy for me to hear that our good and pious table companion and house guest [Robert Barnes] has been so graciously called by God to pour out his blood for the sake of God’s dear Son and to become a holy martyr. Thanks, praise, and honor be to the Father of our dear Lord Jesus Christ, who has let us see the same kind of times which were seen at the beginning [of the church], times in which his Christians, who had eaten and drunk with us (as the apostles said of Christ, Acts 4) ... are taken away before our very eyes and from our eyes and our side to martyrdom (that is, to heaven) and become saints.”<sup>5</sup>

What constitutes martyrdom for Luther is not the killing of a Christian, but the reason for it. “It is not the punishment but the reason that makes martyrdom”, says Augustine.<sup>6</sup> And Cyprian of Carthage specifies: “It is the Gospel from which martyrs emerge.”<sup>7</sup> “Martyrs do not make the gospel, but they become martyrs through the gospel.”<sup>8</sup> Those who bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by their dying can be considered martyrs.

Luther, however, does not allow every claim of “evangelical” martyrdom to stand. If he sees false doctrine at work in the testimony, he cannot recognise Christian martyrdom. He writes on the death by execution of Anabaptists in a letter to Wenzeslaus Link of 12 May 1528:

“I judge the constancy of the Anabaptists in death to be similar to that of the Donatists

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<sup>5</sup> Preface to Robert Barnes' Confession of Faith (1540), WA 51, 449,7-17 (translation by Robert Kolb).

<sup>6</sup> Sermo 53a, 13: Martyrem non facit poena, sed causa.

<sup>7</sup> Cyprian, Epistula 38,2,1: Euangelium Christi [...] unde martyres fiunt.

<sup>8</sup> Cyprian, Epistula 27,3: Non martyres euangelium faciunt, sed per euangelium martyres fiunt.

whom Augustine describes, and of the Jews in the ruins of Jerusalem of whom Josephus wrote, and many others like them. There can be no doubt that their fanaticism [*furor*] stems from Satan, especially when they die blaspheming the sacrament. Holy martyrs, such as our Leonhard Kaiser, die with fear and humility, and with a leniency towards their enemies born of magnanimity; but [the Anabaptists] compound their obstinacy with – loathing and indignation towards their enemies, and that is how we see them die.”<sup>9</sup>

Martyrdom is not a heroic sacrifice that seeks to achieve something beyond one’s own life, but the faithfulness to Christ that is offered. In it, the Gospel becomes true for one’s own life. According to Luther, there is no threat of death in the lasting fellowship with Christ. In 1522, i.e. after the Edict of Worms, he wrote to the imperial knight Hartmut of Cronberg:

“They threaten us with death; if they were as wise as they are foolish they would rather threaten us with life. It is a foolish, shameful threat when they try to frighten Christ and His Christians with death, for they are victors over death. It is like trying to frighten a man by saddling his horse and putting him up for a ride. But they do not believe that Christ is risen from the dead and is Lord of life and death; He is with them even in the grave, nay, even in hell. But we know and boldly insist that He is risen and that death is nothing but the end of sin and of itself” (Luther, 1918, 105; WA 10 II, 55,3-12).

For Martin Luther, the fact that one’s own loss of life can correspond to the Gospel is shown in a theology of the cross, as he put it in 1518 with reference to 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 in his theses on the *Heidelberg Disputation*. According to Luther, he deserves to be called a right theologian “who understands that which is visible of God’s being and turned towards the world as made visible in suffering and the cross.”<sup>10</sup> He who “does not know Christ, does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and in general good to bad. [...] But God can only be found in the cross and suffering.” (WA 1, 362,23-29)<sup>11</sup>

The cross and suffering of Christ cannot simply be appreciated through passion piety<sup>12</sup>. In his 1522 *Sermon on the cross and suffering of a true Christian* in the merchant’s church in Erfurt (WA 10 III, 361-371), Luther points out that “all who want to be Christians must bear the cross” (WA 10 III, 368,3f):

“The cross of Christ is the shame and the great disgrace which Christ innocently suffered. If I lie in bed and am sick, or if one is killed by fire, water or sword for his crime, that is not the cross of Christ, but the cross of Christ is the shame and persecution for righteousness’ sake. Therefore, the true Christians must be accused as heretics and evildoers. They must be condemned, despised and judged by everyone, so that even anyone can use them as a wiping cloth” (WA 10 III, 368,15-23).

In his 1523 *Letter to the Christians in Riga, Reval and Dorpat*, Luther points out that the

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<sup>9</sup> 5 WA.Br 4, 457,9-15: Constantiam Anabaptistarum morientium arbitror similem esse illi, qua Augustinus celebrat Donatistas, et Iosephus Iudeos in vastata Ierusalem, et multa talia, furorem illum tamen esse Satanae non est dubium, presertim ubi sic moriuntur cum blasphemia sacramenti. Sancti martyres, ut noster Leonhardus Kaser, cum timore et humilitate magnaue animi erga hostes lenitate moriuntur; illi vero quasi hostium tedio et indignatione pertinaciam suam augere, et sic mori videntur (translation by David Bagchi).

<sup>10</sup> Disputatio Heidelbergae habita (1518), thesis 20, WA 1, 354,19f.

<sup>11</sup> Proof of the 21st thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Koepf, Ulrich. 2011. “Passion Piety”. *Religion Past and Present*, 9.

evangelical doctrine he presents is to be suffered:

“If you hold to this pure doctrine and abide in it, you will not escape the Cross and persecution, for the evil spirit cannot endure it that his holiness, which he has established by works and through the clergy throughout the world, should thus be put to shame and brought to nought. But be steadfast, and re-member that you have no right to fare better than your Lord and Bishop, Christ, who also suffered because of this doctrine, for He rebuked the work-righteousness of the Pharisees. Such a Cross is necessary and profitable for you, for it brings you a firm and assured hope, so that you hate this life and wait cheerfully for the life to come. Thus you will be perfect in the three things, – faith, love and hope” (Luther, 1918, 201f; WA 12, 149,30-150,5).

Similarly, Luther, in interpreting the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer in his *Large Catechism* of 1529, speaks of the Word of God that is to be suffered:

“Where God’s word is preached, accepted or believed and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. And let no one think that we will have peace; rather, we must sacrifice all we have on earth – possessions, honor, house and farm, spouse and children, body and life. Now, this grieves our flesh and the old creature, for it means that we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us” (Kolb & Wengert, 2000, 448-49).

Finally, in his *Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering*, which he delivered in 1530 before the Saxon envoys to the Diet of Augsburg at Coburg Fortress, he once again emphasises the Christian willingness to suffer and the community of suffering with Christ:

“If I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the colors of the court; the dear Christ issues no others in his court; suffering there must be. [...] If you don’t want to do it for nothing and without any merit, then you can let it lie and so deny Christ. The way is at hand, but you must know that if you refuse to suffer you will also not become Christ’s courtier. So you may do either one of these two, either suffer or deny Christ” (LW 51, 199).

One’s own suffering occurs in communion with Christ’s suffering, which, under the signature of the cross, paradoxically proves to be a divine reality or a gift of Christ to believers:

“Thus the suffering of Christ has become so mighty and strong that it fills heaven and earth and breaks the power and might of the devil and hell, of death and sin. And then if you compare this treasure with your affliction and suffering, you will consider it but small loss to lose a little property, honor, health, wife, child, and even your own life. But if you refuse to regard this treasure and to suffer for it, so be it; go on and let it lie. He who does not believe will also receive none of these unspeakable goods and gifts” (LW 51, 200).

The passion of Christ and his death on the cross are transferred to the kingdom of God through his resurrection and exaltation and are thereby determinative for the evangelical way of governing “without constraint and force, without law and sword” (LW 45, 93):

“Christ is King and Lord in the kingdom of God, as Psalm 2[:6] and all of Scripture says. For this reason he came into the world, that he might begin God’s kingdom and establish it in the world. Therefore, he says before Pilate, ‘My kingdom is not of the world, but everyone who is of the truth hears my voice’ [John 18:36-37]. In the gospel

he continually refers to the kingdom of God, and says, ‘Amend your ways, the kingdom of God is at hand’ [Matt. 4:17, 10:7]; again, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ [Matt. 6:33]. He also calls the gospel a gospel of the kingdom of God; because it teaches, governs, and upholds God’s kingdom” (LW 45, 88f).<sup>13</sup>

Luther knows how to distinguish the non-violent reign of Christ from the kingdom of the world or worldly authorities. The exercise of a secular office of war or sword by Christians to protect public order is under divine providence, but cannot be service to the body of Christ or testimony to his passionate regency. In his *Muster-Sermon Against the Turks (Eine Heerpredigt wider den Tuerken)*, which he wrote in 1529 after the Turkish siege of Vienna under Sultan Suleiman I, Luther knows how to follow the distinction between God’s temporal and spiritual regiment:

“That is why I so faithfully advised in the previous booklet [*On War Against the Turks*, 1529] that one should not wage war against Turks under the name of Christians, nor should one attack him with warfare as an enemy of the Christians. [...] Christ will be weak and suffer on earth with his own, that he may make fools of the mighty and put them to shame, and use their rage to make heaven full of martyrs and saints for him (though they are ignorant), that his kingdom may be full the sooner, and that he may come to judgment and give the tyrants their reward before they know it. Thus have I counseled, and so do I counsel: that every man should endeavour to be a Christian, willing and ready to suffer of the Turk and of every man. But let him not fight as a Christian or under a Christian’s name, but let your temporal overlord wage war. Under his banner and name, you shall travel, as a secular subject according to the body, who has sworn to be obedient to his overlord, body and soul. This is what God wants from you, Romans 13[:1ff.], Titus 3[:1] and especially where such a conflict is not done out of incuriosity, to gain property and honour, but to protect and shield country and people, wife and child, as this war against the Turk does. Thus we read of our dear Saint Maurice and his companions and many other saints: that they went into battle, not as Christians, nor against Christians, but as subservient, obedient citizens or knights, called and summoned by their emperor or other of their authorities, whom they owed to serve with body and goods, and that was not called a Christian army or people, nor a Christian conflict, but the emperor’s people or army” (WA 30-II, 173,18-174,11).<sup>14</sup>

In the further course of his *Muster-Sermon Against the Turks*, however, Luther overlooks the distinction between martyrdom for the Gospel of Christ and violent death on the battlefield in the service of the worldly regiment when he speaks of the “Turk”, i.e. the Turkish army as “murderers of saints and makers of martyrs” (WA 30 II, 175,2f). His contemporary interpretation of the Book of Daniel is decisive for this (WA.DB 11 II, 2-130). In his *Preface to the Prophet Daniel* of 1530, Luther identifies the fourth beast in the seventh chapter – according to tradition – with the Roman Empire, from which, analogous to the ten horns, ten kingdoms emerge, which in turn are challenged by another kingdom (7:24f):

“The fourth beast, with the iron teeth, is now the really guilty one. This is the last, the Roman empire; with it the world should have an end, as Daniel here has much to say about the Final Judgment and about the kingdom of the saints that is to follow this one. However he portrays this Roman empire in such a way that it should first be broken up

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<sup>13</sup> Luther, Martin. 1523. “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed.”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Miller, Gregory J.. 2017. “Luther and the Turks”. In Vol. 2 of *Martin Luther: A Christian between Reforms and Modernity (1517-2017)*, edited by Alberto Melloni, 649-661. Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter.

into ten kingdoms. These are the ten horns: Syria, Egypt, Asia [Minor], Greece, [North] Africa, Spain, Gaul, Italy, Germany, England, etc. He also indicates that one small horn shall knock off three among the top ten horns – meaning Mohammed or the Turk who now holds Egypt, Asia, and Greece – and that this same little horn will fight the saints and blaspheme Christ, something that we are all experiencing and seeing before our very eyes. For the Turk has had great victories against the Christians, yet denies Christ while elevating his Mohammed over all. Certainly we have nothing to wait for now except the Last Day, for the Turk will not knock off more than these three horns” (LW 35, 300).

Luther unfolds this interpretation in detail over several pages in his *Muster-Sermon Against the Turks*. Where the devil goes to work as Christ’s antagonist at the end of time and takes the “Turk” into his service for this purpose, the two-kingdom doctrine is broken up in a bellicose way and Christians are actively involved in a battle:

“Let him therefore that would be a Christian at this time take heart in Christ, and think not henceforth of peace and good days: the time of such affliction and prophecy is at hand; neither is our defiance and consolation in the future of Christ, and our redemption far off, but shall quickly follow, as we shall hear. Therefore hold fast and be sure that the Turk is certainly the last and most grievous wrath of the devil against Christ, by which he will break the bottom of the barrel and pour out his fury against Christ’s kingdom altogether, and also the greatest punishment of God on earth against the ungrateful and ungodly despisers and persecutors of Christ and his word, and without doubt the prelude to hell and eternal punishment. For Daniel says that after the Turk judgment and hell shall quickly follow (Daniel 7:10). And you can see it well in the events, how horribly he strangles, impales and chops up people, children, women, young and old, who have done nothing to him, and acts as if he were the angry devil himself in the flesh. For never did a kingdom rage with murder and fury as he does” (WA 30 II, 162,15-30).

“What then is the Turk with his strife but such an evil tyrant, that killeth God’s saints, and maketh them martyrs? Only that the Turk does this with all his might, without ceasing, and makes many more saints before all others; as it is fitting at the end of the world that the devil should give our Lord Christ a good, rich farewell. Dear, it is an excellent and great word that Daniel says that the Turk should not torture a few individual saints like other emperors, but should attack and overpower them with battle and all his might. In the battle, however, many more saints must be defeated than there are individual martyrs who are martyred from time to time outside the battle” (WA 30 II, 175,18-27).

In his 1541 *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks*, Luther even goes so far as to link the military service of Christians with martyrdom:

“If we have done our part and have armed ourselves with the weapons of prayer, we may say with Joab, ‘Be of good courage’ [II Samuel 10:12]. May God’s will be done as he has foreordained and as it pleases him, whether for life or for death. If he must chastise us and allow us to suffer defeat, let us suffer and die in our calling at his command and for his name’s sake. In that case we will be martyrs for God” (LW 43, 237).

When Luther refers martyrdom to the victims of acts of war or war crimes, the genuine testimonial character for the gospel is no longer evident. He comes close to an understanding

of martyrdom that was propagated by Bernard of Clairvaux in his writing *In Praise of the New Knighthood* (1128/29) on the Crusades:

“March forth confidently then, you knights, and with a stalwart heart repel the foes of the cross of Christ. Be sure that neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ. In every peril repeat, ‘Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.’ (Rom 14:8) How gloriously victors return from battle! How blessedly martyrs die in battle! Rejoice, brave athlete, if you live and conquer in the Lord; but glory and exult still more if you die and join your Lord. Life is indeed fruitful and victory glorious, but more important than either is a holy death. If they are blessed who die in the Lord, how much more so are those who die for the Lord!”  
(Bernard of Clairvaux, 2010, 34)

Unlike Bernard of Clairvaux, however, Luther does not invoke any salvific efficacy of a martyr’s death. Martyrdom is neither a meritorious nor an atoning sacrifice before God. And yet Luther’s transfer of the vision from the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel into contemporary events must be questioned – from a heavenly perspective: In the Book of Revelation, the testimony of Christ and especially the blood testimony of the martyrs (Revelation 6:9-11) is qualified apocalyptically. Even if anti-God forces are successfully at work in world events and Christians are seeking their lives, they are not challenged to an earthly battle. Instead, the heavenly voice is addressed to them:

“Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Messiah,  
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,  
who accuses them day and night before our God.  
But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony,  
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.  
Rejoice then, you heavens  
and those who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
for the devil has come down to you  
with great wrath,  
because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:10-12 NRSV)

Juergen Roloff summarised the apocalyptic reality of Christ as follows: “In the crucified and exalted Christ, God’s reign over the world and history comes to its salvific goal [...] Christ is the executor of God’s plan of history towards its end, namely towards the establishment of God’s salvific reign over a renewed earth. What qualifies him for this is his gift of life and his resurrection by God” (Roloff, 1995, 252). In heaven, Christ’s reign is already finally realised, but “the visible realisation of salvation on earth is still pending. For there the adversaries of God are trying to assert their claim to dominion in a fierce struggle against the reign of Christ. [...] From heaven, where Christ already reigns, Satan, God’s adversary, is cast down to earth. There he is free to vent his wrath against God: ‘He knows that he has but a short time left’ (12:12). The target of his wrath is the Church. For it has its place on earth, in the realm of Christ’s reign, not yet established, fought against by God’s enemies” (Roloff, 1995, 253). And yet the “hybrid claim to omnipotence of humanity hostile to God” (Roloff, 1995, 253) fails because of the reality of Christ: his self-giving on the cross (cf. 5:9), his victorious resurrection from the dead and his exaltation prove to be definitive for all the future:

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.” (Revelation 1:17f)

Finally, divine action under the signature of the Lamb catches up with all world events, judges destructively and establishes creatively: “See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:5). At the end of Revelation is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, which salvifically embodies God’s new world. “This is the goal that will become visible at the end of the enforcement of God’s plan of history. But it is at the same time the reality from which the afflicted Church already lives in the present” (Roloff, 1995, 253). Martin Luther can take up this point in his *Preface to the Revelation of St. John* of 1530:

“In a word, our holiness is in heaven, where Christ is; and not in the world, before men’s eyes, like goods in the market place. Therefore let there be offenses, divisions, heresies, and faults; let them do what they can! If only the word of the gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst. As we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with his saints, and wins the final victory” (LW 35, 411).

Where the apocalyptic reality of God in Christ is trusted, martyrdom with its bodily passivity can come into its own. Martyrs cannot lose the life won with Jesus’ word on the cross, “It is accomplished” (John 19:30), in their own dying. Their “bodily confession” – far more than just lip service – takes place in the salvation space of Christ’s Passover mystery. Protestant martyrdom does not bring about something for one’s own salvation or for the salvation of others, but conversely testifies to the life-deciding salvation event in Jesus Christ. Hence the martyr does not seek to sacrifice himself for the realisation of a “higher cause”. Rather, he testifies in a passionate way with his own life and death that Jesus Christ has obtained eternal life with God through his death on the cross and through his resurrection from the grave.

Christian martyrdom does not happen individually, but in a bodily community, namely the body of Christ (cf. 1. Corinthians 12,26f). In Luther’s words: “All the sufferings of Christians are the suffering of Christ. Whenever a member suffers, the whole body suffers.”<sup>15</sup> Thus Martin Luther, in his writing *On Councils and the Church* of 1539, states the “holy cross”, i.e. the communal suffering of the Gospel, as one of the seven visible marks of the Church (notae ecclesiae):

“Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [:11], “Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account.” They must be pious, quiet, obedient, and prepared to serve the government and everybody with life and goods, doing no one any harm. No people on earth have to endure such bitter hate; they must be accounted worse than Jews, heathen, and Turks. In summary, they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to

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<sup>15</sup> WA.TR 5, 327,3-5, no. 5711 (1540): Omnes passiones christianorum sunt passiones Christi. Quandocunque patitur membrum, patitur totum corpus.



death are rendering God a service. No one has compassion on them; they are given myrrh and gall to drink when they thirst. And all of this is done not because they are adulterers, murderers, thieves, or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there, as Christ says in Matthew 5 [:11-12], “Blessed are you when men revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies his people, but also blesses them” (LW 41, 164f).

In the 21st century, these words of Luther can be taken as evangelical encouragement for Christians in situations of persecution around the world.

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