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The Value of Martyrdom in Times of Persecution according to St. John Chrysostom

Abstract

Martyrdom has a special place in our Holy Tradition. Martyrs are regarded as imitators of Lord's passion and genuine disciples of the Lord. According to the teaching of St. John Chrysostom on martyrdom there are many factors which transform persecution from suffering to blessing. Martyrdom has the same value in all ages; its significance is the same from the past to the present and to the future probably, since Church is doomed somehow to confront persecutions. So, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, when a wicked man ascends the royal throne and turns against us, then it is time for trophies, crowns and exploits.

Keywords

persecution, martyrdom, death of martyrs, relics of martyrs, St. John Chrysostom



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1 Introduction

“In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16.33). With these words Jesus Christ warned his followers of the kind of treatment they would have in the world. Doubtless times of persecution against Christians are times of tribulation and pain for them; but on the other hand martyrdom in these times is a kind of triumph for Church, a glorious victory similar to Lord’s victory through passion. Therefore martyrs are regarded as “imitators of the Lord’s passion” and “genuine disciples of the Lord”, who sealed their faith in Christian teaching through their death, just as the “first martyr” Lord sealed His preaching through His death¹.

Referring to the multiple value of martyrdom St. John Chrysostom mentions that “death of martyrs is advocacy of believers, boldness of Churches, constitution of Christianity, abolition of death, proof of resurrection, ridicule of demons, accusation against devil, teaching of philosophy, exhortation to despise present things and way to desire future things, consolation for our suffering and cause of patience, motive for endurance, root and source and mother of all good things”². In this short abstract at least seven aspects of martyrdom’s significance are presented. Let’s see them one by one in the light of all the relevant teaching of St. John.

¹ Α. Φυτράκη, *Μαρτύριον καί μοναχικός βίος* (Αθήνα: Reprint from “Θεολογία” 19 [1941-1948] 1948), p. 5.

² Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, καί εἰς τὸ μεμνησθαι θανάτου, β’, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.) *Patrologia cursus completus series Graeca* [forward cited: PG] (Tomus L: Paris Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 685.

2 Martyrdom as advocacy of believers and boldness of Churches

To prove that martyrdom is always advocacy of believers St. John notes that when there are disputes about doctrines and our faith is decried, we invoke the death of martyrs saying to our opponents, who convinced them (martyrs) to despise present life? If Christ did not die and resurrect, who achieved these supernatural things? For no human power could in such a long time convince myriads of people, not only men but even women and children, to despise present life, confront monsters, ignore fire, and overcome every torture and punishment. And after all that suffering Christian faith still increases, while false doctrines fall by themselves. The cause of all these is the fact that Christ lives and acts in the souls of the martyrs³.

The death of martyrs strengthens Church. Their passions prove that Christians fear no persecution or death but become more and more bold through suffering. The grace of martyrs spreads to all believers. To explain this St. John leans on St. Paul's teaching on Church as "body of Christ". He says that they (martyrs) did, we delight; they fought, we rejoice; theirs the crown, common the fame, or rather the glory belongs to the whole Church. And how does this happen? It happens because martyrs are parties and members of us. And whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it⁴.

³ *Ibid*, in: PG 50, pp. 685-686.

⁴ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τόν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Ῥωμανόν α', in: PG 50, pp. 605-606.

3 Martyrdom as constitution of Christianity

To understand martyrdom as constitution of Christianity we should take into account the following:

From the earliest time martyrdom, the “baptism of blood”, was considered an equivalent of normal Baptism where this had not been received⁵. St. John mentions that, just as baptized in water, so martyrs bathe in their own blood⁶; and St. Gregory the Theologian notes that this baptism is more venerable because there is no defilement after that⁷.

Since the end of the 2nd century AD the anniversary of the martyr’s death, taken as his heavenly birthday, was kept a feast with a liturgical celebration at his tomb; and later churches were frequently built on the site⁸. St. John preaches that every burial place of martyrs provides great spiritual benefit to the crew of the Church⁹.

The relics of martyrs are considered more valuable than gemstones and gold¹⁰. Since the 4th century AD they had to be placed under the altar of every Church. This practice is based on the book of Revelation¹¹ and has as a start the custom of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist on the tombs of martyrs

⁵ E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church* (Oxford University Press 1997³), p. 1046. Cf Π. Μπούμη, *Κανονικόν Δίκαιον* (Αθήνα: έκδ. Γρηγόρη 2002³), pp. 99-100.

⁶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ὁμιλία ἐγκωμιαστική εἰς τόν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Λουκιανόν, β΄, PG 50, p.522.

⁷ Γρηγορίου τοῦ Θεολόγου, Λόγος ΙΖ΄- Εἰς τὰ ἅγια Φῶτα, ΙΖ΄, in: PG (Tomus XXXVI: Paris Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 356A.

⁸ E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church*, p. 1046.

⁹ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Εἰς τήν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, α΄, in: PG 50, p. 683.

¹⁰ J. Patinot, *Μαρτύρων, τιμή, Θρησκευτική καί Ἠθική Ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία* 8 (Αθήνα 1968), col. 799, (798-804).

¹¹ Rev. 6.9: “I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held”.

during the first centuries¹². So the relics of martyrs became gradually a center for the common worship of Church. This makes martyrdom a fastening, reinforcing and fundamental power for the Church, a kind of exclusive and fruitful soil upon which the Church grows¹³. Therefore martyrdom is presented as constitution of Christianity.

4 Martyrdom as abolition of death and proof of resurrection

Martyrdom is a replicative imitation of Christ's passion¹⁴. Enduring all kind of tortures till death for the sake of Christ martyrs overcome death the same way He did it. Therefore "death of martyrs is victory of martyrs"¹⁵. Martyrs prove that love for God is stronger than fear of death. As it is said, martyr believes, loves, fights, defeats corruption, enters the path to heaven, unites with the divine Bridegroom, rises in the homeland of angels, inherits imperishability¹⁶.

Evidence for the above is that martyrs can do miracles after death. It is no coincidence that since the 4th century AD relics of martyrs are used for curing people of various diseases and

¹² Δ. Μωραΐτη, Λειψίανα, ἄγια, *Θρησκευτική καί Ἠθική Ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία* 8 (Ἀθήνα 1968), col. 214, (212-214).

¹³ Στ. Παπαδόπουλου, *Πατρολογία*, vol. A (Ἀθήνα: Copyright: Stylianos G. Papadopoulos 1991²), p. 224.

¹⁴ Γ. Μαντζαρίδη, *Χριστιανική ἠθική* (Θεσσαλονίκη: έκδ. Π. Πουρναρά 1995⁴), pp. 265-266. Cf Ed. Christen, *Martyrium* (III/2. Systematisch-theologisch), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 22 (Berlin 1992), p. 214, (212-220): "Theologisch ist das Martyrium als Ernstfall der kreuzesnachfolge in die Schicksalgemeinschaft Christi einzuordnen".

¹⁵ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ὁμιλία ἐγκωμιαστική εἰς τὴν ἀγίαν μάρτυρα Πελαγίαν τὴν ἐν Ἄντιοχείᾳ, β', in: PG 50, p. 581.

¹⁶ Σπ. Μπιλάλη, *Οἱ Μάρτυρες τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας*, Vol. A (Ἡ Θεολογία τοῦ Μαρτυρίου) (Ἀθήνα: έκδ. Ὁρθόδοξος Τύπος 1973), p. 262.

particularly for casting out evil spirits¹⁷. St. John says that the unbelievers laugh when they hear about exploits of martyrs after death but this is no reason for us to stop talking about them. A common man cannot do exploits after death, but a martyr can do many and great exploits, not for him to become more brilliant but for the unbeliever to see that death of martyrs is not really death but start of a better life, prelude to a more spiritual state and removal from the minor to the best¹⁸.

The body of the martyr is empty of the soul's energy but that does not matter because soul is replaced by a greater force, the grace of the Holy Spirit, which gives answers to everyone in favour of the resurrection through the miracles martyrs do. So if God gives more power to dead and decayed bodies than in all living, it is certain that He will give martyrs a better and more blissful life at the time of crowns¹⁹.

5 Martyrdom as ridicule of demons and accusation against devil

In almost all his encomiastic speeches on martyrs St. John notes that devil and demons are always behind the persecutors of Christians. It is them who try to make believers deny Christ. But

¹⁷ Εύθυμίου Στύλιου (Ἐπισκόπου Ἀχελώου), Μικρό χριστιανικό λεξικό (Ἀθήνα: Ἀποστολική Διακονία 1995²), p. 123. St. John says that the ashes of martyrs cast out demons [Εἰς τοὺς ἀνδριάντας, ὀμίλια η', β', in: PG (Tomus XLIX: Paris Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 99]. In another occasion he adds that the power of martyrs cures diseases and gives wings to entire cities [Περὶ τῆς τῶν μελλόντων ἀπολαύσεως, καὶ τῆς τῶν παρόντων εὐτελείας, β', in: PG (Tomus LI: Paris Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 348]. He believes also that even reliquaries can have great power, just as the bones of martyrs have (Εἰς τὰς ἀγίας μάρτυρας Βερνίκην καὶ Προσδόκην παρθένους, καὶ Δομνίαν τὴν μητέρα αὐτῶν, ὀμίλια ἐγκωμιαστική, ζ', in: PG 50, p. 640).

¹⁸ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Εἰς τὸν ἅγιον ἱερομάρτυρα Βαβύλαν, α', in: PG 50, p. 529.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

martyrs resisted them and keeping their faith in Christ till death even severely tortured is like laughing against them for their failure. So martyrdom is ridicule of devil and demons, as it is ridicule of persecutors; it is a clear defeat for the killers and a glorious victory for the killed²⁰.

As a result of that demons are afraid of martyrs and their relics. They cannot stand their power and shining glory, that is why they do not come near their tombs²¹. If we take a possessed by demons man close to a martyr's tomb, we will see him jumping and leaving²². And when we see a possessed man next to a martyr's tomb lying on the back and wriggling, there is nothing else that we see but the head of evil cut off²³.

So martyrdom shows that demons are weak after all; it shows as well that they are insensitive. Martyrs have body and feel much pain when persecutors treat them badly. They keep their faith though and endure all tortures for the love of God. Unlike them demons have no body so they cannot feel physical pain. No one persecutes them and yet they are very ungrateful to God. Is there an excuse for them? Can they be forgiven? Not at all! The virtue of martyrs makes them reprehensible and condemnable²⁴.

²⁰ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τόν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Ἰουλιανόν, γ', in: PG 50, p. 671.

²¹ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τήν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, β', in: PG 50, p. 686.

²² Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τόν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Ἰουλιανόν, β', in: PG 50, pp. 669-670.

²³ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τόν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Βαρλάμ, δ', in: PG 50, p. 681.

²⁴ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τήν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, γ', in: PG 50, p. 687.

6 Martyrdom as teaching of philosophy

Perhaps the most educational aspect of martyrdom is the one concerning philosophy mainly with reference to morals, given that martyrdom is regarded by Christians as the peak at the scale of moral acts²⁵.

St. John preaches that just the sight of tombs makes us think about the end of our life and realize that nothing is certain in this life; if we accept that, it will not be easy to waste our life in sin²⁶. But the sight of tombs and reliquaries of martyrs causes us even stronger feelings. Thinking about their pains, struggles, prizes and crowns, we become more humble, even if we have done great things²⁷.

That is why God left us their relics. He could take martyrs to heaven like Prophet Elijah or Enoch but benevolent as He is He wanted to give us one more exhortation to virtue, their relics. The sight of a reliquary amazes our soul and we feel that the martyr, whose relics we see, is there praying with us. Such an experience helps up to become better people²⁸.

Furthermore martyrdom changes the way we think about death. Many people believe that dying alone in a foreign land without the presence of relatives is bad death, is worse than the death of a dog. But what is really worse than that is not to die abroad but to die in sin. On the other hand good death is not to die and be buried in luxury but to die being a righteous man. So we must beatify those who die in virtue. We must also try to be

²⁵ Π. Χρήστου, Ἑλληνική Πατρολογία, Vol. 2 (Θεσσαλονίκη: έκδ. Κυρομανός 1991²), p. 462; cf R. Hedde, Martyre, *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* X (Paris 1929), col. 220, (220-254): “Le martyre est un acte de vertu, car il consiste à demeurer ferme dans la vérité et la justice contre les assauts de la persécution”.

²⁶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, α', in: PG 50, p. 684.

²⁷ *Ibid*, β', in: PG 50, p. 685.

²⁸ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Λόγος εἰς τὸν μακάριον Βαβύλαν, ια', in: PG 50, pp. 550-551.

virtuous ourselves and avoid wickedness, because virtue benefits both alive and dead people while wickedness shames the living and leads the dead to eternal punishment²⁹.

7 Martyrdom as exhortation to despise present things and way to desire future things

Two are the reasons why martyrs endure to the end. The first is their love for God; no one loves God as much as they do³⁰. The second is their desire for future goods in heaven. St. Basil the Great notes that death is sleep for the righteous or rather passing away to a better life. Therefore martyrs thrill slaughtered. The martyr sees not the risks but the crowns; does not shudder at the sight of wounds, but counts the prizes; does not see the executioners below flogging, but imagines the angels above acclaiming; cares not about the transitory risks but about the eternal rewards³¹.

But what are all these prizes and rewards? Well, “eternal life and bliss” would be enough as an answer. But St. John prefers to be more analytic. He says that heavens welcome martyrs as heroes, just like a city welcomes famous athletes³² or soldiers who won in the battlefield. On the way to heaven angels are ahead and archangels accompany martyrs. When they ascend into heaven all the holy forces come to welcome them and hear everything about their exploits. Then they lead them to the king of heavens, who welcomes them as friends and compliments

²⁹ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, ς', in: PG 50, pp. 691-694.

³⁰ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους πάντας τοὺς ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ μαρτυρήσαντας, β', in: PG 50, p. 709.

³¹ Βασιλείου τοῦ Μεγάλου, Ὁμιλία ΙΖ' - Εἰς Βαρλαάμ μάρτυρα, 1, in: PG (Tomus XXXI: Paris Garnier Freres, 1857), p. 484A-B. Cf Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὸν ἅγιον μάρτυρα Ἰουλιανόν, α', in: PG 50, p. 668.

³² Hence St. John calls martyrs “athletes of piety”.

them more than all the others. As they showed the greatest love, now they get all the glory they deserve³³. Therefore we should not shudder hearing that someone died a martyr, but we should shudder hearing that someone became soft and fell losing all these prizes³⁴.

After this description it is obvious that martyrs worth to be imitated³⁵; and the real honour to a martyr is to imitate him³⁶. But how is this possible when there is no persecution? Besides, voluntary martyrdom is disapproved by Church³⁷. According to St. John though there are many ways to imitate martyrs. He says specifically that martyrs despised life, we can despise luxury; they threw their bodies into the fire, we can throw money into the hands of the poor; they stepped on lit carbons, we can flow out the flame of bad desire. All these are burdensome but also beneficial. Generally we should care not about the present difficulties but about the future goods³⁸.

³³ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους πάντας, β', in: PG 50, p. 710.

³⁴ *Ibid*, in: PG 50, p. 709.

³⁵ Therefore after this description St. John puts three rhetorical questions to his audience: *Ibid*: "Didn't you fear martyrdom before? Don't you desire martyrdom now? Don't you feel sorry now that these days are not days of martyrdom?"

³⁶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Εἰς μάρτυρας ὁμιλία, in: PG 50, p. 663.

³⁷ Ν. Μητσοπούλου, *Θέματα Ὁρθοδόξου Ἠθικῆς Θεολογίας Α'* (Ἀθήνα: Ὁργανισμός Ἐκδόσεως Διδακτικῶν Βιβλίων 1992), p. 202.

³⁸ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου, Εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους πάντας, β', in: PG 50, pp. 710-711. In another occasion St. John states that when we see martyrs despising present life, even if we are more insensitive than anyone and the most sluggish, we will show higher spirit, will despise luxury and money, and will desire to be where they are (Εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, γ', in: PG 50, p. 687).

8 Martyrdom as consolation for our suffering, cause of patience and motive for endurance

Everyday life is full of problems and difficulties. Quite often we feel that we cannot deal with them. Sometimes is just a fever we have and we think that life is unbearable, we resent and behave like children³⁹. But when we see how cruelly martyrs were tortured, we take their suffering as a cause to be patient of illnesses. And if we are poor or something very bad happens to us, we will have consolation for all our suffering realizing what happened to them⁴⁰.

Besides we see that many people who think suffering unbearable spend much time at the tombs of the departed. The reason is that they get consolation doing this otherwise they would not do it. Sometimes just to see a piece of clothing of the departed is a relief for them. That is another reason why God left us the relics of martyrs⁴¹. He left them to us so that we get consolation for our suffering and become stronger to deal with all the problems and difficulties of life.

9 Epilogue

From the analysis of St. John's teaching on martyrdom it becomes clear that there are many factors which transform persecution from suffering to blessing according to the beatitude "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matt 5:11). Martyrdom has a special place

³⁹ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους πάντας, β', in: PG 50, p. 709.

⁴⁰ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν μεγαλομάρτυρα Δροσίδα, γ', in: PG 50, p. 687.

⁴¹ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, Λόγος εἰς τὸν μακάριον Βαβύλαν, ια', in: PG 50, p. 551.

in Holy Tradition; and Tradition, as Father Dumitru Staniloae mentions, is the Church itself as form of the undiminished power of Christ through the Holy Spirit⁴². Martyrs as “genuine disciples of the Lord” and prominent members of the Church are the main representatives of Christianity in the world.

It should be also noted that martyrdom has the same value in all ages. St. John Chrysostom urges us to honour all martyrs, old ones and new ones, with the same eagerness and mood, and teaches that we must consider not the time of martyrdom but the bravery, the soul’s piety, the unshakable faith and the zeal of martyrs⁴³. The significance of martyrdom is the same “from the ancient catacombs to the communist prisons”, from the past to the present and to the future probably, since Church is doomed somehow to confront persecutions. As St. Macarius the Egyptian says, this is the way of Christianity. Wherever the Holy Spirit is, there persecution and struggle follow like a shadow⁴⁴.

So let’s keep in mind the words of St. John Chrysostom that, when a wicked man ascends the royal throne and turns against us, then it is time for trophies, crowns and exploits⁴⁵.

⁴² π. Δ. Στανιλοάε, *Ὁ Θεός, ὁ κόσμος καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος. Εἰσαγωγή στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη Δογματικὴ Θεολογία* (Μτφ. π. Κωνσταντῖνος Coman καὶ Γιώργος Παπαευθυμίου) (Ἀθήνα: ἔκδ. Ἀρμός 1990 [2nd reprint 2008]), p. 89.

⁴³ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, *Ὁμιλία ἐγκωμιαστικὴ εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους μάρτυρας Ἰουβεντῖνον καὶ Μαξιμῖνον τοὺς μαρτυρήσαντας ἐπὶ Ἰουλιανοῦ τοῦ Ἀποστάτου, α΄*, in: PG 50, p. 570.

⁴⁴ Μακαρίου τοῦ Αἰγυπτίου, *Ὁμιλία Πνευματικά, ὁμιλία ΙΕ΄, ΙΑ΄-ΙΒ΄*, in: PG (Tomus XXXIV: Paris Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 584A.

⁴⁵ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσοστόμου, *Λόγος εἰς τὸν μακάριον Βαβύλαν καὶ κατὰ Ἰουλιανοῦ, καὶ πρὸς Ἑλληνας, η΄*, in: PG 50, p. 544.