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## **God's Sanctity, Human Frailty and the Shape of Christian Vocation**

### ***Božja svetost, človeška krhkost in oblika krščanske poklicanosti***

*Abstract:* The lives of the saints are a true 'hagiophany'. Through them »God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men« (LG 50). This paper deals with the relation between God and the human being as it is manifested in the notion of sanctity. It first stresses divine filiation as the right frame (by contrast with anthropocentric perspectives) to understand this relation and then reflects on the Christological character of holiness and martyrdom. From this perspective, the relation of the human being with God comes out with interesting nuances and reveals the close unity of *ethos*, worship and history that it involves. The saint bears in his ontological constitution the *forma Christi*.

*Keywords:* God, sanctity, holiness, divine filiation, vocation, martyrdom

*Povzetek:* Življenje svetnikov so resnična hagiofanija. Po svetnikih »Bog ljudem na živ način razodeva svojo navzočnost in svoje obličje« (LG, tč. 50). Članek je posvečen razmerju med Bogom in človekom, kakor se kaže skozi pojmovanje svetništva. V prvi vrsti poudarja Božje sinovstvo kot ustrezen okvir (za razliko od antropocentričnih pogledov), ki omogoča razumevanje omenjenega razmerja, nato pa ponuja razmislek o kristološkem značaju svetosti in mučeništva. V skladu s takšnim pogledom se človekov odnos do Boga kaže kot poln zanimivih odtenkov in razkriva neločljivo povezanost med etosom, čaščenjem in zgodovino, ki jo vključuje. Svetnik v svojem ontološkem temelju prinaša »Kristusov značaj ali obliko« (*forma Christi*).

*Ključne besede:* Bog, svetništvo, svetost, božje sinovstvo, poklicanost, mučeništvo

## **1. Introduction**

The lives of the saints are a true *hagiophany*. In them, as it is stated by the Second Vatican Council, »God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men« (LG

50). It is the Holy Spirit the One who gives rise to the radiance of holiness and who elicits the glory of God reflected in their lives. In the words of Pope Francis, »each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel« (GE 19; Buch 2013, 433–437). This paper deals with the relation between God and the human being as it is manifested in holiness. It begins with an approach to the idea of God that stresses the concatenation of both the downward and the upward movement from God to creature and from creature to God by the gift of divine filiation. Then it reflects on the primary notion of sanctity and martyrdom in its Christological core. From this perspective, the relation of the human being with God comes out with interesting nuances and reveals the close unity of *ethos*, worship, and history that it involves.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. God's sanctity and the reframing of human's frailty

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### 2.1 God of hope and fear of God

In August 1978, at a conference titled 'God's Sanctity, End and Shape of Christian Life', the German theologian Leo Scheffczyk rhetorically asked whether – given the suppression of the value of all that is holy in the contemporary world and the widespread lack of knowledge and disinterest in the transcendent – it wouldn't be better to abandon the idea of the Holy God, God of sanctity, and simply stay with the God of trust, the God of hope. This idea of God would be enough to offer to the human person a strength that would be clear and helpful to him in the unfolding of his life. Why then continue to strive to reach that very high summit of sanctity, which is so hidden and inaccessible and which seems to mean very little for a personal relation with God? God's sanctity, *mysterium tremendum*, which infinitely surpasses the human and it is revealed fearful and dangerous if one approaches Him as profane, could be set aside. It would be enough to present to the human person just practical and convenient truths that remind him of the permanent truth of God's good will for humankind (Scheffczyk 1979, 1022–1026). The God whom Isaiah claims as the Thrice-Holy One (Is 6:3), transcendent and full of majesty, and before whom human's fragile heart trembles and feels fear, would no longer be necessary. After all, are not God's compassion and mercy enough to be sustained in this life? Demanding human beings to rise to the most transcendent perfection, is not something that, deep down, goes beyond what God could reasonably ask for?

The idea of God, thus, is fragmented by a mutually exclusive quandary: either He is a compassionate God in whom the human can trust, or He is a majestic and infinitely holy being, who demands glorification and whom the human person, fraught with weaknesses, can only approach »with fear and trembling« (Phil 2:12).

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However, the root of this dilemma is not to be found in the biblical revelation of God. God reveals Himself at once as *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*: a God who makes the human fearful of his unworthiness and, at the same time, makes him feel astonishment, allures him and saves him.

Behind these alternatives lies not the biblical image of God, but the anti-Christian idea of modernity that sees God as a limit for the human being, as a competitor of human freedom and autonomy. God and the human are confronted with each other in a kind of opposition where only two paths are possible: affirming God and denying the human, or, conversely, denying God and affirming the human. Both carry the seed of atheism within them. Modern atheism explicitly resolves this antithesis between the human and God: »Man is getting rid of God – in the words of H. de Lubac – in order to regain possession of the human greatness that, it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another. In God, he is overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom.« (De Lubac 1995, 24–25) Anthropocentrism also does this, albeit more subtly, by advocating a God tailored to humanity. An ancient case for this anthropocentrism can be found in Porphyry. He sought to discredit Christian theology by demonstrating its incompatibility with Greek philosophy, that was constituted as the only parameter of rationality (*Against the Christians*, fr. 73, 6–8). He, as Methodius of Olympus stated, equates God with the measure of his own way of thinking (*Against the Christians*, fr. 83, 2–3). In its modern shape, anthropocentrism resolves the antithesis between God and the human by presenting God as an intrinsic condition of the human. This implies a Copernican turn in the theological discourse, which is reversed so that the human is no longer the image of God, but the measure of God. »God is the mirror of man«, is the well-known expression of L. Feuerbach in his *The Essence of Christianity*.

Even if anthropocentrism is not taken so far that it ends up falling into its logical atheistic consequence, the idea of a God in the measure of the human entails the loss of the faith's peak and transcendence. Faith itself becomes totally falsified. On the one hand, by not considering seriously God's transcendence and total sanctity, the human person is neglected in his highest capacity and possibility; and, on the other hand, the relation between God and the world is misperceived hindering the comprehension of creation and, ultimately, of redemption. Anthropocentric theology rightly asserts that God in creating wills the good of humanity, but another essential aspect of the creative act is obscured: God creates the world and the human being to be glorified in it, because he seeks the adoration of His sanctity (Scheffczyk 1979, 1024). That God creates to be glorified means that he creates to make the world participate in his fullness, to make it holy. God does not create the world or the human being because he seeks in them his own fullness. God would then be a beggar of the human. Rather, God, having his fullness in the love of himself, in the Trinitarian love, wills to involve the human in that love, and therefore he creates him.

## 2.2 The new frame: Divine filiation

The anthropocentric idea of modernity does not fully understand that the human, more than a being facing God, is a being towards God. Creation entails God's communication *ad extra* to the creature, for which humans are 'other' before the Creator; but it also means – and this is truly important – that God is freely calling the human to participate in his divine life. Therefore, God's creative act as a divine operation *ad extra*, could also be considered an operation *ad intra*, in the sense that the creature is made by God a partaker of his inner divine life. By being created, the human is called *ad intra* by God, namely, he is called to participate in His divine life. And this is what the mystery of salvation attains: God gives human beings the gift of being sons and daughters involving them in the Trinitarian communion as children of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (Ocáriz 2000, 69–95). Salvation is therefore much more than a simple liberation from guilt, an amnesty from crime through which the human person can live calmly in the midst of his fragility.

Creation and salvation lead the human eye to God as the peak of its own existence. The primitive Church confessed this with total conviction. Human life and glorification of God was understood as something inseparable. »For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God«, is the famous expression by Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* IV, 20.7; Orbe 1996, 299). Moreover, the doctrine of the marvellous exchange, as the summary of Christian redemption, points out that the divine filiation is not a simple unfolding of the person's being, but instead requires a newness in being that only God can give. The Son of God through the incarnation assumed humanity in his own filiation, giving birth to many brethren in himself for the Father. A new relation is established through the Son: a new filiation, the living in the Son, the living in Christ, which is widespread in the writings of Paul (Dunn 2006, 390–412; Ocáriz 2000, 69–95). This new being – *esse* – and this new relation – *ad Patrem* – defines the life of the Christian in all its dimensions. It is a gift from God that takes the human to the summit of his existence and, therefore, constitutes a value that should never be forsaken or replaced with another. This is the witness of the martyrs. Since the beginning of the Church, they bore witness to the sanctity of God – that God is always more, always greater – and to the essence of Christian life: the human person has been made capable of responding to God's sanctity through of love.

## 3. The shape of Christian vocation

There is no dilemma in this approach: the compassionate and merciful God is the one who clothes the fragile and unworthy human being in Jesus Christ and, by doing so, clothes him in His holiness, is pleased with him and makes him capable not only of following in Christ's footsteps, but of taking part in his same kinship with the Father. Martyrs thus show that total self-giving to God is the basic category of Christian existence. The Christian destiny is to live God's life and all dimen-

sions of his human existence are subordinated to this new life. Christians do not place martyrdom as a culmination, as the end of the path, but as the starting line of a new disposition towards the world and towards themselves, a new way of acting and living in which the participation in the divine life is recognized as the good above all other goods.

### 3.1 A new existence in Christ

The heightened consciousness of the Christian vocation held by the primitive Church appears with great clarity and simplicity in Paul's language. In his letters he frequently refers to the church members as the 'saints', *οἱ ἅγιοι* (Procksch and Kuhn 1974, 88–115). For example, in Romans he designates Christians as the 'saints', the sons of God who are guided by the Spirit and for whom Christ intercedes according to God (Rom 8:25). In the opening of the First Letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the faithful of Corinth, calling them »those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints« (1 Cor 1:2). He also starts and concludes other letters with similar expressions (Rom 1:7; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 1:2; Phil 4:21-22). In the same letter to the Corinthians, he exhorts them to resolve the conflicts arising between Christians »before the saints«, that is, within the Christian community without turning to pagan courts (1 Cor 6:1); and in Colossians speaks of »the collection for the saints« (Col 16:1). Those who join the Church through the blood of Christ are reconciled with God, since through Christ Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father in a single Spirit, and are constituted – reads the Letter to the Ephesians – »fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God« (Eph 2:19). Paul considers himself »the least of all the saints« (Eph 3:8). This same title appears in the Acts of the Apostles in Ananias's response to the vision of the Lord, who commands him to lay his hands on Saul of Tarsus: »Lord, I have heard many speak about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.« (Acts 9:13)

Sanctity is not defined primarily by social involvement in the community of the Church, but by the union with Christ that arises in the Christian through the Church, that is, by the incorporation into the mystery of Christ that begets in the Christian a new existence as a member of Christ's body. What prevails is not the horizontal dimension of the relation with the community, but the vertical awareness of belonging to Christ, of being a new creature, a son of God. This is clear if we look at the root of the notion sanctity. In the Old Testament, the term ἅγιος already indicated primarily a relation with God, »the Saint of Israel« (Is 43:14), and its use extended to those who were close to or in contact with God (Psalms 16:3; 34:10). The angels are saints and the sanctuary of the temple is sacred (Ex 29:30; Heb 8:2; 13:11). Biblical sanctity is not something that humans can acquire or achieve, or anything that belongs to them by nature, but instead is a gift granted by God. Paul uses this term to refer to those who were baptised, who due to joining Christ were 'put apart', separated from the world, those whom God saved and »had called to a holy life« (2 Tim 1:9). Christians are saints due to a calling from God; the privilege of being members of the community of saints is due to

the calling of the divine grace of Christ (Phil 1:1; Alonso 2009, 73–76). In Revelation, the saints are those who will be on the side of God in the final battle (Rev 13:7; 14:12; Louth 2011, 3).

As Romano Guardini points out, these saints were simply the Christians: people who lived in Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus and other places, who believed and hoped, who were tormented by their fragility and who lived in the midst of pagan surroundings, which entailed all sorts of hardships. However, they were also those who – knowing what it meant to be Jewish or pagan – discovered the divine glory of the Gospel, that is, they had perceived the »love of Christ, which exceeds all knowledge« and had a new existence governed by the Sanctity of God (Guardini 1956; Mariani 2018, 123). This new existence is crucial to grasp theologically what sanctity is. Peter Brown in his very well-known article „The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity“ delved into holiness as it appears historically as a claim to power and explores its social significance (Brown 1971, 80–101), but the deep theological meaning of sanctity remained unexplained. Precisely is this theological notion that allows a proper understanding of the saint’s self-perception and of his social function.

### 3.2 Witness of Christ: a new end of life

The key figure for the comprehension of the theological notion of sanctity is the martyr. Μάρτυς, as commonly accepted, means witness, he who bears testimony to something he knows or has seen (Strathmann 1981, 474–514). The use of this term to refer to those who suffer, ultimately to death, due to their faith is certainly a novelty. However, it could not be understood without looking at the martyrial figure that emerges from the Old Testament. Part of the old development of this notion is the death and suffering to which the prophets were subjected (Jer 26:8-11; 20-23; 2 Chron 24:17-22; 1 Kings 19:10-12 and Neh 9:26) and the witness of the death of the Maccabees, that upheld the strength in faith and aroused the hope in the Lord’s intervention (2 Mac 6-7; Dan 11-12). In the New Testament there are two fundamental events that contribute to this development. On the one hand, the meaning that Christ himself gave to his suffering and to his death; a fate of which he was fully aware and to which he granted an undeniable redemptory meaning; and, on the other hand, the teachings on the mission and destiny of his disciples. In fact, the martyrial catechesis of the primitive Church was founded on the words of the Lord that Matthew situates after the selection of the Twelve and when they were sent forth to preach:

»Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves /.../ they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles.« (Mt 10:16-18)

»You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.« (Mt 10:22)

»A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master /.../ If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household.« (Mt 10:24-25)

»He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.« (Mt 10:39)

Since the very beginning, the existence of the primitive Church had a martyrial sense. The Acts of the Apostles gives a clear idea of this atmosphere of martyrdom when speaking of the apostles rejoicing in suffering offenses in the name of Christ (Acts 5:41).

While the term martyr in the New Testament is not directly related to the laying down of one's life, but rather refers to the one who bears witness to the faith and truth of the Gospel, it could be said that the μάρτυς fulfils the purpose of the ἄγιος which is implicit in the baptismal confession: those who confess Christ can be expected to have that confession tested in the context of persecution (Lk 21:13-15; 1 Pet 4:12-14; Rom 5:3-5; Louth 2011, 4). It merits stressing that witnesses of Christ are not only those who have seen the events of Christ's life, but also those who announce Him and bear testimonies on Him to others. This aspect of the notion of μάρτυς, which points to the work of evangelisation, towards a mission, is clearly revealed in the figure of Paul, who is a witness for Christ in so far as he was sent to proclaim the Good News (Acts 22:14-15; Strathmann 1981, 489). An example of this is Stephen, who is not called 'martyr' because he dies, but he dies because he is a witness of Christ, and he is rightfully so because of his evangelising activity. With his death, Stephen offers the greatest proof of the seriousness of his testimony. Hence, Paul, when referring to the outcome as »the blood of your witness Stephen« (Acts 22:20), joins both realities: testimony and blood. The same association appears in a similar way in the Book of Revelation where the testimony is related to the blood of the lamb and the giving of life unto death: »And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.« (Rev 12:11)

The term 'martyr' is used to designate the cruel death because of one's faith in the mid-second century Asia Minor. It appears in *Martyrium Polycarpi* XIX, 1, written shortly after the death of Polycarp in 155 AD. In the third century Origen of Alexandria explained the qualification of martyr in these words:

»All who bear witness to the truth, either through their words or deeds or working in some way in favour of them, can call himself a 'witness' (martyr). But the name of 'witness' (martyr), in the proper sense, is due to the community of brothers that, impressed by the strength of spirit of those fighting to the death for truth and for virtue, established the custom of applying it to those who bore witness on the mystery of the true religion by spilling their blood.« (Origen, *In Iohannem* II, 210 [Blanc 1966, 350])

The most widespread explanation of the origin of this meaning is that Christian martyrdom primarily took place in a legal setting in which Christians gave testimony of their faith before the judge, often under torture. It does however seem clear that behind this usage there was a deep theology of martyrdom. The primitive community learned this martyrial theology from the Gospel and it had an essentially eschatological nature. In the martyr the true saint is contemplated, the one who bears witness to Christ before death (Louth 2011, 4), the saint who has reached his goal. The martyr was the Christian, the one among the saints, who had been victorious at the life's end. The primitive Christian community lived with great eschatological awareness. We could say that Stephen's vision when dying of an open heaven, when he »looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God« (Acts 7:55), was more real for the first Christians than the earthly life with its persecutions and sufferings. This heaven was their living hope. Primitive texts make this clear depicting the Christians' joy – and even their desire for – when facing martyrdom (e.g. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Romanos*; Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 50, 15; Janssens 1985, 424). Christians were fully aware of martyrs' dwelling in the presence of God.

#### 4. Christological nature of martyrdom: key of Christian vocation

If for the primitive community the saints were those who joined Christ through baptism, received the life of grace from the Holy Spirit and were made new man, the martyrs were those who were united to the sacrifice of Christ with their own lives. Martyrdom is an *imitatio Christi* (Pellegrino 1958, 38–54). This is how Luke recounts the end of Stephen's life, establishing an explicit connection between the deaths of Christ and Stephen. This was how martyrdom was understood and experienced in Antiquity. It is an imitation and following of Christ, an authentic union with Him. For example, the *Acts of the Martyrs* reveal this by putting on the lips of Felicitas shortly before she was martyred the following words: »I suffer what I am suffering now, but then there will be another in me who will suffer for me, because I will suffer for Him.« (Ruiz-Bueno 2012, 419–440) Martyrs experience an identification with Christ, so that it is Christ who suffers in them and who conquers death through them. There is a true participation in Christ's life and sacrifice (Ferguson 2014, 269–279).

The Christological nature of martyrdom is also expressed in cultic way. The death of the martyr is a sacrifice described in a liturgical tone that reflects the new worship started by Christ. This does also appear, albeit veiled, in the narration of the martyrdom of Stephen. The Acts of the Apostles present the last words of Stephen as a new interpretation of Moses and the Law in the light of Christ (Acts 7:1–56). The Jews accused Stephen of speaking against Moses and against God, but what he was actually doing was a rereading of the Old Testament in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was a Christological interpretation,



and this is the reason why the Jews rejected it, claiming his words were blasphemy. That is the reason of his condemnation. Stephen explained that the Cross is at the centre of the history of salvation, showing that Jesus is the final accomplishment of the entire history. Above all, Stephen clarified that the cult of the Temple had ended, »the Most High does not dwell in houses built by human hands« (Acts 7:48), he said, alluding to the Prophet Isaiah (Is 66:1-2). The contact between human frailty and divine mercy is no longer the Temple, but Christ. Christ's cross is the supreme act of divine love converted into human love, that put an end to the ancient worship with animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple; the Risen One is the new and true Temple.

Paul took up this Christological interpretation and developed it in Romans 3:24-26. He described the death of Jesus in cultic categories and identified Christ with the propitiatory of the Temple: »Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation in his blood through faith.« (Rom 3:25) Paul saw a radical transformation of the reality of worship in the cross of Christ. The cross is the realisation of true worship and union with God of which the Old Testament sacrifices were image. This is particularly important because Paul could not have interpreted Christ's death in this way if Jesus himself had not imbued his death with a meaning of love and redemption (Ratzinger 2005, 99–100). At the Last Supper, Jesus had already accepted and beforehand consummated his death as the sacrifice of himself to the Father out of love.

This transformation of worship did not mean that the material worship of ancient law had become a spiritualist worship, in the sense of a simple ethical and moral worship. The transformation actually consisted in the fact that the worship of the Old Testament, carried out by means of symbols, has been revealed as an image and prophecy of the authentic worship, which is the cross of Christ: the true divine-human love replaced the rites of worship that were based in the blood of sacrificed animals. The animal blood put symbolically before God's mercy the sins of the people. Christ's blood is not a symbol, but a real laying down his own life which restores out of love the relation between God and the human person (Sabourin 1961, 302). There is no spiritualisation of worship, but conversely a real and definitive union between adoring God and a life of dedication (Krajnc 2018, 797–811). The sacrifice on the Calvary takes on what is symbolic and ritual in the Old Testament and instituted the new and true worship: the Eucharist is carried out in a dedicated existence. Worship under the Law of Moses with sacrificed animals is not replaced by moralism (it is not about humankind doing everything alone based merely on moral endeavours), but by Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Sesboüé 1988, 286). Christians ought to take part in this supreme act of worshipping God undertaken by Christ on Calvary. This is precisely the spiritual worship (Rom 12:1), the cult according to the Logos of which Paul speaks. It involves the Christian becoming »one in Jesus Christ« (Gal 3:28) and it is in this union – and only in this union – where Christians can be in him and with him a 'living sacrifice' and can offer to God the 'true worship'. Sacrificed animals were a substitution of man. In his surrender to the Father, Jesus Christ does not replace us, but rather

takes us into him, truly re-presenting us (truly making us present). In his union with Christ, the human, despite his weakness, becomes a living sacrifice, a true act of worship (Ratzinger 2005, 120).

For this reason, the theology of the cross, the theology of martyrdom – of the own's life surrendering – and the theology of the Eucharist are inseparable for Paul (Ratzinger 2005, 103–104). Thus, it is not uncommon for him to refer to the act of dying for Christ with liturgical images: »For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come« (2 Tm 4:6), and »Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all« (Phil 2:17). He thus interpreted martyrdom as part of Christ's sacrifice. Indeed, the Christian's life, which is the »holy temple of God« (1 Cor 3:17; Eph 2:21) acquires its full meaning in Christ's sacrifice to the Father.

This teaching of Paul had great repercussions in the primitive Church. Perhaps the most eloquent example of this would be the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which is described liturgically, as a participation in Christ's Passover and a full communion in the Eucharist. Polycarp is taken like a lamb towards God, as an acceptable and holy offering to God. On the pyre, he pronounced a long doxology, a long liturgical prayer and, as he was publicly burned at the stake, the fire looked like a candle and his burning body like baked bread, emitting a smell »like incense« (*Martyrium Polycarpi* XIV). The pleasant aroma and the making of bread meant that the martyr had become like Christ; his life had become an offering (Ratzinger 2005, 117–118).

## 5. Continuing martyrdom: *ethos*, worship and history

The primitive Christian community's experience of martyrdom was progressively forged into a theology of martyrdom that was already quite well-established in the third century, with prominent figures such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria in the East and Cyprian in the West (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV, 15.3–5; Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium* II; Cyprian, *Ad Fortunatum. Exhortatione Martyrii*). In the fourth century when persecution ended, it experienced large-scale development. The sudden change the Church experienced with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which moved from persecution to being favoured and adopted as the imperial religion, led to an identity crisis for the Church: the Church would have to show its face to the world under conditions that were very different to those it had known before that time. In the midst of this crisis, the Church's determination to remain the Church of the martyrs stands out unchangeable (Louth 2011, 6). After all, it is about being faithful to the totality that God claims: to love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mk 12:28; Dt 6:5; Guardini 1956; Mariani 2018, 129–130). The martyrial meaning of Christian life took on other characteristics besides persecution, although its foundations remained identical. Martyrdom is then described as the following of Christ throughout the whole life; and thus, being a martyr

involves resisting the attacks of the enemy and giving oneself completely to God. As it was for Paul, for the martyr to live is Christ and to die is a gain (Ph 1:21).

It was also at this time that the Church built up a widespread cult of martyrs. This cult is theologically based in Christ death and resurrection and differs from the pagan cult of heroes (García Sánchez 2019, 597). The preaching of the Fathers of the Church expresses the magnitude of the devotion to the martyrs in this period. Sermons on Saint Stephen and on the martyrs of each place proliferate and new figures of martyrial asceticism arise. The monk is a living and peculiar example (although it's not the only one) of martyrial asceticism, as depicted by Athanasius in his *Life of Saint Anthony* (Alviar 2018, 394–395). Also, in a distinctive connexion between the figure of the apostle and the martyr, the defence of orthodoxy is described in a martyrial language by those bishops who suffered persecution and penalties at the hands of the authorities owing to his preaching and confession of the faith.

Beyond the singular figures of the monk, the bishop or other characters, the deep meaning that martyrdom has for the Christian life appears clearly in the way the Fathers of the Church exposed the core of salvation as the union of *ethos*, worship and history. They believed that –through the Incarnation – God was no longer a God for himself, but instead a God with us, a living God who came to save us. The Old Testament's concept of holiness, especially the adjective *qāḏōš* (saint, divine), already points to this union between worship, morality and history in mankind's relationship with God. And this is precisely due to the understanding of God as a personal being and due to the historic dimension of man's relationship with God (Procksch and Kuhn 1974, 91; 114). Through Christ, human freedom had a new beginning: the human person could live his life as true act of spiritual worship to God. In other words, the life on Earth, the free decisions and operations that the human person carries out during his life reach God. This is the essence of Christological faith: Jesus, in giving himself totally faithfully to the fulfilment of the Father's will, reorients humanity back to God. Christ restores humanity to the glory of the Father, since in him and through him the human being receives the God's gift that makes him able to respond to divine love with the loving surrender of his own existence. Christ revealed that the end of life is not a mere chronological end (πέρας). Life is not a simple series of events, a matter of time. Rather it is directed towards a goal, a consummation. Life is history, because beyond a simple end, there is a goal (τέλος) that must be achieved, an aim that must be conquered and that gives to everything a meaning. This goal grants consistency to time, converts it into history. Thus, the fulfilment of history no longer consists solely in its conclusion, but in its completion and perfection. The Christian, like the martyr, is the one who live his human existence as a history in which he worships God and God sanctifies him.

The union of *ethos*, worship and history is written with particular clarity by Origen and, especially, Gregory of Nyssa, who described Christian life as the imitation of Christ (Brugarolas 2017, 319–322). They understood that the ideal of human life is the imitation of divine nature. They may have recalled Plato when speaking

of this (*Theaetetus* 176b–177a; *Republica* 613b), although what is sure is that they had before their eyes Christ's exhortation of being perfect like the Father (Mt 5:48; Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* 15–28). They developed the theme of the imitation of divine nature joining it to the imitation of Christ (Völker 1955, 253; Mateo-Seco 2010, 502). As Gregory of Nyssa explained, given divine impassibility and human nature inherent passions, human imitation of the divine nature would be impossible without the Incarnation: God himself is the One who taught us how to imitate him through Christ (*De Beatitudinibus* I, 4; *De perfectione* 48–51; *Oratio catechetica* 5; Drobner and Viciano 2000, 26; Meredith 2000, 98). Incarnation completely changes the pattern of life's ideal. That which philosophy proposed as the path towards divinization (imitating God) is – paradoxically – specified by a path of humility and suffering, a tenet very distant from the Hellenic ideal. For Gregory, the imitation of Christ and the imitation of the divine are equivalent, since imitating the life of Christ means following and becoming one with the Logos (Špelič and Bogataj 2017, 79–95).

This comprehension of Christian life, borne witness to by the martyrs, has an essentially eschatological nature. It orients human's life towards the final consummation and perfection, and confers great value to the realities (both, sensible and intelligible) of human life (Rordorf 1975, 445–461). The imitation of God is not a spiritualistic path of denying matter. Rather, it is about the union with Christ, a bond of unity granted by the mysteries of Christ's earthly life and whose final consummation involves the incorruptibility of the human body and the supreme good of the soul. In this way, Christianity takes Jewish expectations to its accomplishment, since the hope and promise of salvation are already fulfilled in the present (Christians are already living in the end of salvation, which is Christ; Celarc 2019, 441–456) and also overcomes the Hellenic dualism between matter and spirit: salvation concerns the human person not only in his upper dimensions, but in the totality of his existence, it is a true *salus carnis*.

## 6. Conclusion

At the beginning of this pages a rhetorical question about the God of mercy and the God of sanctity was posed. The dilemma between these two ways of contemplating the divine arose out of an anthropocentric perspective that is not in accord with the biblical revelation of God. The right frame to understand God and human's relation is that of divine filiation, which is a kind of relation that entails both God's gift and human response. It is a divine gift that takes the human person to the summit of his existence and constitutes a value that should never be forsaken or replaced with another. According to this, the logic of sanctity is that of martyrdom, which is not at the end or culmination of Christian existence but constitutes the starting point of a new disposition towards all things. This primordial comprehension of holiness and martyrdom emphasizes the Christological nature of Christian life, which is latter described (we alluded to Origen and Gre-

gory of Nyssa) in terms of *mimesis* and participation in Christ. In this sense it is possible to affirm that the saint truly manifests the shape of Christ. The saint – and the Church itself – bears in his ontological constitution the *forma Christi*.

## Abbreviations

GE – Francis 2018 [Gaudete et exultate].

LG – Second Vatican Ecumenical Council 1964 [Lumen Gentium].

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