

And to the Virgin mild, the Queene of heaven hye  
With Jesus her lovinge Child, in all eternitie.

Unto all prophetes meeke, to Christes Apostles deere,  
Marters, Confessers eake, and to all virgins cleare  
And unto each of them, crowned in their degree  
With Joy in Jerusalem, godes blessed face to see.

*finis.*



### THE MARTYRS' ALTAR

A SERMON PREACHED AFTER THE CONSECRATION  
OF THE HIGH ALTAR IN THE CHURCH OF ST PETER  
THE APOSTLE, AT EYNHAM, ON THE FEAST OF  
ST PETER'S CHAINS, 1950

By

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*The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and the torment of death shall not touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure was taken for misery: and their going away from us, for utter destruction: but they are in peace. And though in the sight of men they suffered torments, their hope is full of immortality.—*  
Wisdom, chapter 3.

**I**N the splendid ceremony at which we have been assisting, there are two elements: the dedication of the altar and the burying of the relics of martyrs in that altar. At some periods and in some parts of the Catholic world these two elements have been so distinguished that they have even taken place on different days. Since this is the Feast of St Peter's Chains, and St Peter, Apostle and Martyr and first Bishop of Rome, is our great patron, I propose to dwell chiefly on the most Roman of these two elements, which were not conflated as they are now until the Middle Ages; and the most Roman of them is the enshrining of the relics of the martyrs in the altar of sacrifice. It was not till after the Roman Empire had officially recognised the legality of

the Catholic religion in the early fourth century that we were able to have permanent churches and fixed altars; and then the churches were at first dedicated, set apart for the worship of God in the celebration of Mass, simply by the decree of the Christian Emperor handing them over to religious uses. And the altars which it was the main purpose of those churches to house, were considered sufficiently hallowed by the celebration of Mass upon them. How indeed could they be more or better hallowed?

But during the years of persecution it had early become the practice to offer the Holy Sacrifice upon the tombs of the faithful departed, and especially upon the tombs of those who had borne witness to the truth and life of God that was in them by the shedding of their blood unto death—those whom we call above all others 'the Martyrs', 'the witnesses'. In this way the faithful still on earth, in their great act of worship, associated themselves and felt themselves associated with those faithful ones who had gone before, dying in the peace of God but needing still for their entry into heaven the prayers of those on earth; associated themselves and felt themselves associated with those others who, by their supreme act of fidelity in accepting violent death rather than forswear their God and Saviour, were in their heavenly glory already able to join their prayers to the pleadings of those who sought to follow in their path. Thus the whole of Christ's Church militant on earth, suffering in purgatory, triumphant in heaven, was linked in the perpetuation of the memory of his redeeming sacrifice, through which the fruits of his passion and death, fruits of example, fruits of grace and holiness and help, were made, as they still are made, available to the world he died to save.

Eventually, and before very long, this privilege of having the body and blood of Christ offered on the tomb was confined to the Martyrs, and it became necessary, if this dear and familiar practice was to be continued, to bring their bodies or relics to the church, instead of building the church over their last resting-place. And so we find their remains being conducted to their new sepulchre with triumphal procession such as befits the memory of their glorious constancy and close sharing in the blessed Passion of their Master. Their grave, like any other Catholic grave, had to be blessed, and so as with any other, but with more solemnity it was washed with Holy Water and made fragrant with incense; it was even anointed with Holy Oil, as, in one old tradition of

Rome, were the breasts of the dead. Henceforth their sacred remains will rest beneath the stone of sacrifice, a perpetual reminder to the worshippers that he whose body and blood are offered thereon claims their allegiance too so long as life shall last, and that the power of his death is also at *their* disposal to bring them to the crown of life everlasting.

We have all, as our patron St Peter tells us in his first Epistle, been 'regenerated unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that cannot fade, reserved in heaven for us who by the power of God are kept by faith unto salvation. Then, he goes on, you will be triumphant. What if you have trials of many sorts to sadden your hearts in this brief interval?' It was in the consciousness of that living hope that the martyrs withstood their terrible trials and came to their triumph which we are celebrating. And there have been martyrs in every age of the Church. In her first three hundred years more than half the time was a time of widespread and active persecution. It has been calculated that till the peace of Constantine 129 years were years of persecution and 120 years were of partial though never complete tolerance. And the years of worst persecution were so spread through the rest that there was not a single generation that had not the example of ever-renewed martyrdom before its eyes.

Catechetical instruction was designed to prepare the faithful for this very real possibility, so that we find simple and unlettered people of every age and both sexes with answers to their judges ready on their lips—answers which they not only proclaimed in court, but continued to assert under the prolonged tortures to which they were often subjected before gaining the release of death. Little books of passages from Sacred Scripture were written and circulated to strengthen their faith and their hope. 'Blessed are those who suffer persecution in the cause of right; the kingdom of heaven is theirs.' 'There is no need to fear those who kill the body, but have no means of killing the soul; fear him more who has the power to ruin body and soul in hell.' 'Whoever acknowledges me before men, I too will acknowledge him before my Father who is in heaven, and whoever disowns me before men, before my Father in heaven I too will disown him.' 'He is not worthy of me, that loves father or mother more; he is not worthy of me, that loves son or daughter more; he is not worthy of me

that does not take up his cross and follow me. He who secures his own life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake that will secure it.' 'Every man that has forsaken home or brother or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive his reward a hundredfold and obtain everlasting life.'

The preparation for a very possible martyrdom was not only moral and intellectual; it was also physical. Deliberate practice of severe fasting and physical privation hardened the Christian against the day when, to use our Lord's words to St Peter, 'another would gird him and lead him whither he would not'—taking him to slow death amid the filth and squalor and starvation and actual torture of the roughest prisons.

They armed themselves deliberately, of course, with the power and strength of the sacraments. St Cyprian in Africa, himself a future martyr, says: 'Since a new persecution is at hand, let us be ready and armed for the combat. Let us not leave unarmed and defenceless those whom we urge on to the fray; let us unite them by the protection of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, refreshing them with the divine nourishment that is to be found in the Eucharist, their safeguard and wall of defence against the enemy.' Again and again we find them extremely conscious of what the sacraments had done to them. They had been reborn in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, dedicated and sealed to be temples of the Holy Spirit, enlightened by his presence, made houses of prayer. They had, in a word, been made Christians, other Christs. 'It is Christ,' they said, adapting St Paul's words 'who suffers in me.' All that the judges could get out of one woman was: 'I am a Christian.' 'What is your name?' the judge asked her. 'What good is it to know my name? I am a Christian.' 'What is your master's name?' 'He is only the master of my body; the master of my soul is God.' And a man, on being asked 'Who are you?', answered: 'Caesar's slave, but a Christian, having received freedom from Christ and by his grace having the same hope as these'—who stood beside him in the dock.

The Church has had such martyrs in every age, and our own times are comparable with those early centuries of the Church in this respect, and they look as though they will continue to be so. We see even in our day already a flowering of that desire for the prize of martyrdom which was so marked a feature of the

spirituality of the early centuries. And the other element in our ceremony of consecration should remind us of the truth that shone so brightly in our martyred brethren of every age, the truth of what it is to be a Christian. For that is why we have baptised this altar with Holy Water, and anointed it with the Oil of Confirmation, and encircled it with clouds of incense—to impress on ourselves that by our baptism and confirmation we are consecrated as temples in which clouds of prayer must ascend, in which the sacrifice of Christ must be continually offered, so that everything we think and desire and do and say and suffer is united to his total offering of himself to the Father for the salvation of the world. As we renew his sacrifice upon this holy table, not only today, but every day that we do it, let us see to it that all that is done there is being reflected in our lives. The new birth of baptism, the strengthening of confirmation has been accomplished in us once and for all; but the clouds of prayer must go up continually, and the following of Christ upon the way of the Cross, even to the hour of death however it may come, that too must never cease. The example of the martyrs whose bones lie buried here is ever before us, bearing witness that though in the sight of men we suffer torments, our hope is full of immortality. Afflicted in few things we shall be well rewarded, when God has tried us and found us worthy of himself.

The strong Son of God, whose plea for mercy on a sinful world was heard upon the Cross, will, if we live united to him, hear us too in our needs, as he hears and has ever heard the cries of the martyrs amid their sufferings. My Jesus, mercy! Mary, my loving mother, pray for me! St Peter, Prince of the Apostles and glorious martyr, come to my aid!