

A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by St Augustine ¹

The gospel tells us how Christ the Lord walked upon the waters of the sea, and how the apostle Peter did the same until fear made him falter and lose confidence. Then he began to sink and emerged from the water only after calling on the Lord with renewed faith.

Now we must regard the sea as a symbol of the present world, and the apostle Peter as a symbol of the one and only Church. For Peter, who ranked first among the apostles and was always the most ready to declare his love for Christ, often acted as spokesman for them all. For instance when the Lord Jesus Christ asked who people thought he was and the other disciples had cited various opinions, it was Peter who responded to the Lord's further question, *But who do you say that I am?* With the affirmation: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* One replied for all because all were united.

When we consider Peter as a representative member of the Church we should distinguish between what was due to God's action in him and what was attributable to himself. Then we ourselves shall not falter; then we shall be founded upon the rock and remain firm and unmoved in the face of the wind, rain and floods, which are the trials and temptations of this present world. Look at Peter, who in this episode is an image of ourselves; at one moment he is all confidence, at the next all uncertainty and doubt; now he professes faith in the immortal One, now he fears for his life.

Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you upon the water. When the Lord said *Come.* Peter climbed out of the boat and began to walk on the water. This is what he could do through the power of the Lord. What by himself? *Realizing how violently the wind was blowing, he lost his nerve, and as he began to sink he called out, "Lord, I am drowning, save me!"* When he counted on the Lord's help it enabled him to walk on the water; when human frailty made him falter he turned once more to the Lord, who immediately stretched out his hand to help him, raised him up as he was sinking, and rebuked him for his lack of faith.

Think, then, of this world as a sea, whipped up to tempestuous heights by violent winds. A person's own private tempest will be his or her unruly desires. If you love God you will have power to walk upon the waters, and all the world's swell and turmoil will remain beneath your feet. But if you love the world it will surely engulf you, for it always devours its lovers, never sustains them. If you feel your foot slipping beneath you, if you become a prey to doubt or realize that you are losing control, if, in a word, you begin to sink, say: *Lord, I am drowning, save me!* Only he who for your sake died in your fallen nature can save you from the death inherent in that fallen nature.

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year A – New City Press – NY – 1999 – pg 114

A reading about Christ the Martyr and the martyrdom of the Christian, by Rene Latourelle. 1

It was the persecution of the first century of the Church that occasioned the elaboration of [the] notion of [the] martyr as ...the Christian who witnesses publicly to faith in one God and in the divinity of Christ, and who upholds this witness even to death....For them, witnessing to the faith means being united to Christ as spouse to spouse; to deny him would be to separate from him. It is not death that the martyrs seek, but rather Christ, to whom they want to remain faithful, joined to him in his passion.

In the course of the centuries, this notion of martyrdom has become notably impoverished. In the theology of martyrdom a distinction is made between *hatred of the faith* and *witness for love of Christ*. One can see, however, that up until well into the twentieth century the emphasis was on the *hatred of the faith* shown by the persecutor or executioner. ...Now in many of these cases, for example that of the victims of the Nazis such as Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein, the motives of the tyrant are not purely religious but political as well. In the two cases just mentioned, there never was a confrontation between the tyrant and the victim....

Fortunately, on this notion of martyrdom, as on so many others, Vatican II, by returning to the sources, that is to Christ the Martyr, has proposed a teaching that represents a prodigious qualitative leap in relation to preconiliar theology. Martyrdom is no longer presented *first of all* as death inflicted by enemies *in hatred of the faith*, but as the *sign of the greatest love*.

In the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* at no. 42, it is said:

The Church, therefore, considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the highest proof of love. By martyrdom a disciple is conformed to the image of the Master, who freely accepted death for the salvation of the world, perfecting that image even to the shedding of blood.

The principle of discernment for martyrdom given in this text is *the giving of one's life for Christ and for one's brothers...* Martyrdom is situated in continuity with the death of Christ who gave his life for the salvation of all...[and this text]...places before all else a positive feature: martyrdom is the sign of the greatest love, even to the point of giving one's life.

On 30 July, 1941 it was discovered that a prisoner had escaped from the camp at Auschwitz. By way of reprisal, the authorities of the Nazi camp condemned ten of his companions to death by starvation. Among these victims was the father of a family, horrified at the thought of dying without ever seeing his family again. Kolbe offered himself in the man's place. After sixteen days in detention, there remained only four survivors of the group of ten.

Kolbe was given an injection and died. He never had to renounce his faith before a Nazi tribunal; rather, he voluntarily offered his life for one of his companions in captivity. He did not die a martyr in the classical sense of the word. Nevertheless he was proclaimed a martyr without canonical basis, on 9 November, 1982. The pope characterized his death as "a sign of love," as a martyrdom of charity. In the words of John Paul II:

This death, taken on spontaneously out of love for others, does it not make Maximilian Kolbe similar to Christ, the model of all martyrs, who gave his life on the cross for his brothers? Does not such a death possess, for our times, a particular and penetrating eloquence? Does it not constitute an especially authentic witness of the Church in the world of today? Therefore, in virtue of my apostolic authority, I decree that Maximilian Kolbe, who, following his beatification, was venerated as a confessor, will henceforth be venerated also as a martyr.

The death of Father Kolbe is in a sense a salvific event. Indeed, the truth of the Gospel is the salvific proclamation of the dignity and sacredness of the human person. The gift of one's life, out of love, in order to bear witness to this dignity is therefore an ecclesial testimony in favor of Christ and his Gospel.

On the basis of these texts, we can say that the martyr - the highest proof of love - is a witness who has set out to follow Christ, even to the point of death, in order to attest to the truth of salvation. Recognized as such by the voice of the people of God, the martyr is then authenticated by the Church as a faithful witness of Christ.

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From a Homily of st. Bernard of Clairvaux ¹

Today the glorious Virgin has ascended into heaven, surely filling up the measure of those who dwell there. But it might seem more fitting for us to weep than to clap our hands. If heaven rejoices in Mary's presence, does it not follow that our world below should bemoan her absence? Nevertheless, let us make an end of our repining, for here we have no abiding city; we seek the very city to which blessed Mary has gone today. If we are enrolled as citizens of heaven, it is surely right for us to remember her and to share her joy even in our exile, even here beside the waters of Babylon. Our Queen has gone before us, and so glorious has been her entry into paradise that we, her servants, confidently follow our mistress, crying: *Draw us after you and we shall run toward the fragrance of your perfumes.* We in exile have sent on ahead of us our advocate who, as mother of our judge and mother of mercy, will humbly and effectively look after everything that concerns our salvation.

Today earth has sent a priceless gift up to heaven, so that by giving and receiving within the blessed bond of friendship, the human is wedded to the divine, earth to heaven, the depths to the heights. A sublime fruit of the earth has gone up to heaven, from whence the best of gifts, the perfect gifts descend. The blessed Virgin has ascended on high, and therefore she too will give gifts to us. And why not? Surely she lacks neither the ability to do so, nor the will. She is the queen of heaven; she is compassionate; she is the mother of the only-begotten Son of God. This more than anything else proves the greatness of her power and love – unless, perhaps, we do not believe that the son of God honors his mother, or unless we doubt that Love itself, which is born of God and rested nine months in her womb, evoked a response of love in her heart.

But quite apart from the benefits that will accrue to us through her glorification, if we love her we shall rejoice because she goes to her son. We shall certainly congratulate her without reserve, unless – which God forbid – we are wholly without gratitude toward her who has found for us the way of grace. The Lord whom she first received when she entered the village of this world, today receives her into the holy city. But can you imagine with how much joy, with how much glory? On earth there was no worthier place for Mary to receive the son of God than the temple of her virginal womb. Nor in heaven is there a worthier place for her than the royal throne to which her Son has today exalted her.

Who can describe either how Christ was begotten or how Mary was taken up into heaven? Just as Mary surpassed in grace all others on earth, so also in heaven is her glory unique. If eye has not seen or ear heard or the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, who can express what he has prepared for the woman who gave him birth and who loved him, as everyone knows, more than anyone else? Blessed indeed is Mary, blessed in many ways, both in receiving the Savior, and in being received by the Savior.

¹A Word in Season – vol. IV- Augustinian Press – 1991 – pg 145

**A reading about the great revelation of God=s mercy to Elijah,
from a book by Dom Damasus Winzen. 1**

[These accounts in the books of Kings of the two kingdoms] is not intended to be a complete. @ These accounts show the development of history in the light of divine justice. God rewards faithfulness and punishes disloyalty; He fulfills His promise to David. Indeed, despite the disloyalty of the people, God never rejects His Afirstborn@ completely. In every decisive crisis a Aremnant@ is saved.

The most critical moment for the worship of the One True God in the northern kingdom of Israel came during the reign of Ahab and his wife Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. She induced her husband to make the worship of Baal, the town-god of Tyre, the official religion of the country (1 Kgs 16.29-33). At this moment God raised up Elijah the prophet. His mission was to show against the heathen Abaals@ C personifications of the powers of nature C that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is not a part but the **Lord** of his creation. His name C Elijahu, AYahweh is the only God@ C is already a profession of faith. His whole personality reflects the power of the Lord of heaven and earth. *AHe stood up like a fire, and his word burned like a torch@*, [as the book of Sirach (48.1) describes him]. On the great Day of Decision on Mount Carmel his calm and quiet confidence in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob triumphed over the frenzy of the prophets of the Baals (1 Kgs 18.47-46).

God=s fatherly hand, however, took Elijah and brought him from the height of victory on Mount Carmel C which means Agarden of fruit trees@ C into the desert to taste the bitterness of exile and defeat. Utterly exhausted, he sat down under a broom tree and requested for himself that he might die. *Alt is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers@* (19.4).

The titanic personality of Elijah had to go through the A valley of death@ to receive on Mount Horeb the great revelation of God=s mercy. Standing on the rock where Moses had seen the *Agoodness of the Lord@* (Ex 33.19) after the incident of the Molten Calf, Elijah sees the Lord passing by. *ABut the Lord was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire; but after the fire a still, small voice of silence@* (1 Kgs 19.9-12). Thus the prophet

of Divine Wrath was initiated into the secret of God's love. (over)

Centuries later we find Moses and Elijah listening again to the *Astill, small voice of silence* when Christ was glorified on Mount Tabor, *And they spoke of His departure which he was to go through with at Jerusalem* (Lk 9.31). The *A voice of silence* is the Lamb of God Who opened not His mouth when He was crushed for our iniquities. It was the *A voice of silence* which rebuked James and John when they suggested that the Lord should send fire from heaven and consume the Samaritans, *Even as Elijah did*: *The Son of Man has not come to destroy lives but to save them* (Lk 9.54, 56). The God of Israel shows his superiority over the heathen gods of fertility, of animal growth and of sexual love, not by destroying His enemies, but by sending His Son to become a sacrifice for their sins. The Resurrection and the Ascension of the crucified Christ is the final triumph over the powers of nature. The historical mission of the great antagonist of the *ABaals* C Elijah C end, therefore, with his assumption into heaven (2 Kgs 2.11).

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THE MYSTERY OF DEATH, from the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World²

It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute. Not only are we tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of our bodies, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction. We rightly follow the intuition of our hearts when we abhor and repudiate the utter ruin and total disappearance of our own person. We rebel against death because we bear in ourselves an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavors of technology, though useful in the extreme, cannot calm our anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for high life which is inescapably lodged in our breast.

Although the mystery of death utterly beggars the imagination, the Church has been taught by divine revelation and firmly teaches that we have been created by God for a blissful purpose beyond the reach of earthly misery. In addition, that bodily death from which we would have been immuned had we not sinned will be vanquished, according to the Christian faith, when we who were ruined by our own doing are restored to wholeness by an almighty and merciful Savior.

For God has called us and still calls us so that with our entire being we might be joined to him in an endless sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption. Christ won this victory when he rose to life, for by his death he freed us from death. Hence to every thoughtful person a solidly established faith provides the answer to our anxiety about what the future holds for us. At the same time faith gives us the power to be united in Christ with our loved ones who have already been snatched away by death; faith arouses the hope that they have found true life with God...

Pressing upon the Christian to be sure, are the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death. But, linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope.

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For since Christ died for all, and since our ultimate vocation is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.

Such is the mystery of humankind, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.

²GAUDIUM ET SPES, 18:22.

Apart from his gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by his death; he has lavished life upon us so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father!

08.17.17

A reading on the example of the martyrs, from a homily by St Augustine. ³

Let us not imagine that in keeping the feast of the Martyrs with great solemnity, we are benefiting them. They who are in the joy of heaven with the angels have no need of our honors and if they rejoice with us, it is at being imitated, not at being honored. However, though this veneration does not benefit them, it is useful for us: but to honor them without imitating them, would be lying flattery. If then these solemnities have been instituted in the Church of Christ, it is only to unite all the members of Christ and to enlist them as followers in the steps of the martyrs of Christ. Such is the fruit of today's festival; there is no question of any other.

When, in fact, we propose God himself as our example, human weakness readily answers that it is above its power to imitate him to whom it cannot be compared. In that case Jesus Christ our Lord will be proposed to it as model who, being God, clothed himself in mortal flesh in order the better to persuade us also clothed in this same flesh, adding word to example; Christ, it is written, "suffered for our sakes, and left you his own example; you were to follow in his footsteps" (*1 Pet 2:21*). Yet will not frail humanity reply again: "What comparison is there between me and Christ? He was one of us, but he was God. He took flesh, but without ceasing to be the Word, assuming a new nature without losing that which was proper to him. For, as St Paul says, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (*2 Cor 5:19*). Once again, how can I compare myself with Christ?

Therefore, to remove all pretext from the faithlessness of the weak, the Martyrs have made a broad way for us. It was necessary that the foundation should be solid as stone, in order that our footsteps should be steady: they have cemented it with their blood and their testimony, and finally, reckoning nothing of their bodies, they have thrown them under the feet of Christ as he advances to the conquest of the heathen, as, On Palm Sunday, the people threw their garments under the feet of the ass on which he rode. Who would be ashamed to say: "I am inferior to God"? I grant you are very much so. "I am inferior to Christ"? Yes, certainly, and even to his humanity. But Peter was what you are; so was Paul, and the Apostles and Prophets were all what you are yourself. If the example of our Lord alarms you, at least imitate those who are like you his servant. They go before you in dense crowds: no more excuse for your lukewarmness. Will you say to me again: "I am very far from Peter and Paul"? Are you then also far from truth? There where the illiterate receive the crown, there is no excuse for vanity. Are you less than children?

Watch then, my friends, that in celebrating the sufferings of the Martyrs you fill yourself with the desire to imitate them. They knew that they must choose a good cause if their work was to be made fruitful. They remembered that not only had our Lord said: "*Blessed are the persecuted*", but: "*blessed are those who suffer persecution in the cause of right*" (*Mt 5:10*). Choose yourselves the good cause, and do not be disturbed by what you suffer in so doing.

3 Sermon 325. Trans., Lectionary and Martyrology, ed. Encalcat Abbey, 1956, 509-510.

The Life of Bl Gueric of Igny – from the Introduction to his Sermons
By Fr Hilary Costello, OCSO ⁴

Gueric of Igny was born around 1075 at Tournai and was educated in the humanities, dialectic and theology at the cathedral school. Gueric was first attracted to the eremitical life. He went to Clairvaux without any idea of staying there. He only wanted to derive spiritual advantage from a meeting with the Abbot Bernard. Bernard saw the makings of a good monk in Gueric and urged him to stay.

Like so many of the Clairvaux community, Gueric was considerably older than his abbot. By human standards he was more mature and experienced. Gueric remained at Clairvaux for thirteen years. Igny was founded as the fourth foundation of Clairvaux in 1127. In 1138 the first abbot of Igny, Humbert, resigned and returned to Clairvaux. Gueric was chosen as its second abbot. There is a passage in the *Vita Hugonis* which suggests that Bernard influenced the choice considerably. “It was Bernard who brought Gueric to the monastic life and Bernard favored his election as abbot. He knew of no man living more holy than Gueric and so declared him the one candidate for the office. But this does not indicate that Gueric was imposed on the community. The monks of twelve years standing would have known him at Clairvaux. Gueric himself says that the community chose him: “I am no physician and in my house there is no bread’. That is what I said from the start: ‘Do not make me your leader.’ It is not right for one to rule who cannot be of service. And how can he be of service who is not a physician and in whose house there is no bread? He has neither the art of healing souls nor learning to feed them with? I told you this, but you would not listen. You made me your superior.” Gueric may indeed have been about sixty years old, but then his long experience both before and after his entrance into Clairvaux must have been thought a valuable asset.

Igny flourished under Gueric. Vocations were plentiful and so were benefactors. Much land and money was given to the monastery during his tenure. It was none of this that was to make the abbot’s name known to posterity, but the spiritual teaching committed to writing in his sermons. He seems to have died on August 19, 1157. More than six hundred years later his remains were taken into a new church.

Along with Bernard, Aelred of Rievaulx and William of St Thierry, Gueric has been called the four evangelists of Citeaux.

⁴ Gueric of Igny – Liturgical Sermons – vol. 1 – Cistercain Fathers Series #8 – Cistercian Publications – Spencer, MA – 1970 – pg xi ff