

Imitating the mysteries that you celebrate: martyrdom and Eucharist in the early Patristic period

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The Ghent Altarpiece, painted by the van Eyck brothers for the church of St Bavon in Ghent, was completed in 1432. One of the largest panels in this triptych depicts the Adoration of the Lamb in the heavenly Jerusalem. The artists effectively illustrate the scene from chapter seven of the Book of Revelation (Rev 7:9–17). On the central altar stands the Lamb of God. From his wounded side a stream of blood and water flows into a chalice, also positioned on the altar. A group of kneeling angels encircle the altar. Some hold the instruments of the passion such as the Cross, the crown of thorns, the spear, the hyssop stick and the pillar of the scourging. Others kneel in worship, while the two in the forefront wave censers before the Lamb.

Various groups of individuals, positioned diagonally in the scene, are depicted either kneeling before the altar or converging towards it. Among these certain members carry palm branches in their hands. Some are dressed in white robes. In front of the altar lies a fountain with flowing water, while above the altar a dove is depicted, hovering over the whole scene, as if in answer to an epiclesis. Rays emanate from the dove, touching the altar and the four assembling groups.

As Ysabel de Andia notes, 'the image of blood is a red thread running through the entire book [of Revelation]'.¹ Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness (cf. Rev 1:5, 3:14), is the focus of the ever-expanding liturgical ripples in the heavenly Jerusalem, as depicted in the Book of Revelation. The Ghent Altarpiece depicts the Lamb and the chalice as the focal point of this heavenly liturgy. One of the elders explains to John: 'These are the people who have been through the great persecution, and because they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb, they now stand in front of God's throne and serve him day and night in his sanctuary' (Rev 7:14–15). The Lamb is also the guiding Shepherd, leading his faithful witnesses to the springs of living water (cf. Rev 7:17).

This text from the Book of Revelation, and the van Eyck brothers' masterpiece, place before us the message of the union of the martyrs with Christ's passion and their share in his victory over suffering and death. Seer and artists alike

¹ Y. de Andia, 'Martyrdom and truth: from Ignatius of Antioch to the monks of Tihminine', *Communio* 29 (2002) 62–88, at 65.

give their message a liturgical context. Prominent in this is the eucharistic cup and the reference to the blood of the Lamb. It is as if the Lord's command: 'Do this in memory of me' (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24–25) constitutes an invitation not only to celebrate the Eucharist, but also to imitate its message and lay down one's life for others in imitation of the Good Shepherd's love (cf. Jn 10:11, 15, 17–18).

The martyrs Cosmas and Damian are among the list of martyrs whose names feature in the Roman Canon. While we know relatively little about these martyrs, they are traditionally regarded as having endured martyrdom in the great persecution of Diocletian in AD 303. The offertory prayer from the Mass for their memorial on 26 September reads as follows:

Lord,

we who celebrate the death of your holy martyrs

offer you the sacrifice

which gives all martyrdom its meaning.

Be pleased with our praise.²

This prayer implies a close link between the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, with its memorial of the paschal mystery, and the sacrifice involved in martyrdom itself. The martyrs are the ones whose particular path of discipleship involves a radical *imitatio Christi*. In a special way they reveal themselves as the ones who imitate the mysteries that they celebrate.

In this paper I wish to explore the linkages between the Eucharist and martyrdom in the early Patristic period. By so doing I shall try to enter into the mind of the persecuted and describe something of the spiritual motivation that led so many martyrs to face death courageously for the sake of Christ's name. I limit my comments to four fathers, three of whom died as martyrs in the period prior to the Great Persecution of Diocletian: Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna and Cyprian of Carthage. Our final witness will be Augustine of Hippo, who did not die as a martyr but had to deal with the problem of false martyrs among the Donatists in the aftermath of the Great Persecution. Furthermore, Augustine contributes significantly to the theological understanding of martyrdom and the cult of the martyrs in the early Church, including some important comments on the interrelationship of Eucharist and martyrdom.

ST IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Ignatius of Antioch ranks as one of the most famous martyrs of the early Church. We are left in the dark as to the precise reasons that led to his arrest at Antioch and his being brought to Rome, under military escort, to face death in the Flavian

² From the Proper of Saints for 26 September, Memorial of SS. Cosmas and Damian, *The Roman Missal* (Alcester & Dublin, 1975), p. 632.

amphitheatre c. AD 107, during the reign of the emperor Trajan. As G. W. Bowersock noted in his Wiles Lectures in 1993, despite Ignatius' zeal for death at the hands of the Roman authorities, his seven letters are 'wholly untouched by the language of martyrdom'.³ The word *μάρτυρας* had not yet evolved from its secular meaning of a 'witness' to the more specific designation of the one who bears witness to Christ by the shedding of their own blood. However, Ignatius' famous letters, written en route to his 'sanguinary demise' at Rome, will be significant milestones in influencing that change of meaning of the term 'martyr'.

Disciple and imitator

Throughout his seven letters Ignatius' favourite terms of self-description are those of the disciple (*μαθητής*) or the imitator (*μιμητής*) of Christ, the Master. The dynamic language of striving 'to attain' or 'to imitate' God is common place in the letters.⁴ Ignatius will often include personal disclaimers concerning his own unworthiness or imperfection as disciple and imitator of Christ. Thus, in his opening address to the Ephesians he states:

I am a prisoner for the Name's sake, but I am by no means perfect in Jesus Christ as yet; I am only a beginner in discipleship, and I am speaking to you as fellow-scholars with myself.⁵

He also informs the Ephesians that his encounter with the wild beasts at Rome will be a boon, enabling him to become a true disciple (*Ad Eph.* 1).

Ignatius' passionate concern for death, as perfecting his discipleship, has often been insensitively misinterpreted by subsequent commentators. He has been accused of displaying 'a pathological yearning for martyrdom'.⁶ In charting some of the potential Stoic influences on Ignatius, Tanner refers disapprovingly to Lauchli's interpretation of Ignatius' martyrdom as 'masochistic and pathological'.⁷ In his fine study of the *imitatio Christi* theme in Ignatius' mysticism, Tinsley refutes Théo Preiss' thesis on the predominance of Gnosticism in Ignatius' outlook, especially in his motives for imitating Christ's passion.⁸

Christocentricity of Ignatius' thought

The deep Christocentricity of Ignatius' thought is evident in his self-description as 'a prisoner for the Name's sake' (*Ad Eph.* 1,3). Re-echoing a characteristic

3 G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 77. 4 For a good analysis of this theme see R. Darling Young's article 'Ignatius of Antioch: "Attaining the Father"', *Communio* 26 (1999) 333–42. 5 Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Eph.* 3. The English translation of Ignatius' letters is taken from M. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings* (London, 1968). 6 Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 6, referring to the views of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix. 7 R.G. Tanner, 'Martyrdom in St Ignatius of Antioch and the Stoic view of suicide', *Studia Patristica* 16 (1975) 201–5, at 201. 8 E.J. Tinsley, 'The *imitatio Christi* in the mysticism of St Ignatius of Antioch', *Studia Patristica* 2 (1955) 553–60.

Johannine theme he states: 'For we have no life apart from Jesus Christ', and again, 'Apart from him, nothing else should have any other value in your eyes' (*Ad Eph.* 3,11). He describes himself as being full of 'humble devotion to the Cross' (*Ad Eph.* 18). It is the Lord's passion and death which constitutes the very mystery which summons people to become believers and to endure tribulations with patience as genuine pupils of Christ, the only teacher (*Ad Mag.* 9).

Ignatius displays a regular concern to counteract Docetic interpretations about Christ, his incarnation, passion and death, and the Eucharist itself. Consequently he often stresses the full and true reality of Christ's passion and death.⁹ Christians prove the authenticity of their lives by being Christians in reality and not just in name (*Ad Mag.* 4). Ignatius can advise the Magnesians: 'Unless we are ready and willing to die in conformity with his passion, his life is not in us' (*Ad Mag.* 5). Clearly this constitutes the key to understanding Ignatius' own desire to die for Christ, in conformity with Christ.

It is through imitating and sharing in Christ's passion that Ignatius can endure his own sufferings with serenity: 'But it is only in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of sharing his sufferings that I could face all this; for he, the perfect man, gives me strength to do so.'¹⁰ Writing to the Philadelphians, Ignatius can describe Christ's cross, death and resurrection, and the faith that comes through him, as his 'sacrosanct records'. By these and the prayers of the community he hopes to be justified (*Ad Phil.* 8). Towards the end of his letter to the Trallians we meet Ignatius combining the mystery of the cross creatively with the Pauline notion of the Body of Christ, while castigating those who espouse Docetic beliefs:

They are none of the Father's planting; if they were, they could at once be known for true branches of the cross, and there would be no corruption in their fruit. It is by the cross that through his passion he calls you, who are parts of his body, to himself. A head cannot come into being alone, without any limbs.¹¹

Because of his intense devotion to Christ and his passion, Ignatius can regard his chains as 'spiritual pearls' — *τοὺς πνευματικῶνς μαργαρίτας* (*Ad Eph.* 11). It is through patient forbearance with persecution, privation and contempt that the true disciple imitates the Lord (*Ad Eph.* 10). By trying to walk in Paul's footsteps Ignatius hopes to come to God (*Ad Eph.* 12). Paul himself had deeply espoused the twin themes of the *imitatio Christi* and conformity to the paschal mystery. So Ignatius can urge the Philadelphians to be 'imitators of Jesus Christ' as he was of the Father (*Ad Phil.* 7).

Ignatius' Letter to the Romans — the martyr's vade mecum

Ignatius' *Epistola ad Romanos* ranks as his most famous letter. It differs from the other six in its silence about certain doctrinal themes, so characteristic of the other

9 Ignatius, *Ad Mag.* 11; *Ad Smyr.* 2,7; *Ad Phil.* Salutation; *Ad Trall.* 10. 10 Ignatius, *Ad Smyr.* 4. 11 Ignatius, *Ad Trall.* 11.

letters, and in its explicit concern with his forthcoming martyrdom. This letter enjoyed enormous popularity and an independent circulation in the early Church, effectively acting, as Bishop Lightfoot states, as 'a martyr's *vade meum*'.¹² Throughout this letter we witness Ignatius' repeated plea that the Roman community not intercede to rescue him from his imminent martyrdom. Should they intercede on his behalf he will become a mere 'meaningless cry' unto God. If his wishes are observed he will become 'an intelligible utterance of God' (*Ad Romn.* 2). This letter is unique also in the manner in which eucharistic imagery and motifs predominate in Ignatius' passionate description of his approaching death. It is as if the passion of Christ, the Eucharist and Ignatius' own death are interwoven perichoretically.

A libation being poured upon an altar

While Ignatius speaks in a number of places of his life as an 'offering' or *antipsydon* (ἀντψυδων),¹³ in the letter to the Romans he uses the Pauline notion (cf. Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6) of his life being like a sacrificial libation being poured upon an altar: 'This favour only I beg of you: suffer me to be a libation poured out to God, while there is still an altar ready for me' (*Ad Romn.* 2). The Christians are to form a choir around him, singing hymns of praise in Jesus Christ to the Father. If Ignatius has elsewhere in his letters referred to the sole valid Eucharist being one where the united community gathered around their bishop, tunefully in harmony like strings of a harp,¹⁴ here he portrays himself as consummately realising this ideal in his forthcoming martyrdom.

God's wheat – purest bread for Christ

Bowersock notes how Ignatius is often 'more comfortable and more explicit when he writes in metaphors'.¹⁵ This is especially noteworthy in the letter to the Romans. Ignatius wrote to the Ephesians that his encounter with the wild beasts at Rome would be 'a boon that would enable him to become a true disciple' (*Ad Eph.* 1). Convinced of the genuineness of Christ's sufferings he could justify to the Trallians (*Ad Trall.* 10) and to the Smyrnaeans (*Ad Smyrn.* 4) his prayer for combat with the lions and other punishments. Writing to the Romans Ignatius moves into a different literary register, rich in eucharistic overtones:

Pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat (στῖρος εἶμα θεοῦ), ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread (καθαροῦ ἄκροτος) for Christ.¹⁶

¹² J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers – Part II: St Ignatius and St Polycarp* (London & New York, 1889), pp 186–7. ¹³ Ignatius, *Ad Eph.* 21; *Ad Smyrn.* 10; *Ad Polyc.* 2, 6. See Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 79–81. ¹⁴ Ignatius, *Ad Smyrn.* 8; *Ad Phil.* 4; *Ad Eph.* 20. ¹⁵ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 78. ¹⁶ Ignatius, *Ad Romn.* 4.

Martyrdom and Eucharist in the early Patristic period

In this celebrated passage Ignatius continues by referring to the beasts in the arena as his sepulchre, devouring his body until no scrap remains visible. Then, and only then, will he 'truly be Christ's disciple'. This, as Tinsley notes, refuting Théo Preiss' study, represents no Gnostic despising of the body or matter, but the passionate plea of one engaged in the *imitatio Christi* to a consummate degree.¹⁷ Ignatius pleads with the Romans not to prevent him being a sacrifice (θυσία) to God (*Ad Romn.* 4).

Imitating the Passion of my God

In imitation of Christ, who though harshly dealt with bore it humbly, Ignatius, too, pleads his readiness to endure the horrible drama of the arena:

Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverising of my entire body – let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ!¹⁸

Despising things of the earth, Ignatius speaks movingly of his sole desire being Jesus Christ who died and rose again for us. He speaks of the 'birth-pangs' that are upon him as he strains to attain 'the light, pure and undivided'. As if reaching a crescendo, we witness Ignatius exclaim: 'Leave me to imitate the passion of my God' (*Ad Romn.* 6).

Fain for the Bread of God – Craving love imperishable

In section 7 of the *Epistola ad Romanos* Ignatius refers to himself as 'yearning for death with all the passion of a lover'. He describes his detachment from earthly desires in his readiness to face death. With decided Johannine echoes we meet Ignatius contrasting things mundane, earthly and perishable, with things spiritual and imperishable, all in a eucharistic context:

Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me: 'Come to the Father'. There is no pleasure for me in any meats that perish, or in the delights of this life. I am fain for the bread of God (ἄκροτον θεοῦ), even the flesh of Jesus Christ, who is the seed of David, and for my drink I crave that blood of his (τὸ αἷμα αὐτοῦ) which is love imperishable (ἀγέσταν ἄφθροτος).¹⁹

The food and drink that he longs for here are clearly the Eucharist itself. In his letter to the Trallians he had encouraged them to intensify their grip on their faith,

¹⁷ Tinsley, 'The *imitatio Christi* in the Mysticism of St Ignatius of Antioch', p. 555. ¹⁸ Ignatius, *Ad Romn.* 5. ¹⁹ Ignatius, *Ad Romn.* 7.

which he equated with the flesh of the Lord, and their love, which he linked with the life-blood of Jesus Christ (*Ad Trall.* 8). In his salutation to the Philadelphians Ignatius refers to a joy that is characterized as 'eternal and unfailing', associated with Christ's blood. However, it is in the letter to the Ephesians that we meet a reference to the Eucharist that is closest in sentiment to his comments in section 7 of the *Epistola ad Romanos*. Here, characteristically emphasizing the theme of unity, he urges the Ephesians to meet for one common breaking of bread: 'the medicine of immortality (*φάρμακον ἀθανασίας*), and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for evermore.'²⁰

Following the fourth evangelist, Ignatius sees in the Eucharist the pledge of eternal life, the great antidote to death. Hence, on the threshold of his martyrdom he can long for the bread of God and Christ's blood as his *vivium*. The manner in which he describes himself as being ground into flour, so as to become pure bread for Christ, bespeaks a mysticism of unity with the mystery of the Eucharist itself. As Tanner observes, Ignatius' desire to be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts was no pure masochism. Rather, it reflects his belief that his sacramental ingestion of Christ, complemented by his own obedience unto death, renders him into a deep unity with Christ.²¹

Eucharist and martyrdom

Ignatius is at pains to sketch himself as being an imitator and disciple of Christ. The path of discipleship only reaches perfection by passing through the crucible of martyrdom. It is by his martyrdom that he hopes 'to attain to God', imitating the passion of his God. His passionate concern for ecclesial unity finds its focus in the Eucharist. This works at two complementary levels. On the one hand, there is the vision of the members of the Church united harmoniously around and with their bishop in the celebration of one common Eucharist. At another level, there is the emphasis on the personal level of union in faith and love of each member of Christ with their Head, brought about by the Eucharist itself. The authentic living of Christianity involves our willingness to die in conformity with Christ's passion. Apart from doing this Christ's life is not in us. Not surprisingly, the *Epistola ad Romanos*, the letter where Ignatius speaks at length about his martyrdom, is also the letter where his mind is most focused on the Eucharist.

While acknowledging Ignatius' use of sacrificial language in the *Epistola ad Romanos*, Schoedel tends to downplay the eucharistic associations or resonances of Ignatius' thought. He prefers to attribute some Ignatian emphases to Gnostic, pagan or secular influences.²² Schoedel regards it as 'unlikely that Ignatius regards himself as a kind of Eucharist'. A more sensitive appraisal of Ignatius' thought occurs in Richard Johanny's comment on the same letter:

²⁰ Ignatius, *Ad Eph.* 20. ²¹ Tanner, 'Martyrdom in St Ignatius of Antioch and the Stoic view of suicide', p. 204. ²² W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: a commentary on the Letters of Ignatius*

The entire thinking of Ignatius in this matter is a dynamic prolongation of the eucharist. Like the eucharist, and on the basis of it, martyrdom derives its value from the passion of Christ and leads to the resurrection. Through identification with Christ and through the complete gift of self that martyrdom entails, Ignatius will fulfil in himself the radical meaning of the eucharistic sacrifice; as far as possible, he will make real in himself the eucharistic mystery that is celebrated in the sacrifice of the altar.²³

Likewise, Ysabel de Andia, in her study of martyrdom in the Patristic and contemporary eras, refers to Ignatius' Letter to the Romans as 'the principal document that confirms the eucharistic interpretation of martyrdom'.²⁴ She notes, as does Lightfoot, that Ignatius' *Epistola ad Romanos* appealed to St Irenaeus who cites section 4 of this Ignatian letter in his *Adversus Haereses* V 28.4, interpreting Ignatius' martyrdom in a similar eucharistic sense.

For Ignatius of Antioch, his path of discipleship found its perfection in his martyrdom. The *imitatio Christi* involved him in a radical and costly solidarity with Christ. His faith in Christ and love of him led him to crave the bread of God, the medicine of immortality, and the love imperishable, which he associated with Christ's blood. Martyrdom and Eucharist alike were intimately connected with Christ's passion. Ignatius is an important early witness as to how the one was interpreted by reference to the other, thus keeping both in close association with each other.

ST POLYCARP OF SMYRNA

One of Ignatius of Antioch's letters was addressed to his younger contemporary Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp followed in Ignatius' steps, dying as a martyr some fifty to sixty years later at the age of 86.²⁵ Polycarp is an important milestone in the history of martyrdom since with him we have the first written account of a martyr's death. Furthermore, this account bears witness to the public cult of the martyr and his relics following his martyrdom.²⁶

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom was composed by the Smyrnaean community and sent to the church at Philomelium, but was also intended for a wider

of Antioch (Philadelphia, 1983); for his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, see pp. 165–91. ²³ R. Johanny, 'Ignatius of Antioch', in W. Rordorf et al., *The Eucharist of the early Christians* (New York, 1978), pp. 48–70, at p. 65. ²⁴ de Andia, 'Martyrdom and Truth: from Ignatius of Antioch to the monks of Tibhirine', p. 74. ²⁵ *Martyrium Polycarpi* 18. The precise date of Polycarp's martyrdom has been much disputed. See L.W. Barnard, 'In defence of Pseudo-Bionius' account of Saint Polycarp's martyrdom', in P. Granfield & J.A. Jungmann (eds), *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten* (Münster Westfalen, 1973), i, 192–204, at 192, for a note on the disputed dates. ²⁶ *Martyr Polyc.* 18.

audience. The concluding section of the account makes reference to one Marcion who had made 'this brief summary', followed by the name of Evaristus the scribe. The surviving manuscript of the *Martyrium* also bears additional copyists' notes and names. A further version of the *Martyrium* is preserved in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* IV 15, with occasional variations from the account we find in Pionius.²⁷ Barnard has convincingly refuted H. von Campenhausen's theory of interpolations in the account of Polycarp's martyrdom, von Campenhausen having held the view that Eusebius' account was the original and that this text had undergone alterations at the hands of later redactors. The details of Barnard's careful refutation of von Campenhausen need not detain us here in our more limited task of examining the eucharistic undertones of the account of Polycarp's martyrdom.

A mirror to Christ's passion

In the course of Barnard's study he lists eighteen parallels between the account of Polycarp's passion and that of our Lord in the gospels. These cover such details as the names of the officials involved, the theme of betrayal, Polycarp's prior prophecy of his martyrdom, his patience, the heavenly voice bringing encouragement, the manner of his death, and the piercing of his side.²⁸ As Barnard perceptively notes, if Polycarp had urged the Philipians to imitate Christ (*Ad Philipp.* 8), 'it is wholly probable that his own followers would have seen this reflected in his own martyrdom'.²⁹ Details of our Lord's passion narrative and imagery associated with the Eucharist colour, or at least provide the best means of describing, the account of the venerable Polycarp's martyrdom. Indeed the account starts that: 'He was to fulfil his destiny by sharing the experiences of Christ' (*Martyr. Polyc.* 6).

Sacrificial ram and burnt offering

Following the account of Polycarp's arrest and interrogation by the governor, we meet the following description of Polycarp: 'Bound like that, with his hands behind him, he was like a noble ram taken out of some great flock for sacrifice; a goodly burnt offering all ready for God.'³⁰ This description of Polycarp being ready for sacrifice acts as a prelude to his final prayer, which is rich in eucharistic resonances.

Polycarp's prayer

The author of the account of Polycarp's martyrdom is at pains to portray him as a man of deep prayer. In his seclusion prior to his arrest he is described as 'doing

²⁷ See Barnard, 'In defence of Pseudo-Pionius' account of Saint Polycarp's martyrdom', and D. Tripp, 'The prayer of St. Polycarp and the development of anaphoral prayer', *Eph. Lit.* 104 (1990) 97-132, for discussion of the variants. ²⁸ Barnard, 'In defence of Pseudo-Pionius' account of Saint Polycarp's martyrdom', pp 194-5. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195, n. 8. ³⁰ *Martyr. Polyc.* 14. The English translation is taken from *Early Christian writings*, trans M. Staniforth (London, 1968).

nothing else day and night but praying for us all, and for churches all over the world, as it was his usual habit to do' (*Martyr. Polyc.* 5). It is in the context of such prayer that he has a prophetic vision of his imminent martyrdom and the precise form that it will take. At the moment of his arrest, one of his petitioners was 'to be allowed an hour to pray undisturbed' (*Martyr. Polyc.* 7). Those who witnessed him at prayer were struck with awe at such a saintly old man. However, it is the prayer that he uttered just prior to his death that has attracted most attention and comment.

As early as 1899 J. Armitage Robinson drew attention to the 'liturgical echoes' present in Polycarp's prayer prior to his martyrdom.³¹ He noted parallels with certain formulations in various Egyptian Church Orders, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and the *Canons of Hippolytus*. Other verbal similarities to the *Didache* and 1 *Clement* were also noted. Whatever the provenance of Polycarp's prayer, whether representing his *ipsissima verba* or that of a prayer placed on his lips by the author of the *Martyrium Polycarpi*, Armitage Robinson typified the prayer as being 'full of echoes of the liturgical language of the Church'.³² In later studies this same author refuted Dom Cagin's view that Polycarp's prayer represented a close equivalent to the earliest known Apostolic anaphora. He furthermore doubted the authenticity of Polycarp's prayer, feeling that its concluding doxology was doctrinally anachronistic, given the early date of his martyrdom.³³

Barnard's study also noted the 'substantial second century parallels to Polycarp's prayer', most notably in the *Didache*, 1 *Clement*, Justin's *First Apology*, the later *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, and additional Egyptian liturgical sources.³⁴ David Tripp's more recent study once again examines Polycarp's prayer in detail in the wider context of developing patterns of anaphoral prayer.³⁵ Based on a careful comparison of vocabulary between Polycarp's own *Letter to the Philipians* and the text of the prayer attributed to him in *Martyrium Polcarpi* 14, Tripp is of the opinion that the prayer may not represent the *ipsissima verba* of Polycarp, but rather the mind of Evaristus, the scribe whose name is affixed to the martyrdom account. On the basis of his analysis, and comparison with other liturgical texts, Tripp concludes that Evaristus quite probably followed the established pattern of eucharistic anaphora, which he uses as a model for Polycarp's prayer.³⁶ He further suggests that the themes of the short prayer match well the theological emphases of Evaristus. These he typifies as being twofold. Firstly, his predilection for sacrific-

³¹ J.A. Robinson, 'Liturgical echoes in Polycarp's prayer', *Exposition*, 5th Series, 9 (1899) 63-72, at 66-9. ³² *Ibid.*, 72. ³³ J.A. Robinson, 'The "Apostolic Anaphora" and the prayer of Polycarp', *JThS* 21 (1920) 97-105, at 101-5. The reference was to Dom Cagin's *L'Anaphore Apostolique et ses témoins* (Paris, 1916). See also J.A. Tyrer and F.E. Bigham, 'The prayer of St. Polycarp and its concluding doxology', *JThS* 23 (1922) 390-2; J.A. Robinson and R.H. Connolly, 'The doxology in the prayer of St. Polycarp', *JThS* 24 (1923) 141-4 and 144-6. ³⁴ Barnard, 'In defence of Pseudo-Pionius' account of Saint Polycarp's martyrdom', pp 200-3. ³⁵ Tripp, 'The prayer of St. Polycarp and the development of anaphoral prayer'. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

cial imagery in describing Polycarp's martyrdom. Secondly, his treasuring of the privilege of communion and participation with the martyrs and the saints.³⁷ Tripp sees the reference to the veneration of Polycarp's remains, and the associated theme of communion, as anticipating the *Communicantes* of the later Roman Canon.

Turning our attention to the actual prayer itself, let us examine some of its themes. Polycarp's short prayer falls into three consecutive sections, which Tripp calls: (a) thanksgiving, (b) petition, and (c) praise and doxology. The thanksgiving section has two foci: Firstly, thanks is offered to God for divine being and for the revelation received from God through Christ 'his beloved child'. The second section of thanksgiving makes explicit reference to the theme of martyrdom, linked with the eucharistic cup:

I bless you that you have granted me this day and this hour that I may share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of our Christ for the resurrection to eternal life both of soul and body in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.

The second petitionary section of the prayer has recourse to the language of sacrifice and refers back to the communion of martyrs in the second thanksgiving section:

May I be received among them before you this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared beforehand and revealed beforehand and have fulfilled, O God never lying but true.³⁸

Tripp regards Polycarp's prayer as revealing *one* form of anaphoral prayer, and not *the* original anaphora, or pattern of anaphora, if such ever existed.³⁹ Tripp suggests several potential functions for Polycarp's prayer being inserted into the account of his martyrdom. Among these his final four functions have a particular relevance for the theme of this paper. Firstly, he suggests that it offers an interpretation of martyrdom itself as a participation in Christ's sufferings. Thus we meet the phrase: 'that I may share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of our Christ'. Presumably the 'cup' here refers to the cup offered to the sons of Zebedee (cf. Mk 10:38–39), the cup of the agony in Gethsemane (cf. Mt 26:39), and the eucharistic cup. Secondly, Tripp sees the prayer as an act of worship which God is asked to accept graciously. Thirdly, as the *Martyrium Polycarpi* was being sent by the Smyrnaeans to the church of Philomelium and elsewhere, it was intended to be read out in the course of a liturgical assembly. As Tripp notes: 'This prayer obviously expects to be echoed in the prayers that will be uttered in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102. ³⁸ *Martyr. Polyc. 14*. The text of the prayer is taken from Tripp's article. ³⁹ Tripp, 'The prayer of St Polycarp and the development of anaphoral prayer', 98. He thus concurs with J. A. Robinson in refuting Dom Cagin's thesis on the paleoanaphora.

the liturgy of those churches.' Finally, Polycarp's prayer sets the interpretation of martyrdom in the context of the Eucharist. Thus, as with his fellow martyr Ignatius, martyrdom is seen as sharing alike in Christ's sufferings and in the deepest reality of the Eucharist.⁴⁰

Tripp argues that the references to the Spirit and incorruptibility seem misplaced in Polycarp's prayer, interrupting the normal flow of the anaphora-style prayer. However, Polycarp is really here being depicted as sharing Ignatius' conviction about the Eucharist as a *φύλακον ἀθανάτου*. The Spirit effecting the change in the eucharistic elements, changes the martyr's mortality into immortality. The author of the account of Polycarp's martyrdom twice refers to him gaining 'the crown of immortality' (*Martyr. Polyc. 17.19*). Polycarp's admiring pupil Irenaeus will later stress the very gift of immortality as one of the fruits of receiving the Eucharist itself.⁴¹

Like bread being baked in an oven

Polycarp's prayer is followed immediately by the final stages of his martyrdom being described by an eyewitness. The author builds on eucharistic imagery in describing Polycarp the martyr being enveloped by the flames as if he were in an oven:

A great sheet of flame blazed out. And then we who were privileged to witness it saw a wondrous sight: [...] the fire took the shape of a hollow chamber, like a ship's sail when the wind fills it, and formed a wall round about the martyr's figure; and there was he in the centre of it, not like a human being in flames but like a loaf baking in the oven, or like a gold or silver ingot being refined in the furnace.⁴²

Ignatius may have passionately desired to become 'purest bread for Christ', but here we see a related motif in the description of Polycarp, unharmed by the flames, like a loaf being baked in the oven. Furthermore, building on the earlier description of Polycarp as a 'sacrificial ram' being prepared for 'a burnt offering', the author continues: 'And we became aware of a delicious fragrance, like the odour of incense or other precious gums'. The choice of language here is a deliberate borrowing from the ritual of sacrifice and its accompanying prayer.

The piercing of Polycarp's side

A high point in the Johannine passion narrative is represented by the piercing of Christ's side (cf. Jn 19:34), whence flowed blood and water. This text was redolent

⁴⁰ Tripp, 'The prayer of St Polycarp and the development of anaphoral prayer', 97–8. W. Rordorf in his article 'Aux origines du culte des martyrs', *Revue de Théologie* 45 (1972) 315–31, also explores the eucharistic allusions or imprints in the account of Polycarp's martyrdom, see especially 317, n. 5 and 318, n. 1. ⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV 18.5; V 2.3. ⁴² *Martyr. Polyc. 15*.

lent with sacramental associations for the fathers from the Greek, Latin and Syriac traditions alike. It comes as no surprise to find an allusion to this detail in the account of Polycarp's martyrdom. His *imitatio Christi* involved a re-enactment of this detail of the passion:

Finally, when they realised that his body could not be destroyed by fire, the ruffians ordered one of the dagger-men to go up and stab him with his weapon. As he did so, there flew out a dove, together with such a copious rush of blood that the flames were extinguished.⁴³

The power of Christ's blood to achieve momentous events in the drama of salvation finds an echo here in the power of the martyr's blood to vanquish the flames seeking to annihilate him.

The veneration and cult of Polycarp and his relics

Following Polycarp's death we witness his faithful followers wishing to rescue his mortal remains. Polycarp 'the peerless martyr' had gained 'the crown of immortality' (*Martyr. Polyc. 17.19*). The Jews and other officials feared their future cult of Polycarp as a substitute for Christ. However, Polycarp's followers make clear the distinction between the veneration of Polycarp and his remains and the honour due to Christ:

Little do they know that it could never be possible for us to abandon the Christ who dies for the salvation of every soul that is to be saved in all the world – the Sinless One dying for sinners – or to worship any other.

The text continues:

It is to Him, as the Son of God, that we give our adoration; while to the martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we give the love they have earned by their matchless devotion to their King and Teacher. Pray God we too may come to share their company and their discipleship.⁴⁴

The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp is important for the early reference to the cult of the martyr and his relics. The remains of Polycarp, 'more precious to us than jewels, and finer than pure gold', were carefully gathered and laid to rest in a secure place. This location becomes the focus for the community's subsequent assembly, commemoration and celebration:

⁴³ *Martyr. Polyc. 16*. The reference to the dove here, representing the human spirit or soul, is regarded as a later addition to the original text. It is absent from Eusebius' account of the martyrdom. ⁴⁴ *Martyr. Polyc. 17*.

There we shall assemble, as occasion allows, with glad rejoicings; and with the Lord's permission we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom. It will serve both as a commemoration of all who have triumphed before, and as a training and a preparation for any whose crown may be still to come.⁴⁵

We are not told what particular form this commemorative gathering at the martyr's shrine would take. Within a short while, as we shall see with Cyprian, the cult of the martyrs on their *dies natalis*, will be linked with a eucharistic celebration at their place of martyrdom or burial.

The becoming Eucharist of the martyr

Cardinal Ratzinger, commenting on the *Martyrium Polycarpi*, has referred to it as being depicted as liturgy, 'indeed as the becoming Eucharist of the martyr, who enters into full communion with the pasch of Jesus Christ and thus becomes Eucharist with him'.⁴⁶ Having referred, like Armitage Robinson, Barnard and Tripp, to the eucharistic themes in Polycarp's prayer, Cardinal Ratzinger comments on the three-fold miracle that accompanied the venerable martyr on the pyre 'in which once again the liturgical character of the occurrence is portrayed in its diverse significance.' The enveloping flames take the form of a ship 'with billowing sails that transport the martyr across the boundaries of earth into the hands of God'. The martyred body of Polycarp takes the appearance of baked bread rather than that of charred flesh. Finally, the scent of incense or some precious aroma replaces the smell of burnt flesh. Cardinal Ratzinger notes that such a pleasant odour in Scripture is both 'a constituent ingredient of the theology of sacrifice' and a witness to 'a life that has become pure, no longer exuding the stench of the lie and corruption, the decaying smell of death'. The cardinal concludes his reflections on Polycarp by describing the martyr's union with the eucharistic mystery:

Thus the image of the pleasant aroma and that of becoming bread belong together, the martyr has become like Christ; his life has become an offering [...] Surrender into the body of Christ has triumphed over the power of death: the martyr lives and gives life, precisely through his death, and so himself has entered into the eucharistic mystery.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Martyr. Polyc. 18*. ⁴⁶ J. Card. Ratzinger, 'Eucharist and mission', *ITQ* 65 (2000) 245–64, at 258. This article represents the text of an address given by Cardinal Ratzinger to the Eucharistic Congress of the diocese of Como in September 1997. I am grateful to Fr D. V. Twomey SVD, the translator of the article, for bringing it to my attention. ⁴⁷ Ratzinger, 'Eucharist and mission', pp 258–9.

ST CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

The early stages of Cyprian's episcopate coincided with the Decian persecution (AD 250–1), during which he went into hiding. By adopting this strategy, he sought to continue support, encouragement and leadership of his flock through his various letters and emissaries, a strategy that he would have to defend against Roman criticism (*Ep.* 20). The aftermath of the Decian persecution saw Cyprian involved in decisions about the reconciliation of the lapsed, the case of the Novatianist schism, and the re-baptism controversy, all taking place under the renewed threat of further persecution under Gallus in 252. His nine-year episcopate terminated with his martyrdom at Carthage in 258 during the third wave of persecution under Valerian.

The various periods of persecution were also times when Cyprian had to deal with issues related to the *confessors*. We witness Cyprian exhibiting a twofold strategy in their regard. On the one hand he lauds their heroism, gives them the pledge of prayerful support, and displays solicitude for their access to the Eucharist while in prison. On the other hand, we witness his concern over the liberal issuing of *libelli pacis* by certain confessors and their claim to effect reconciliation and even celebrate the Eucharist, by virtue of their special status as confessors, rather than being ordained ministers. This has been analysed in detail in Allen Brent's recent study of Cyprian's correspondence with Lucianus, and the case of Celerinus, whom Cyprian specifically appointed as a lector, following his brave confession of the faith under torture during one of the waves of persecution.⁴⁸

Exhorting the 'milles Christi' to martyrdom

Always a devoted student of the Bible, Cyprian addressed his *De exhortatione martyrii* to Fortunatus, bishop of Thuccaloni in AD 257, just at the outbreak of the persecution under Valerian. Ever fond of describing Christians as *milles Christi*, Cyprian states the aim of this work:

bringing together from Scripture exhortations for the preparation and strengthening of minds of the brethren, with which I might animate the soldiers of Christ for the spiritual and heavenly struggle.⁴⁹

In this work, which Cyprian acknowledges to be hurried in composition, and therefore incomplete, he outlines thirteen theses and uses these as pegs on which to hang relevant scriptural texts, all aiming to train the *milles Christi*. His various theses deal with such topics as the dangers of idolatry, the divine punishments awaiting those

⁴⁸ A. Brent, 'Cyprian's reconstruction of the martyr tradition', *JEH* 53 (2002) 241–68. ⁴⁹ Cyprian, *De exhort. martyrii*, I (CSEL 3.1, 317, ed. G. Harrel), English translation from R.J. Deferrari (FOTC 36, 313).

who sacrifice to idols, scriptural predictions of periods of trial and persecution, the providential purposes of these periods that Christians may be proved, the importance of perseverance and hope which bring one to the final reward of the palm and the crown. Especially noteworthy is Cyprian's sixth thesis:

We, redeemed and quickened by the blood of Christ, should place nothing before Christ, because neither did he place anything before us and he on account of us preferred evil things to good things, poverty to riches, servitude to domination, death to immortality ...⁵⁰

Those awaiting martyrdom must keep their focus on the joys of Paradise, eternal sovereignty and rule, immortality, God and Christ. Cyprian's words of advice here, and their strong Christocentric focus, find a close parallel in his slightly earlier composition, *De Dominica oratione*. Commenting on the third petition of the Lord's prayer, dealing with the accomplishment of God's will, he states:

To place nothing at all before Christ, because he placed nothing before us, to cling inseparably to his love, to stand bravely and faithfully at his cross; when there is a struggle over his name and honour to exhibit the constancy in speech with which we confess, under investigation the confidence with which we enter combat, in death the patience for which we are crowned; this is to wish to be a co-heir with Christ; this is to do the commandment of God; this is to fulfil the will of the Father.⁵¹

Cyprian's treatise of exhortation to Fortunatus makes no explicit reference to the Eucharist in preparing and strengthening Christ's soldiers for battle. The memory of Christ's sufferings and passion, and his costly love for his disciples leading to victory over death, is his primary focus. However, among Cyprian's letters we find many precious and important connections between martyrdom and the Eucharist. In what follows I shall seek to outline some of his particular points of emphasis.⁵²

Not blushing to drink Christ's blood

Cyprian's famous *Letter 63* (c. AD 253) to Caecilius, bishop of Bitha, aims to refute the practices of the Aqurari who substituted water for the traditional mixture of wine and water in the eucharistic chalice. Arguing from a whole catena of Scriptural texts, Cyprian explains that the union of water and wine in the chalice symbolises and expresses our integral unity with Christ in the Eucharist (*Ep.* 63, 13). Urging

⁵⁰ Cyprian, *De exhort. martyrii*, 5 (CSEL 3.1, 320; FOTC 36, 317). ⁵¹ Cyprian, *De Dom. orat.* 15 (CSEL 3.1, 277–8; FOTC 36, 140). ⁵² For good studies of the themes of martyrdom and Eucharist, separately or in combination, in Cyprian, see the following sources: A. D'Als, *La*

