

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

Women's martyrdom

Death, gender and witness in Rome and El Salvador

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WHILE I WAS UNDERTAKING A COURSE OF STUDY on issues concerning women and spirituality, part of the course requirement was to read and examine the narrative of the passion of Perpetua and Felicity,¹ the two early Christian martyrs. In debate with my colleagues, I found them enthusiastic, seeing the text as a 'hero' story of two young women who were able to exercise a degree of control over their destinies as embodied spiritual women. My colleagues felt that this was an important text for contemporary women to reclaim and that in particular, it had something to offer women facing oppression and violence. It was felt that the model offered by the two women martyrs was one whereby in the midst of persecution, they had achieved freedom, both inner freedom and freedom from definition by their male oppressors. My own reaction on first and subsequent readings of the text was much more ambivalent.

As a twenty-first century Western woman I have difficulty in relating to a concept of sanctity that demands 'becoming male', but this is not my prime concern. To 'become male' was an acknowledged route to holiness in hagiographic literature of the early Christian period. My greater concern is about the explicit portrayal of the bodily suffering of these women. Having read this and hagiographic texts relating to the Roman virgin martyrs, my response is one of revulsion. I have a sense that there is something prurient and perhaps even pornographic in some of these writings.

When this paper was first written, it was becoming clear that the systematic abuse and rape of women and girls in Kosovo was being employed as a weapon of war. Seven years ago women suffered similarly in the Rwandan genocide and many were murdered or left pregnant and with HIV/AIDS. Others had been tortured and forced to watch the slaughter of their children. In El Salvador and Guatemala the 'Mothers of the Disappeared' continue to search for their children,

kidnapped or killed in the conflicts in these lands. As the suffering continues unabated, the reading of women's 'martyrdom' texts challenges me to ask the following questions: is the model of martyrdom portrayed helpful for contemporary women? Are there other models of women's martyrdom we might also consider? Is the concept of 'martyrdom', traditionally understood, adequate for women today?

In addressing these questions I will begin by examining historical accounts of women's martyrdom and by highlighting recurrent themes in the literature. In particular my interest will be centred on descriptions of embodiment in these texts. I will then examine some examples of modern women martyrs, focusing on the lives and deaths of the four churchwomen murdered in El Salvador in 1980. In so doing, it will be necessary to set this event in its historical context. In conclusion, I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these models and then try to determine whether the traditionally understood concept of martyrdom is adequate for women today.

The word 'martyrdom' is derived from the Greek *martyrein*, meaning 'to bear witness'. In Christian understanding this has meant witnessing to Christ and to the Christian faith, even under pain of death at the hands of others. Christ himself is the archetypal martyr in the scriptures.² There has been a cult of women martyrs since early Christian times. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* dates from 203 CE and is the oldest surviving material attributed to a historical woman. Pre-Reformation English churches also provide evidence of mediaeval cults of women martyrs, frequently portraying the Roman virgin martyrs on their rood screens.³ The text of *The Passion* is unique in allowing Perpetua to speak with her own voice, alongside the words of an editor. Other accounts are exclusively the work of male authors. Unsurprisingly, a strong theme of suffering runs through these stories. While we know that the details were embellished,⁴ it is important to examine the ways in which women endured bodily suffering. In the stories of the virgin martyrs, there is a strong emphasis on the body as object. Agatha resisted seduction and was tortured and had her breasts twisted off. Agnes, a thirteen-year-old virgin, resisted seduction and was sent to a brothel and then stripped and burned before being stabbed. Barbara was tortured, had her breasts cut off, and was stripped and scourged before being decapitated. For trying to assist Katherine of Alexandria who died on her famous wheel, the Emperor's wife had her breasts cut off. Blandina was hung on a post as bait for wild animals, then scourged, placed on a gridiron and tossed by a bull. While hanging

on the post, she assumed the shape of the Cross and we are told that 'those who saw her recognized the presence of Christ within her'.

Recurrent themes in this literature are: a woman who chooses to die rather than yield her virginity, enforced bodily nakedness as humiliation, and punishment by removal of the breasts – surely that most feminine of symbols. Only in the case of Blandina is there any recognition that in her bodiliness she is created in the image of God, and only when she is at her most degraded does she represent the broken Christ.

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity

Perpetua's story

Both Perpetua and Felicity were wives and mothers. Perpetua was breast-feeding a son and Felicity was pregnant. Perpetua seems to have lived under the control of her father who was hostile to her Christianity. She was physically afraid of him to the extent that she feared he might blind her. At her baptism she prayed for *sufferentia carnis*, translated by Tilley as 'patient endurance in her own embodied existence'.⁵ Her desire was not only for spiritual steadfastness but also for physical courage.

Perpetua writes of her bodily discomfort while in prison, emphasizing the pain of her engorged breasts resulting from separation from her child. In a vision she sees a ladder surrounded by torture instruments and at its foot, a dragon. Unafraid, she treads on the beast and reaches an elderly 'Good Shepherd' figure who offers her curdled cheese to eat. On awaking, Perpetua can still physically taste the sweet curds and she realizes that this is a taste of heaven. From then on, she dissociates herself from the males who have until then defined her.

From this moment, and despite her father's attempt to drag her away from her interrogation, Perpetua remains steadfast. There is no going back to her old life now that she has tasted the food of martyrdom. At this point, her lactation ceases. She is free of the males who have controlled her.

In her final dream, Perpetua enters the arena and encounters an Egyptian opponent. She is prepared for battle by being stripped naked and rubbed with oil and she declares '*facta sum masculus*' – 'I have become a man'.

This statement reflects the popular view that male bodies and male experience are normative. Since women were unable to become physically male, male and female became metaphors for moral categories.⁶

'Becoming male' was to show signs of spiritual development. Perpetua's 'male' body indicated that she would be victorious in the contest and in her martyrdom. Martyrdom was male-defined as policy and masculine-defined in its exercise.⁷ Martyrs were soldiers or athletes and, influenced by her Christian reading, Perpetua thus envisioned herself as such.

Felicity's story

Felicity was a slave who was eight months pregnant at the time of her incarceration. There was concern among her fellow prisoners that they might have to die without her as Roman Law prohibited pregnant women from being sent to the arena. In response to their prayers Felicity delivered a daughter prematurely and gave the child to her sister. Unlike Perpetua, she continued to lactate so that when she entered the arena, we are told that 'the milk dripped from her breasts'. Tilley asserts that the difference between these two role models meant that women of any status could identify with the martyrs.⁸ It is difficult from a twentieth-century perspective to assess the effectiveness of this strategy since, apart from the wives of kings, there is a lack of married women saints.

The editor's view

The editor then describes how Perpetua refused to put on the dress of the priestesses of Ceres to enter the arena. The women were then stripped naked but the crowd demanded that they be reclothed. On re-entering the arena, clad in a loose robe, Perpetua was attacked by an angry cow and tossed in the air. Oblivious to her injuries, she rearranged her clothing and her hair and the editor makes much of this perceived modesty. Tilley interprets this gesture as Perpetua's desire that on her day of martyrdom, she should be properly prepared in her bodily suffering, clad for her hour of glory.⁹ It is difficult to perceive Perpetua's motives at this distance, but it is certainly quite difficult to believe that modesty was her priority at that point!

Finally, when he fails to decapitate her, Perpetua guides her executioner so that he can cut her throat. To the very last, Perpetua had retained some control over her body and her destiny. Her request for '*sufferenzia carnis*' had been granted.

In the descriptions of the bodily suffering of all of these women, certain elements suggest that the violence inflicted on them is of the kind that is violence against women-as-women. Rape and being sent to a brothel and having one's breasts severed are all examples of gender-based violence. Being publicly stripped naked, especially in a post-

partum state with breasts leaking milk, is an attempt at gender-based humiliation. Being sent to the arena to die from attack by a cow rather than a male animal as was the norm, gives a clear message that gender plays a part in the story. I think that this is what lies at the root of my unease. These accounts seem to support a structure of male dominance by including stereotypes about women. The women are defined in terms of their sexuality and the underlying assumption is that aggression is the normal mode of male behaviour and submissiveness the natural mode of the female. In these terms, sanctity is about choosing death in the face of male attack. The violent behaviour is not condemned. It is women's resistance to it, in choosing death over loss of virtue, that is lauded as holy. The attack is ostensibly on the women's adherence to the Christian faith but it is also on them as women, as a punishment for engaging in 'deviant' behaviour.

The positive aspect of the story of Perpetua and Felicity was that as married women and mothers, they provided a role model for identification by other women who had husbands and children. Tilley states that:

As the relationships which defined Perpetua and Felicity were stripped from them . . . they became more and more who they really were. So too, the women of the audience could rejoice in becoming who they truly were. In their freedom from the males who had up until then defined them, they moved from a dependent state to an independent one where they could truly claim the name 'Christian'.¹⁰

While filled with admiration for the courage of these women and their refusal to allow themselves to be humiliated, and also appreciating their sense of themselves as embodied Christian women in a dualistic world, I think that Tilley overstates the case of their worth as 'role models'. It is not within the scope of this article, but I question whether the concept of 'independence' as spiritual progress is not an androcentric one.

The American women martyrs

In El Salvador in December 1980, a small group of onlookers watched and prayed as the bodies of four North American women were exhumed from the earth. They had been beaten and shot in the head at close range. Many of the bystanders had known them – Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel an Ursuline Sister, and Jean Donovan, a Lay Missioner.¹¹ On the evening of 2 December

they had been raped and shot in the back of a van and then dumped at the side of a road.

Fear of Marxism after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 led to large numbers of Western missionaries being sent to strengthen the church of Latin America in the 1960's and 70's. The effect of this was to cause many of these missionaries in the *barrios* to see the world and the Gospel in a new way and to question the church's role in supporting the anti-Communist defenders of the status quo.¹²

The missionaries found no real desire for social change and they discovered that those who were advocates for justice and human rights were accused of being 'Communists'. The military responded violently to attempts at solidarity with the poor and human rights violations occurred daily. Whilst living out the church's 'option for the poor', many clergy, religious and lay people were labelled 'subversive' for proclaiming a vision of God's justice that was critical of the oppression around them, and as such, their lives were endangered.

One of those most in danger was the previously conservative Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, who had become a fearless opponent of injustice and a champion of the poor. In homilies broadcast to the nation, he castigated the regime in El Salvador and preached Gospel values. After urging soldiers to disobey their superiors in a homily on 23 March 1980, he was murdered while celebrating Mass the next day. The influence of Monsignor Romero was one of the reasons that had drawn these women to work in his diocese. They had already ministered extensively in Latin America and they were not naïve about the situation in El Salvador. Writing of them, the president of their congregation said:

They were not 'blind to the evil and sin in the world, nor were they naïve about its causes. The wisdom of their faith was that their lives were not focused against evil and sin but upon the holiness of human life.'¹³

So in December 1980, in full knowledge of the risks, Maura and Ita returned to El Salvador after attending a meeting in Nicaragua. Jean and Dorothy were at the airport to meet them. At around ten that night, three peasants in a pineapple field saw a white van stop; the men heard gunfire and the van moved off. The next day a campesino on his way to work found the bodies.

These women had chosen to remain in El Salvador because of their passion for the poor of that land. As a result they were raped and killed. As Elizabeth Johnson, quoting Karl Rahner, points out:

They were not sent before a tribunal to deny Christ, nor were they made to sacrifice to the Emperor but . . . the act of martyrdom is there when death is foreseen as a possible consequence of witnessing to the Gospel and the courageous choice is made to continue nevertheless . . . in our day the death of the martyr 'can be a consequence of an active struggle for social justice and other Christian values.'¹⁴

This struggle for social justice as a Christian value is what Jon Sobrino has dubbed 'political holiness' in an article that defines holiness as 'the practice of faith, hope and charity, and the virtues generated by the following of Jesus'. By 'political' he means 'action directed towards structurally transforming society in the direction of the Kingdom of God, by doing justice to the poor and oppressed, so that they obtain life and historical salvation'.¹⁵ This adds a new dimension to the meaning of martyrdom. It is about more than pursuing single-mindedly an adherence to Christian doctrine and being prepared to die in defence of it, no matter how admirable a calling that may be. It is about exercising a 'political love' that is kenotic. This kind of love is about allowing ourselves to be 'stripped' and going into situations of need, vulnerable and with empty hands, and it is also about denouncing injustice and oppression. It is this kind of loving that Sobrino states *ex opere operato* leads to persecution.¹⁶

This was the kind of loving that took these women back into El Salvador despite the deaths of Romero and thousands of ordinary campesinos. It would be easy to think that they had no fears, but that would be to do them a disservice. It is important that we mark that they were afraid, and that at times they felt lonely and grief stricken.

Ita and her then partner and friend, Carla Piette, had voiced their concerns in a letter to their sisters back in the States,

Given the war situation . . . we have felt quite isolated and alone. We feel the need of more palpable solidarity . . . neither of us is an emotional or psychological giant in this crazy situation . . .¹⁷

Later, Carla died in a flash flood and Ita wrote:

Carla and I had talked lots of times about the possibility of our dying . . . we talked about how difficult it would be if we weren't together for the one who was left behind.¹⁸

Jean wrote to her friends of her fear of torture while Maura was in anguish before deciding to replace Carla in El Salvador. They were ordinary, yet extraordinary, human women full of human emotions, not plaster saints.

There are similarities between the narratives of the early and contemporary women martyrs. The Americans also suffered violence directed at them specifically as women. We know that the killings were pre-meditated and ordered by senior military,¹⁹ but it is not clear whether the rapes were also ordered. It seems likely that they were perpetrated in an attempt to humiliate and punish a group of celibate women living a counter-cultural lifestyle. The rapes were themselves a political act, designed to assert male power over women who refused to be cowed into accepting the status quo.

In contrast to the people they served, the Americans were educated and had the support of a religious order. Significantly, they also had the *choice* of whether or not to remain in the situation. This is not to devalue their courage but merely to highlight that they had choices not available to those around them. In continuing to identify with the 'anawim' they rendered themselves open to suffering the same fate – torture, disappearance and being murdered.

For Perpetua and Felicity, martyrdom entailed separation from the people and events of daily life and the decision to surrender their lives in defence of the doctrine of Christianity. There was no such 'grand gesture' on the part of the Americans. They were not seeking martyrdom, indeed as we have seen they feared what they might be called to do. While for Perpetua, martyrdom meant gaining control of her body and her destiny, for these women the priority was to carry on feeding the hungry and tending the sick, knowing ultimately that this might mean losing control over what would happen to their bodies and their futures.

Elizabeth Johnson draws distinctions between 'egalitarian' and 'patriarchal' models of sanctity. In the former, martyrs are seen as 'brothers and sisters surrounding the living with lessons of encouragement', while in the latter, the holy dead are 'heavenly intercessors before the distant throne of God obtaining good things for needy petitioners'.²⁰ I would suggest that the primary value of the American women martyrs today is their ability to be a group of sisters 'sur-

rounding the living with lessons of encouragement'. This is not to deny their value as intercessors in any way. As they opted to share the lot of oppressed people in the interest of offering spiritual nourishment and practical support they did so out of a self-defining compassion nourished by Christian faith that provided a model for those around them.

The martyrdom of survival

Having examined the texts of the *Passion* and the virgin martyrs, I will now consider whether these are helpful for contemporary women facing political and religious violence and oppression today. For many women caught up in war the reality is that they will be raped, lose their partners and children and perhaps spend years living in refugee camps. There are several areas of potential conflict between the early models and the situation of those women, and I list these:

- Stories of women who preferred to die rather than suffer sexual assault have the potential to compound the shame, guilt and trauma of those who have been unable to avoid such attacks.
- Though many women today are seeking freedom from definition exclusively in terms of 'wife' or 'mother', those women like Perpetua and Felicity who succeeded in this are inappropriate role models for bereaved women who mourn for their dead husbands or children. Such models at this time are potentially alienating and may induce misplaced guilt at the depth of grief experience.
- The majority of persons who survive conflicts and end up in refugee camps are women. For these women, except in very rare instances, the 'grand gesture' model of martyrdom in defence of a faith or a cause is not an option. When others' survival depends on women, they will do whatever it takes to survive, even if that means resorting to stealing or prostitution in order to feed a family.
- For most women in these situations martyrdom is likely to be about living and surviving in extreme hardship, rather than dying. Consequently they will automatically dismiss the credibility of material that undermines their choice for life as a moral value.

Despite these criticisms, I believe that the narrative of Perpetua and Felicity offers a model of women with courage and integrity who refused to allow themselves to be humiliated. There is a problem, however, in that it needs careful reading and feminist interpretation to reach that point. My concern is that these texts continue to be mediated largely by men who present them from an androcentric perspective. I

suggest that they need to be used with caution and supplemented by other models of martyrdom.

In addressing whether there are other models of martyrdom that are equally or more appropriate, I used the example of the American women in El Salvador. This model has much strength, but it also has limitations:

- A potential source of dissonance is that these were not married women with husbands and dependent children. They were educated, single women with the freedom to choose whether or not to remain in the country in a way that their neighbours did not.
- These women were North American vowed religious or affiliated to a religious congregation. As such, they had the powerful structures of the White House and the Church to demand an explanation for their deaths. They have been remembered as martyrs in a way that the thousands of campesinas who suffered the same fate have not. This is potentially alienating to those who feel that their own lost loved ones have been forgotten.

More positively, however, these American women portray a picture of a group committed to witnessing to Christ through the service of the poor. In so doing, they accepted the risks of the situation and shared a mutual vulnerability with those they served. They were not the ‘winners’ that history so often records. They died a cruel and messy death at the hands of forces they were powerless to resist. In that, they shared the same fate as their neighbours and it is easy for those in oppressive situations to identify with them. They were not seeking a heroic death; instead they concentrated on bringing life in the midst of death, and their prime concern was for what Elizabeth Johnson describes as ‘survival as a holy choice’.²¹ Women can identify with this as they struggle to feed and care for their children in refugee camps, and as they give birth and provide nourishment in the midst of death. Enduring a horrible death courageously is one way to salvation but it is not the only way. Women’s ability to keep on providing hope, nourishment and care for others in the midst of terror and suffering are surely equally salvific?

In attempting to answer the question, ‘is the concept of martyrdom, traditionally understood, adequate for today?’ it is necessary to return to our original definition. For centuries the church has recognized as martyrs those who die for the faith, but our earlier definition makes it clear that it is in the act of witnessing that one becomes a martyr, rather than the act of dying. We have said that for women living under oppression, it is witnessing to life in alliance with the God of life, rather than opting for death, that is a priority. Consequently, in official mar-

tyrologies there are very few women represented. Martyrologies are written to preserve memory of a radical witness to justice, and if they ignore the 'living martyrdom' of women they cannot be said to represent the witness of all God's faithful people.²²

While some may argue that witness without death cannot be said to constitute martyrdom, the Church itself has precedents of 'living martyrdom'. Martyrdom was sometimes conferred as an honour on persons who suffered for the faith, and monks, commencing with Anthony of Egypt, are said to have undergone a kind of martyrdom in their pursuit of the ascetic life.²³ I have spoken of the many ways in which women testify to life, and choose to act to protect and defend life in the midst of death, and I believe that women's lives reveal an efficacy that goes beyond martyrdom traditionally understood.

As survivors, women honour all their experiences. They are not just victims. By virtue of their survival they experience God in a profound way, through living in the pain, through honouring the truth and through radical acts of love. We need to honour their courage and their witness because it is resurrected presence – the divine breaking into history.²⁴ In this way I believe that women's experience challenges us to broaden our concept of martyrdom to include not only the holy dead but also all those who are 'living martyrs' and witnesses to Christ.

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NOTES

- 1 M. A. Tilley, 'The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity' in E. Schüssler-Fiorenza (ed), *Searching the Scriptures*, vol II: *A feminist commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp 829–858.
- 2 B. Ramsay, 'Martyrdom' in M. Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p 632.
- 3 E. Duffy, 'Holy maidens, holy wifes' in W. J. Sheils and D. Wood (eds), *Studies in church history* Vol 27 (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1990), pp 175–196.
- 4 Ramsay, p 632.
- 5 Tilley, p 837.
- 6 K. Vogt, 'Becoming male', *Concilium* 182 (1995), p 76.
- 7 Tilley, p 845.
- 8 Tilley, p 849.
- 9 Tilley, p 850.
- 10 Tilley, p 849.
- 11 P. Lernoux, *Hearts on fire* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p 229.
- 12 Lernoux, p 230.

- 13 J. Noone, *The same fate as the poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p xiii.
- 14 E. Johnson, *Friends of God and prophets* (London: SCM Press, 1998), p 154.
- 15 J. Sobrino, 'Political holiness: a profile', *Concilium* 163 (1983), p 18.
- 16 Sobrino, p 20.
- 17 Noone, p 108.
- 18 Noone, p 124.
- 19 Noone, p 148.
- 20 Johnson, p 79.
- 21 Johnson, p 155.
- 22 J. Grovijan, 'Grabbing life away from death', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991), p 20.
- 23 Ramsay, p 634.
- 24 Grovijan, p 27.