

The Spirituality Of Martyrdom

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Translator: Mary Frances Dorschell, OSU
Associate Professor of French
Brescia University College
London, Ontario

On July 17, 1794, just ten days before the fall of Robespierre during the French Revolution, sixteen Carmelites from the monastery of Compiègne were condemned to death and guillotined the same day at what is now the Place de la Nation on the east side of Paris. Offering their lives for the salvation of France and the restoration of the Catholic Church in their country, the sisters, each in turn, received a final blessing from their prioress, Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine or Madame Lidoine, as she is sometimes called. Then, singing Psalm 117, "Praise the Lord, all you nations," they climbed the steps of the scaffold. The sixteen Carmelite martyrs are buried in the Picpus Cemetery which lies within walking distance of the Place de la Nation. The burial site is situated at the rear of the property belonging to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The Carmelites of Compiègne were declared "venerable" by Leo XIII in 1902 and beatified by Pius X in 1906. It is interesting to note that Thérèse of Lisieux had a great devotion to the martyrs and had several images of them.

The martyrdom of these sixteen women has become known throughout the world through various works, both fictional and nonfictional, describing their tremendous courage and devotion. In 1931 the German author, Gertrud von Le Fort, wrote *Die Letzte am Schaffott* (The Song at the Scaffold), a short novel based on the story of the Carmelites' martyrdom. Some of the characters of this work are fictional, while others are historic figures. In the late 1940's the French writer, Georges Bernanos, was asked to provide the dialogues for a scenario based on von le Fort's work. *Dialogues des Carmélites* was published in 1949 and presented on the stage for the first time in 1951 in Zurich, Switzerland. Then in 1957, Francis Poulenc composed his well-known opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and finally, in 1960, the film version of the Carmelites' martyrdom appeared. All of these works are partly fact and partly fiction.

Over the years Professor Bush has produced several well researched works unveiling the true account of the life and martyrdom of the Sisters. *La relation du martyre des seize Carmélites de Compiègne* (Paris : Cerf, 1993) and *To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1999) are but two of the author's most notable publications on this subject.

In 1985, while doing research on the Carmelites of Compiègne, Professor Bush found a four stanza Christmas carol to be sung at the crib which Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine wrote for Christmas 1792 or 1793. According to Professor Bush, this carol "goes far in revealing Madame Lidoine's deep mystical orientation as she contemplated the guillotine" (*To Quell the Terror* 113). I have provided an unofficial translation of each stanza of the carol as it is discussed in this article.

The remarkable depth of the spiritual experience of the Carmelite who was not only the prioress but also the true mother of the martyrdom of the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne is revealed in the four stanzas of this canticle written to be sung at the crib. (. . .)

THE SOUL IN LOVE

The spirituality with which Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine was filled should be explained. Her dynamism highlights to what extent it appears to be a true spirituality of martyrdom which allowed the great prioress to carry out her idea of a community oblation. However, such a spirituality is nothing new. It is, on the contrary, part and parcel of the great and noble spirituality of the Christian Church.

Even so, it seems to be in danger today of being forgotten by Christians who have become enamoured of very

human ideas about "justice" or "democracy." Such ideas, admirable in themselves as aspirations, tend, however, to make the believer turn a blind eye to the basic need of all human nature to be converted, not by conformation to human ideas, but by a transformation carried out due to the action of the Almighty God working in the heart of the believer.

For the baptized Christian, this can be nothing less than the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are at work in him/her, drawing him/her towards the glory of the transformation of his/her entire being by the uncreated light of the thrice holy and all powerful God of Christians.

If she had not been moved by an ardent spiritual experience flowing forth from her love for Jesus Christ, would Mother Lidoine have ever accomplished this act of community consecration? At the age of forty-one, she succeeded in leading her fifteen daughters all of whom, except three, were older than she, to the sickening, foul-smelling place of slaughter which was the guillotine set up at the gate of Vincennes, the 29 day of Messidor, Year II of the French Republic, one and indivisible.

Singing for God's Mercy to be confirmed in them, they climbed the steps of the scaffold. The two oldest were both over seventy-eight and one of them could not walk without a crutch; the youngest was only twenty-nine. (. . .)

Martyrdom means "witness" in Greek. The massacre of the Holy Innocents was indeed a mysterious and one of the most striking pieces of evidence of the fact that God became Man in Bethlehem of Judea under the reign of Tiberius. In a similar fashion, the execution of the Carmelites was a witness rendered to the "presence" of God.

In that place of horror which is now the "Place de la Nation," in Europe's great "City of Lights," the sickening stench of the blood of approximately one thousand victims putrefying in the heat of that July evening was lifted up before humans and angels. It also gave eloquent witness to a basic flaw in the illumination of that Age of Enlightenment entirely enamoured of the philosophers' ideals.

Let us not be mistaken regarding the motivation of Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine's spirituality. Faced with the horror of the disintegration of Christianity taking place around her, she lovingly threw herself into the secret hidden source of the Church of God. This secret source of living waters imposes on the believer who immerses himself/herself in them the urgent need not only to love but to bear witness to this love before humans and angels. (. . .)

There are two facts which make the existence of such a need possible. First of all, there is the dynamism of the mystery of the Creator's glory and of His divine economy acting everywhere in creation. Secondly, there is the idea of the Christian becoming incorporated into Christ at Baptism.

From this starting point, Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine enlightens us by revealing to us the great love of her own very great soul. It is a secret which risks astonishing the reader who does not know that one can love not only with the heart and the body but also with the entire soul. Such was Madame Lidoine's love for Jesus Christ.

THE DESIRE OF THE SOUL

*Heavenly Child, You are the One whom I desire,
No other object satisfies my heart!
It is decided, therefore, I belong to You,
I feel the heat of Your love!
Heal this criminal and guilty heart,
May it be wounded with pain and love!
Heavenly wounds, oh wounds so desirable!
Afflict this heart that it may suffer night and day!*

The first stanza is addressed to the Heavenly Child, the One who is the King of Glory, the very source of

uncreated light. But we see Him, as a Child, stripped of His majesty. He lies on a bed of straw in a stable among the beasts of the land. This newborn Infant remains nonetheless the goal of all human desires. He is always and for all eternity the sole response to the soul having no other friend, no other protection, no other love. The One whom we contemplate here as the "Heavenly Child" is the Alpha and the Omega of all our desires.

Madame Lidoine knows this. She does not only say that it is He alone whom she desires, but also that "no other object" can satisfy her heart. Like the married woman who has chosen her husband and rejected all others, like the loving spouse, she dreams about, contemplates and thinks only of her love. (. . .)

Right from the first line, she recognizes the uniqueness of her own relationship with the "Heavenly Child" as well as the consequences of this uniqueness. She belongs to no one but Him alone. She declares that there is nothing left for her but the warm attraction of the love of the One who stripped Himself for the human race.

As in every genuine experience of love, she recognizes that she is unworthy of the One whom she loves. Her "criminal and guilty" heart needs to be "healed," not only by the love she bears for this object of her longing, but also by the "gentleness" that she can only feel in participating in this way in His love for His creation.

But, a truth rooted in Christian mystical tradition is that the more God wants to make Himself loved, the more He makes the desire for it grow in His creature. Madame Lidoine's heart is wounded therefore by the infinite dimensions that her love takes. The object of her desire, the divine Logos, can belong to her in an exclusive way only after death. (. . .)

In the eyes of the world, such a love, such exclusivity in love, can only be seen as imprudent. Furthermore, in asking insistently for these heavenly wounds to afflict her heart, she opens herself up to a fact known by every lover: the loving heart can exist only in a permanent state of suffering. But, paradoxically, it is always "with the consent" of the one who loves that this takes place. And so, Madame Lidoine prays that her heart may "suffer night and day."

THE GIFT OF THE SOUL

*Divine Love, to Your crib,
I come to make the gift of my entire being,
My soul surrenders itself to Your severity!
And forever I surrender my reasoning.
I want nothing, Your heart is everything,
I sacrifice here my thoughts and desires
In Your heart I want to be enclosed
With Your love, I can accept martyrdom. . .*

In the second stanza, Mother Lidoine affirms before the crib of the God-Man, before "Divine Love" who has taken on human form, that she has come there to offer a gift. It is, moreover, an action that she truly desires to perform with her entire "being." For from this moment on it will no longer be solely a question of the martyrdom of heart for which she has been longing "night and day."

She will go further. It is a question now of her body: her blood and her flesh. This is what she understands by this gift of "(her) entire being." Her soul filled with love for the Divine Child, she approaches the crib to make this total gift which explains the meaning of her expression, "of my entire being. For to give one's heart is one thing, but to give one's body is something else.

Like every lover, she confesses that she does not understand very much about her great desire. (. . .) The boldness of her faith pushes her to accept her heart as her only master, even as far as a death which, in the eyes of mortals, will seem unjust and violent.

Madame Lidoine is capable of reaching this state of total abandonment of body and soul, indeed of "(her) entire being," because she no longer desires anything, having found in the heart of this Heavenly Child, of this

incarnation of Divine Love, all that she desires. Through Him, she is ready to sacrifice all her thoughts on all matters. All her other desires no longer mean anything to her, provided that she can be "enclosed" in her heart. For that she is ready to accept all suffering, including the witness of martyrdom. (. . .)

Accepting martyrdom is, therefore, nothing other than no longer accepting partial but full participation in this love. This participation in God's love continues throughout the ages through the witness (the martyrdom) of Christians in whatever form it may be manifested. But in the case of Madame Lidoine, there are specific and explicit implications.

Indeed, Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine was not thinking about martyrdom in an abstract way. Since April, 1792, the guillotine had been existing in all its revolutionary glory. Queen or peasant, king or baker, marquis or cattle dealer, all, without any further distinction, had their heads chopped off by Sanson's (the executioner's) blade. Nothing was more probable than the fact that the Carmelites would have to pass by this entirely modern machine if they wanted to be martyrs of their day which had so great a need of witnesses rendered to this Heavenly Child.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE SOUL

*Ah! on death are my hopes founded,
For I die from not being able to die.
Hasten, Lord, hasten my deliverance!
Break these bonds, satisfy my desires! ...
Slice as You will, sacrifice Your victim!
Your divine blows will be sacred to me!
My delight will be to die under Your hand,
How appealing to my heart is Your severity!*

It is in this third stanza that we rightly find the most striking image of the entire text, although this image is implied rather than being stated explicitly. For the guillotine, about which we have just spoken, is scarcely hidden behind the little phrase, "Slice as You will, sacrifice Your victim." It could scarcely be absent from the mind of this mother of the martyrs at the moment when she wrote these lines, knowing that it could fall to the lot of each one, through the mercy of the new republican equality.

The means of receiving the palm of martyrdom matters little, however, for it is not on the guillotine that Mother Lidoine bases her hope, but on death itself. What is important is situated far beyond the form that martyrdom will take: it is the witness of one's very life, the witness of absolute love, of that love which according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest love which leads us to die for others.

Suffering from living without being perfectly united to her love, Madame Lidoine begs this Heavenly Child to answer all her desires to hasten the day of her "deliverance," to break "these bonds" which hold her back in this valley of tears. She is ready: let Him come!

"Dying from not dying" is an integral part of the spiritual experience of the great Teresa of Avila. In proposing the act of holocaust to her daughters as an efficacious means of praying for the salvation of France and her Church, Mother Teresa of Saint Augustine is herself full of this spirituality. Therefore, it is not by chance that we find here this reference to the famous phrase of Teresa of Avila: "For I die from not being able to die."

And although the image of the guillotine is scarcely hidden beneath the verb "to slice," the prioress remains lucid. It will be neither the executioner Sanson, nor one of his sons, nor one of his servants who will really be responsible for the final violent blow by which "(her) entire being" will be sacrificed. It will be He, the One who alone can satisfy her heart. (. . .)

There is found the happiness of the spouse who no longer knows any attraction than that which she names with classic reticence and modesty, the "severity" of this Spouse. But the "severity" of the living God can be terrible and the human being can be incapable of seeing in it anything at all of justice or happiness. But that does not matter.

Her own sacrifice as victim is accepted therefore with a firm heart. Under His hand she will die happy, having found at last her happiness in Him, the source of all joy and the answer to all the desires of the human race.

LAST ACT OF ABANDONMENT

*Divine Shepherd, under Your leadership I place
This dear flock entrusted to my care!
Loving Child, beside Your crib
I place the mother and the children!
Mother of love, noble sovereign,
Within your bosom, deign, oh deign to place us.
Your dear children, our powerful Queen,
Have the right to hope in your help.*

According to a traditional form, the fourth stanza consists of a prayer divided into two invocations. The first half is an invocation to Christ Himself, to this "Heavenly Child" invoked from the beginning, no longer now as a newborn Infant, but as the Divine "Shepherd." Here as elsewhere, however, Mother Lidoine makes an act of abandonment, keeping nothing for herself. Here as elsewhere she surrenders everything and everyone to Him, reserving nothing for herself, not even her own person or the persons of her sisters who make up the community of Compiègne.

For what good is it to abandon oneself to Christ if one still wants to keep something for oneself, if one wants to limit His hold on our lives? That would not be true abandonment. To continue to keep one's right to reason and to foresee is not abandoning oneself to God.

Has this great prioress of martyrdom not already surrendered her reasoning? Has she not already sacrificed her thoughts and desires? Confident in the love which never deceives, she now abandons to Him the entire little flock of the Carmel of Compiègne.

This offering will be accepted in royal fashion. The community will be annihilated. In embracing the mystery of love in which she so longed to participate, Mother Lidoine and her daughters along with her will become witnesses right up to death of the love of the "Heavenly Child."

The second half of this last stanza, still following the traditional form, is a prayer to the holy patroness of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Humbly and without any pretentiousness of thought or of reasoning, Mother Lidoine asks that she and all her daughters be placed in the mystical bosom of the Holy Virgin. As Christian women consecrated to this "Mother of love," to this "noble sovereign," do they not have the right to hope for her help not only during the course of their lives, but especially at the hour of their formidable sacrifice?