



On the Veneration of Saints and Martyrs, Ancient and Modern

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During the first week of the 2006 archeological season at Hippos, a city set on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, our team from Concordia University, Saint Paul, Minnesota took a break from the heavy labor to tour the ruins and to see the work of the other groups excavating parts of this Decapolis city. As Jolanta Mlynarczyk, codirector of the Polish team, explained the work done at the Northwest Church complex, I patiently waited to see the inscription in the mosaic floor of the church atrium: “Offering for the rest of Antonia, deaconess.”¹ Who was deaconess Antonia? What was her role in this Byzantine-era community of faith? How had her life of service so touched others that the community honored her in death with an inscription naming her? Had she been buried in one of the two cist tombs in the room adjoining the atrium and her remains venerated for decades?

The myriad of questions flooding my mind flowed from three sources—vocational, scholarly, and personal. First, as a Lutheran deaconess, I was naturally curious about Antonia, my spiritual forebear in the church’s ministry of service. Sec-

¹For details about the inscription, see *Hippos - Sussita: Sixth Season of Excavations (July 2005)* (Haifa, Israel: Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, 2005) 51–53.

While the Lutheran Confessions condemn the invocation of saints, they commend their proper veneration. Considering modes of veneration in the early church offers insight into appropriate customs and rituals for those who have died more recently in and for the faith.

ond, my scholarly interests in liturgical studies and history had led to a deepening interest in the church's long history of veneration of saints and martyrs. Finally, on a personal level, I was reminded of another deaconess, my friend Margaret, and of the hundreds of people who had attended her funeral after her early death from cancer in 1998.² I imagined Margaret as a modern-day Antonia. My interest in ancient church practice surrounding saints and martyrs surfaced again in August 2007, when another member of my deaconess community, Evelyn Middelstadt, was brutally murdered by a man whom she was trying to help.³ As my deaconess community has struggled to make sense of Evelyn's death, the language of martyrdom inevitably entered our conversations.⁴ These public musings are my attempt as a Lutheran to recover aspects of early church practice for a veneration of contemporary saints and martyrs.

SCRIPTURE AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

As a Lutheran, my fascination with the stories of ancient martyrs and saints may seem like desire for forbidden fruit. After all, Luther, following the pattern of the New Testament (for example, 1 Cor 1:2), declared all Christians to be saints (and at the same time sinners). And Article XXI of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* condemns the invocation of saints, not only because "Scripture does not teach us to call upon the saints or to ask the saints for help,"⁵ but more importantly, because the term "mediators of intercession...obscures the office of Christ and transfers to the saints the confidence that we should place in the mercy of Christ."⁶ Nevertheless, the *Apology* does not reject the *veneration* of the saints. Rather, it approves a threefold way of honoring them:

The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church....We ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts....The second kind of veneration is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings.⁷

Although, as the Lutheran Confessions argue, Scripture is silent on the invo-

²For a retrospective of Margaret's death, see the article by her daughter, N. Karis Towe, "Discovering Beauty: Images of Death and Dying (Photographs of Margaret Heine Towe)," *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 10/2 (1998) 4-9.

³For details, see Paula Schlueter Ross, "LCMS deaconess murdered; suspect arrested in Wichita," *Reporter*, September 2007, 1; also <http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=12409> (accessed May 2, 2008).

⁴For information about the Lutheran Deaconess Association and Lutheran Deaconess Conference, see the official web site: <http://www.valpo.edu/lda/>.

⁵*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* XXI:10, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 238.

⁶*Ibid.*, XXI:15, 239.

⁷*Ibid.*, XXI:4-7, 238.

cation of saints, two books in the New Testament provide early church perspectives on the martyrs, those who were first venerated by the church. First, the story of proto-martyr Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles links Stephen's life and death to that of Jesus.⁸ As a story that imitates the life, suffering, and death of Jesus in its basic outline, it becomes a model for later accounts. Through such a narrative, the account of the martyr's life and death serves to draw one into the life and death of Jesus.

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Second, the Revelation to John, perhaps written during the reign of Emperor Domitian near the end of the first century, presents the early Christian belief about those who had died confessing their faith in Christ. Emperor Domitian demanded that his subjects address him as "Lord and God," and those who refused to do so were put to death. The message of Revelation "is a trumpet call to the persecuted, assuring them that, despite the worst that the Roman Empire could do, God reigns supreme, and Christ, who died and is alive forevermore, has the power to overcome all evil."⁹ The vision in chapter seven depicts martyrs "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne [of God] and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands," singing praises to God (Rev 7:9). An elder in the vision says of this multitude: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple" (Rev 7:14). The vision of the martyrs standing in the very presence of God communicates a glorious, comforting message of hope, namely, that after death those persecuted for their faith enjoy an ongoing, intimate relationship with God.

THE WITNESS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Documents from the early church describing the martyrdom of individuals show the development of the veneration of martyrs consistent with this biblical witness. Martyrs are both those whose life and death imitated Christ and who in death are assured close and immediate communion with God. Two examples, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*¹⁰ and *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*,¹¹ illustrate both points,

⁸Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 52–53. See the following parallels: the Spirit empowering their preaching and healing (Luke 4:14 with Acts 6:8); similar words that lead to condemnation (Luke 22:67–71 with Acts 7:56–57); similar words spoken at death (Luke 23:46 with Acts 7:59, and Luke 23:34 with Acts 7:59–60).

⁹Bruce Metzger, Introduction to The Revelation to John, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 364 NT.

¹⁰*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) 142–144.

¹¹*The Martyrdom of Perpetua*, in *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought*, ed. Amy Oden (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 26–37.

while also providing other clues to explain how and why the practice of venerating martyrs spread throughout the early church.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, a city in Asia Minor, was martyred—burned alive—between A.D. 155 and 160. The eyewitness account, apparently recorded soon after the event, describes Polycarp’s arrest and trial as well as the gruesome details of his death. The summary paragraph declares: “By his endurance he defeated the unrighteous magistrate and so received the crown of immortality; now he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous, and glorifies the almighty God and Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ” (19.2). He, like the martyrs in Revelation, is in the very presence of God.

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A major portion of *The Martyrdom of Perpetua* is a firsthand account by Perpetua herself, a young married woman from a good Roman family in north Africa who was martyred in 202 or 203. Made abundantly clear in this narrative is the confidence of Perpetua and her companions that through their martyrdom they would enter immediately into the presence of God. Perpetua describes a dream in which she climbs a ladder to heaven and meets God (in the form of a shepherd milking sheep) surrounded by “several thousand white-robed people” (§6). One of her companions, Saturus, also describes in detail a dream in which they enter heaven, hear the ceaseless chanting of “holy, holy, holy,” are welcomed by God, and “recognize many of our friends, among whom were martyrs” (§12). The day before her martyrdom, Perpetua has a vision in which she fights as a man in the arena, is victorious over her opponent, and receives the branch of victory (§10). Indeed, the narrator whose material frames Perpetua’s account uses the same language of victory to describe their day of martyrdom: “The day of victory dawned, and with joyful countenances they marched from the prison to the arena as though on their way to heaven” (§18).

Although textually less closely connected to the Passion Narratives of the Gospels than the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua* contains some loose parallels with the passion of Jesus. The narrative begins with the arrest of Perpetua and her companions, and her account includes descriptions of “rough treatment by soldiers” (§3), of a rushed hearing before the governor (§6), and a final meal together (§17). *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* more closely parallels the passion of Jesus. Like Jesus, Polycarp makes a passion announcement, saying, “It is necessary that I be burned alive” (5.2). Like Jesus, Polycarp “waited to be betrayed” (1.2) by those close to him, in his case by “members of his own household” (6.2). Like Jesus, he is tried before the Roman authority (the proconsul), the crowd shouts for his death, and he is condemned to die (9–12).

But based on his analysis of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Michael Holmes ar-

gues that the parallels with the gospels are merely characteristic of the literary genre and not the interpretative key to the text.¹² Holmes's point holds true for *The Martyrdom of Perpetua* as well. The introduction and conclusion of Perpetua's personal narrative, added by an eyewitness, offer the interpretative key or theme of this account. The introductory paragraph argues that, just as "ancient" examples of faith "were written expressly for God's honor and humans' encouragement," so "we deem it necessary to disseminate the written accounts for the glory of God, lest anyone with a weak or despairing faith might think that supernatural grace prevailed solely among the ancients" (§1). Using similar words, the narrator concludes the text, reiterating that both ancient and "more recent examples" of martyrdom are "sources of encouragement for the Christian community" and that the martyrs themselves "give honor to our Lord Jesus Christ" (§21).

For Holmes the phrase "a martyrdom in accord with the gospel" (1.1) is the interpretative key to *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Holmes identifies three criteria in the text by which the author attempts to show Polycarp's death is "in accord with the gospel." His martyrdom is, first of all, by divine will, not human initiative (2.1, 20.1); second, the martyr shows concern for the salvation of others (1.2, 3.1); and third, endurance in the face of suffering is a mark of the martyr (2.2–4, 13.3, 19.1–2).¹³ The interpretative keys of both accounts offer ways of exploring the value of venerating modern-day saints and martyrs in the life of the church consistent with the types of veneration outlined in the *Apology*.

But Holmes's analysis of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* also opens up other avenues for consideration of modern saints and martyrs. First, one need not be concerned about a direct pattern of imitation with the life and passion of Jesus. The direct parallels are, as Holmes argues, a literary characteristic, not that which made the person a martyr. The point of this literary characteristic is how it functioned in early church hagiography. Thus, a contemporary narrative of a saint or martyr would function to draw the reader or hearer into the life and death of Jesus Christ, and that might be done through a variety of literary devices.

Second, Holmes's interpretative key from the text—that Polycarp's was a martyrdom in accord with the gospel—is described in marked contrast with another member of the faith community, Quintus. The author of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* portrays Quintus as one who gave himself up voluntarily, persuaded others to do so also, and then "turned coward," offering sacrifice to the emperor rather than facing the wild beasts (4). By setting Polycarp's martyrdom in opposition to the actions of Quintus, the account illustrates an important aspect of the early veneration of martyrs and saints: they began in a local context, within a community of faith that knew the martyr. The veneration of a martyr first developed as a local commemoration, it was fueled by the memories of those who had known person-

¹²Michael W. Holmes, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp and the New Testament Passion Narratives," in *Trajectories through the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher M. Tuckett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 418–422.

¹³Ibid., 419–421.

ally the one who had died for the faith, and the celebration of the person's martyrdom was passed on to the succeeding generations through both narrative and ritual.

In its description of the actions of the faithful after his death, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* provides evidence of veneration practices that would become common throughout the early Christian world:

And so later on we took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and deposited them in a suitable place. There, when we gather together as we are able, with joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in commemoration of those who have already fought in the contest and also for the training and preparation of those who will do so in the future (18.2–3).

This brief paragraph describes two practices of veneration developed by the early church. First, the commemoration for the martyr is the date of the martyr's death, a practice still followed by the church today.¹⁴ On this day, the martyr joined the host described in Revelation that stands in the very presence of God.

Also worth noting is the long history of venerating the physical remains of the martyr attested to by *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Although not stated explicitly in this early source, Peter Brown's assessment of this practice offers a theological rationale that even the sixteenth-century Reformers might accept.¹⁵ According to Brown, the development of the veneration of the saints in the West and its connection with the tomb of the saint is not, as David Hume argued in the eighteenth century, a case of the polytheistic-leaning masses winning out over the monotheistic elites.¹⁶ Rather, the veneration of saints and martyrs at their tombs was a "joining of Heaven and Earth," the reorienting of a worldview that had been dominated by Platonic thought and had imagined a great divide between the two.¹⁷ The physical remains of the saints were the link between heaven and earth, between the divine and human.

LESSONS FOR VENERATING CONTEMPORARY SAINTS AND MARTYRS

My reflections on early church practice lead me to three proposals for fruitful veneration of saints and martyrs in the twenty-first century. The first relates to the overarching theme in the New Testament and the two accounts of martyrdom from the early church examined here—the assurance that at death the martyr is immediately with God. Although this belief became the theological foundation for the intercession of the saints on behalf of others,¹⁸ that ought not overshadow this message of hope and comfort. Narratives of contemporary saints and martyrs

¹⁴For example, the commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, April 9, is the date of his death.

¹⁵Concerning relics, the *Smalcald Articles* declare that "they lack God's Word, being neither commanded nor advised, and are a completely unnecessary and useless thing." *Book of Concord*, 305:22.

¹⁶Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 13–18.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, chapter 3.

might move Christians beyond the pious platitudes popular in American Christianity that stress the deceased's union with other dead loved ones rather than union with God as the Christian's ultimate end or goal. What makes saints and martyrs extraordinary is the close union they have with the mind of Christ in this life. As models of faithfulness for others to imitate, narratives highlighting this aspect of their lives might bring Christians to a deeper understanding of the power of grace to draw one into union with God.

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The second proposal may seem more controversial than the first. I advocate exploring ways to venerate the physical remains of saints and martyrs, which would require constructing rituals to be done at the grave. I see such veneration as a theological corrective to the church's ever-present tendency to go gnostic, elevating the spirit above the body. When that spirit/body dualism takes hold, Christians neglect two of the profoundest mysteries of the church, the incarnation and its implication for human salvation, the resurrection of the body. It seems that Protestant reticence toward the practice of venerating human remains has resulted in the void being filled by civil religion and popular culture. Civic Memorial Day ceremonies honoring war dead take place in cemeteries, and the United States has constructed pilgrimage sites within its national park system that honor the fallen.¹⁹ Christian rituals venerating local saints and martyrs done in cemeteries would provide the opportunity to hear again the words spoken at the committal ("In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life...") and reinforce this core Christian teaching.

Finally, I want to highlight again the local context in which the veneration of saints and martyrs developed. Deaconess Antonia of Hippos never made it into the "big leagues" of sainthood, but the inscription in the church floor attests to her impact in the lives of the Christian community in which she served. Like Antonia, Deaconesses Margaret Heine Towe and Evelyn Middelstadt will never be more than "local" saints and martyrs, but their impact at their places of ministry and within the Lutheran Deaconess Conference continues beyond their earthly lives. Margaret's slow death from cancer gave her the opportunity to die as she had

¹⁹Examples include the USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii and the Flight 93 Memorial site outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where the fourth hijacked plane of 9/11 crashed. Among the most well known examples in popular culture is Graceland, home and final resting place of Elvis. But even a living icon like Oprah falls into this category, as a recent segment on National Public Radio illustrates. "Oprah's Closet Now Open to Fans" describes those who purchase items worn by her as way to get close to the star. See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90344001> (accessed June 1, 2008).

lived—articulating her deep faith in Jesus Christ in an open and matter-of-fact manner that eludes most Christians. Her personal e-mails to a host of family and close friends during her struggle against cancer are a testimony not unlike the personal account left by Perpetua. She continues to be a model of faithfulness to many even a decade after her death.

A few weeks before her death, Evelyn was honored by her deaconess community for fifty-five years of service. Her remarks to the group at the anniversary celebration included—as her comments to the community nearly always did—an exhortation to work on issues of racism and injustice. I have no doubt that my community will invoke the memory of Evelyn as we continue our discussions of these issues and reflect on how we as a community can effect change in the church and world. In death her exemplary life of service, poured out on behalf of minorities and those on the margins of society, will become an even more powerful measure by which the community, which claims as one of its hallmarks a bias for the poor and oppressed, will hold itself to account.

When we gather for our annual meeting in a few weeks, our opening worship will begin by remembering those in our community who have died in the previous year. Through narrative and ritual we will honor the saints and martyrs among us, whose lives, lived in conformity with the gospel, offer “sources of encouragement for the Christian community” and “give honor to our Lord Jesus Christ.” My hope is that other Christian communities will venerate their local saints and martyrs to similar ends. ⊕

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