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## *Grace of Martyrdom*

(Centenary of the Martyrdom of Blessed Brother Charles)  
(1916-2016)

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## INTRODUCTION

The spiritual family of Brother Charles celebrated the centenary of his Martyrdom in December 2016. It was the last act of his life that took place on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916. There have been many questions asked about the interpretation and importance of this act for his spirituality, its meaning and relevance for us who are invited and challenged to follow his way of life. What do we understand and what can we spiritually draw from this act?

There are three main sections in my reflection on the theme of Grace of Martyrdom namely Witness, Martyrdom and Challenges.

Before I start my reflections on the theme, in order to make my perspective clear, some introductory remarks and preliminary observations must be made. Naturally there can be many perspectives of looking at an event. Instead of going into various critical ways of analysing the background and context of the event or the factors that led to the death of Brother Charles, I will focus my reflections on the event of the death of Charles in the light of his entire life.

The concept and thesis in these reflections is that one cannot understand an event of life as an isolated event. A human person lives in a concrete historical context and not in a vacuum. Neither one can understand events taken as in juxtaposition, without having a link with one another. The events of life are interwoven and interconnected. There is an inner and inbuilt connection and relation in the events of life. It is called continuum or necessity of relations in the language of history and sociology. It is part of evolution in every life. There is a certain current of spirituality going through the life which gives meaning and provides a binding thread for separate and isolated events and acts in life.

History is not only looking at the past and recalling gone memories. History is rather giving an interpretation today to the memories of the past and giving meaning to the future. Thus history carries only what moves ahead. History, in this sense, is moving forward towards the future. History is thus on the one hand celebrating memories of the dead past and on the other hand giving hopes to the future that is alive.

The basic purpose of my reflections is not to understand the event of death of Brother Charles in an academic manner and approach. Our purpose rather is to understand Brother Charles through this event of his life. What type of man was he? The purpose of these reflections is not to provide an academic research but to elaborate the spirituality and the way of life of Charles and to understand him closely and deeply. Such a perspective will certainly be useful to know his person, way of life and his spiritual legacy.

- There is certainly a great historical jump of 100 years. The event upon which we are reflecting today took place more than hundred years ago.

- There is also a geographical jump as this event took place thousands of kilometres away from us.
- There is a cultural jump as Charles was a Frenchman. He died in Africa among the Tuareg tribe.
- There is also a linguistic jump. And one can go on talking about this variety of jumps.

When we talk about an event we do not try to imitate it, though we may easily be led to romanticize to do so. Imitation means to do exactly as Charles did and to act exactly and in the same way as he did and to live exactly the way he lived. Imitation, historically speaking, is not possible. We cannot imitate Jesus in the way he talked, dressed, ate...etc. Historically it is not possible to go back thousands of years and try to live in first century Palestine under Roman colonization. But we can follow Jesus, his teaching and values of the Kingdom and the Gospel.

Imitation is not desirable but following is inevitable. We follow Brother Charles and do not imitate him. At the level of imitation, there can be many forms of devotion. We may, for example, kiss the picture of Brother Charles, wear his medal and bow before his statue. But following his spirituality is important.

## **PART ONE: WITNESS**

### **1. Terminology**

Let me first give a clarification of term and its literal meaning at different levels in different contexts. The Church Fathers are divided in two categories according to the language in which they spoke and wrote. There were Greek Fathers (Oriental, Eastern) and Latin Fathers (Occidental, Western). These languages have been the languages of the Church for thousands years. Even till this day there are many terms in our liturgy and different faculties of theology which have come from Greek and Latin namely Eucharist, Baptism, Sacrament, Liturgy, Deacon, Kyrie, Gloria, Credo...etc. This is a very long list. Many terms of Greek and Latin are being used today in all vernacular languages of the local Churches.

It is interesting to look into the first historical background and original context from where these terms were originated, introduced and the meaning they carried. Let me focus on three basic and common meanings of the Greek word Martyr.

In its first and *secular meaning* it was used in the case of a legal witness attesting a truth in court. Thus the word martyr was used in profane language and in its secular context and usage. Even today the word *Martyria* or *Martyrium* is used in court language in some countries of the world. It is more on the level of 'information and confirmation of a fact'.

The second meaning of this Greek word is more in a *religious sense*. It means 'to give true witness to one's faith'. The book of the Apocalypse uses this word in its religious meaning. At the

same time Apocalypse adds and gives more and higher meaning than just at the level of information and attestation of a fact. It has a deeper meaning than just passing on static information or knowledge as in the case of its profane meaning and use.

At this level of its use it is more at a personal level. Thus the witness of the truth of faith is at a different and higher level i.e. the level of faith committed to the truths one upholds. At this level witness will be more genuine and dignified according to the level of commitment one upholds to the level of truths of faith.

The witness to the truths of faith consists of the commitment of a person to the truths of faith that one confesses, proclaims and attests. Witness will be measured according to the level of one's commitment to the truths of faith. The more the fidelity to the truths of faith, the stronger the witness would be. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the word *Martyria* or *Martyrium* received the meaning of martyrdom, laying down one's life for the truth doctrine of faith. One is willing and ready to suffer persecution and death for faith.

- The first meaning is giving witness in court
- The second meaning is giving witness to one's religious truth and
- The third meaning is dying for your faith

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction”. (Rev. 2:10)

“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name you, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives” (Rev. 2:13).

In the narration of the encounter of the first disciples with Jesus, they desire to know where Jesus stays. “Rabbi, where do you stay?” Jesus responds to them by an invitation and challenge, “come and see”.

The first stage of being a disciple of Jesus is be with Jesus, to adhere to him, and to be there where Jesus is. There can be a mediator and indicator showing who Jesus is. It can be a person, an event, a book, a sermon, a direct intervention and encounter with the divine.

The second stage in discipleship is of a personal experience of being with Jesus and being formed by him. This ‘Come and see’ is the foundation of any discipleship. The personal experience of being with Jesus becomes witness of being disciple.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus”. (Acts 4:13)

At times in some evangelical contexts ‘witness’ is misunderstood and even misused to mean that witness is telling, informing the other person about God, Christ, the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. **Witness literally and as used in the Gospel means the way and practice of life**

**according to one's faith and discipleship.** Thus one's spirituality is one's witness. And when discipleship and witness are joined together they produce an effect like evangelization and mission.

## **2. Important Events in the Life of Brother Charles**

Without going into detail in all the events of his life it will suffice to say that Charles was a sincerely searching person throughout the 58 years of his life. This search was constant and continuous. His life started as a researcher and as an explorer. He engaged himself in geology and geography and was applauded and awarded for his exploration and his discoveries.

When in October 1886 at the age of 28 he was converted to faith in Christ, this led him to rediscover Jesus and himself and to go to Nazareth. Charles was seeking Nazareth as a form of spirituality and the way of life of Nazareth, rather than Nazareth as a town and locus. This was a pilgrimage of spirituality. In his search Charles joined the Trappist monastery in 1890, first in France and later in Syria.

But in his search he left the Trappist Order and went to live in Nazareth living in a little hut working as a servant for the Religious Sisters for three years. In 1901 he was ordained priest in France. In the same year he went to Ben Abbes in Algiers. Finally in 1905 he went to Tamanrasset. There were about 20 families residing over there and Charles lived the last decade of his life in the desert.

Brother Charles died on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916. On 13 November 2005 about 91 years after his death, he was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI.

## **3. Salient Characteristics of his Life**

Charles was a person constantly searching for what God wanted from him? As a Trappist, as a priest, as a servant of the Sisters at Nazareth and finally becoming a brother, universal brother, to all and everywhere. He wanted to live as Jesus lived. His spiritual priority was to be 'little', simple and available in love to all and everywhere and at every moment.

Brother Charles was impressed by the common, ordinary and hidden life of Jesus for 30 years at Nazareth. It is fascinating that instead of being attracted and impressed by the great and wondrous miracles of Jesus manifesting his divine power, he was more attracted and impressed by his life at Nazareth in a state of powerlessness. Being Son of God, he lived an ordinary and simple life. Charles was impressed by this dimension of the Incarnation. **Life at Nazareth was a life of poverty and dependency.** He was searching for **fraternity, brotherhood, being in fellowship and solidarity especially with those who are at the periphery of the society and powerless.** This he searched at Nazareth and in the desert.

Brother Charles was engulfed by the mystery of Nazareth where Jesus being Son of God, lived in a family, neighbouring with ordinary people. Once he became certain of his vocation he made a

choice of his life to love and live only for one who had called him. **He wanted to incarnate in himself the choice he made for love of Jesus.**

In 1915, towards the end of his life after the outbreak of the First World War, there was a lot of political upheaval and tension in the world. There was war in France and it affected all the colonies of France. The pressure of rebellious movement was growing from local people. From April 1915 onwards there was a sudden escalation of these crises. On 11<sup>th</sup> April, in a letter Charles wrote about the certainty of coming war. On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1916 the military situation became a risk. Charles planned to build a tower for his defence. But his plan was disclosed and it went against him.

#### **4. Event of Martyrdom**

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916, the first Friday of the month, at about 7:00 pm there was a knock at his door. He peeped through the door thinking that someone has brought mail. He stretched out his hand to receive the post. There were three men. They pulled him out and bound him with robes. They forced him to kneel down and threw him on the sand. In the darkness of night they took him to the East South of the tower, untied him, shot him and threw him in the ditch, a few yards away from his door. They covered his dead body by spreading sand on it. On 21<sup>st</sup> December, twenty days after his death, the military came, saw the grave and put a Cross on it.

There were three letters Charles wrote on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916. These letters were enveloped and the postal stamps were pasted and ready to be posted. One of these letters was posted and received on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1917. Another letter was found after one year. In one of these letters it was written:

“I live today as if I had to die this evening a martyr”.

This Martyrdom was a personal practice of discipleship. This was a way of life and his witness. He wanted to live like Jesus and to have personal intimacy with Jesus. He desired to live a way of life as if today he would be martyred. It is not a single act of his death but the intention and the option of his whole life which attests this event of death and transformed into Martyrdom. There could have been various political factors and tribal dimensions around the event of death of Brother Charles, but his way of life gives his death the meaning of Martyrdom.

## **PART TWO: MARTYRDOM**

### **1. Summit of the Acts of Martyrdom**

The parameter of Martyrdom does not lie in a single, isolated and ultimate act. Martyrdom is not only in the final act of death. It is in the continuous practice of life. It is a totality of acts and the summit of one's witness and practice of life.

Let us for a while reflect on the event of death of Jesus Christ. If taken as a single and isolated act of what happened on Calvary, it was a death for a criminal and of a political nature. Jesus died on the cross as a political criminal under the death sentence by Pontius Pilatus, the Roman Governor. But when the totality of activities of the life of Jesus (miracles, teachings, passion, death and resurrection, Pentecost) were taken into consideration, the Apostles reflected death on the cross as a messianic, vicarious and salvific death. A life laid down as ransom for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Historically the death of Jesus was a Roman punishment for criminals but theologically, for believers, it became death of the Saviour.

Still another example from the Gospel is that of the death of John the Baptist. When taken as a single, isolated and last act, it was the death of a political prisoner. His preaching caused pressure and danger for Herod's moral and political power. This led to the death of John the Baptist. But weighing the life, preaching and standing for truth, the death of John the Baptist is interpreted as Martyrdom.

## **2. Practice and Exercise of Martyrdom**

Here we will reflect not on the act of martyrdom but on the practice of martyrdom in daily routine. In the demands of discipleship Jesus mentions, "Everyone who wants to be my disciple let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Cross at the time of Jesus was not a religious icon or symbol. It had no religious significance. It had only one meaning and that was of a cruel Roman death penalty for political criminals and rebels.

This is the law of nature and there is no doubt about it that life desires comfort and security. Practice of self-denial as a demand of discipleship, therefore, goes contrary to the desire of life. Believers who trust divine providence and love for others deny self-securities and comforts and go out to reach the least at the periphery of society. Those who practise self-denial are able to love. One who is not ready for self-denial cannot love. This is very true in all social relations, especially in family life.

The prayer of abandon of Brother Charles is a beautiful example *par excellence* of practice of the martyrdom. The concept and words of the prayer of abandon are used by Jesus on the Cross and by Stephen before his death. Brother Charles in his whole life was practising martyrdom. "The prayer of abandon" gives us a standard and norm for understanding his martyrdom. The practice of martyrdom was in his desire for powerlessness and going to the desert. It is the experience of lowliness as Mary sings in her Magnificat.

Martyrdom is an experience of self-sacrifice and giving oneself as a ransom for many. When Brother Charles understood self-denial in love, he said, "I cannot do anything but to love and to live for the one who has called me".

The virtues and the value such as self-denial and surrender for the love of God and love of others lead to listening and obeying. These values bring about conversion in a person. The prayer of

abandon is the mind-set of the crucified Christ. It is a form of practising martyrdom. It is a prayer of martyrdom.

### **3. Characteristics of Martyrdom**

There are many verses from the Holy Bible and especially from the Gospels which were liked by Brother Charles. He received inspiration and spiritual strength from them. Here we mention just two.

“In all truth I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest”. (John 12:24)

This verse divides the whole Gospel according to John into two main parts: The Book of Signs (chapters 1-11) and The Book of Glory (chapters 12-21). The second part is introduced by this verse. This verse plays an important role and it introduces a turning point in the life of Jesus: this part, starting with this pericope concerning the Paschal mystery, experience and last discourse in the life of Jesus.

“Jesus replied to them: Now the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. In all truth I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life”. (John 12: 23-25).

The text mentioned above introduces the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels which mention three Passion Predictions, the Gospel according to John omits these passion predictions. Instead of this John introduces these verses in which Jesus speaks about the mystery and experience of his Passion and Resurrection.

The second text much loved by Charles is from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

“Thus I will joyfully take pride in my weakness, in my powerlessness so that the power of Christ may abide in me.” (2-Cor.12:9)

There are many more verses from the Scriptures, especially the Greek Scriptures, which help us to understand the mind of Brother Charles. It also deals with and his yearning to live like his Master and his desire to die like his Master, a life as a martyr.

Certainly there are many temptations and obstacles on the way of martyrdom. There are cultural and social temptations. Perhaps the greatest of all these is of self-denial, the fear of dying and being ‘no one’ in oneself. But there cannot be a spirituality without a desire for the love of God and of the other person. Persons desiring to live a ‘normal’ life and ‘life as usual’ cannot be cherished.



## **4. The Graces of martyrdom**

It is the sum of one's activities that provides unification and gives a tune to the song of one's life. The way one lives gives meaning and significance to one's death. The practice of life is in a way of preparation for one's death. Every human life, religion and movement cannot sustain themselves unless they have, in one form or the other, experience of martyrdom.

Life dies but martyrdom lives forever. There is a resurrection in martyrdom. No wonder Tertullian, the Church Father, said “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. Brother Charles lives among us today because of his martyrdom which he practised in his life.

## **PART THREE: FROM MEMORY TO MOVEMENT**

### **1. Centenary of the Martyrdom**

While celebrating the Centenary of the Martyrdom of Brother Charles, we celebrate an event, and a moment which took place more than a hundred years ago. But we celebrate that event as a movement among us today. We are not looking back at what happened years ago in Africa; rather we are reflecting on the spirituality that sustains us to move forward.

Good Friday, the death of Christ, for example, receives its meaning when taken and understood in the perspective of both the earthly life lived by Jesus and life of the risen Christ after the resurrection. But what gives meaning to everything is the experience of the life of the believers in the communities after Pentecost, living the Paschal experience of Jesus Christ in their own lives in communion. The experience of resurrection in the communities gives continuation and fulfilment to the Resurrection of Christ till the end of times.

The celebration of martyrdom of Brother Charles, likewise receives its ‘fuller meaning’ in the practice of life of his spiritual following. It is this spiritual journey which we celebrate. It is the spirituality that we are trying to practise and propagate. It is not a single event of death that we speak of, but the whole life of one who was martyred. And this is the spirituality of the martyrdom.

### **2. Context of Paradox and Contradiction**

The context of the society in which we live is that of paradoxes and contradictions. Every life craves to live and not to die. Everyone dreams to be successful and powerful. Everyone desires to have possessions. In such a context today no one likes to be and to look powerless. Everyone is possessed by fear to lose. At times these are external, social, cultural, economic and political pressures. But at times these pressures are self-created, self-imposed and hence artificial. In the

face of such pressures it is difficult to speak and practise dispossession, self-denial and surrender. In such a situation it is difficult to read and follow the prayer of Abandon.

The Church is challenged to review and search for a new meaning of Martyrdom, even when it is different from what she has been holding for centuries. The Church ought to reinterpret the meaning of Martyrdom in order to strengthen itself. The meaning of Martyrdom must be reinterpreted in new emerging contexts.

A decade ago there was an attack on a Church in the Diocese of Arrissa, India. Some people lost their lives. H. E. Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop of Mumbai visited that place and went to console the families of the victims. While expressing his condolences with a widow, Cardinal asked her, "What can I do for you?" The widow cried out and requested that her husband be declared a martyr. Certainly he is martyr for the local believing community.

On Sunday morning of 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015, there was an attack by Islamic religious terrorist simultaneously on two Churches in the same area in Lahore, Pakistan. Mr. Akash Bashir, a young man who was voluntarily serving as guard at the gate of the Church compound, combated and blocked the terrorist from entering the Church where Holy Mass was taking place. In this combat he lost his life but saved hundreds of believers in the Church. Was not this an act of martyrdom?

And there are so many examples in the local Churches all over the world.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude this reflection and sharing by reading a line from the letter which was written by Musa 15 days after martyrdom of Brother Charles. Musa was the chief of the tribe in Tamanrasset and friend of Brother Charles. He wrote this letter to the sister of Brother Charles. He wrote:

“Charles has not died only for you; he has died for us all.

May God grant him mercy and may we all be together with him in paradise.”

This is a letter, or rather a witness, attesting a truth by a non-Christian friend of Brother Charles who knew him and lived with him during the last decade of Brother Charles' life. This letter attests that the death of Charles is an act of martyrdom.

Finally I would like to end these reflections by sharing one line from the letter of Brother Charles written on 1st December 1916, the day he was martyred:

***“I live today as if I had to die this evening a martyr.”***

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