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Counter-culture of Compassion: The Early Christian View of Roman Games and the Possibilities of its Application in the Contemporary Relationship of Church and Society[1]

Abstract

Christian martyrdom can be seen as an expression of the counter-cultural reality of the Church, her conflicting tension between the world and the coming kingdom of Heaven. In this context, it is also a problematic concept that, in many cases, leads to violence and avoids the possibility of dialogue; however, it inseparably belongs to the heart of Christianity. Because of that, we should think about it in new and fruitful ways. This paper tries to think specifically about early Christian martyrdom in the context of a victim perspective and critique of the Roman gladiatorial games, concentrating on the element of compassion, which was unexpected in the Roman empire of the first centuries after Christ. That perspective of compassion is something that we can grasp, like the substantial essence of early Christian martyrdom, and which is also meaningful for our time and situation of mainly Church-society relations. This is shown with peak Christian game critique – Tertullian's *On Games*, and examples of the three oldest martyrdoms – *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne*, and *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. We can use that found compassion in new situations where we, at the moment, like the Romans, do not see a need or reason for it.

Keywords: martyrdom, early Christianity, religious violence, compassion, Roman games, Church – society relation.

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Kontrkultura współczucia: wczesnochrześcijańskie spojrzenie na rzymskie igrzyska i możliwości jego zastosowania we współczesnych relacjach Kościoła i społeczeństwa

Abstrakt

Chrześcijańskie męczeństwo może być postrzegane jako wyraz kontrkulturowej rzeczywistości Kościoła, jego konfliktowego napięcia między światem a nadchodzącym Królestwem Niebieskim. W tym kontekście jest to również problematyczna koncepcja, która w wielu przypadkach prowadzi do przemocy i wyklucza możliwość dialogu, jednak nierozerwalnie należy do istoty chrześcijaństwa. Z tego powodu należy myśleć o nim w nowy i owocny sposób. Niniejszy artykuł próbuje przemyśleć męczeństwo wczesnych chrześcijan w kontekście perspektywy ofiary i krytyki rzymskich igrzysk gladiatorów, koncentrując się na elemencie współczucia, który był czymś niespotykanym w imperium rzymskim pierwszych wieków po Chrystusie. Perspektywa współczucia jest czymś, co możemy uchwycić, podobnie jak istotę wczesnochrześcijańskiego męczeństwa. Ma ona również znaczenie w naszych czasach i w sytuacji, w której mamy do czynienia z relacjami Kościół – społeczeństwo. Pokazuje to krytyka gier chrześcijańskich w dziele *O grach* Tertuliana oraz przykłady trzech najstarszych męczeństw: *Męczeństwo Polikarpa*, *Męczennicy z Lyonu i Vienne* oraz *Męka Perpetui i Felicyty*. To odnajdowane współczucie możemy wykorzystać w nowych sytuacjach, w których w danej chwili, podobnie jak Rzymianie, nie widzimy potrzeby ani powodu do jego okazywania.

Słowa kluczowe: męczeństwo, wczesne chrześcijaństwo, przemoc religijna, współczucie, rzymskie gry, relacja Kościół – społeczeństwo.

Introduction

What does it mean when we speak about the Church in the context of counter-culture? It means the perspective where the Church stands in radical opposition to the majority of society. I am convinced that counter-culturalism is something inherent in the Church. By her claim to transform the world in a direction towards the eschatological kingdom of God, the Church always stands in conflict and tension with the world. Thus, it does not form an alternative culture or subculture that is different, in its often indifferent way, but a counter-culture that stands in opposition to the world and claims its own transformation[2] – which is something the Church at least calls for, but sometimes also takes upon herself. In this sense, the New Testament Church was already counter-cultural, as was the pre-Constantinian early Church, at least according to such scholars as Brigitte Kahl, Warren Carter, and Richard Horsley, who interpret the New Testament in its tension with the Roman Empire and apply this counter-cultural hermeneutic,

[2] For the difference between subculture and counter-culture see e.g. Keith A. Roberts. 1978. "Towards a Generic Concept of Counter-Culture". Sociological Focus 11 (2): 111–126. Cf. Ross Haenfler. 2023. Countercultures, In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Second edition. Eds. David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Doug McAdam, Bert Klandermans, 1–4. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm056.pub2.

which only makes sense precisely in opposition to Rome. So they put the context of the power of the Emperor, and the powerlessness of the Crucified One, the mission of the *Pax Romana* and the mission of the apostles.[3] In this sense, the Church is naturally in a state of culture wars, and it's not entirely some digression or an anomaly.

1. Problem of Martyrdom

One of the concrete counter-cultural components of Christian theology and practice that manifests itself in this culture clash is martyrdom. Martyrdom is the framework in which the Church has existed from the beginning – Jesus Christ himself is a martyr in the sense of the word as the Church has understood, and continues to understand it. He himself prepares his disciples for martyrdom and persecution (e.g. Mk 10:30; Mt 5:10-12; Lk 6:22; Lk 21:12; Jn 15:20). Martyrdom is one of the clearest, if not the most clearest, features of the early pre-Constantinian Church, one that is positively embraced as its own, and one that has accompanied and continues to accompany it in various transformations to this day.[4] For us, martyrdom is a downright counter-cultural clash between a culture of violence and a culture of peace, a culture of power, and a culture of weakness.[5] Martyrdom is still part of the Christian way of thinking, and can hardly be separated from it, so Christianity still remains Christianity.

But martyrdom is also a very problematic concept. And doesn't matter in which religious or secular tradition. However, we are still thinking about the problematicness of strictly Christian martyrdom. I will highlight the criticism of three scholars – Mark Juergensmeyer, Candida R. Moss, and Matthew Recla – who, in summary, see martyrdom as a framework of thought responsible for severe conflicts, the emergence of violence, and its gradation, and perhaps we could say as an almost toxic but also inseparable concept from Christianity.

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[3] Warren Carter. 2008. *John and Empire: Initial Explorations.* New York – London: T & T Clark International, 79–81.

[4] For example, when the Church becomes a state church, there essentially cease to be Christian martyrs. The conflict shifts very much into a position of asceticism, but one that holds similar tensions – including dualism, black-n-whiteness and conflict. We can see this in Maureen A. Tilley's analysis in the example of Donatism, which did not reconcile itself to the Romanization of Christianity and, from its perspective, collaboration with the state while holding its tension with the state this time, of course, in the form of asceticism rather than martyrdom. See Maureen A. Tilley. 1997. "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: From the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert." Journal of Early Christian Studies 5 (1): 21–35.

[5] There undoubtedly plays a significant role the fact that we read also old Church martyrdom through the retrospective lens of the lives and sacrifices of such figures as Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Maxmilian Maria Kolbe.

According to Mark Juergensmeyer, martyrdom is part of a "cosmic war" discourse that precludes dialogue and compromise.[6] Thinking about cosmic war, the war of good and evil is part of an inherently religious mindset, and while it can take the form of a relatively, shall we say, healthy and harmless one, where we think of our spiritual life as a struggle with Satan, whose attacks of temptation to sin must be repelled by renunciation, moderation, piety, etc.[7] Then it is only a step away from moving this war into the secular dimension when the other person, the political party, the church, or the state, becomes Satan or rather his minion, which must be overcome, which is, after all, the typical thinking of the early Church in a martyr context. A martyr is a warrior with the Devil who manifests himself through his Roman minions. According to Juergensmeyer, this reasoning is responsible for the process of sacralising the conflict and demonising the adversary. Thus, for example, an "ordinary" military conflict becomes a holy war in which ordinary soldiers no longer fight, but holy martyrs fall on our side, striving to stand against a demonic enemy who must be destroyed without mercy at any cost. Such a conflict, however, can never again move to the level of dialogue, negotiation, and compromise because that would be negotiating with the Devil, and logically, that is not permissible.[8]

Candida R. Moss, in addition to joining this critique, adds that the martyrdom narrative is often used in a completely inadequate context. A martyr is one who is weak, without resources, who suffers persecution, or at least various life-threatening or complicating hardships, for their faith in Christ. This is adequate, she says, in China or North Korea, for various marginalised Christian groups in states with anti-Christian laws, etc. However, suppose the martyrdom narrative is invoked by, for example, a group of prominent white American evangelicals who have elected political representatives, who live in a country they largely control and determine its direction, who are not persecuted in life or by restrictions on their freedom, who merely feel offended that someone in a debate has told them their openly disagreeable opinion. In that case, this is not only inappropriate but downright insidious and fraudulent use of the martyrdom narrative. When a Church is merely criticised for her overly conservative or progressive views, that is not a martyr situation. The big problem arises, first of all, when such a person or community, referring to the martyr history of Christianity or persecution

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[6] On this point, that martyrdom precludes dialogue and compromise, he agrees with the next critic of martyrdom Candida R. Moss.

[7] Asceticism as the other side of the coin of martyrdom, as two different expressions of the same core of thinking, is described by e.g. Gail P. Streete. 2021. *Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom, and Asceticism in Early Christianity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[8] Mark Juergensmeyer. 2017. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Fourth edition, revised and updated. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

in non-Christian countries, says that they feel persecuted and intend to use inadequate means of force in defence of the alleged persecution. This, by the way, according to Moss, was not so dramatic even in the early Church because, in most cases, Christians were simply punished for breaking the law by refusing to sacrifice to the emperor, thus de facto refusing loyalty to him.[9]

Matthew Recla, on the other hand, criticises martyrdom from the perspective that he sees it as institutional violence perpetrated by the institution of the Church on the individual martyrs. The problem, he argues, is that because martyrdom is adored, and it leads to imitation even in situations where it would not be necessary, thus entering at least into a kind of grey-zone of semi-voluntary/provoked martyrdom,[10] even though the Church rejected outright that kind of martyrdom in at least post-Constantinian theology. Therefore, he points to the forced martyrdom of, for example, martyred missionaries, social activists, abortion martyrs, and others, who are driven into that position, as it were, by an institution that adores martyrdom while paradoxically condemning suicide, and so their blood is on hands of Church institution more than hands of their tormentors.[11]

Although we may identify or disagree with these critiques and their conclusions in different ways and to various degrees, I am inclined to say that martyrdom is a problematic concept. It exists precisely in the counter-cultural tension of the Church setting. It enters into the relationship between the Church and society, influencing her decisions, methods, and outcomes, and not always in the best way or direction.

However, since martyrdom, as already mentioned, cannot be separated as a concept from faith and theology, it is certainly worthwhile to try to grasp it in a meaningful and beneficial way that does not deepen the conflict.[12] However, it cannot be conflictless at all(!); nevertheless, it should resolve conflict by bridging it through a Christian foundation that I identify as compassion – God has compassion with humans or Creation as a whole, Christ has compassion

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[9] Candida R. Moss. 2013. *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom.* New York: Harper Collins.

[10] More about the problematic of so-called voluntary or provoked martyrdom, see: Candida R. Moss. 2012. "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern." Church History 81 (3): 531–551.

[11] Matthew Recla. 2022. *Rethinking Christian Martyrdom: The Blood Or the Seed?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[12] I see this in conscious connection with Miroslav Volf's statement: "The cure is not less religion, but – in a certain carefully delineated sense – *more* religion." Miroslav Volf. 2005. *Odmítnout nebo obejmout?: totožnost, jinakost a smíření v teologické reflexi*. Praha: Vyšehrad, 13. (Italics original, translation from Czech FS. The citation is from an introduction to the Czech translation of Volf's book). According to Volf, we do not need less but more religion, the kind that brings peace. Because the religion that does not bring peace will not disappear by itself because the secularization thesis has failed. See e.g. Miroslav Volf. 2019. *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation.* Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press, 275–279.

with those who suffer, the early Church, in the context of martyrdom, and the arenas, has compassion with the actors of the Roman games. This dimension of compassion can be an excellent interpretive framework for us to interpret martyrdom, which can be meaningfully actualised in contemporary issues of the Church and the world.

This perspective allows us to view martyrdom as a kind of counter-cultural public theology[13] that seeks to awaken compassion where society would not expect it. In this perspective, I am consciously following René Girard, for whom the biblical tradition is the element that brought into European thinking a perspective of compassion for victims, that is, its real novelty compared to Greek and Roman culture.[14] In fact, Friedrich Nietzsche famously pointed this out when he spoke of the origins of so-called slave morality in the Hegellian master-slave dichotomy, which he finds as a fruit of Judaeo-Christian resentment. However, I see here, together with Girard, just the opposite dimension of this origin, which is positive and not negative in its core.[15] This is manifested precisely in martyrdom-victim perspective and, more specifically, in its direct context with the gladiatorial games in the amphitheatre, in which Christian martyrs were often involuntary (sometimes voluntary!)[16] participants.

2. Roman Games

The gladiatorial games, initially sacrifice with a fight to the death as a tribute for the dead or the gods, became part of a concept known as "bread and games." It was a response of the Roman Empire to the problem of high unemployment and crime rates.[17] Bread means the free distribution of grain and, later explicitly, bread. The games, however, were the more important part of this whole. The games were held in amphitheatres scattered throughout the Roman Empire, where a theatrical and ritualised penal system occurred. Roman politicians consciously used the games as an identity and consensus-building tool.[18] Death was

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[13] Cf. John W. de Gruchy. 2007. "Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre." International Journal of Public Theology 1 (1): 26–41, 40–41.

[14] Michael Kirwan. 2005. *Discovering Girard.* Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 73–84. Cf. According to Paul Veyne, the shift from Greek-Roman culture to Christianity is nothing less than a shift between really different discourses. Paul Veyne. 2015. *Foucault, jeho myšlení, jeho osobnost*. Praha: Filosofia, 40.

[15] Kirwan. 2005. *Discovering Girard*, 8, 84–86.

[16] See note 10 above.

[17] Explanation of the complex origin of games as such e.g. here: Przemysław Kubiak. 2014. *Damnatio ad bestias i inne kary wykonywane na arenie w antycznym Rzymie.* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 21–33.

[18] Cf. Erik Gunderson. 1996. "The Ideology of the Arena." Classical Antiquity 15 (1): 113–151.

theatrically represented here as a mythological drama or the liturgical destruction of barbarians and other enemies of Rome.[19] Paul Veyne even claims the Roman games were a liturgy of absolute power.[20] It was about creating and reinforcing identity in a multicultural whole – "who are we and who are they" regarding Romans vs. barbarians and social classes. This was matched by the arrangement of places separate for different classes, yet in unity centred around the Roman hierarchy against the space of the arena where the enemies – the others – died, which was firmly embedded in the architecture of the amphitheatres. The proliferation of Roman amphitheatres around the Mediterranean was a very costly undertaking, both to build and to operate,[21] with games filling 4–6 months of the year as a standard, for example, at the turn of the 2nd/3rd century,[22] in contrast to the cost of bread for the number of people suffering from hunger, which was way cheaper.[23] Yet, from the game organisers' point of view, it paid off because the frequency and quality of the games had an indisputable impact on their support and popularity, including emperors, who sometimes became one through the success of the games they organised.[24]

Yet there are few accounts of the course and details of the games from classical authors.[25] A great source of information about the course of the games is the often very brutal mosaics, with which people decorated their homes. Research by Shelby Brown, who has studied these mosaics and their function, shows that the inhabitants of the Roman Empire viewed them not as we do, with pity and distress, but as deserved punishment for the worst criminals. It expressed the distance of the good citizens from the subversive elements and confirmed their place.[26] Ingvild Sælid Gilhus says, "We must conclude that the spectators in the Roman world did not usually identify with the victims."[27] Thus, for example, artistic statements depicting or describing the opening of Flavius' amphitheatre show zero compassion for the dying. Sympathy is on the side of the law, even perhaps on the side of the animals who help to carry it out at the time.[28]

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[19] Ralph Hage. 2021. "Violent Identity: The Coliseum and the Narrative of Death." Art and Architecture Journal 2 (2): 29–42, 37–39.

[20] Veyne. 1992. *Bread and Circuses*, 403.

[21] Hage. 2021. "Violent Identity", 33–34, 40.

[22] Petr Kitzler. 2004. Tertullianus: demytizace osobnosti a protipohanská polemika v De spectaculis. In: Tertullianus. *O hrách: De spectaculis*. Ed. Petr Kitzler, 7–87. Praha: Oikoymenh, 60–61.

[23] Hage. 2021. "Violent Identity", 33–34.

[24] Alison Futrell. 2006. *The Roman games: a sourcebook.* Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publushing, 11–21.

[25] *Ibidem*, ix–x.

[26] Ingvild Sælid Gilhus. 2006. *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas.* London – New York: Routledge, 183–184.

[27] *Ibidem*, 183.

[28] *Ibidem*, 184.

3. Critique of the Games

What took place in the arenas has a radically different explanation from the Roman and Christian side regarding their own religion and cosmology. For the Romans, it was a ritual killing of those who had ostracised themselves from human society by their actions. Tacitus, for example, describes martyrs under Nero who were dressed as animals because, by their actions, they became one and, like animals, were torn apart by dogs. The execution had religious features. It was attended by commoners, elites, and even gods through their statues, which were, as often, covered up because the crime of the condemned was so heinous that they could not look at it. The execution was thus a true cosmic restoration of order.[29] Contrast to this is the Christian perspective, which is on the side of the victims, who were often Christians themselves. According to Gilhus, Christians were even the only group criticising the games. This may not be true on an absolute scale, but the degree to which Christians criticised the games compared to non-Christian authors is undoubtedly incommensurable. What makes the whole counter position all stronger is that it was a frequent theme of martyr texts, one of the early Church's major literary genres.[30]

According to Kathryn Mammel, it does not mean that there wasn't any Roman criticism. Still, it was very specific and limited to particular individuals, not whole groups, as in the case of Jews or Christians, where the criticism was much more massive overall, in depth and frequency. For Roman authors, games and shows, in general, were not a very common topic at all. It may even seem that they felt some ambivalence about discussing it at all. If there was some critique, it had various reasons. Because games are entertainment, which, like any other entertainment, leads to softness. Seneca sees the problem of making a big emotional crowd, which is dangerous. Of course, there is also certain snobbishness about the entertainment of the popular masses. Romans criticise circus racing as a waste of time, athletics as Greek, immoral and unrealistic, and theatre as low and softened. Such criticism, however, does not apply to the gladiatorial games, which are viewed in a purely positive way in a Roman context since they are educational in character. The gladiatorial games evoke *virtus* – virtue, courage, and manliness. Yet Christian criticism was massive and common at all shows, but most severe specifically against the gladiatorial games.[31] However, we cer-

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[29] *Ibidem*, 185.

[30] *Ibidem*, 184.

[31] Kathryn Mammel. 2014. Ancient Critics of Roman Spectacle and Sport. In *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Eds. Paul Christesen, Donald G. Kyle, 603–616. Malden, MA: Willey Blackwell; Kitzler. 2004. Tertullianus: demytizace osobnosti a protipohanská polemika v De spectaculis, 63–66.

tainly cannot ignore the fact that gladiators themselves are viewed somewhat ambivalently. They are the heroes of the fights that educate for bravery; they are praised and applauded. And yet, like prostitutes and actors, as pleasure-giving professions, gladiators were automatically in a state of *infamia* – disgrace. By comparison, a cowardly soldier or a bribed judge was in the same state. Consequently, they were, for example, excluded from the highest offices of the state and had other restrictions.[32] The cruelty of the gladiatorial games is thus relegated to a specific space, yet it is not common to be openly criticised.[33]

4. Peak of Christian critique of games by Tertullian

The pinnacle of criticism of the games from a Christian perspective in a theoretical way is undoubtedly Tertullian's *De Spectaculis – On Games*,[34] which is written primarily for the Christian reader to discourage them from attending the spectacle. Although Tertullian wrote extensively about games in his other writings, he devotes an exclusive treatise here. According to Petr Kitzler, Tertullian is neither the first nor the last Christian to criticise the games. Tertullian's predecessors, however, devoted at most a chapter or a brief mention to games. But games were already criticised by the Greek apologists. Also, we find sources of Christian criticism already in Judaism – in Josephus Flavius and Philo of Alexandria. But also in the books of Maccabees (1Macc 1:14 and 2Macc 4:9ff). Tertullian, in particular, draws on the Greek fathers, but also on pagan authors. For example, Athenagoras of Athens says that to watch someone being murdered is the same as murdering them oneself. And Eirenaios, in *Adversus haereses*, is the first to link games with idolatry.[35]

After Tertullian, the criticism of the games is based on what he has already written. Because he has discussed everything so extensively that there is no room for more. Of course, followers mostly follow the line of morality, while the Eirenaeus-inspired question of criticising games as idolatry goes into the background, and the text here serves for possible arguments not in the context of games but in the question of criticising pagan theology. In criticising games, Tertullian's followers often used an almost slick version of Cyprian, who reduced the whole to

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[32] Roger Dunkle. 2013. *Gladiators: violence and spectacle in ancient Rome.* (1st ed. by Routledge) London – New York: Routledge, 35–36.

[33] There are some criticisms, but they are more likely to be anomalies confirming the rule. Cf. *Ibidem*, 8–9.

[34] Or more often translated as *On Shows*, because the issue of the book is not only gladiatoral games but all the "shows" of the arena – racing, athletics and theatre also.

[35] Kitzler. 2004. Tertullianus: demytizace osobnosti a protipohanská polemika v De spectaculis, 61–64.

two main arguments – 1) games are murder, and watching them is participating in them; 2) theatre is immoral.[36] In addition to his extensive criticism of the games from the perspective of unmasking them as idolatry to demons, which rightly points to their essentially religious dimension, Tertullian strongly criticises the dimension of cruelty and mercilessness, which is why he coins one of his many neologisms *immisericordia* – mercilessness (De Spec. 20.5).[37]

The text deals a lot with the problem of cruelty in general, which belongs to games, especially gladiatorial ones (De Spec. 20-22). He also points out the ruthlessness of arenas in the context of the murder of Christians who are fellow citizens while the crowd cheers and cries for blood over their suffering. On the other hand, he reproaches the Christian visitors to the games for loving their neighbour and enemy, and here they show only ruthlessness, which, if not permitted elsewhere, is also not permitted here (De Spec. 16.5-7). In describing the history of the games, he points to the very context of the increasing cruelty that accompanied it: "But by degrees their refinement came up to their cruelty; for these human wild beasts could not find pleasure exquisite enough, save in the spectacle of men torn to pieces by wild beasts."[38] (De Spec. 12.4) He goes on to point out the problem of the ambivalence of the visitors to the games, who outside the amphitheatre have a problem with anything they approve of in it, outside it, they avoid situations they seek there, etc. He also mentions the ambivalent position of gladiators, who are loved yet viewed as prostitutes (De Spec. 20-22).

However, the crux of Tertullian's critique with respect to our topic stands in chapter 19 of *De Spectaculis:*

> And are we to wait now for a scriptural condemnation of the amphitheatre? If we can plead that cruelty is allowed us, if impiety, if brute savagery, by all means let us go to the amphitheatre. If we are what people say we are, let us take our delight in the blood of men. "It is a good thing, when the guilty are punished." Who will deny that, unless he is one of the guilty? And yet the innocent cannot take pleasure in the punishment of another, when it better befits the innocent to lament that a man like himself has become so guilty that a punishment so cruel must be awarded him. But who will pledge himself to me that it is always the guilty who are condemned to the beasts, or whatever the punishment, and that it is never

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[36] *Ibidem*, 81–82, 86.

[37] Cf. Kitzler's note n. 230 – Tertullianus. 2004. *O hrách: De spectaculis*. Ed. Petr Kitzler. Praha: Oikoymenh, 172.

[38] Cited according to Sydney Thelwall's (1869) translation of Tertullianus. *The Shows, or De Spectaculis*. Accessible from: "The Tertullian Project" (20. 6. 2024) https://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-09.htm.

> inflicted on innocence too, through the vindictiveness of the judge it may be, the weakness of the advocate, the severity of torture? How much better then it is not to know when the bad are punished, that I may not have to know when the good perish–that is, if savour of good is in them at all. Certain it is that innocent men are sold as gladiators for the show, to be victims of public pleasure. Even in the case of those condemned to the games, what can you say to the fact that punishment for the smaller offence should carry them on to murder?[39]

The criticism of what happens in the arena attacks many sides – from the point of view of cruelty, senselessness, the danger of error and condemnation of the innocent; it is a criticism of the joy of the suffering of the criminal instead of a regret for his sin. Crucially, I see it as calling for the need for compassion for all involved: all victims – guilty and innocent, as well as willing and unwilling abusers. Yet, the conclusion of the writing is a sometimes almost literally sadistic account of the eschatological sufferings of those who are truly responsible for the games cruelty (De Spec. 30). However, it is the eschatological nature of this violence that I see as important. As a statement of the fact that violence clearly does not belong in the hands of human beings.[40] This concludes Tertullian's quite categorical condemnation of this cruel spectacle.

5. Perspective of the victim in martyrdom narrative

The main criticism, however, is the inverted optics, perspective, and language using the eyes of victims in the martyr texts depicting the death of Christ's followers. To their seriousness, we can add the respect they enjoyed in the early Church, including their regular liturgical use.[41] We will look at what such a reversed perspective toward compassion for the victim of violence might look like through the example of three martyr texts that are counted among the oldest and most authentic – *Martyrdom of Polycarp, Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* and *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*.[42]

Martyrdom of Polycarp – In the text describing the martyrdom of the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, as well as several of his predecessors during the same per-

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[39] Cited according to T. R. Glover's translation: Tertullian, Minucius Felix. 2007. *Apology. De Spectaculis. Octavius.* Terrot Reaveley Glover, Gerald Henry Rendall. Trans. [Repr. der Ausg.] 1931. The Loeb Classical Library 250. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 279.

[40] Cf. Volf's statement that we need to allow the possibility of eschatological violence to avoid violence here and now. Volf. 2019. *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated*, 285–302.

[41] Eric Rebillard. Ed. 2017. *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs.* Oxford – New York – New York: Oxford University Press, 25–27.

[42] Cf. Moss. 2013. *The Myth of Persecution*, 93.

secution, we can identify several moments when the theme of compassion we are examining comes to the fore. The text offers, like martyr texts in general, a very sharp contrast between the peacefulness of the martyrs and the cruelty of their tormentors, but especially the bloodthirstiness of the spectator crowd. Thus, for example, when the crowd sees the fearlessness of the Smyrrhenian martyrs, they crave the blood of their bishop Polycarp (Mart. Polyc. 3.2). Subsequently, when Polycarp is captured, interrogated, and his accusation is announced – the crowd goes wild and demands that he be torn to pieces by a lion; when this cannot be granted because of the course of the games, they demand death by him being burnt alive, and the people themselves immediately converge and bring wood to the stake (Mart. Polyc. 12-13). Nevertheless, paradoxically, even this cruel mob is moved by pity, according to the writer of the martyrium. Thus, for example, Polycarp's predecessors were scourged so cruelly, "… causing the bystanders to both pity and lament them."[43] (Mart. Polyc. 2.2). Later again, some soldiers who come to capture Polycarp, seeing his forgiveness and piety, "… regretted that they had come after so godly an old man."[44] (Mart. Polyc. 7.3). However, we cannot perhaps see this as a testimony to Roman empathy, but rather as a rhetorical figure who, on the one hand, defends the justice and devotion of the martyrs, but at the same time perhaps puts their compassionate perspective into the mouth of a state and society where it is not usually found.

Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne – Martyr's report of the persecution and martyrdom of the Gaul's community is a theatrical, emotional, and gradual text describing the drastic events of the ruptures and torture, the apostasy, and the advocacy of the apostates. Here again, we encounter a strong contrast between the viciousness of the torturers and the bloodthirstiness of the mob and the bravery and conciliation of the martyrs. We find here an interesting criticism of the writer who condemns the wanton violence against the old Christian (Mart. Lyon 1.29-31) as well as the cruelties inflicted on children and women (Mart. Lyon 1.53-54). Another contrast typical of martyr texts is the transcendent joy of the martyrs despite the obvious, objective suffering and horror they experience. Likewise, the Church community sees their faith perseverance as a victory and cause for rejoicing. They are troubled, however, because they cannot bury their martyrs. The cruelty of the torturers continues, when they refuse to release the butchered bodies (Mart. Lyon 1.61-63).[45] Here, too, we find a desired reflection of compassion in the pagans but a minority view that seems to exist timidly in the abundance of cruelty:

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[43] Cited according to Eric Rebillard's translation: Rebillard. Ed. 2017. *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs*, 91.

[44] Cited according to Rebillard's translation: *Ibidem*, 95.

[45] A similar situation can be found in the aforementioned Martyrdom of Polycarp 17,1.

> And some snarled and gnashed their teeth at them, seeking to exact on them a more extravagant vengeance. Others ridiculed and mocked them, at the same time magnifying their idols and ascribing to them the punishment of those men. The more reasonable ones, who seemed to feel a degree of sympathy, reproached them often, saying: "Where is their god and what profit have they got from his worship, which they chose over their own lives?" (Mart. Lyon 1.60, cf. 1.32-35).

An exciting moment in Lyon's martyrdom is the compassion for the *lapsi* – the apostates. The pagans themselves, paradoxically, look upon them as weaklings, as a kind of miserable and inadequately trained gladiators[46] (Mart. Lyon 1.11). On the other hand, the martyrs themselves look upon them, weeping for the apostates and begging God for them (Mart. Lyon 2.6).[47]

Passion of Perpetua and Felicity – The need for empathy in our last example is heightened by the role of women, who are also mothers. Right from the beginning of her prison diary, Perpetua recounts the horror of their imprisonment and the anxiety of being separated from her child, still an infant (Pass. Per. 3.5-6). This anxiety fades as the text progresses and is increasingly replaced by the joy of heavenly hope, which becomes more and more certain even through her visions. This motif of changing a frightening and hopeless situation is shown in her relationship with her child and father.[48] Perpetua's father is an important figure there, and several times throughout the story, he persuades her more and more strenuously to fall away from the faith. Importantly, however, he does so not for her sake but for his own, for the threat of disgrace and the threat to the family's reputation and comfort (Pass. Per. 5.1-5). On the other hand, Perpetua is filled with compassion for her father. Especially when he is beaten with a rod before her eyes, she identifies with his pain. "… [I]t was as if I were being whipped myself. Thus I was sad for him, the wretched old man."[49] (Pass. Per. 6.5). Perpetua also sympathises with her deceased brother, whom she meets in one of her visions and who suffers in the afterlife. In the end, she absolves him of this punishment by persistent prayer (Pass. Per. 7-8).

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[46] Cf. the critique of non-trained gladiators: Carlin A. Barton. 1989. "The Scandal of the Arena." Representations 27 (3): 5–8 (1–36).

[47] Kitzler argues that the martyrs had compassion only for those *lapsi* who eventually confessed, but not for those who remained in their apostasy. Petr Kitzler. Ed. 2009. *Příběhy raně křesťanských mučedníků: výbor z nejstarší latinské a řecké martyrologické literatury*. Praha: Vyšehrad, 98, note 13.

[48] Petr Kitzler. 2012. *Athletae Christi: raně křesťanská hagiografie mezi nápodobou a adaptací*. Praha: Filosofia, 70–71.

[49] Cited according to Rebillard's translation: Rebillard. Ed. 2017. *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs*, 311.

We can also observe here again the contrast of the terrible objective reality that the martyrs overcome, and we look up to them in bliss because we cannot overcome it ourselves. The amplification of this reality is perhaps illustrated by Perpetua's exclamation to the watching Christians, and as if explicitly to the reader-listener:[50] "Stand firm in the faith, love one another and do not stumble because of our sufferings."[51] (Pass. Per. 20.10). Another situation showing the tension between the objective reality of suffering and the exaltation of the martyr occurs when one of the captured Christians, Secundulus, dies already in prison, which the writer interprets, somewhat paradoxically in the martyr's context, as mercy because he was spared from the cruel beasts (Pass. Per. 14.2). This perhaps again shows that the joy of the martyrs is otherworldly, but the worldly side of the matter is still cruel and terrible. The opposite moment, where the possibility of undergoing martyrdom is, on the contrary, a grace, but also a moment indicative of the ambivalence of early Christian compassion and the necessity of not exaggerating its absolute inclusiveness, is when Felicitas fears lest her blood be shed with criminals. For she is eight months pregnant, and so cannot be condemned to death. Nevertheless, the fellow martyrs successfully pray to God, and she gives birth prematurely but safely so that she can be martyred(!) (Pass. Per. 15.1-5). The fear of being polluted by co-suffering with criminals has a unique mark of exclusivity. While Christ himself was crucified with thieves (Lk 23:33).

As in the previous texts, the crowd of spectators plays an important role, and we see a breaking perspective on the suffering shown here. On the one hand, the crowd demands that the martyrs be killed at a place where they can see them clearly so that they can feed upon the sight of their deaths (Pass. Per. 21.7). On the other hand, however, they show pity for the youth of the women executed for their comeliness and motherhood. However, the cruel turn is in that moment, the crowd does not ask for their mercy, but for a dress-up; they may not see their youth and motherhood to see their torture and death (Pass. Per. 20.2-3). Thus, in our perspective, this is a picture of the deliberate deafening of awakening conscience and compassion. The part of Perpetua's vision where she fights the Egyptian is also an expression of the otherness of the martyrs. The rules of the match are set up so that the Egyptian, when victorious, kills, while Perpetua, when victorious, receives a branch with golden apples (Pass. Per. 11.9). Although the vision is usually interpreted in the context of the struggle with the Devil, it is here that we can also read the contrast between the way gladiators, torturers, and

[50] Martyr stories were in early church read like a liturgical reading before a sermon. Cf. *Ibidem*, 25–27.

[51] Cited according to Rebillard's translation: *Ibidem*, 327.

martyrs act. While some are willing to lay down their lives but take them, others lay down their lives but do not take them.

Conclusion

The martyr and the story that is told of their suffering point to compassion in an unusual situation[52] when it identifies itself with the victims of something that, for the time being, was not seen as problematic at all. Indeed, the martyr texts describe the story of the arena from an unusual situation – from the victims' perspective. In the context of Tertullian and, therefore, as already mentioned, generally early Church position, we can read this texts as a witness of compassion. However, we typically focus on other themes of martyr stories, namely that of the martyr dying for fidelity to the faith by refusing to pay divine homage to the Emperor or the Roman gods; or we look at whether martyrdom is undertaken voluntarily and provocatively – when a Christ-follower is forcing the authorities and they cannot do anything but condemn them to execution[53] – such an almost activist action is advocated, for example, by the North African or Montanist tradition;[54] or whether is martyrdom only a matter of last resort, as Clement of Alexandria, for instance, demands.[55] At other times, we focus on the role of marginalised ones as women and slaves in martyrdom; we think about the struggle with Satan, visions of the afterlife, the question of the identity-creating dimension of martyrdom, etc. But often, we have already moved beyond the discourse in which the victim of suffering is worthy of compassion. We pass over it because it is a discourse that is already our own. It is already expected for us to have compassion with the victim of suffering, and so, as it were, invisible to us. But it was an outright novelty in the first four centuries AD of the Roman empire.[56]

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[52] We can see this in the context of Everett Ferguson's thesis that the martyrs in the arena are on a mission, which is commonly considered the context of martyrdom in the early church. For this public action, they take that "prime time" in the dust of the arena. It is the most watched place in the Roman world, where they can address the audience with a heroic faith that overcomes the pain and death, but also by their willingness and innocence in clash with the cruelty of the practice of the games at its heart. Everett Ferguson. 1993. "Early Christian Martyrdom and Civil Disobedience." Journal of Early Christian Studies 1 (1): 76 (73–83).

[53] Recla gives this situation in the interesting context of suicide by cop. Recla. 2022. *Rethinking Christian Martyrdom*, 25–26. Cf. L. Stephanie Cobb. 2019. "Suicide by Gladiator? The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas in Its North African Context." Church History 88 (3): 597–628.

[54] Kitzler. 2012. *Athletae Christi*, 22–23.

[55] Cf. Candida R. Moss. 2012. *Ancient Christian martyrdom: diverse practices, theologies, and traditions.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 145–162.

[56] Cf. Carlin A. Barton certainly writes that there is no sympathy for the victims on the part of the Romans. Of course, on the other hand, neither are Christians primarily concerned with stepping out of this chain of violence, because the martyrs are in a sense a kind of gladiators, but they

In this perspective, the function of the martyr would be not primarily in the *imitatio Christi* through death[57] but in Christ's identification with the victim, the simple opening of the victim's perspective, the perspective of compassion in a surprising, unexpected context. This does not mean to abolish the martyric context in its classical form, but precisely in the awareness of its limits and the problematic nature of its usefulness in other ways, that then there will be no need to cram martyrdom everywhere and where it is not needed and to overemphasise that very moment of death and physical sacrifice.

The Church can then apply this martyrdom framework as an expanding perspective of compassion. Because although the process might seem to be one-step – that we have compassion for the victim or we do not – it is more complex than that, in the sense that it is always about the particular situation of the victim. Because we are not always able to see the victim as a victim. We are not always able to see the cruelty of the various sufferings to which we should apply our compassion for the victim.[58] The history of the Church and society has already seen many such milestones in which our perception of compassion has shifted or expanded – we can speak of compassion for the suffering of slaves, serfs, marginalised races and peoples, women, and children. Their sufferings and situations have been as invisible to us at different times in history. We have not been in the habit of identifying with them. Because they were in the right place in the socially and, of course, theologically set order, and if they suffered there, they suffered rightly. They were in their place, and we, in turn, were in ours, like spectators and victims in the arena. The significant shift, leap, or turn, however, comes when we find compassion for the victim of our own social and cultural system because the killing in the arena was a systemic, right, and orderly thing(!). The moment we can empathise with someone like that, the possibility of wherever we can apply and feel that compassion expands dramatically. However, it is obviously not self-evident, automatic, or workless. In doing so, such an expansion of the field of compassion is still precisely counter-cultural, and therefore problematic and conflicted, but in a meaningful way.

Specific examples of the martyr-witness and counter-cultural stance of the contemporary Church can take many different positions and forms, always appropriate to their own context. Pope Francis is a good example of such a practice

are "only" fighting for another organiser/editor of the games. Barton. 1989. "The Scandal of the Arena" 9, 30 (note 54).

[57] This is, for example, in such a masochistic way, a central theme of Ignatius of Antioch.

[58] In this sense, Okure, Sobrino, and Wilfred write about the need to re-think if we should not have looked at the victims of the impact of brutal capitalism on the poor of the third world, like martyrs. Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino, Felix Wilfred. 2003. "Introduction". Concilium: International Journal for Theology 39 (1): 7–11.

that opens eyes to compassion for overlooked suffering. For example, his comments on the war in Ukraine bring a raw perspective on the ongoing suffering that demands our attention to politically and strategically attuned discussions, despite, or perhaps because of, the often controversial perception.[59] Let us also remember Francis' traditional washing of the feet of prisoners, disabled and refugees – when he pulls our eyes to see the suffering we overlook.[60] The Church in Germany is active in caring for refugees and migrants, going above and beyond the rules and perhaps the law to save lives and publicize a problem that used to arouse passions but is now rather ignored, and these people are still suffering.[61] Christian Climate Action, which is active primarily in the context of the Church of England, through their suffering draws attention to the suffering of the weakest threatened by climate change. Moving sights come as we read or watch a report of police officers arresting peacefully protesting and, many times, old pastors, and our eyes open to the suffering of the weak in light of the climate crisis.[62] A sensitive, but all the more important, issue is the conflict over abortion, where the Church has persistently called for opening the eyes of society to compassion for those who cannot defend themselves and yet have the right to enter life. On the other hand, we can observe a no less counter-cultural and important effort by the Church to draw attention to the suffering of women related to the unavailability of this option. In doing so, they remind us to consider the sinfulness and imperfection of the world, where, unfortunately, there are no simple or black-and-white solutions.[63] The classic example of the counter-cultural Church standing with the suffering are the churches in the line of liberation theology, first of all in Latin America, Africa and East Asia. They are not only helping the needy but calling on the world to open its eyes to the suffering of those who are massacred by inhuman regimes that we in our comfort ignore, who slave in factories for cheap products that we brazenly buy with cheap money, who are discriminated against and persecuted for their faith and beliefs and we do not care. The most significant example is Archbishop Oscar Romero's martyrdom, which made visible the suffering that

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[59] Philip Pullella. 2024. "Pope says Ukraine should have 'courage of the white flag' of negotiations." Reuters. (4. 12. 2024) https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-says-ukraine-should-have-courage-white-flag-negotiations-2024-03-09/.

[60] Junno Arocho Esteves. "Pope Francis washes feet of Muslim refugees." The Catholic Weekly. (4. 12. 2024) https://catholicweekly.com.au/pope-francis-washes-feet-of-muslim-refugees/.

[61] E.g. Christoph Strack. "More and more refugees seek protection in churches." Deutsche Welle. (4. 12. 2024) https://www.dw.com/en/church-asylum-more-and-more-refugees-seek-protection-in-churches/a-69236496.

[62] E.g. Susan Parfitt. "'I am proud of our action; I am ashamed of the government; I acted out of love' – Rev Dr Sue Parfitt's Court Statement." Christian Climate Action. (4. 12. 2024) https://tiny.pl/wgt22hc8. More about this Church movement: https://christianclimateaction.org/.

[63] See, for example, the US Catholics for Choice movement: https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/.

the world had massively overlooked until then.[64] And we would find many other such moments, large and small, where the Church, contrary to the society and culture in which it finds itself, stands alongside the unseen victims and very often suffers with them to make that suffering visible. It bears witness to the horror that we can change and opens our hearts to compassion. In that way, the Church stands in line with the early Christianity and its martyrs.

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[64] Rubén Rosario Rodríguez. 2017. *Christian Martyrdom and Political Violence: A Comparative Theology with Judaism and Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 201–216.

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