

## The Forgiveness of Martyrs: the Seeds of Unity

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### Abstract

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The author reviews recent ecumenical commemorations of the Christians martyred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then attempts to suggest that John Milbank's *Being Reconciled* could provide intellectual resources for Christians seeking to offer and receive forgiveness. The author suggests that a powerful sign of Christian reconciliation would be the common commemoration of those killed by their fellow Christians and counted as martyrs on the part of some, including Saints Josaphat Kuntsevych of Polotsk and Athanasius Philipovich of Brest.



In this paper, we attempt to draw connections between martyrdom and Christian unity with the help of one of the important texts of Radical Orthodoxy (henceforth: RO), John Milbank's *Being Reconciled*.<sup>1</sup> The connections between martyrdom and ecumenism have been increasingly remarked upon by theologians and Christian leaders in the latter part of the twentieth century. Consider the following examples.

First, during the Great Jubilee of 2000, on 7 May 2000 at the Coliseum in Rome, there was an “ecumenical commemora-

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<sup>1</sup> *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2003).

tion of the witnesses to the faith in the twentieth century” at which Pope John Paul II spoke of

the precious heritage which these courageous witnesses have passed down to us is a patrimony shared by all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities. It is a heritage which speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division. The ecumenism of the martyrs and the witnesses to the faith is the most convincing of all; to the Christians of the twenty-first century it shows the path to unity. It is the heritage of the Cross lived in the light of Easter: a heritage which enriches and sustains Christians as they go forward into the new millennium.<sup>2</sup>

That same day, the pope also issued an apostolic letter to the Romanian Greco-Catholic Church stressing that “under the merciful gaze of her Lord, the Church remembers her past, acknowledges the errors of her children, confesses their lack of love for their brethren in Christ and consequently asks forgiveness and forgives, seeking to re-establish full unity among Christians.”<sup>3</sup>

Three weeks later, the joint communiqué of the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue in North America spoke of the ministry of reconciliation and also stressed the need for forgiveness.

In June 2001 in Lviv, Lubomyr Cardinal Husar publicly acknowledged that the members of his Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church had also made mistakes and caused violations towards their compatriots and begged forgiveness for this, having meanwhile offered the forgiveness of Greco-Catholics to those who had persecuted them. Recalling the suffering of the martyrs, he called this forgiveness “a new energy.”

Also in June 2001, during his historic visit to Ukraine, Pope John Paul II said that “the Christians of different confes-

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<sup>2</sup> See his homily at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20000507\\_test-fede\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000507_test-fede_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> No. 11. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20000720\\_unione-romania-roma\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20000720_unione-romania-roma_en.html).

sions have been persecuted and killed for Christ. Their common martyrdom is a powerful calling towards reconciliation and unity. It is the ecumenism of martyrs and witnesses of faith that shows us the way towards unity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians.”

In Rome in October 2002, while repaying the historic visit that Pope John Paul had made to Romania in 1999, the Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Teoctist of Bucharest stated:

All the good that was done for the rapprochement of the Churches during the last century of persecutions should not be lost now in freedom.... That is why today in embodying Christian unity, we should become united in seeking the holiness of Christian life in the light and from the perspective of ecumenical holiness, which the martyrs and the confessors of faith of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have testified to us.

On February 20, 2004, Walter Cardinal Kasper stated in Moscow: “We can say that the blood of so many martyrs of all Churches, Orthodox and Catholic, are the seeds of unity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.”

Finally, consider the words of Pope Benedict XVI in a letter to Cardinal Husar on February 22, 2006. In discussing the liquidation of the Greco-Catholic Church in Ukraine, the persecutions and the martyrs, the pope wrote of his hope that the commemoration of the abolition of the Church in the pseudo-synod of Lviv of 1946 may become an occasion for “appeal to the Spirit-Paraclete, that he may cause to flourish everything which promotes unity.... It is a plea for the gift of brotherly love, and for the forgiveness of offences and injustices suffered in the course of history.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of these reflections, we may adapt Tertullian’s famous dictum “*sanguis martyrum semen christianorum*” to say that “the forgiveness of martyrs is the seed of forgiveness of Christians,” especially of the mutual forgiveness necessary

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<sup>4</sup> The text of this letter is available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/letters/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20060222\\_husar-ucraina\\_en\).html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20060222_husar-ucraina_en).html).