

What is a Martyr?

Tomorrow marks the commemoration of the feast of St. Demetrios the Great Martyr and myrrh-flower, my patron saint. As I contemplated my sermon for today, I thought about the concept of a martyr. What exactly is a martyr?

Now the Church has six major orders of saints

1. **The Apostles** , who were the first ones to spread the message of the Incarnation of the Word of God and of salvation through Christ.
2. **The Prophets** , because they predicted and prophesied the coming of the Messiah.
3. **The Martyrs** , for sacrificing their lives and fearlessly confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind.
4. **The Fathers and Hierarchs of the Church** , who excelled in explaining and in defending, by word and deed, the Christian faith.
5. **The Monastics** , who lived in the desert and dedicated themselves to spiritual exercise (*askesis*), reaching, as far as possible, perfection in Christ.
6. **The Just** , those who lived in the world, leading exemplary lives as clergy or laity with their families, becoming examples for imitation in society.

There are three other categories that we commemorate at the *proskomide* on Sundays, The Holy Unmercenaries (Cosmas and Damianos), the angels and the writers of the liturgies

Saints can be categorized in more than one category like St. Panteleimon who was a Great Martyr and a holy unmercenary

Martyr comes from the Greek word *martyras*, which means [witness](#). It was used not only in the secular world but also in the Old and the [New Testament](#) of the Bible. The process of bearing witness was not intended to lead to the death of the witness. Yet, one of our ancient writers, Josephus states that witnesses, especially of the lower classes, were tortured routinely before being interrogated as a means of forcing them to tell the truth.

During the early Christian centuries, the term acquired the extended meaning of a believer who is called to witness for their religious belief, and on account of this witness, endures suffering and/or death. The death of a martyr or the value attributed to it is called **martyrdom**. Being a martyr

indicates a person who is killed for maintaining a [religious](#) belief, knowing that this will almost certainly result in imminent death. Martyrs sometimes declined to defend themselves at all, in what they saw as a reflection of [Jesus'](#) willing sacrifice.

Martyrs became a reality during the first three centuries of Christianity. As an illegal religion and a threat to the Roman State, Christians were targeted by Roman authorities and either thrown to the lions or placed in the arena to fight gladiators. They were given the option of either burning incense to the Pagan Gods, which would mean that they betrayed Christ, or not burning incense, which would result in their physical death.

It took a great conviction and an incredible love for Christ for these martyrs not to apostatize. Perhaps this was the reason why catechumen, those who desired to be baptized, would spend about three years preparing for their baptism—reading, studying, praying and fasting before they were eventually baptized. They needed to be sure that they were spiritually ready for the possibility of accepting martyrdom.

The early Christian persecutions ended in 313, when St. Constantine the Great made Christianity a legal religion. After that there were few opportunities where someone could become a martyr. It was not until after the fall of Constantinople that Orthodox Christians would once be faced with martyrdom. In 1453, the Ottoman Empire conquered the Byzantine Empire and the Church and its faithful were under the Turkish Yoke.

Christians were not persecuted for their faith per say. But Christians were assessed a head tax, which Muslims did not have to pay. They could not ride on horses, and were considered second class citizens. Nevertheless, there were thousands of martyrs who fueled the faith through the blood they shed. It was illegal to convert a Muslim into a Christian. Even Christians who converted and became Muslims could not become Christians again without the possibility of being killed. Yet, hundreds who did convert and regretted it, went back to the place where they betrayed Christ, renounced Islam, proclaimed Christ and were arrested. They were tempted to take back their confession and tortured if they refused, hundreds were killed and became martyrs.

In 1821, most of the Church was liberated from the Ottoman Turks and the martyrdoms just about stopped. But before 1821, before 1453, even before Christianity became a legal religion, there was a group of people who gave up their lives for Christ, and still do today—Monks. Monasticism began in the deserts in the third century. Monks live in this world, but have renounced the world and all earthly possessions in order to live a communal life in purity, and holiness. They don't give up their very lives to death, but they give up all the pleasures of this life and dedicate themselves to prayer, fasting and every other spiritual virtue. They are the modern day martyrs.

What about us today? There are no persecutions of Christians except perhaps in predominantly Muslim countries, and were not monks and nuns. The answer is, any one who wishes to follow Christ in this world and sinful generation, WILL FACE SOME PERSECUTION. The Christian who is honest in doing his or her taxes, will pay more money to the government. The Christian who chooses to take off during Holy Week or other Holy Days, or the business owner who insists on closing on Sundays in order to come to Church will experience some sort of financial hardship. Even married couples who understand that during their sacrament they were joined together and that the crowns on their head also represented martyrs crowns, know that they are called to suffer for each

other. True Christian marriage calls for each of the spouses to be willing to be martyrs for each other —“husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave His life for Her.”

Every time you put Christ or another person before yourself, every time you act in a selfless way, and are persecuted as a result, you share, albeit in a small portion, in the company of the martyrs. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” Christ reminds us in the Beatitudes.

Every Christian is called to be a witness to Christ, for some it costs them their life, like St. Demetrios, for others, it cost something less. Yet every Christian should be reminded that discipleship comes at a price.

As we reflect on the life of St. Demetrios and his martyrdom, let us always remember our calling as Christians, and be willing at all times to accept persecution as a consequence of our faith. In this way, may we also be numbered among the saints and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.