



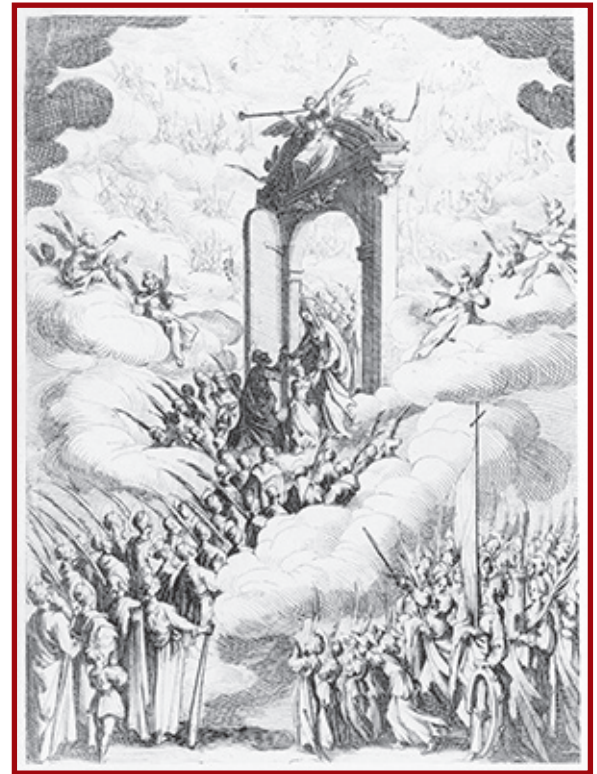
The Cult of the Martyrs

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The Greek word *martus* (or *martur*) originally meant someone who served as a witness or testifier, usually in secular contexts. By the second century CE, when Christian martyrdoms had begun, the term took on its current definition denoting one who is required to testify to religious beliefs and dies for those convictions. Martyrs can also be political, and some would regard Socrates or Martin Luther King as such, but this essay will focus on the martyrs whom the Catholic or Orthodox church canonized into sainthood. Some scholars also distinguish *white martyrdom* from *red martyrdom*, the former being self-imposed suffering that did not typically result in death. The latter are those who died violently, such as the martyrs represented in the Museum's collection.

Although the Roman Empire was known for Christian martyrdoms, evidence indicates that they were sporadic, and unified policy regarding Christianity was lacking. The first systematic persecution occurred under the emperor Nero (r. 54–68 CE), but the reasons behind it probably had little to do with Christian beliefs. When a great fire destroyed much of Rome in 64 CE, blame was cast on Nero himself, as some concluded that the emperor wanted to clear land for his private estate in the city center. A consensus then formed that Nero had scapegoated Christians for the fire to remove suspicion from himself, thus triggering the persecutions. The apostles Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome during that time. For the next 200 years, persecutions seem to have been small and limited, but they increased substantially in the third and early fourth centuries, when the empire was increasingly under threat. Discrimination largely ended under Constantine (r. 306–337 CE, solely from 327), but non-Nicene Christians would still suffer.

The cult venerating the martyrs certainly existed by the second century CE, and *martyrologies* (martyr accounts) were already being recorded. The cults also thrived through the collection of relics. The martyrdom of the bishop Polycarp, who died about 155 CE in Asia Minor, provides early evidence for the preservation of bodily remains. Accounts report that officials burned Polycarp's body to prevent his followers from having a grave to venerate, but they retrieved the bishop's ashes and buried them in a secret location. After the reign of Constantine, the number of martyrs celebrated by the Church exploded exponentially. Calendars were created with "feast days" designated for each martyr, and *martyria* (shrines) marking graves and sites of martyrdom proliferated. The empire was also combed for relics: hair, bones, teeth, pieces of cloth, and other remains were enshrined in churches that rose in great numbers in honor of the martyrs. Church father John Chrysostom (d. 407 CE) proclaimed relics to be more valuable than gold because



Jacques Callot (French, 1592–1635)
The Virgin Receiving Martyrs into Heaven, 1636
Etching
Museum purchase (66.3)

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MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

they had miraculous healing and protective powers. The faithful begged to be buried *ad sanctos* (“by the saint”) so that they might be protected and resurrect beside the martyr on Judgment Day. Moreover, the bodies of some martyrs were said to be beyond decay, preserved in their graves in supernatural stasis exuding the “odor of sanctity,” which wafted up to visitors like the fragrance of roses or violets. Other martyrs were *myroblytes* (“perfume-gushers”) because their very bodies discharged fragrant oils, or such liquids even seeped from their images. Not surprisingly, the liquids, or *myroblysiads*, had miraculous healing powers.

The churches that burgeoned across Europe and the Mediterranean world exposed generations of the faithful to the martyrs, and kept their cults alive. Particularly from the Renaissance onward, artists created thousands of images representing the lives of martyrs and their grisly deaths. Of the martyrs represented in the Museum’s collection, the apostle Andrew is among the earliest to have died, reportedly during the Neronian persecutions. Brother of the apostle Peter, Andrew preached as far west as Greece, where he finally ran afoul of the governor of Patras. Ordered to stop his preaching, Andrew refused and was condemned to death on the cross, but he declared himself unworthy to die like Jesus, so he was crucified on an x-shaped cross (now known as “St. Andrew’s cross”). Some of Andrew’s remains are in the Basilica of St. Andrew in Patras, while a portion was transferred to Scotland, where Andrew remains enormously popular.

St. Sebastian, a Christian in the Praetorian Guard of Diocletian (r. 284–305), refused to renounce his faith once discovered. Diocletian had Sebastian tied to a tree (or column) and shot full of arrows but this did not kill him, and he was rescued and healed by a Christian woman. He later bravely faced Diocletian again, berating him for his impiousness. The outraged emperor then had Sebastian bludgeoned to death and thrown into the Cloaca Maxima, Rome’s sewer system. The Basilica San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura in Rome houses some of the saint’s remains, while his silver-encased cranium is in the Wallfahrtskirche (pilgrimage church) in Ebersberg (Germany).



Andrea Boscoli (Italian, 1550–1606)
The Martyrdom of St. Andrew, ca. 1601
Pen and ink wash
Museum purchase (73.264)



Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528)
St. Sebastian at the Column, ca. 1498–1499
Engraving on paper
Museum purchase (79.93)

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Both Erasmus of Formia and Catherine of Alexandria were also martyred during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maxentius (r. 306–312 CE). Erasmus (aka Elmo) was a bishop of Formia (Italy) who allegedly underwent numerous tortures, including being burned and rolled down a hill in a barrel full of knives. After Erasmus inexplicably survived these assaults, his abdomen was slit open and his intestines were wound around a windlass. The relics of Erasmus are in the local cathedral of Gaeta (Italy). Catherine was a young Alexandrian girl who converted to Christianity after a religious vision. When she chided the emperor Maxentius for his cruelty, he had her imprisoned and tortured, then ordering her body broken on a spiked wheel. At the touch of her body, however, the wooden wheel shattered. Catherine was then beheaded but milk gushed from her neck rather than blood. Angels were said to have conveyed her body to Mt. Sinai for burial, where it was found 400 years later, uncorrupted, and exuding *myroblysias* that were used in miracles. Catherine’s relics are in the monastery at the foot of the mountain, where her head and hand continue to emit a sweet odor. ■



Attributed to the Masters of Dark Eyes (Netherlandish, ca. 1494–1514)
Manuscript Illumination Showing the Martyrdom of St. Erasmus (detail)
 From a Book of Hours, ca. 1514
 Ink, tempera, and gold on parchment
 Gift of William A. Scott (2009.638)



Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528)
The Martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria
 Ca. 1498, printed after 1700
 Woodcut on paper
 Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling and Deborah S. Booker
 in memory of Arthur Mills Stratton (78.45)



Attributed to Louis Cousin, called Luigi Primo (Flemish, ca. 1606–ca. 1667–1668)
Miracle of the Martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria, ca. 1625
 Oil on obsidian
 Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.126)