

INVITED SESSIONS

MARTYRDOM

- Topic: My Body Broken for You: Rethinking Martyrdom, Discipleship, and Communion
- Convener: Kevin F. Burke, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
- Presenters: Sharon Thornton, Andover Newton Theological Seminary
Fumitaka Matsuoka, Pacific School of Religion
Julia Prinz, Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity
Kevin F. Burke, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

In the context of the vigorous “rethinking of martyrdom” carried on in journals such as *Concilium* over the last thirty years, this session sought to broaden the concept of martyrdom. In the context of the conference theme, *All the Saints*, the presenters, two Catholic and two Protestant theologians, addressed martyrdom in an ecumenical/interfaith context and engaged questions raised by the worlds of political, liberation, and feminist theologies by offering two co-presented papers. In addition, both papers sought to weave together five sub-themes: (1) the martyr as a community of witness; (2) martyrdom as primarily about a life of faith and witness, not a violent death; (3) the chain of witnesses linked by song (psalm) and story; (4) the anamnestic and subversive Eucharistic fellowship that emerges from martyrdom; (5) the living of justice by the Christian community that embodies the martyr’s hope.

Julia Prinz and Kevin Burke entitled their reflection: “*What I Must Not Forget*”: *Martyrdom and Discipleship, Mysticism and Politics*. Drawing on the concrete examples of Oscar Romero of El Salvador (1980) and the Trappist monks of Algeria (1996) and utilizing a distinction (found in Christology) between *narrow* and *broad* ways of framing the inquiry, they argued for the importance of the broad framing in order to account for the changed situations surrounding martyrdom in our postmodern world. Kevin Burke developed a comparison between one of the first bishop-martyrs of the Church, St. Ignatius of Antioch and Archbishop Romero: the dramatic account of the former’s martyrdom focuses on his refusal to recognize the idols of the Roman Empire as true Gods. Romero, broadly considered a martyr who died confronting the idols of a brutal regime, is not yet canonized as such in part because his death *could* be construed as a political killing rather than *in odium fidei* (martyrdom narrowly construed.)

Julia Prinz reframed the hermeneutical question of martyrdom by investigating the witness of the Old Testament and, in particular, the *chain of poetic witness*

found in such texts as Psalm 82. The Hebrew words translated with *martyrion* in the Septuagint carry a range of meanings primarily focused on “witness” or “testimony” (i.e. the ark is “the ark of testimony.”) This in turn evokes the primordial relationship between God and God’s people characterized by justice. *Martyrion* is thus bound in its roots to a human-divine encounter. It encompasses a dynamic springing forth from the revelatory character of the word spoken and acted out by JHWH in justice and compassion. At the same time, the classical Greek understanding of *martyrion* is intrinsically rooted in experience and seeks to make that experience accessible to others by the way of memory. In the New Testament, the “I am” of Jesus, one of the indications that Jesus is the witness *par excellence* in the gospel of John, is not primarily an ontological description of Jesus’ identity but the short formula for an encounter with the God “who will be in the world as the one who will be in the world.” In the tradition of the Psalms, Jesus gives testimony to justice and compassion in the encounter with and the *presence* of God through his preaching and works, and he gives testimony in the *absence* of God with his Cry from the Cross.

Sharon Thornton and Fumitaka Matsuoka entitled their reflection, *A Community as Martyr: Martyrdom through the Lenses of Feminist & Interfaith Experiences*. Consistent with feminist claims that all reality is relational while insisting that suffering not be glorified, Sharon Thornton considered martyrdom relationally and communally and Fumitaka brought in an interfaith communal experience by introducing Christ Church of Chicago (Tri-C) as a community that is a living “martyr.” Born of the internment camp experiences thrust on Japanese-Americans during World War II, members of the community serve the wider Chicago public out of a deep sensitivity to pathos and “exilic” experiences. The UCC community, although started by Japanese Americans (Buddhists and Jews as well as Christians), welcomed African Americans, Thais, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, and Latin Americans, continuing the chain of witness by living a life of justice and compassion while subverting the dominant narrative of hostility and hate.

Tri-C as a community of faith was founded on the injustices suffered by its members at the camps. The importance of cooperation, patience, and sympathy in order that “others not suffer needlessly” – this is what the camp experiences meant for the founders of Tri-C. The presenters concluded that the sacrifice of the martyrs makes resistance to unnecessary suffering visible. As such martyrs break the power of the “official” narrative and free the future for an alternative reality and, in so doing, they initiate hope for all people.

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