

## **The choice of martyrdom**

The ultimate expression of Christian freedom, martyrdom often remains a death which could have been avoided. The choice to be exposed, to not flinch from the dangers of witnessing, is a characteristic of the Christian martyr. Of course, once the threat becomes pressing, the witness may deem that flight or denial would be the equivalent of renouncement. This is a matter of godly and careful judgement which none can impose on another. Whatever the case, however difficult the final decision, the choice to stand firm and not hide oneself or one's convictions is a sign of freedom from consequences which cannot be controlled.....

The death of a martyr is not that of a fanatic, a sectarian or a hero. It can retain a problematic character; it is not in itself free of anxiety or doubt.....However a true martyr is one who dies without despair, even if confronted with despair, as Jesus was in Gethsemane. This constitutes an important difference from those who sacrifice themselves or immolate themselves in order to show that their cause is legitimate. Some 'offensive martyrs' take their enemies with them in death, or, if they cannot, they take with them ordinary, secondary victims, attacked blindly or by chance. Such suicides for political or religious causes are in reality an act of deep despair.

It is the mark of a true martyr to fight to the end against what is inhuman and barbarous, to resist violence, to subvert it in often going so far as to recognise in their executioners people who are lost, who are their own brothers. It is a conversion of violence into an act of love, in imitation of Christ..... If there is grief, it is not for the life lost, but for the disfigurement of another, the executioner, by the violence to which he has surrendered himself.....Here the resistance to inhumanity precedes forgiveness already given, if need be.

Source: Emmanuel Durand, Professor in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences of l'Institut Catholique de Paris. Extract from *Faut-il repenser la qualification chrétienne du martyr ? Critères théologiques et opportunité pastorale*.