The Christological Imperative: notes towards a speculative re-interpretation of Catholic martyrdom

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“The Church...considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift...the highest proof of love...since Jesus laid down his life for us, no one has greater love than he who lays down his life for Christ and his brothers...by martyrdom a disciple is transformed into an image of his master, who freely accepted death on behalf of the world’s salvation; the martyr perfects that image even to the shedding of blood...all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow him along the way of the cross through the persecutions the Church will never fail to suffer” (Lumen Gentium 1964: 42)

“[the martyr] is raised up to perfection...and [is] already in possession of eternal salvation” (Sacrosanctum Concilium 1963: 104)

Fear, the reaction to danger, is commonly considered to be a fundamental condition of being human. Lingis says that every being capable of movement deploys this capacity when faced with circumstances or forces that threaten their existence (1998:151). This reaction is seemingly instantaneous, when our lives are threatened we immediately pull away from the site in which our permanent undoing threatens to become a reality. This capacity for fear combined with the ability to flee has surely saved the majority of us countless times. But there are situations where time...slows; where the movement of the event that threatens our undoing is kept in check by the silence that follows the proposing of a question: in these circumstances whether we die or not would seem to be in our power, in our capacity to choose whether or not to flee. In this instance I am speaking directly of the specific events that result in the executions that are interpreted as martyrdoms. There is a choice to be made: deny your faith and maintain your existence; or embrace your faith and suffer a brutally prolonged violent and public death. This choice is the one that martyrlogies claim the martyr is presented with; it is also a choice, according to the extract above, that the subject of the Catholic faith must always be prepared to make in the positive: that is the direction of death. Yet a simple order from the ruling authority of your faith is surely not enough to override the very presence of fear at this critical moment of your existence. There is something else, something that allows you to manage this fear and speak the very words that announce your material extinction: christianus sum.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault declares that “the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.”(1991: 30) This claim is the starting point for this paper; a claim which I understand to argue that the subject is the effect of the operation of a discursive power that actively requires the subject to embody the discourse. This relation between the body and discourse I understand to be productive in the sense that discourse produces an “imaginary”, a specific horizon of intelligibility that marks the limits of knowledge for the subject; a horizon that produces knowledge of the body by constructing an imaginary body. I use imaginary here in the sense employed by Moira Gatens when she says “an imaginary body is not simply a product of subjective imagination, fantasy or folklore...[it is] those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be their appropriate treatment.”(Gatens 1996: viii) These ready-made symbols are the products of discourse, of a history of discourse. Gatens goes on to deploy Bourdieus notion of habitus, of discourse as the “embodied history [of discourse], internalized as a second nature.” (Bourdieu in Gatens 1996: xi) This habitus I understand in the sense of an imperative, of a discursively produced logic that is internal to the functioning logic of the subject of a particular discourse. In this case I am referring to the subject of Catholicism. Lingis says that ‘our actions, initiatives where we maintain a sense of ourselves, are projects; they posit objectives. But they also reveal imperatives.” (1998: 171) It is in this sense that I employ the Imperative: an “imperative” Lingis says “is not a concept...[it]...is a given, a fact”(1998: 179). Consider, for example, the implications of this statement: “since Jesus laid down his life for us, no one has greater love than he who lays down his life for Christ and his brothers.” (Lumen Gentium 1964: 42) The importance of Jesus to Catholic
The Catholic conception of reality: the notion that God intervenes in the human situation for a specific purpose, to that is, as an embodied engagement with material reality in the name of God. Revelation is the fundamental logic that drives commitment means not only committing to the truth in an intellectual manner, it means commitment as praxis, self-revelation is an act of love that has certain responsibilities, conditions or expressions. To Catholics faith proper, so to speak, involves the acceptance of God’s divine invitation. (Wright 1978: 713) In acceptance the Catholic act of faith becomes centered, it enables the “internal unity and self-possession” of the subject. (Wright 1978: 716) This acceptance is understood to reflect that the subject freely receives the gift of faith from God. Turning towards the self-revelation of God in openness and acceptance not only orients the human being towards a specific existential relation to material reality defined by God, but requires an active moment of engagement, a commitment to this orientation. (Wright 1978: 716) To Catholicism God’s self-revelation is an act of love that has certain responsibilities, conditions or expressions. In this sense commitment means not only committing to the truth in an intellectual manner, it means commitment as praxis, that is, as an embodied engagement with material reality in the name of God. Revelation is the fundamental logic that drives the Catholic conception of reality: the notion that God intervenes in the human situation for a specific purpose, to

The Christological Imperative as the Logic of the Catholic Subject

The contemporary manifestations of Catholic communities, much like Catholic communities across two millennia, understand themselves as a response to the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, specifically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Put in another way, the condition of possibility for this community is the very act of self-disclosure by God that Jesus represents; consequently, this community is defined by its response of faith in and to this event. To Catholicism faith is a “personal, fundamental option in which the human being, through grace and trusting in God’s power effective in Jesus Christ, responds in consensus with the church with his or her confession to the saving event of revelation.” (Beinert and Fiorenza 1995: 249) This understanding has as its basic tenet the manifestation of a relationship between God and humanity characterized by “fidelity”. What is crucial to this formulation is that this relationship exists and is conducted in the material context of humanity. Catholic faith, therefore, is a response, an embodied confession by a subject to the self-revelation of God in human history; a confession that signals active participation - manifested in the material context of humanity as fidelity - in this relationship. In this first section I will be arguing that this confession has, if you will, two sides and two moments or phases: a subjective and an objective side and an internal and external moment or phase.

The theological term fides qua creditur is commonly understood to refer to the act of having faith, an act that is always understood as the human response to an invitation from God to an encounter with God; a response, an act that fundamentally seeks to name an experience of God. (Kelly 1998: 56) That this encounter occurs in human history makes it very clear that faith is effectively about reality, about the experience of life itself as a gift from God. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 170) In this sense Catholic faith is “both a decision and a project that lays claim to, involves, and interprets the whole person and all of his or her reality.” (Beinert and Fiorenza 1995: 252)

In Catholic discourse the act of faith itself is understood to begin with openness, a turning towards something. (Wright 1978: 712) Openness here has two referents, firstly, the exposure of the subject to the divine encounter; and secondly, the very space within which this encounter is manifested, the very condition for this encounter, is understood as openness on the part of God. God’s self-disclosure in revelation is an opening, a coming into the existential reality of humanity. As such openness in the Catholic act of faith is an exposure to an orientation - initiated by God - of the subject towards its material conditions. Faith as openness places the subject in “a state of being ultimately concerned” for the meaning and structure of the material reality that is a subject’s circumstance. (Tillich 1957: 1) Catholic discourse proposes that the subject is “interpellated”, “converted” and “transformed” by God.

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communicate. In this sense Catholic faith as a confession or response to the event of the self-revelation of God is co-extensive with faith as an assent to the content or message (objective) of this self-disclosure: salvation.

The theological term *fides quae creditur* denotes the particular content of faith. It refers to a matrix of discursive statements, the adherence to which constitutes the “particularity” of faith. (McGrath 1997: 570) Accordingly Catholic faith is the acceptance of the propositions of revelation; propositions that, insofar as revelation is addressed to Humanity and therefore embodied in community, are formulated or expressed in an ecclesial community of the faithful, namely, the Catholic Church. (Beinert and Fiorenza 1995: 252) The task then, of this community, is to interpret, preserve and proclaim the propositions of faith. Catholic faith as the message of revelation is therefore experienced as community with God, fostered and articulated (mediated) in a living historical community of the faithful that is the Catholic Church. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 171) Maintaining fidelity is the organizing logic of faith. In a general sense, fidelity is understood in a wide variety of ways: from loyalty and devotion to reliability and trustworthiness, to name but a few. The Catholic understanding of fidelity is an expression of love: “through an utterly free decision, God has revealed himself and given himself to man. This he does by revealing the mystery, his plan of loving goodness, formed from all eternity in Christ, for the benefit of all men (sic).” (Catholic Catechism 1994: 50) In as much as faith is a response of fidelity to God’s revelation, it is therefore a response of love to an original expression of love: the unconditional love that God is said to have for humanity.

J.M.R. Tillard, in a paper entitled “Faith, the Believer and the Church”, claims that any “serious discussion about faith... needs a profound and lucid consideration...[of]...the believer’s relation to the community in which and through which he or she receives the Christian message.” (1994: 216) What is effectively at stake in this statement is the role of this community in relation to the believer. Tillard’s understanding of this relationship is two-fold: on the one hand, it is closely linked with his understanding of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. (1994: 216) This relationship is understood to be reciprocal in that Scripture is not only the Word of God it is the *Gospel of God*, as such it is “the truth which affords salvation.” (1994: 217) Therefore in order for this truth to be actualized, it’s authentic meaning needs to be recognized (received) and disseminated to all of humanity across time and history. The role of Tradition is, therefore, the identification and dissemination of the authentic meaning of revelation. In this sense the role of the community is to foster and encourage the believer to partake - in communion with the community of believers - in the authentic revelation of God. On the other hand, the relationship between believer and community relates closely to the relationship between “Word” and “Sacrament”, in his own words: “The efficacy of the Word has to be embodied in the materiality of the signs to make real the concrete *communion* which God wills.” (1994: 218) Articulated in another fashion: the Word does not simply promise salvation, the community does not simply disseminate the authentic meaning of the Word: it actualizes this message in and through the Sacraments of the church, which are the means of dissemination and the means of salvation.

For Tillard Catholic faith then is the articulation of a dynamic relationship: “the relation between god’s initiative and human freedom is ‘sacramentalised’, mediated and brought about, in the relation between the Church and the believer.” (1994: 228) The justification for this faith, understood as sacramental, lies in the fact that “the responsible self cannot decide only with its own free will, isolated from the mind of the Church. It decides and acts in the koinonia (communion) of the Body of Christ.” (1994: 228) In other words Tillard effectively presents salvation, the purpose of revelation and the focus of faith, in terms of a functional insularity, a dynamic internal to a specific community: this is effectively what I am referring to as the internal phase of the confession that characterizes the Catholic community.

If, as I have argued, the event of God’s self-revelation takes place in human history, then Catholic faith as confession is much more than the stating of belief that is the “I believe.” Revelation serves to orient the subject towards a specific relation to its existential reality, therefore, the fact that this relation calls for the active articulation of the message of love, hope and salvation that is disclosed in the act of God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ, is fundamental to the dynamic relation between revelation, faith and salvation. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 1816) Faith as fidelity is an active bearing witness to the faith; it is not the ‘having’ of faith but the active confession of faith (praxis) that defines fidelity. Brian O. McDermott, in a paper entitled “Faith in the God of Jesus Christ”, explains that while faith in Jesus Christ is manifested through belonging to a community, whose defining characteristics are belonging and believing, faith also implies sharing in the two-fold mission of Jesus during His ministry in this world: the proclamation and preparation of the Kingdom Of God. (1989: 48-49) In other words, to Tillard’s Sacramental faith McDermott adds Prophetic faith. The logic of prophetic faith is
driven by an impulse generated by the knowledge that God’s plan has not yet been fully realized. Fundamental to this aspect of faith is the act of universal dissemination: the proclamation and preparation of the Kingdom of God. In this sense McDermott highlights an engagement with the broader community of the world, an engagement conducted on the grounds of and in terms of a fidelity to what Catholics understand as the will of God or the divine plan: salvation.

For McDermott this engagement with the world is defined by a deeper engagement with Jesus through prayer and praxis. Through prayer, he argues, the believer understands that believing in Jesus involves walking his path, and that means praxis, a relation to the world that aims to change the conditions of humanity, to actualize God’s plan for Salvation in the places it has yet to be heard. (1989: 57-58) He argues “we learn how to be disciples of Jesus not by slavish imitation of the stories about him in the gospels but by learning what discipleship in our own time and place require...[by]…meditat[ing] on the gospels in the light of the sign of the times.” (1989: 58) Catholic faith is then the articulation of a dynamic relationship that is intimately linked to an engagement with the conditions of humanity in the world at large, conditions that are determined according to a specific index: the divine plan of salvation. In other words fidelity is to Jesus’ mission, not simply to the figure of Jesus; as such it involves a confrontation with the world at large; a confrontation that constitutes the external phase.

To sum up then, the space that Catholic discourse inhabits and that therefore produces Catholic subjects is opened up, according to this discourse, by the direct intervention of God in this world. The event that signals this intervention is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. That which defines a Catholic subject is faith and faith is the embodied confession of a particular interpretation of this event. This interpretation is mediated by the community of the faithful at large: the church. What positively determines faith is fidelity – mediated and performed within community - to a particular interpretation of this event. This interpretation is that God offers humanity eternal salvation through the sacrifice of the life of Jesus. This sacrifice is understood as the perfect performance of fidelity not simply to God’s will, but significantly, it represents fidelity on the part of God to humanity (love). The sacrifice of the life of God through Jesus is therefore the event that determines the space within which the Catholic subject exists. The Christological Imperative is then - as a response to this original act of fidelity - an active fidelity to this interpretation of the event that is the death of Jesus. For the Catholic subject this involves embodying an orientation to reality that is defined by this very interpretation: one of imitation, of confession, of being “prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow him along the way of the cross.” (Lumen Gentium 1964: 42)

The Christological Imperative as an Anti-Corporeal Logic

It is this event that is the focus of Mel Gibson’s film The Passion of the Christ. The film itself has generated a great deal of controversy, its graphic and unremitting violence has more often than not been the focus of the many and polarized reviews of the film worldwide. One such critique is Bjorn Krondorfer’s paper “Mel Gibson’s Alter Ego: A Male Passion for Violence”, which argues that the core of the film “is the visual display of a human body systematically beaten into a bloody pulp.” (2004: 16) He states that this “display of gratuitous violence ultimately leaves the film empty of religious content,” because “what this film shows is the undoing of a human rather than a story of the resurrected Christ.” (2004: 17-18) Krondorfer’s critique, then, can be summed up as follows: Gibson’s film by failing to adequately treat the resurrection of Jesus fails to accurately represent a key component of the dominant interpretation of the Passion narratives: that “suffering is not just an annihilating and nihilistic experience but, instead, carries some redemptive meaning.” (2004: 17) In the now famous interview with Primetime correspondent Dianne Sawyer, Gibson responds to the critics of his film by suggesting that the people who have an issue with this film do not have an issue with him but with the Gospels themselves. (Gibson 2004) At stake in the debates surrounding the film, I argue, is an interpretation of the Christological Imperative that drives catholic subjectivity and its relation to the body. In this section I argue that the significance of Gibson’s film is that it brings the modern Catholic subject face to face with an anti-corpooreal logic that is its very condition of possibility. In other words I want to suggest that Gibson’s film is absolutely saturated with religious content precisely because it portrays the “undoing of a human.”

It is with the words of the prophet Isaiah that Gibson begins and frames his film: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by his wounds we are healed.” The immediate question, though, is “why did Jesus have to die in
order to secure eternal salvation?” Any attempt to understand Catholic subjectivity cannot ignore the need for the function of a notion of eternal salvation: it is the very horizon that generates the intelligibility of the Catholic subject; the index of all catholic actions, utterances and discourses. This need is articulated by the prophecy itself: our “transgressions” and our “iniquities”; in short our sins, required the death of Jesus. The reason for this is quite complex, sin, according to Catholic discourse, is a fundamental condition of being human: you are born with it. Quoting St Thomas, the church declares that “the whole human race is in Adam ‘as one body of one man.’ By this ‘unity of the human race’ all men are implicated in Adam’s sin.” (Catholic Catechism 1994: 404) Accordingly, the church initiates subjects into membership through the ritual of baptism, especially infants. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 403) The rite of baptism, whether of infants or adults, involves the symbolic washing of the body, which makes it clear that, even in an infant who has yet to commit “personal sin”, there is need to wash away the sin that humanity carries with it as its birthright: the body itself; after all are we not of “one body” with Adam? Sin is then, according to this discourse, an ever-present offence to God. The body itself, the human body, is therefore very much the zero point of sin, that which sin always signifies: a concern for the body as body, as corporeal; the body, however, does not simply signify sin, it makes sin manifest, is always already the very presence of sin; consequently, the body is that for which atonement must be made.

Atoning for transgression of the laws of God is fundamental to both Judaic and Catholic performances of faith. In the books believed to be authored by Moses, specifically Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, we find in exhaustive detail the rules and regulations that define an existence in covenant with God. These texts prescribe rituals of sacrifice, the necessary performance of which restores the subject to covenant with God through the function of a substitute whose death symbolically cleanses the subject of sin. A significant difference between the two discourses is that Catholicism traces its particular faith to an act of atonement that is considered to complete and perfect these very rituals: the crucifixion of Jesus. (RCIA 2003: xi) This point is crucial, the rites of the Hebrew Bible, according to Catholicism, were basically ineffective. (RCIA 2003: xi) The problem of effectively atoning for sin is, quite simply, that humans should, but only God can. In order then, for God to substitute for humanity, God, according to the discourse, became human: in the person of Jesus “the Word [God] became flesh.” (John 1:14) To take the place of humanity in the sacrificial rites that constitute and re-constitute the Divine Law, God collapses the difference between deity and humanity simply by acquiring a body; the Hypostatic Union means exactly this: Jesus is both fully God and fully human. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 464-69) It is these two natures, existing in perfect harmony that allows for the interpretation of Jesus as the substitute sacrifice that generates “eternal salvation for humanity.” (Col. 2:9) To present the gift of salvation God effectively enters the world as God-man. The significant point here is that in order for God to atone for our sins, it is necessary that he become one of us, to share in the condition that requires atonement, therefore, according to the definition of this condition it is effectively the body that signifies the new humanity of God that legitimates the substitution: “as one man’s trespasses led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men (sic)” (Rom. 5:18)

By becoming human God, in the person of Jesus, is in a position to make the gift of eternal salvation to humanity by sacrificing his life according to the God-prescribed method for atonement. It is this act in all its violence that Gibson’s film concentrates on. As I have shown in the previous section this act is understood as an act of extraordinary love. The relentlessly graphic violence of Gibson’s film is designed to heighten the intensity of this very love. He says, “I wanted it to be shocking…extreme…so that they [audience] see the enormity of that sacrifice. To see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness.” (Gibson 2004) To Catholic discourse the violence itself functions as further proof of the very need for this sacrifice: “It is precisely in the Passion, when the mercy of Christ is about to vanquish it, that sin most clearly manifests its violence.” (Catholic Catechism 1994: 1851) In this sense the dominant interpretation argues that the very nature of sin, the very need for humanity to be redeemed is “inscribed on the body”, to invoke the famous Foucauldian expression, of Jesus. In this interpretation, therefore, eternal salvation is abstracted from the “murder” of Jesus: “from the greatest moral evil ever committed – the rejection and murder of God’s only Son, caused by the sins of all men – God…brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption.” (Catholic Catechism 1994: 312)

The problem here is that the discourse simultaneously maintains two specific, and I would argue logically inconsistent, causal relations for this event. The intelligibility of this event is marked by God’s willingness to sacrifice, a feat that demonstrates the love God has for humanity. In this sense, God wills the event in order to offer humanity salvation. The
discourse, however, also maintains that this love is manifested as a reaction to the material events that manifest this gift: the death of Jesus is simultaneously held to be God’s gift and proof of humanity’s fallen nature. The redemptive meaning that Krondorfer claims the film lacks is given by the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection quite literally signifies a victory over death and therefore over sin, which caused death to exist. That which signifies this rebirth is the resurrection of the body of Jesus. But if this body is now cleansed of sin, it is no longer the body of humanity; a point which would in no way contradict the discourse itself, except that if this is in fact the case then all bodies should now be cleansed of sin. But this is not the case; we, as humans only get our new bodies, the eternal bodies that mark our eternal salvation at the end of history, on the last day in a mass resurrection of the faithful. (Catholic Catechism 1994: 1002-1003)

The anti-corporeal logic that I am arguing is at the centre of the Christological Imperative, is masked by the blurring (displacement) of a causal relation in this event. The problem I have with this interpretation is this: If the death of Jesus is understood as a sacrificial gift that secures for all of humanity salvation, and this gift is understood as the plan for salvation devised by God, then the gift itself does not manifest until Jesus dies and is resurrected. In other words, the gift is not the appearance of Jesus in this world. The gift, as eternal salvation, is manifested by the death and resurrection of Jesus, by the sacrifice of his life and therefore as the intention of God the gift cannot be abstracted from the event as sacrifice. It is the very condition that gives rise to the event itself: “it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb.10:10) If we trace God’s intention through the events that manifest it we cannot ignore that what is sacrificed, what constitutes the surface upon which the divine will is inscribed, is the body of Jesus. If the death of Jesus, the sacrifice of his life is necessary for the gift of eternal salvation - manifested in the resurrection of Jesus – and the legitimacy of this sacrifice is given by its complete and effective performance of the rituals of atonement – a performance for which God needed to become human in order to share in our condition – then we need to focus on what exactly it is that makes God human. If the purpose of the sacrifice is to defeat sin and the zero point of sin is the body, then clearly the gift of eternal life is presented to humanity through the ritualistic God-prescribed destruction of that which requires atonement: the body. In other words Catholic discourse operates through a circular logic that obfuscates the fundamentally anti-corporeal nature of the event of self-revelation by displacing responsibility onto the subject of discourse. The crucifixion in so far as it is understood as necessary to redeem humanity (original sin) effectively renders null and void a fundamental component of the dominant interpretation of this event: that God chose to become human, and that this choice was guided by love for humanity. The crucifixion and resurrection itself undoes, because of the very necessity for these events, that which renders it intelligible as a gift. Hatred is indeed ‘inscribed on the body’ of Jesus, it is not, however, the hatred of Humanity, it is God’s hatred of the body.

Therefore, if Jesus is in fact the Son of God, and his actions - insofar as they are held to be the paradigmatic performance of fidelity – form the basis of the Christological Imperative, then, insofar as he is the Son of God, he has unmediated (hypostatic union) access not only to the divine will, but to its intentions. That being the case two significant points follow: firstly, if Jesus is actively and perfectly performing fidelity to the will of God and has unmediated access to it, then it seems logically impossible to blame anyone but God for his death. The death of Jesus is, for all intents and purposes, the noble suicide of God. Secondly, if eternal salvation is bought by the death of Jesus and is signified by the resurrection, then the life that he is actively sacrificing is marked by its condition as human. (If life as we know it is mortal – a condition generated by the fall – then God cannot sacrifice His (sic) life until he acquires one.) In this configuration the life that is at stake is human life, God becomes human in order to have a life that can be sacrificed, but if that is the case, and according to the discourse it is, then the only thing that is actively sacrificed in this event is the body itself.

In the Hebrew rituals of sacrifice the human body occupies a privileged space, the very nature of this sacrifice as substitutionary means that the body itself is spared the punishment of sin. In the Catholic re-articulation of this ritual the body itself becomes the target. That which lends intelligibility to the dominant interpretation of this event, that which actively articulates the human component and is therefore the solitary marker for that humanity in this event is embodiment. If then the Catholic through the rite of baptism shares in the death and resurrection of Jesus – the new covenant – then Catholicism as a discourse has as its condition of possibility an anti-corporeal logic: salvation as the gift of eternal life from God through the sacrifice of His (sic) Son Jesus is delivered in the aftermath of the violent destruction of that which constitutes the greatest affront to God, the body. If then a Catholic subject is defined by fidelity to the dominant discursive interpretation of this event - a fidelity marked by the Christological Imperative - then the Catholic subject/soul is not simply
the martyr figure? Secondly, and to my mind more importantly, if, as I have argued, the Christological Imperative is the fulfillment of a religious mandate to imitate Christ, then what kind of choice is actually available to position oneself in extraordinary circumstances and yet manage to act in extraordinary ways: martyrdom is more than entertain various possibilities; they put their lives behind the truth." (2000: 2-3) Martyrdom then, like the death of Jesus is considered a selfless act, a gift. My first intervention then is as follows: If a Catholic subject is produced or called into existence by the act of self-revelation by God - the purpose of which is to offer humanity salvation – and the Catholic subject is defined in terms of a fidelity to this event, then it stands to reason that the Catholic subject, as fidelity to this event, is entirely cognizant of a particular economy of salvation that determines not only its relation to reality, but more important, the interpretation of this event. In this sense then, the Catholic subject is also aware that "by martyrdom a disciple is [not only] transformed into an image of his master" (Lumen Gentium 1964: 42) but the martyr "is raised up to perfection...and is already in possession of eternal salvation" (Sacrosanctum Concilium 1963: 104) Given that the goal of a Catholic subject is eternal salvation, and that the subject actively chooses death in this event, it is difficult to maintain a reading of this act as "selfless." The dominant reading of martyrdom and its intelligibility as selfless sacrifice is therefore dependent on a subject who chooses to declare fidelity in extreme circumstances while simultaneously being ignorant of a fundamental tenet of that very faith.

1. The extracts from Lumen Gentium and Sacrosanctum Concilium at the beginning of this paper articulate in a nutshell the significance of the figure of the martyr to Catholic discourse: the martyr represents, in as much as a martyr "lays down his life for Christ and his brothers", the perfect performance of faith as heroic witness. Robert Royal, whose text The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century is subtitled "a comprehensive world history", echoes the interpretation of this death as heroic and selfless. He says "the martyrs...clearly are not driven by a selfish gene...martyrs are real human beings...who were fearful when they were placed in extraordinary circumstances and yet managed to act in extraordinary ways...martyrs do more than entertain various possibilities; they put their lives behind the truth." (2000: 2-3) Martyrdom then, like the death of Jesus is considered a selfless act, a gift. My first intervention then is as follows: If a Catholic subject is produced or called into existence by the act of self-revelation by God - the purpose of which is to offer humanity salvation – and the Catholic subject is defined in terms of a fidelity to this event, then it stands to reason that the Catholic subject, as fidelity to this event, is entirely cognizant of a particular economy of salvation that determines not only its relation to reality, but more important, the interpretation of this event. In this sense then, the Catholic subject is also aware that "by martyrdom a disciple is [not only] transformed into an image of his master" (Lumen Gentium 1964: 42) but the martyr "is raised up to perfection...and is already in possession of eternal salvation" (Sacrosanctum Concilium 1963: 104) Given that the goal of a Catholic subject is eternal salvation, and that the subject actively chooses death in this event, it is difficult to maintain a reading of this act as "selfless." The dominant reading of martyrdom and its intelligibility as selfless sacrifice is therefore dependent on a subject who chooses to declare fidelity in extreme circumstances while simultaneously being ignorant of a fundamental tenet of that very faith.

2. Daniel Boyarin, in his text Dying for God, defines martyrdom as “deaths that are seen, murders in public places.” (1999: 21) Boyarin’s primary point is that not only has there “been a kind of general collusion between Jewish and Christian scholars to insist on...[a]...total lack of contact and interaction” (1999: 7) between Judaism and Christianity in the first four centuries of the Common Era, but that early Christians would have seen themselves as Jewish - both in their self-conception and religious practice - effectively meaning that the work of ideological separation was being carried out explicitly at a textual level. Martyrdom, he argues, and the conversations (discourses) around it are fundamentally the site where this work of separation is manifested. (1999: 35; 65) A significant aspect in this separation was that in early antiquity “for the first time the death of the martyr was conceived of as the fulfilling of a religious mandate per se and not just the manifestation of a preference ‘for violent death’ over ‘compliance with a decree.’ For Christians...it was a central aspect of the experience of Imitation of Christ.” (1999: 95) My second intervention then takes two forms: firstly, if, as Boyarin argues, martyrdom was conceived of as the fulfillment of a religious mandate to imitate Christ, then what kind of choice is actually available to the martyr figure? Secondly, and to my mind more importantly, if, as I have argued, the Christological Imperative is the...
manifestation of an anti-corporeal logic that drives the subject as fidelity, then what possible meaning can sacrificing your life – understood as your body – for the truth of faith possibly have when that very truth is the destruction of the body?

3. In his text Salvation at Stake Brad Gregory declares that his work seeks to make “not only a historical contribution to our understanding of early modern Christianity, but also a methodological contribution to how historians approach it.” (1999: 2) Gregory presents his project in terms of an analysis that allows the martyrs to speak for themselves, that seeks simply to understand of early modern Christianity, but also a methodological contribution to how historians approach it. To that end he proposes four conceptual co-ordinates that need to be present for an event to be interpreted as martyrdom:

- The notion of martyrdom must exist and be available to contemporaries.
- There must be people willing to punish the heterodox with death.
- There must be people willing to die for their religious convictions.
- There must be survivors who view those executed for their religious convictions as martyrs. (1999: 27)

My third and final intervention is threefold: firstly, if martyrdom, to be significant, requires a community that is willing to interpret the death as martyrdom (Gregory), and martyrdom is significant in that it makes manifest the truth of eternal salvation as a gift (Lumen Gentium) – a fundamental component of the self-revelation of God, the very notion of martyrdom that Gregory requires to exist – and it is the task of this community of the faithful to interpret the authenticity of revelation, as “the responsible self cannot decide only with its own free will, isolated from the mind of the Church,”(Tillard) then does this not effectively displace the defining moment of martyrdom? To the extent that this moment is no longer within the temporal borders of what constitutes the material event? Secondly, if “all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow him along the way of the cross through the persecutions the Church will never fail to suffer,”(Lumen Gentium) then does not the discursive fact that the community – that collective body of the faithful that defines the authentic revelation that gives rise to the subject (Tillard) - defines itself as always already persecuted not suggest that the subject is always already the effect of a discourse that has sublimated the notion of persecution? With the consequence that persecution is primarily an effect of the dynamics internal to the logic of the subject? And finally, if this is the case, and the Catholic subject is always already a potential martyr, then does this not effectively mean that the discourse of the martyr pre-exists the event? With the consequence that the discourse of martyrdom as persecution and the figure the martyr as persecuted is not necessarily abstracted from a material event of persecution?

The interventions into the discourse of martyrdom that I have suggested also have, I argue, implications for thinking with Foucault. In Discipline and Punish Foucault traces the disappearance of a specific modality of power that inscribed itself explicitly on the body of the subject. The paradigmatic example of this modality is the power of the sovereign that Foucault describes in the execution of Damiens the regicide. This analysis has quite often been taken up by theorists analyzing the development and history of Catholic discourses of martyrdom. In Foucault’s analysis the discourse that produces Damiens as a subject is that of the sovereign, as such Foucault limits his analysis to the investigation of a particular power relation that both names the event and the subjects that it produces. If a significant consequence of what I am referring to as the Christological Imperative is that the discourse of martyrdom is not necessarily abstracted from the event but is perhaps applied to the event - with the further consequence that the martyr is not produced by the event but produces the event as martyrdom – then taking up Foucault’s work involves analyzing what amounts to a double inscription. There is more than one power relation being invoked in the production of a particular event as martyrdom. Analyzing the event in terms of a power relation that manifests itself materially as persecution serves firstly to simply confirm the dominant discursive interpretation of the event; and secondly serves to further obfuscate the vested interest that the persecuted Catholic community has in persecution. What Foucault’s work lacks, and by extension what is lacking from the majority of the work researching the history and development of Catholic discourses of martyrdom that take up Foucault’s line of reasoning is an analysis of the role of the community of the faithful in the event of martyrdom. This analysis involves an engagement not simply with Catholic discourse as a matrix of practices, but more significantly an engagement with Catholic discourse as a matrix of theological notions. It is the subject’s investment, commitment and attachment to a particular defining discourse (the one that it bears witness to not the one in front of whom it testifies) that needs to be analyzed. That which the martyr bears witness to is not simply the authority of God, but more significantly, the subject’s belief in this authority.
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Notes

1. This prophecy articulates a functional interpretation of the death of Jesus that is perfectly harmonious with the dominant Catholic interpretation. It represents an image of Jesus that rests on his actions (sacrifice) and what he achieved: our healing, our eternal salvation. The condition of possibility for the gift of eternal salvation is the gift of sacrifice: “Jesus laid down his life for us…freely accepted death on behalf of the world’s salvation.” (Lumen Gentium, 42) Accepting this interpretation not only opens a frame of intelligibility for Gibson’s film, but is also, as I have argued in the previous section, the very notion that opens the space for a catholic subjectivity. In order for this action to be considered a gift, it seems to me that it in some way should provide for humanity something that it needs.

2. Catholic discourse proposes a humanity in need of saving; indeed large volumes of texts are dedicated to demonstrating not only the need for salvation, but the fact that humanity is undeserving of salvation. See for example Catholic Catechism, 386-87.

3. The New Testament defines sin in both passive - a standard humanity fails to achieve, an iniquity – and active terms: as wilful transgression of God’s laws. Sin in this sense is both testament to an inward corruption of character and an active transgression of the laws of God. The mark humanity fails to achieve, or the laws it transgresses are established by God in the role of Creator. Catholicism emphasizes the godless self-centeredness of sin: that sin is an offence against God. The notion that sin is an attempt to place humanity above God is a key concept in the determination of sin. See for example Catholic Catechism, 1852-76; 2303; 2539; etc.

4. The Christian fact that is the fall of humanity does not serve to obliterate responsibility, indeed it creates the very notion. Adam and Eve are the paradigmatic examples of sin and are held responsible for the state of sin to which each human is believed to be born into. See Catholic Catechism 387; 1440; 1871-72.

5. The consequences of the fall, while numerous, affected human nature in two significant ways: firstly humanity is now, because of the fall, mortal; and secondly, this human nature is always already transmitted, through birth, ‘in a fallen state;’ in other words sinful. (Catholic Catechism, 404) My point is that, surely the necessity to baptize an infant before it has had
opportunity to willfully indulge its sinful nature points to the very fact that it is the body, in its corporeal state, with its hungers and drives (sinful nature) that is the locus of sin.

6 It is important to understand that these rituals are prescribed by God; they are considered a mark of God’s love for his people that he would give to them a mechanism through which they could atone. Though these rituals are extremely intricate and varied it is, I believe, possible to outline some general characteristics. When employing the metaphor of sacrifice to interpret the crucifixion the New Testament refers only to those of the animal variety. Of these the Old Testament knows four main types: the burnt offering, the peace offering, sin and guilt offerings. In each of these sacrificial rites we can discern five main stages:

- The first stage is the offering of the animal that is to be sacrificed. To draw the animal near signifies that the worshipper is making clear its intention to worship and to re-establish the fellowship with God.
- The second stage is the ‘laying on’ of hands on the animal, and is often interpreted in one of two ways: either as an identification with the offering, or as the symbolic transferal of sin to the victim.
- The third stage is the actual killing of the animal. This step is crucial in that it is the recognition that transgression of the laws of god is punishable by death.
- The fourth stage involves the manipulation of the blood of the animal which is collected in the previous step.
- The final stage is that of the burning on the altar of prescribed parts of the animal. This step is interpreted and is justified according to a variety of Old Testament sources, particularly Leviticus 1:9, 13, 19 ‘[it was] an aroma pleasing to the Lord.’ (Morris, 45-49) #36

7 If only in implication, the very need for the eternal salvation that Catholicism claims to provide would point to an ineffectual ritual that this discourse itself completes and supersedes in the sense of once and for all. See Eph. 5:2; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 9:14; Rom. 8:3; 1 Pet. 3:18. See also RCIA, xi.