



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE US SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Contemplation: Can I Get a Witness?

In the early days of the Vincentian Family, St. Vincent instructed the priests of the Mission to regularly read [The Martyrology](#), a listing of the names and stories of the Church's martyrs. St. Louise required the Daughters of Charity to read it daily. In this way, they would be reminded of the great cloud of witnesses before them who had truly imitated Christ, which all the faithful are called to do.

The Catholic Church defines martyrdom as *"the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death."* [CCC, 2473] At the center of martyrdom is not only the death of the martyr, but the act of witness. Indeed, the very word martyr derives from the Greek word meaning "witness", and while few of us will ever face the threat of death for our faith, we all are called to bear witness to it. Vincentians, in particular, are called to bear witness, not only in word, but through our actions, *"to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love."* [Rule, Part I, 1.2]

Vincent, hearing the story of a Daughter of Charity, who, though gravely ill herself, had left her bed to help a sick person, and died from her exertions soon after, suggested that she was, by the witness of her actions, *"a martyr to charity."* [CCD X:409] He suggested that *"there are several kinds of martyrdom"*, and that to be a martyr may not necessarily entail dying in a specific act, but it did require action. In other words, to share the Gospel *"not in words but by conforming one's life to that of Jesus Christ and witnessing His truth and sanctity to the faithful and to unbelievers; consequently, to live and die like that is to be a martyr."* [CCD XI:167ff]

In this same light, Blessed Frédéric argued that *"to be a martyr is possible for every Christian"*, not by dying instantly, but by giving our whole lives, however long they may be, to God and the neighbor. To be a martyr, he said, is *"to give back to heaven all that one has received: his money, his blood, his entire soul."* [90, to Cumier, 1835] For Frédéric, then, a martyr's life could also end in natural death, after many years, as long as those years are lived as true witnesses to the truth of the faith. In this sense, martyrdom is exemplified by our Vincentian virtue of [selflessness](#), in which we *"[die] to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice; members share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves in a spirit of generosity."* [Rule, Part I, 2.5.1]

By virtue of living, we also are dying. The choice we have before us, then, is not whether to die, but how to live: as observers, or as witnesses, testifying through our example to the faith, to the truth, and to the one true hope that transcends death. As Frédéric reminds us *"Religion is less for thinking than for acting and, if it teaches how to live, it is so we may learn how to die."* [70, to Falconnet, 1834]

Contemplate

Do I concern myself more with giving assistance, or with giving witness to Christ's love?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)