

TIMELY TOPICS



DIocese of Columbus, Office of Religious Education and Catechesis

Modern Martyrs: A Lenten Primer

What to offer up during Lent? Maybe you usually give up chocolate or snacking or decide to do something positive like going to daily mass more frequently; but have you ever considered sacrificing your life? No, this is not to suggest being morbid or suicidal, but rather to challenge our usual perceptions of what Lenten sacrifice is and what it could be.

Lent is not only about “giving up” something. Rather it is a special time set aside to re-evaluate more carefully our lives, acknowledge and repent of our sins, and purify our hearts so that we can be conformed more closely to Christ and share at Easter in the new life won for us. But do we really understand how special this time is? Do we fully realize the immediate and long term graces, or gifts, that abound if only we open ourselves to God’s presence and action in our lives?

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“GIVING UP” SOMETHING.

Martyrs throughout the centuries have responded to the grace offered by God to those who remain faithful to the end. They have understood the eternal consequences of their actions and remained true to their convictions. In so doing, they have purified their hearts for final union with Christ. Certainly not everyone needs to suffer death by martyrdom in order to find unity with Christ; but the sacrifice of the martyrs can be a call to each of us to re-evaluate how much we are willing to let go of our own agenda and/or the pressures of the world around us in order to remain faithful to our God.

The following stories of several groups of modern martyrs challenge us to embrace this Lent as a real opportunity to change and purify our lives.

25 Mexican Martyrs

The Catholic Church has experienced persecution at various times throughout Mexican history. One of the most devastating periods was during 1926-1929. While there is no official count of how many lay people, religious and clergy were killed, a representative group of 25 priests and lay persons were canonized in 1992. This group, as well as dozens of individuals such as the well-known St. Miguel Pro, refused to stop practicing the faith and preaching the word of God, despite government attempts to eliminate public

worship, close churches and threaten individuals living the Catholic faith. The majority of the 25 Mexican Martyrs were killed by firing squad. Their famous phrase, *Viva Cristo Rey*, “Long Live Christ the King,” encapsulated their profound belief in the Supreme Power of God. They are commemorated on May 25.

Martyrs of Nowogrodek

On August 1, 1943, 11 sisters from the Religious Community of the Holy Family of Nazareth were driven into the woods outside the Polish town of Nowogrodek, shot to death by Nazis and thrown into a mass grave. These brave women died in exchange for the lives of 120 others.

The sisters first arrived in Nowogrodek in 1929, but were not immediately welcomed by the Polish community. General sentiment toward the sisters changed over the next decade due to the loving witness and service they provided. When World War II broke out, the Russians seized control of the town and disbanded the sisters, forcing them to take off their habits and abandon their community life. Two years later the Germans took over. Though the Nazis allowed the sisters to return to their convent and wear their habits, they brutally rounded up Jews, priests and any other “dissenters,” shooting many in the town square. From July 17-19, 1943, a random group of 120 people, mostly men, were arrested. The sisters prayed that they might be sacrificed instead of this group and their prayers were answered; the 120 prisoners were set free in exchange for the sisters’ deaths. Their feast day is August 1.

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Korean Martyrs

Catholicism came to Korea in the seventeenth century, with the faithful suffering various persecutions throughout the next 300 hundred years. In these persecutions, however, were the seeds of great faith. In a matter of three years following the martyrdom of two Korean converts in 1791, the Church in Korea grew to over 4,000 members! The government's sentiments towards Korean Catholics would ebb and flow throughout the centuries. Missionaries would be allowed to come and then forced to leave for large periods of time, requiring the steadfast leadership of Korean lay people and native clergy to maintain the faith. Some of the most severe persecutions were in 1839, 1846, and 1866, when over 8,000 laity, religious and priests were tortured and killed. Their crime: practicing a faith that was considered "alien" to the native culture. In 1984 John Paul II canonized 103 Koreans from this group. Their witness continues to enkindle the faith of persecuted Christians around the world. Their feast day is September 20.

Ugandan Martyrs

In 1964, the 22 African Martyrs were canonized. These brave young men of the royal court of King Mwanganga of

Buganda were killed in the persecutions of 1885-1887. The Bugandan kings held complete authority over the lives and actions of their subjects, particularly those at court. To deny a king his wish in any way meant certain death. Mwanganga grew to resent the growing influence of Christian missionaries in his court. When some of the young pages began to resist his sexual advances and to spend time learning their catechism, Mwanganga called his court together and demanded that those who prayed stand on one side and that those who did not, stand with the king. Those siding against the king were condemned to be burnt alive. The king then threw out all foreign missionaries, but when missionaries returned after Mwanganga's death they found five hundred faith-filled Christians and over 1,000 catechumens waiting for them! The Ugandan Martyrs are commemorated on June 3.

These stories are by no means exhaustive. There are many, many, other examples of martyrs who in recent times have stood up to the challenges of secular society and purified their hearts with the grace of God. May this Lent be a time that we truly recognize and accept the possibility of conversion, in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom and with whom we minister. ✨

Questions for Reflection

Follow the linked subheads in the previous article for more complete summaries of the lives of these saints. After reading these accounts, take some time to consider how their struggles resemble similar struggles we endure today. We might not be faced with direct attacks on our physical lives, but there are certainly many things that try to destroy our spiritual lives. Share these questions (or ones you develop on your own) with your staff, catechists or learners to help deepen their Lenten journey as well.

The Mexican Martyrs were denied the sacraments and forced to deny the Kingship of God in their lives.

- ☞ What are the "firing squads" in your life that "target" and seek to destroy your faith?
- ☞ If you were mocked or ridiculed for going to Church on Sunday, how would you respond?

The Martyrs of Nowogrodek offered up themselves as a willing sacrifice for others.

- ☞ How often are we willing to give up our own interests or comfort for the good of another?
- ☞ How difficult is it, to treat those we see on a regular basis with love and charity?

The Korean Martyrs were often left without a shepherd. Despite the newness of their conversion, they kept the faith without the external supports we often take for granted.

- ☞ How would you practice your faith if most everyone around you did not?
- ☞ In what ways can you sustain yourself if you aren't able to receive the sacraments regularly?

The Ugandan Martyrs were rejected because they did not conform to the practices of those around them.

- ☞ How do you express love for those who seek to harm you because of jealousy and suspicion?
- ☞ How willing are you, to speak up against injustices even when it is not popular to do so or would cause you some inconvenience? What are some examples?

Ideas for every age

- ✦ Have your learners read about the lives of the martyrs from one of the groups listed, or another group with whom they identify
 - ⌘ Re-enact the story of martyrdom as a skit, in a story or mime or rap, or through drawing/painting
 - ⌘ With each story, ask the learners to articulate a thought that tells them about their own, personal faith-journeys
- ✦ Invite learners to find pictures of art-works depicting saints' lives (paintings, statues, stained-glass; they could use photographs or online images)
 - ⌘ What are some of the symbols used to indicate the saints' identity?
 - ⌘ Create designs (individually or in groups of 3) that include symbols of virtues, attributes, characteristics they want to develop or to change as a sign of purifying their hearts during Lent
 - Options: crayon, clay, paint, montage, collage
 - Black construction paper/colored tissue paper can be used for "stained-glass"
 - Not recommended for children under 10
- ✦ Use the "Questions for Reflection" in a group setting.
 - ⌘ With larger groups, divide into small clusters (3-5 persons) and give each cluster one of the four groups of martyrs' story to read, along with the related reflection questions.
 - ⌘ Provide an opportunity for private reflection and then share as a group, either verbally or on news print.
 - ⌘ *Bonus:* What Bible stories are they reminded of by the martyrs' stories?

Correlation to Certification Standards & the Graded Course of Study

National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers

1.1 Discern and address current realities in the church and the world in light of the Gospel

1.9 PCL Recognize God's activity in personal life experiences and articulate this understanding with others.

**PCL indicates competencies specific to Parish Catechetical Leaders*

Diocesan Religion Graded Course of Study

II-E. Identify the Church as the Body of Christ continuing Christ's mission of evangelization through word, worship, community and service.

IV-B. Recognize that one responds to the love of God by growing in relationship to God, others, self and all creation.

Six Tasks of Catechesis

Missionary Spirit: Respond to *God's call* whether as lay, ordained, or vowed religious, and develop a *personal apostolate* in family, Church, and society.

Resources

The Mexican Martyrs <http://www.irondequocatholic.org/index.php/Main/The25MexicanMartyrs>

The Martyrs of Nowogrodek <http://www.nazarethfamily.org/eng/spirituality>

The Korean Martyrs http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=4774

The Ugandan Martyrs http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=35

List of other groups of Martyrs <http://saints.sqpn.com/martyr-groups/>

Catholic Shopper lists a variety of books and CDs available for Lent and Easter <http://www.catholicshopper.com/products/lentenbooks.html>