

Mandela a Modern Christian Father *Simbarashe Shepherd Marundu, ofm.*

Introduction

Martyrdom is one of the oldest ways that the church used as a measuring stick for one to be considered a saint. This was done in response to the ongoing persecutions that happened in the Early Church. However, with the development of the Church, Martyrdom was redefined to go beyond the shedding of blood as the single criterion of identifying martyrs in the Church. The purpose of this essay is to discuss in detail the figure of Nelson Mandela and how his deeds can qualify him to be called a modern Christian Father while defying the criteria that the Church used. Nelson Mandela shall therefore be the character because of the various reasons that will be discussed in this essay but generally choosing him was because of how he suffered politically for the freedom of South Africa. The details in this essay will, therefore provide justification as to why Nelson Mandela can be considered a modern Christian martyr.

Understanding of Christian Martyrdom

In order to address the demands of the question under discussion, it is important that one presents what martyrdom is, its types and how it can be relevant to the life of Nelson Mandela as an icon of Christian Martyrdom. The term “martyr” comes from *martus*, a Greek word meaning a witness in a court.¹ There are three different types of martyrdom categorized in the text of the seventh- or eighth-century Cambrai Homily and these are namely, white, blue and red martyrdom.² McLarty adds that the white martyrdom for someone is when they part for the sake of God from everything that they love, although they may suffer fasting and hard work.³ The blue martyrdom is when through fasting and hard work they control their desires or struggle in penance and repentance.⁴ The red martyrdom is when they endure a cross or destruction for Christ’s sake, as happened to the Apostles when they persecuted the wicked and taught the law of God.⁵ Abogado would then reiterate that these three kinds of martyrdom take place in those people who repent well, who control their desires, and who shed their blood in fasting and labour for Christ’s

sake.⁶ Martyrdom can also politicise the relationship between the groups for example the African National Congress (ANC) party and that of the Apartheid government which Nelson Mandela fought against and suffered so much persecution including imprisonment for twenty-seven years.

Nelson Mandela and his Legacy

According to Benson, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in a small village in the south-eastern region of South Africa called the Transkei.⁷ His father was chief of the village and a member of the royal family of the Thembu tribe, which spoke the Xhosa language.⁸ As a boy, Mandela grew up in the company of tribal elders and chiefs, which gave him a rich sense of African self-government and heritage, despite the cruel treatment of blacks in white governed South Africa.⁹ Mandela was also deeply influenced by his early education in Methodist church schools and the instruction he received there set him on a path leading away from some African tribal traditions, such as an arranged marriage set up by a tribal elder, which he refused.¹⁰ Benson further continues to say that after being expelled from Fort Hare University College in 1940 for leading a student strike, Mandela obtained a degree from Witwatersrand University and in 1942 he received a degree in law from the University of South Africa.¹¹ In 1962 Mandela was again arrested, this time for leaving South Africa illegally and for inciting strikes and he was sentenced to five years in jail.¹² The following year he was tried with other leaders of Umkhonto weSizwe on a charge of high treason, following a government raid of the group's secret headquarters and Mandela was given a life sentence, which he began serving in the maximum-security prison on South Africa's Robben Island.¹³

Icon of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Nelson Mandela can be considered a Christian Martyr because he presented himself as an icon of forgiveness and reconciliation, which is also an attribute of a martyr. He did so for the sake of resolving a conflict that existed between two communities. It is said that from his tiny cell on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela championed his political party ANC in such a way that finally a black person was chosen to lead South Africa.¹⁴ His political career and enigmatic leadership were characterized by deep

sympathy, forgiveness, humility and reconciliation – virtues which were reflected in his deeds and speeches wherever he went, before and after his imprisonment on Robben Island.¹⁵ According to Hughes, the majority of the people expected Nelson Mandela to exercise revenge following his release from prison but in the actual fact he forgave even his strongest political opponents and with great humility he tried his best to reconcile different antagonistic parties.¹⁶ It can be noticed that nobody expected Mandela to be able to work closely with Frederick de Klerk, a person who belonged to the very South African regime which had brutally treated Mandela and his comrades in the ANC.

Furthermore, it was Mandela's love for peace and reconciliation which elevated him to international recognition and finally earned him the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.¹⁷ In 2012 the resolution of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee to award the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union made the world remember the historic event when Mandela was given the Nobel Peace Prize for his relentless fighting for peace in South Africa and the world at large.¹⁸ Therefore, in Nelson Mandela we see a good example of justice and peace, some of the basic tenets emphasized in Christianity as well as other world religions.¹⁹ Nelson Mandela made a presentation to the Global Convention on Peace and Nonviolence, New Delhi, India on 31 January 2004 as he said that, "Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish, regardless of race, colour, creed, religion, gender, class, caste, or any other social markers of difference."²⁰ One can already notice some attributes of a Christian Martyr as he had a vision that is aimed at attaining peace and not resorting to conflict.

Assisting and Empowering the Poor

Nelson Mandela can also be regarded as one of the modern Christian Martyrs because he fought for the rights of the poor. While commenting on politics, Nelson Mandela once said that political power should be the basis for the economic empowerment of people.²¹ He further reiterated that we should not allow politics to be relegated to trivialities chosen precisely because they salve the consciousness of the rich and powerful, and conceal the plight of the poor and powerless.²² One of the notable

things that Nelson Mandela did was that he mobilized his government to fight for the citizens languishing in need and poverty.²³ It is the poor and the exploited landless people that Nelson Mandela would urge that they should get immediate rescue hence it is pathetic to see that in Africa the gap between the rich and the poor widens every day and things like unemployment and inflation are on the increase.²⁴ These are some of the problems that Nelson Mandela was concerned about as he spoke much about the consequences of discarding the traditional African way of communal living which includes equal sharing and communal commitment.²⁵ In other words, the current socio-cultural and economic-political problems in Africa are the result of violating what South Africans call ubuntu, defined by Mandela as “that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings.”²⁶

Pan-African Commitment and International Involvement

Nelson Mandela can further be called a Christian martyr because he never stopped being involved in matters that were beyond the borders of South Africa as he continued to fight for the rights and more especially the respect for human life. In 1990, at a congress in Washington DC, Mandela called for the respect of human rights as he uttered that “...to deny people their human rights are to challenge their very humanity.”²⁷ The UN secretary general, Antonio Guterres reported on the Centenary of the birthday of Mandela as he said that Mandela also spoke about poverty on an international level as he said that overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice and it is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life, therefore while poverty persists, there is no true freedom.²⁸ Nelson Mandela International Day in 2018 marked 100 years since the birth of Nelson Mandela and this centenary was an occasion to reflect on his life and legacy, and to follow his call to “make the world a better place.”²⁹ Hence according to the United Nations exhibitions that were done were to honour Nelson Mandela’s contributions to the main areas of work of the United Nations more especially on peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development and illustrates initiatives taken by the United Nations General Assembly in recognition of the South African leader’s legacy on

conflict resolution, reconciliation, gender equality, the rights of children and other vulnerable groups, and the fight against poverty.³⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay was meant to identify one character who can be labelled a Christian Martyr and to justify the reasons why one could be labelled that. In doing so, one has presented Nelson Mandela as a modern Christian and various reasons were put forward including being an icon of forgiveness and reconciliation, the love for the poor and the ability to engage the international community for peace's sake. These are the reasons which one opined that they can very well support the cause of the martyrdom of Nelson Mandela, although this will not be understood in the context of red martyrdom but rather in the context of white martyrdom, for Mandela suffered for what he loved most, that is, freedom and peace to humanity.

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 - ³ McLarty, J. D, Early Christian Theologies of Martyrdom. (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2020) 52.
 - ⁴ McLarty, J. D, Early Christian Theologies of Martyrdom, 56.
 - ⁵ McLarty, J. D, Early Christian Theologies of Martyrdom, 59.
 - ⁶ Abogado, J. Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church. History, Motives and Theology, Available at: https://www.academia.edu/15901803/Persecution_and_Martyrdom_in_the_Early_Church_History_Motives_and_Theology Accessed 28 October 2020., 5.
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 - ⁸ Benson, M, Nelson Mandela. The Man and the Movement, 68.
 - ⁹ Mandela, N, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 43.
 - ¹⁰ Benson, M, Nelson Mandela. The Man and the Movement, 70.
 - ¹¹ Benson, M, Nelson Mandela. The Man and the Movement, 75.
 - ¹² Benson, M, Nelson Mandela. The Man and the Movement, 78.
 - ¹³ Harwood, R. Mandela. (New York: New American Library, 1987) 48.
 - ¹⁴ Harwood, R. Mandela, 90.
 - ¹⁵ Hughes, L, Nelson Mandela. Voice of Freedom. (New York: Dillon Press, 1992) 37.
 - ¹⁶ Hughes, L, Nelson Mandela. Voice of Freedom, 39.
 - ¹⁷ Davis, T. O'Loughlin. Celtic Spirituality. (Paulist Press, Classics of Western

