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## **Witnessing Christ in Their Bodies: Martyrs and Ascetics as Doxological Disciples<sup>1</sup>**

*M. Therese Lysaught*

"This is my body which is given for you" (Luke 22: 19).

"If any man would come after me, let him  
deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8: 34).

Twenty-five years ago, Paul Ramsey and Don Saliers broke new ground in the conversation among academic Protestant ethicists.<sup>2</sup> Their seminal papers, and the responses and subsequent articles contributed from a parallel session at the 1979 meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Northeast Region, sparked a new area of inquiry within religious ethics.<sup>3</sup> By 1991, Mark Searle could list 116 separate titles in his annotated bibliography of works on liturgy and social ethics.<sup>4</sup> When combined with related work in feminist, ecological, medical, and Jewish ethics, and updated to today, the bibliography increases exponentially.

Not only did the 1979 *Journal of Religious Ethics* exchange generate a new conversation, it also largely set the terms of the subsequent debate. Four strands of this initial conversation can be traced. Following Margaret Farley's lead, feminist authors generally critique liturgical practices, particularly from the perspective of social justice.<sup>5</sup> Others seek to identify a fulcrum around which the liturgy-action link pivots, generally following Saliers, who locates the intrinsic, conceptual relationship in the affections, imagination, and virtues, or Philip Rossi, who advocates a narrative approach.<sup>6</sup> Ramsey's method of exploring the theoretical link between liturgy and practical justification through detailed review of specific liturgical rites and their implications for the issues of abortion and divorce has also generated a following.<sup>7</sup> A final approach follows William Everett and Ronald

Green, positing both liturgy and human action as objects for empirical social analysis via ritual studies, anthropology, and ethnography.

Within this conversation, the term "liturgy" is broadly construed, spanning the spectrum from specific sacramental practices, such as baptism and eucharist, to a more inclusive understanding of liturgy as any action of gathered congregants.<sup>8</sup> The definition of "ethics" employed has likewise been broad and amorphous. Two main emphases within these definitions, however, can be distinguished. First, "ethics" is construed as fundamentally about decision-making. Liturgy, it is argued, forms intention, vision, character, or the "self," thereby informing decisions and shaping action. Or liturgy provides substantive conceptual warrants, beliefs about our relationship with other persons, for example, that play a role in the process of practical justification of particular choices. A second emphasis provides a normative criterion for liturgically-formed decisions and actions, arguing that Christian ethics or the Christian life has a specific shape, a shape captured under the rubric of "social justice." This latter meaning is by far the most prevalent connotation of the term "ethics" within the conversation on liturgy and ethics.<sup>9</sup> Rites, actions, and persons stand or fall insofar as they conform to canons of social justice.

This way of construing "ethics" clearly fits our twentieth-century context. If, however, the links we purport to discover between liturgy and ethics are to be valid, they must apply beyond the contemporary Western context of our conversation. Christianity is, after all, inseparable from its tradition. But here we must pause and assess, twenty-five years into our investigations. For I would like to suggest, as troubling as such a suggestion is for my own work, given its indebtedness to and immersion in the work of the past two decades, that there is a serious disconnect between our conversation and the bulk of Christian history.

Consider, for example, seminal figures from the Christian tradition, considered in their socio-historical contexts: Mary, the Apostles and disciples in the Gospels and Acts, early Christian martyrs, desert ascetics, Augustine, St. Benedict and St. Francis, Thomas à Kempis, the Radical Reformers, as well as the twentieth-century figures of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Ita Ford, to name just a few. If liturgy and ethics were in fact connected, this group would surely provide some evidence. But a careful reading of their lives in context suggests that the evidence is largely to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, by contemporary standards of "ethics," this cohort largely fails. They display little that would count as rational decision-making; often their decisions and choices seem most *irrational*. They rarely give explicit emphasis to the role of practical justification in matters of moral dilemma. In fact, they rarely seem to *have* dilemmas, particularly in instances where most contemporary Christians would at least pause. Likewise, by contemporary standards of social justice, most of these figures seem rather piously self-absorbed.<sup>11</sup> While clearly virtuous, they often count their virtues as vices, as temptations to pride and self-righteousness. While certainly concerned about behavior, about the types of lives Christians

ought to lead, little in their lives points explicitly to "ethics." Thus, looking to their lives for evidence or models of "ethics" or for furthering our understanding of how various components of the ethical process function, we come up rather empty-handed.

But models they are. Issues of the political and social construction of sainthood aside, most of the members of this communion have been designated by the church as "saints." In their very diverse ways, they are put forward as models of the Christian life. Furthermore, all were deeply immersed in liturgical practices. From communal celebrations of the Lord's supper and ascetic practices of the early church, to the constant prayer and Eucharistic devotion of the desert ascetics and Franciscans, the *Opus Dei* of the Benedictines and later monastics, and so on, liturgical immersion is a hallmark of all these figures. Nonetheless, we find little *prima facie* evidence that liturgical practice translates into what we would recognize as "ethics."

But if liturgy does not link in these lives to "ethics," must we then concede that liturgy—as many of our undergraduates would maintain—is ineffective and irrelevant? Do we find in these figures confirmation of the findings of sociological studies of contemporary Western Christians that liturgical participation leads to little discernible change in their behavior? Or, might the "data" from the tradition suggest that perhaps it is our hypothesis that is wrong? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question.

I would suggest the latter, that in the case of the historic tradition, the problem lies not with the persons but with the question we pose. In looking to their lives for evidence of the relationship between liturgy and ethics, we are asking the wrong question. Or maybe, to put it more precisely, to posit a relationship between liturgy and ethics is to make a category mistake.

For our forebears in the Communion of Saints did not seek solely to be "ethical" or to live morally upright lives; they knew that God did not call them simply to be "good" people; they suspected their own decision-making as corrupt; they sought the erasure of their "selves." Rather, they knew themselves called to follow God, to live in the divine presence, to embody and live in the Kingdom. In short, they sought to live as *disciples*. The proper question to ask them, then, is: what is the relationship between liturgy and *discipleship*.

As it is with the tradition, so it is today. I would like to propose that the contemporary discussion of liturgy and ethics, with its focus on the translation of liturgy into decision-making or evidences of social action and social justice, has been misguided.<sup>12</sup> Liturgy is not concerned with ethics or social justice or individual moral formation. Rather, liturgy concerns the worship of God and the formation of the church as a community of discipleship. Liturgy concerns God and God's intentions rather than the self and its intentions. In Christian liturgy, God does not call us to be "moral" people; God calls us to be much more—God calls us to be disciples who live in and toward the Kingdom. As such, liturgy is intrinsically linked not with ethics but with discipleship.<sup>13</sup>

This clearly is a large claim. Rather than arguing the formal claim at this juncture, however, I intend to display it by example. Taking this premise as a starting point, in what follows, I examine the relationship between liturgy and discipleship<sup>14</sup> in the lives of two different sets of Christian exemplars: two early Christian martyrs and the desert ascetics. Specifically, I will look at narratives of the lives of Sts. Polycarp, Perpetua and Felicity, Simeon Stylites and Antony. These figures are important because, at least in the Roman Catholic tradition, they have long been designated as "saints," as exemplifying in diverse ways ideals of the Christian life. As such, we are challenged to take their lives seriously, to learn from them and to let their lives be normative for us. Moreover, each reflects a deep liturgical engagement.

Based on the characters and lives portrayed in their narratives, I will argue for two claims. First, rather than simply seeking to do good in the world, to make the right decisions, or to live upright, moral lives, these figures were primarily concerned with being disciples—specifically, with witnessing to and being united with Christ. Secondly, the practice of this discipleship necessarily and indispensably entailed radical bodily transformation, a transformation mediated primarily through liturgical practices.<sup>15</sup>

### **Bodies Gored and Scorched: *Sufferentia Carnis* and Martyrial Witness**

The early Christian martyrs provide the first challenge to the claim that the test of a liturgically-formed identity is social justice. Not only are the texts silent on issues traditionally construed as social ethics, martyrdom in the early Church also fails as a candidate for a systematic ecclesiastical strategy of civil disobedience.<sup>16</sup> Worth recording was not the sort of lives the martyrs led but rather the witness provided through their deaths. The choice of the term itself signals the priority of the theological over the social, deriving as it does from the Greek *martyrein*, "to bear witness."

The early Christian martyrs also challenge one's credulity. The tortures to which the martyrs are subjected are grisly beyond contemporary comprehension; yet the martyrs meet them with equanimity, sometimes joy, and always superhuman endurance. A contemporaneous redactor of one martyr story admits to this unusual state of affairs:

Some of them were so cut to pieces by the scourges that their very vitals were plainly exposed to view, down to the inmost veins and arteries; and yet they still bore up, until even the bystanders were moved to tears of pity for them. . . . It was the same with those who were condemned to the wild beasts. The pains they endured were horrible, for they were forced to lie on beds of spikes and subjected to other varied forms of

torture, in hope that these lingering agonies would enable the Fiend to extort a recantation from them (2).<sup>17</sup>

The apparent suspension of normal parameters of human physiology have led many to discount the details in the martyr stories, especially the "improbable speechifying on the part of the martyr . . . and description of torments that no human being could long have contemplated, never mind endured," as "embellishments having little or nothing to do with historical fact."<sup>18</sup>

However, certain scholars of early Christianity have begun to challenge the certainty of this skepticism. While admitting some room for exaggeration and creative theological editorial license, Maureen A. Tilley suggests that martyr narratives depict an explicable dynamic of "the body as a field of combat on which the torturers and their victims duel."<sup>19</sup> More specifically, she argues that the ascetic practices of the early Church served as training exercises tailored to the trials presented by imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom. Specific practices of fasting, sleep deprivation, physical mortification, sexual continence, and simple repetitive prayer, she argues, served to help reconfigure Christian bodies to withstand the tortures of martyrdom. As Tilley notes:

[T]he torture victim cannot control either the intensity or the duration of the torture, but the martyrs could and did simulate both in their practice of asceticism. The type of ascetic preparation for martyrdom was tied to the sorts of tortures the martyrs would undergo, especially deprivation of food and water. Christian communities would begin fasting as soon as they realized police action was imminent. . . . Such pre-torture practices actually helped change their metabolism so that they survived longer under torture. . . . Tertullian exhorted his readers to prepare for prison . . . . What they would suffer there would not be any penalty but the *continuation of their discipline*. One trained for prison. . . . In undergoing pain, the confessors engaged in a cosmic battle in which the torturers did not merely attack the bodies of the martyrs; they even strove against God. Ascetic training brought the power of God to bear on the battlefield of the body. Christians taught their martyrs to endure pain either by escaping it or by reconfiguring its meaning. . . . Correspondence between Cyprian and the confessors at Carthage shows him teaching them to turn each instrument of torture and pain in each part of the body into a means of uniting themselves to the passion of Christ and training them in the skill of reconfiguring their own bodies.<sup>20</sup>

Careful socio-historical re-readings of the texts, then, suggest that liturgical and ascetic practice helped transform the bodies of the martyrs so that they could withstand the trials to which they were subjected.<sup>21</sup> So transformed, they could continue "following" Jesus in the ways that counted: remaining steadfast in their

faith, remaining in Christ's presence, and continuing to witness to and spread the Good News.

Two martyr narratives display this dynamic: *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the earliest surviving authentic account of Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament (c. 155-177 CE)<sup>22</sup>; and *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, the oldest surviving material one may attribute to a definite historical woman (c. 203 CE).<sup>23</sup>

### Martyrs as Witnesses

The stories of Polycarp and of Perpetua and Felicity are certainly written to witness to those in the church, to provide role models to follow as well as encouragement in the midst of persecution.<sup>24</sup> But as importantly, both accounts detail the ongoing efforts of the martyrs to witness to their persecutors. Three characters in these accounts are targets of evangelization: the guards and soldiers, the governor or tribune, and the crowds at the amphitheater. In both accounts, the soldiers charged with arresting or guarding the prisoners are deeply affected by the protagonists. Polycarp, betrayed by a tortured servant who leads the police to his place of refuge, graciously greets his captors, feeds them, and requests one last hour of prayer before he is taken away: "When they consented, he got to his feet and prayed so full of the grace of God, that two whole hours went by before he could bring himself to be silent again. All who heard him were struck with awe, and many of them began to regret this expedition against a man so old and saintly" (7). Perpetua likewise attests a similar effect on the guard: "A few days later, Pudens, the centurion in charge of the prison, began to praise us. He realized that we had a lot of courage. He let several people in to see us so that we might comfort each other" (IX.1). After his first round with the beasts, one of Perpetua's comartys, Saturus, is found backstage, still trying to convert Pudens, giving him a ring dipped in his own blood as a memento of his death (XXI.1-6).

Both accounts also record conversations between the protagonists and the Governor or Proconsul who will pronounce their sentences. In both cases, the officials exhort, threaten, and berate the prisoners, seeking to persuade them to recant, to swear the oath to Caesar, and to perform the sacrifice. Perpetua is contumacious in her steadfastness, simply repeating over and over "I am a Christian" (VI.3).<sup>25</sup> Polycarp, ever the bishop, goes one step further and challenges the Governor: "If you still think I am going to swear by Caesar's Luck, and still pretend not to know what I am, let me tell you plainly now that I am a Christian; and if you want to know the meaning of Christianity, you have only to name a day and give me a hearing" (10). When the Governor suggests Polycarp evangelize the crowd instead, he responds, "It is you whom I thought it might be worth discussing it with" (10).

But the crowds—large, loud, surly, and abusive—in the end hear the message, stand in silent awe, and some are converted. (16). In Perpetua's case, the crowds come to taunt them in prison; the condemned, in turn, witness to them: "They sent word to the public with the same firm perseverance, warning of the judgement of God, witnessing to their happiness about their martyrdom, joking about the curiosity of the bystanders. . . . So the people all went away bewildered and many of them came to believe" (XVII.2). Polycarp's death "filled all the spectators with awe, to see the greatness of the difference that separates unbelievers from the elect of God."

### **Dying Doxologically**

But why? Why did Polycarp's death "fill all the spectators with awe"? Polycarp's body behaved like no body they had seen before. In its marvelousness, the spectators witnessed one filled with Christ's power through union with Him.

The nature of Polycarp's death turns us to the question of bodily reconfiguration and how the text reads this transformation liturgically. Neither Polycarp nor Perpetua meet their deaths as sentenced. Polycarp is sentenced to be burnt alive; Perpetua is condemned to the beasts. Because of their ascetic and liturgical reconfiguration, however, both survive their designated trials and in the end must be dispatched with a blade.

I will begin with the account of Polycarp's death. Sentenced to be burnt alive, he is tied to the stake.<sup>26</sup> He prays before the fire is ignited:

As the amen soared up and the prayer ended, the men at the fire set their lights to it, and a great sheet of flame blazed out. And then we who were privileged to witness it saw a wondrous sight; and we have been spared to tell it to the rest of you. The fire took on the shape of a hollow chamber, like a ship's sail when the wind fills it, and formed a wall round about the martyr's figure; and there he was in the center of it, not like a human being in flames but like a loaf baking in the oven, or like a gold or silver ingot being refined in the furnace. And we became aware of a delicious fragrance, like the odor of incense or other precious gums. Finally, when they realized that his body could not be destroyed by fire, the ruffians ordered one of the dagger-men to go up and stab him with his weapon. As he did so, there flew out a dove, together with such a copious rush of blood that the flames were extinguished and this filled all the spectators with awe, to see the greatness of the difference that separates unbelievers from the elect of God (15-16).



Polycarp's death brings together the two liturgical motifs in this account: prayer and the eucharist. From the beginning of the story, Polycarp is engaged in the practice of constant prayer. He prays day and night during the time preceding his arrest (5). His intercessions are most thorough: "At length, when he had remembered everyone whom chance had ever brought him into contact with—small and great, known and unknown—as well as the entire world-wide Catholic church, he brought his prayer to an end" (7, 8). As we shall see with Perpetua, during his prayer, Polycarp experiences a vision—a vision which confirms to him that he will be martyred and which foretells the manner in which he will die.

As he stands on the pyre, he boldly proclaims a lengthy prayer:

'O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy blessed and beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have been given knowledge of thyself; Thou art the God of angels and powers, of the whole creation, and of all the generations of the righteous who live in thy sight. I bless thee for granting me this day and hour, that I may be numbered amongst the martyrs, to share the cup of thine Anointed and to rise again unto life everlasting, both in body and soul, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them this day in thy presence, a sacrifice rich and acceptable, even as thou didst appoint and foreshow, and dost now bring it to pass, for thou art the God of truth and in thee is no falsehood. For this, and for all else besides, I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee; through our eternal High Priest in Heaven, thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom be glory to thee and the Holy Ghost now and for all ages to come. Amen' (14).

While Boniface Ramsey discounts this as improbable "speechifying," others suggest that the words echo "the eucharistic prayer Polycarp would have said Sunday by Sunday."<sup>27</sup> Trained in prayer, the words come easily. Practiced in the Eucharist, Polycarp has himself become the Eucharistic offering, the bread and wine. He has become incorporated into Christ. As such, the fire cannot touch him. In a continuation of the Eucharistic symbolism, he becomes "like a loaf baking in the oven."

Polycarp's death suggests that his discipleship is complete—he has imitated Christ to the fullest possible extent. But the joy and calm reported of the martyrs comes not only from a sense of imitation but from a knowledge that Christ is present to them and an experience of unmediated communion with Christ. This presence begins with the vision and continues as Polycarp walks into the noisy amphitheater, a place in "such an uproar . . . that nobody could make himself heard" (8). In spite of this uproar as Polycarp steps into the arena Christ speaks to him: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man" (9). The voice is heard only by Polycarp and his friends. It is this knowledge of Christ's presence, that as with all the martyrs "the Lord was standing at their side and holding them in talk," (2) that

results in their demeanor. Polycarp, during his exchange with the Governor, is described as “overflowing with courage and joy . . . his whole countenance was beaming with grace” (12).

Perpetua’s narrative parallel’s Polycarp’s in a number of ways. Moreover, Perpetua’s embodiment and transformation figure even more prominently in her narrative. Since a complete display is beyond the scope of this paper, I will focus here on her martyrdom itself.<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned above, Perpetua and her four comartys do not meet their ends in the prescribed way. Condemned to the beasts, Perpetua and Felicity prevail. Like Polycarp, they walk calmly, at a peaceful pace, into the arena overflowing with joy, “their faces radiant, trembling with joy not fear.” Confident in her ultimate victory over the evil one and accompanied by Christ, Perpetua “stare[s] down all the spectators” (XVIII.2). Perpetua sings; her comrades reproach the spectators, infuriating them (XVIII.4-9). Their physical demeanor confounds the crowd.

Also like Polycarp, Perpetua is in control over the manner of her torture and execution. Upon entering the arena, the martyrs suffer yet another assault upon their identity, when they are forced to change clothes, being robed in the religious costumes of the local cults. The men were to be dressed as priests of Saturn and the women as priestesses of Ceres, “subject[ed] to one last indignity, to have their bodies arrayed as sacrifices to alien divinities, to die with their bodies newly vested and proclaiming a different identity.”<sup>29</sup>

Perpetua protests, and the officials relent.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the women are “brought out, stripped naked, and covered with nets” (XX.2), to fight with “a most ferocious cow.” The spectators, even as abusive as they have been thus far, find this too much for their sensibilities and “recoiled at seeing the one delicate young woman, and the other immediately post-partum with milk still leaking from her breasts” (XX.3). So the women are hastily dressed and set before the beast, by whom they are tossed and thrown, injured but not severely.

Perpetua comports herself with amazing composure during the attack, a composure that in the end exhausts the sensibilities of the crowd; the beast is removed. The text reports, however, a surprising twist: after the bout, Perpetua “woke up as if she had been dreaming”—without any memory of her duel with the beast (XX.8). Tilley surmises that this experience represents one of “hysterical fugue”; Perpetua’s editor attributes her transcendence of the event to her union with Christ, asserting not that she was denying the experience but rather that during it “she was actually caught up in the Spirit and in ecstasy” (XX.8).<sup>31</sup> As Felicity notes earlier in the text, for Perpetua “there [is] someone within me who suffer[s] for me because I [am] suffering for him” (XV.6).

As with Polycarp, Perpetua’s ability to be victorious over both the beast and the evil one is rooted in liturgical practice. Intertwined throughout the narrative are practices of prayer, baptism, and eucharist. Like Polycarp, Perpetua and her comrades in prison pray day and night. In Perpetua’s case, prayer leads at least

four times to extensive visions or dreams, experiences of union with Christ which give her certain knowledge of the future and of Christ's continuing presence with them. Through the practice of prayer, then, Perpetua trains herself to enter an altered state of consciousness when she finally is taken to the arena.

Equally powerful for Perpetua is her baptism. When the story opens, Perpetua is still a catechumen (II.1). One of the first acts of Perpetua and her comrades upon being imprisoned is to be baptised (II.4). Her baptism gives her the skill she will require for the remainder of her life of discipleship and provides an interpretive key for much of the text, for as she notes: "The Spirit told me not to ask anything from the water except for patient endurance in the flesh [*sufferentia carnis*]" (III.4).<sup>32</sup> From the moment of her baptism, her practice of patient endurance attends bodily transformations. It also prefigures her martyrdom; the final chapter, in *inclusio* fashion, returns the reader's attention to the baptism at the beginning of the story as "the people cr[y] out in testimony to [the martyrs'] second baptism "Well washed, well washed" (XXI.2).

The account closes not only with references to baptism but to eucharist as well. References to eucharistic practice occur three times in the text. Like Polycarp, it is only fitting that the martyrs' final acts reflect the practices of the Body of Christ:

Then the people called for the others to be brought to the center of the arena, so that through their own eyes, the spectators might be accessories in their murder as the sword penetrated the bodies of the martyrs. So the martyrs all got up and on their own went to the place the people wanted them to go. But first they kissed each other so they might bring their martyrdom to completion with the kiss of peace (XXI.7).

The experience of martyrdom is bracketed not only on the closing end by eucharistic practice but on the opening as well. The martyrs together celebrate a eucharistic meal prior to facing their deaths: "The day before the games, the prisoners were having their last meal which they call a *libera* or free meal. But they ate not a free meal but an *agape* or love feast" (XVII.1).

Finally, it is a eucharistic parallel in her first vision that gives Perpetua certainty that martyrdom awaits them and that gives her strengthening consolation to patiently endure in the flesh:

Next I saw the broad expanse of a garden and a grey-haired man sitting in the middle of it, dressed like a shepherd, a tall man milking a sheep. Standing around him were many thousands of people dressed in white. He raised his head and looked at me. Then he said to me: 'Welcome, child.' He called me over and gave me the cheese he milked, just about enough for a small mouthful. I took it in my cupped hands and ate it, and everyone standing around said: 'Amen.'" (IV.8).

At the end of her vision, the sweet taste of the curds lingers in her mouth.

Thus, by transformation sustained through liturgical practices, the bodies of the martyrs witness to the victory of Christ over the powers of the world and to the presence of Christ with His faithful. But this witness is not limited to their life; martyrial bodies experience one final transformation which continues their practice of discipleship: their dead bodies are transformed into relics. Polycarp's account provides the earliest account of the preservation of the relics of the martyrs.<sup>33</sup>

But the jealous and envious Evil One, who always opposes the family of the righteous, and had noticed the sublimity of his martyrdom and the unspotted record of his life since its earliest days, now saw him in the act of having a crown of immortality set upon his head, and bearing off a prize which none could dispute. He therefore proceeded to do his best to arrange that at least we should not get possession of his mortal remains, although numbers of us were anxious to do this and to claim our share in the hallowed relics. . . . However, when the centurion saw that the Jews were spoiling for a quarrel, he had the body fetched out publicly, as is their usage, and burnt. So, after all, we did gather up his bones—more precious to us than jewels, and finer than pure gold—and we laid them to rest in a spot suitable for the purpose. There we shall assemble, as occasion allows, with glad rejoicings; and with the Lord's permission we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom. It will serve both as a commemoration of all who have triumphed before, and as a training and a preparation for any whose crown may be still to come (17-18).

Even in death, then, the bodies of the martyrs continue to witness—to mediate Christ's presence due to their union with Christ, to bring the community together for worship and praise of God, and to encourage their comrades to remain faithful to their identity as Christians.

### **The Revolting as Angelic: Ascetic Discipline and Christian Witness**

Conventional wisdom holds that the desert ascetics were body-denying, anti-social gnostics concerned with personal salvation achieved through a life of self-denial and mortification. Taken at face value, many of their practices are difficult to understand as consistent with the Gospel and the Christian life. Although rooted in Gospel injunctions,<sup>34</sup> the ascetics do not literally imitate the actions of Christ but seek to witness to Christ by becoming united with him. They do this by engaging in severe practices of diminishment and mortification: spending long spells in solitude with a minimum of possessions (a rush mat for a bed, a sheep

skin, a primitive shelter); sleeping as little as one hour a night; speaking not at all for years; praying without ceasing; fighting relentless demons; fasting (eating nothing but bread, salt, and water once a day or nothing but herbs for seven years or nothing but the Eucharist); and mutilating their flesh (burning fingers in the flame of a candle, wrapping the body with chains or ropes which left disfiguring gaps when removed).

Psychologized and relativized, the forms of ascetic practice adopted by the desert ascetics are largely rejected today as psychologically unhealthy and theologically troubling. Helen Waddell, in her introduction to *The Desert Fathers* relates a particularly scathing critique:

The movement was formidable enough in its incidence on civilization to excite the slow-dropping malice of Gibbon, and the more human distress of Lecky. "There is perhaps no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, distorted, and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, spending his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato."<sup>35</sup>

But as with the martyrs, a closer, contextualized reading of the stories of the lives and labors of the ascetics reveals a more complex account, what Palladius (388-412 CE) referred to as "a sufficient proof of the resurrection."<sup>36</sup>

Ascetic desert monasticism comprised a variety of forms.<sup>37</sup> For my purposes, I would like to consider, among others, one of the most extreme and perhaps perplexing forms, that of the Syrian Stylites. Practiced for approximately six centuries, this way of life was pioneered by St. Simeon Stylites the Elder (388-459 CE).<sup>38</sup> Simeon and his colleagues are referred to as "stylites" due to their practice of living for extended periods of time atop pillars (from, the Greek, *stylos*, pillar). Herbert Thurston provides a succinct account of Simeon's life. Being forced to quit the monastery he had entered because of the extreme austerity of his practices, Simeon:

shut himself up for three years in a hut at Tell-Neschin, where for the first time he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. This afterwards became his regular practice, and he combined it with the mortification of standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him. In his later days he was able to stand thus on his column without support for the whole period of the fast. After three years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence in the desert and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space less than twenty

yards in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the desert to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This at last determined him to adopt a new way of life. Simeon had a pillar erected with a small platform at the top, and upon this he determined to take up his abode until death released him. At first the pillar was little more than nine feet high, but it was subsequently replaced by others, the last in the series being apparently over fifty feet from the ground. Around the tiny platform which surmounted the capital of the pillar there was probably something in the nature of a balustrade, but the whole was exposed to the open air, and Simeon seems never to have permitted himself any sort of cabin or shelter. During his earlier years upon the column there was on the summit a stake to which he bound himself in order to maintain the upright position throughout Lent, but this was an alleviation with which he afterwards dispensed.<sup>39</sup>

Like the martyrs before them, the practices of Simeon and his somewhat less-extreme brethren, St. Antony and the desert fathers, were designed primarily to offer witness to and attain union with Christ. To understand how such unique practices might be construed as Christian witness requires a contextualized account of the bodily transformation achieved through such practices.

### **Ascetics as Witnesses**

Although the desert ascetics are characterized as hermits living solitary lives, the textual evidence suggests that they were far from alone.<sup>40</sup> The desert was peopled not only with monks but also travelers and seekers; with these, as well as with their comrades, the monks were in constant interaction. To many who come to the desert, the ascetics were keen to offer charity and hospitality.<sup>41</sup> They fed them, sat with them, and offered them words of spiritual wisdom.<sup>42</sup>

As such, the ascetic life became one of constant witness. While the ascetics did not cultivate or anticipate audiences, people came to the desert not only to seek words of wisdom but simply to watch them and see them.<sup>43</sup> As noted above, the pilgrims in Simeon's case were so numerous that he was forced to build higher pillars in order to find solitude for his devotions.<sup>44</sup> But in doing so, he did not choose a place that was hidden away; instead he remained in full view of any passer-by or pilgrim. This has led some to analogize ascetic practice on display as a sort of performance art.<sup>45</sup> As Patricia Cox Miller notes:

Consider the case of Symeon [sic] the Stylite. For his ancient biographers and contemporary interpreters as well, one of the most striking of Symeon's ascetic actions was his constant standing with arms

outstretched. Ancient interpreters were particularly taken with the performative aspect of Symeon's standing as a spectacle that enticed the gaze of his bystanders. These bystanders became themselves so involved in this activity that, as the *Syriac Life* reports, "his peers began watching him to see if he moved his feet or changed his position."<sup>46</sup>

What did they come to see?

They came to see the real possibility of a life lived in the presence of God. Scholars of desert asceticism emphasize repeatedly that asceticism was not an end in itself. Rather, the texts suggest two ends. To begin with, the overriding end and goal of the lives of the desert monks was God. Through ascetic practices, the monks redirected every aspect of body, mind, and soul to God, placing themselves continuously in God's presence:

The monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God. It was the end that mattered; the ascetic practices were only a means.<sup>47</sup>

Immersed in God's presence, they came to embody the virtues of Christ toward others—peaceableness, reconciliation, forbearance, love, charity, hospitality, truthfulness, service.

But the ascetics sought not only to live continuously in the presence of God; they also sought to be transformed in their very materiality—they sought to become as the angels. As Ward notes: "The ideal was not subhuman but superhuman, the angelic life."<sup>48</sup> In so doing, their bodies became vehicles through which the divine could be glimpsed. Pilgrims came to see "heavenly" bodies.

### Windows to the Divine

Patricia Cox Miller is one who forwards the latter contention, seeking to counter the standard claim that the ascetics were simply dualists, negating the body because they deemed it evil. She begins with a puzzling paradox endemic to ascetic literature:

It is obvious that ascetic practice was geared toward reshaping the body, but it is not so obvious how this reshaping could be viewed as positively rather than negatively, for how, really, could desert reporters look at emaciated bodies, pustulated feet and torsos, bodies seared by red-hot irons and say, "I saw many fathers living the angelic life"?<sup>49</sup>

Miller draws on the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant, who posits an alternative conceptualization of the body in archaic Greek culture. Building on a thesis that within Greek culture all of creation, even the spiritual (i.e., demons, angels), was conceived as somehow “material,” Vernant posits a continuum of embodiment, with the human body being conceptualized as a “dim” version of the “dazzling” bodies of the gods. The bodies of the divine were bodies of plenitude—of completeness, fullness, eternity, self-sufficiency, and so on. Human bodies, in comparison, were limited—incomplete, deficient, mortal, ephemeral. This contrast is not the dichotomized Platonic problem of a positively-valued soul or mind trapped within a negatively-valued body: “As Vernant says, ‘man’s misfortune is not that a divine and immortal soul finds itself imprisoned in the envelope of a material and perishable body, but that his body is not full one.’”<sup>50</sup>

Miller extrapolates Vernant’s findings regarding archaic Greek culture to the ascetic context, proposing that in desert asceticism the body was subjected to practices that sought to reshape it, to reconfigure it as the “dazzling” bodies possessed by Adam in the original creation and the saved, which they shall receive in the resurrection:

The body was viewed with despair and disgust [and] altered by various practices of mutilation . . . not because of its sheer materiality as part of the world but rather because it functioned as a signifier of a lack that was not only spiritual but also corporeal . . . In this way, asceticism can be understood as an attempt to manipulate the “dim” body so as to drive it as close as possible toward that corporeal vitality that is the mark of its exemplar.<sup>51</sup>

This account helps to make sense of the nature of some ascetic practices and of the comments recorded in the lives of the desert ascetics. What would angelic or heavenly bodies be like? Clearly, they are not subject to the limitations of human corporeality. Angels need not sleep, eat, bathe, have sex; they do not speak but rather spend their days praising God or in doing the work of God. Thus practices of sleep deprivation, fasting, constant prayer, chastity, and charity are designed to produce angelic bodies. Nor are they fettered by the constraints of time or space. Practices of repetition—to which the stories of the ascetics regularly attest—move the body beyond time, “for if repetition is repeated often enough, the practitioner achieves a condition of stasis or stillness.”<sup>52</sup>

That pilgrims perceived the ascetics to have been transformed beyond the human is attested again and again in the ascetic literature. Their descriptions of the ascetics ring dissonantly to the modern ear as they find hierophany in the most revolting of physical deformations. As Miller notes, ascetic practice:

was hard work, and it had devastating effects on Symeon’s body—ulcerated feet, a tumorous thigh infested with worms, a dislocated spine,



and so on. Yet despite these gross physical deformations, or perhaps because of them, Theodoret could say, "He beautifies the world," while another man, according to the report of biographer Antonius, picked up one of the worms that had fallen from Symeon's thigh and saw it as a priceless pearl.<sup>53</sup>

Biographers repeatedly refer to the ascetics as "angelic," "heavenly," "resurrected." The ascetics take on characteristics of the angelic—having foreknowledge of events, speaking God's message to others, their faces and persons full of light; the ascetics are frequently described as "shining," being "full of light," "glowing," or being as a flame.<sup>54</sup> An excerpt from the *Sayings of the Fathers* illustrates this:

This same abbot Sisois sitting in his cell would ever have his door closed. But it was told of him how in the day of his sleeping, when the Fathers were sitting round him, his face shone like the sun, and he said to them, "Look, the abbot Antony comes." And after a little while, he said again to them, "Look, the company of the prophets comes." And again his face shone brighter, and he said, "Look, the company of the apostles comes." And his face shone with a double glory, and lo, he seemed as though he spoke with others. And the old man entreated him, saying, "With whom art thou speaking, Father?" And he said to them, "Behold, the angels came to take me, and I asked that I might be left a little while to repent." The old men said to him, "Thou has no need of repentance Father." But he said to them "Verily I know not if I have clutched at the very beginning of repentance." And they all knew that he was made perfect. And again of a sudden his face was as the sun, and they were all in dread.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, through their transformed bodies, the ascetics witnessed to the reality of the divine, to the divine presence in the world, and mediated that presence to those around them. Simply seeing the ascetics could become, for the pilgrim, a religious experience.

The ascetics' bodies mediated discipleship not only by providing visible testimony to the reality of the divine and therefore the truth of the Gospel. They likewise served as the vehicle with which the ascetics engaged in the most direct mode of imitation of Christ: with their bodies, they contested the demons. No discussion of desert asceticism would be complete without some mention of the place of warfare with the demons, since this is clearly one of the main concerns of the ascetic literature. Again and again, this engagement is extensively embodied. A lengthy passage from the life of St. Antony illustrates this engagement:

Then he left for the tombs which lay at some distance from the village. He had requested one of his acquaintances to bring him bread at long intervals. He then entered one of the tombs, the man mentioned locked the door on him, and he remained alone within. This was too much for the Enemy to bear, indeed, he feared that he would fill the desert too with his asceticism. So he came one night with a great number of demons and lashed him so unmercifully that he lay on the ground speechless from the pain.<sup>56</sup>

When his acquaintance returns, he thinks Antony is dead, and so carries his corpse-like body to the town. Antony regains consciousness when his friends are asleep, however, and steals back to the tombs:

Because of the blows received he was too feeble to stand, so he prayed lying down. His prayer finished, he called out with a shout: "Here am I, Antony. I am not cowed by your blows, and even though you should give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ". . . . So thought and spoke the ascetic, but the hater of good, the Enemy, marveled that after all the blows he had courage to come back, called together his dogs, and bursting with rage, said: "You see that we have not stopped this fellow, neither by spirit of fornication nor by blows; on the contrary, he even challenges us. Let us go after him in another way."

Well, the role of the evildoer is easy for the Devil. That night, therefore, they made such a din that the whole place seemed to be shaken by an earthquake. It was as though demons were breaking through the four walls of the little chamber and bursting through them in the forms of beasts and reptiles. All at once the place was filled with the phantoms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and of serpents, asps, and scorpions, and of wolves; and each moved according to the shape it had assumed. The lion roared, ready to spring upon him, the bull appeared about to gore him through, the serpent writhed without quite reaching him, the wolf was rushing straight at him; and the noises emitted simultaneously by all the apparitions were frightful and the fury shown was fierce.

Antony, pummeled and goaded by them, felt even severer pain in his body; yet he lay there fearless and all the more alert in spirit. He groaned, it is true, because of the pain that wracked his body. . . .<sup>57</sup>

The allusions to the stories of the martyrs are unmistakable in this text. The parallels continue, as Antony finds himself accompanied through the trial by Christ himself:

And here again the Lord was not forgetful of Antony's struggle, but came to help him. For he looked up and saw as it were the roof opening and a beam of light coming down to him. The demons suddenly were gone and the pain in his body ceased at once and the building was restored to its former condition. Antony, perceiving that help had come, breathed more freely and felt relieved of his pains. And he asked the vision: "Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to stop my pains?" And a voice came to him: "Antony, I was right here, but I waited to see you in action. And now, because you held out and did not surrender, I will ever be your helper and I will make you renowned everywhere." Hearing this, he arose and prayed; he was so strengthened that he felt his body more vigorous than before. He was at this time about thirty-five years old.

As becomes clear from the texts, the ascetics' ability to withstand the continuous assault of the demons was prayer, for prayer put them into the presence of Christ who is the real agent of victory. But the ability to pray under duress was premised on training—the ongoing practice of prayer as preparation for inevitable, and often surprise, attacks. Constant prayer as a life continually turned towards God both guaranteed that the ascetic would be targeted and promised success in withstanding the attack.

### Conclusion

In the fourth and fifth centuries, the desert ascetics had to contend with demons. Today they must contend with being considered pathological and irrelevant by their companions in the Communion of Saints. But we must not simply write off as irrelevant the lives and practices of those who preceded us in the faith. Understanding their practices in their socio-historical contexts is crucial to making sense of bizarre and gruesome actions that may seem unconnected to the Christian life, and to learning what they can teach us about living as Christians. Moreover, the church has made the normative judgement that these individuals were right, in their time and context, in believing that their practices gave authentic witness to Christ. It is incumbent upon us to take them seriously. If we do listen carefully, the martyrs and the ascetics might continue to bear witness to the complexity of discipleship as the shape of the Christian life.

First, their lives suggest that the "imitation" or "following" of Christ admits of a rich diversity in mode and interpretation. Forms of discipleship, to state an obvious point, will necessarily be context-dependent and historically-situated. Simply because Simeon stood on a pillar for decades does not mean that such action would necessarily be an effective mode of witness in the contemporary context. Just as we find few in the tradition who slavishly and precisely imitated

the life of Christ, neither would rote imitation of these exemplars be fitting. If nothing else, the Christian tradition attests to the creative and open-ended nature of the Christian life, with new and unpredictable modes of witnessing to Christ emerging unexpectedly, often in response to new environments and challenges.

Amid this diversity, however, one finds continuity as well, as one searches for “family resemblance” in these various forms of life. To trace such continuity would require an extended display of Christian practices, but for our purposes two similarities emerge quickly from the two examples introduced above. First, immersion in liturgical practices is a *sine qua non* of an authentic and deeply-committed Christian life. Clearly, forms of liturgical practice change over time as well; eucharistic practices today, for example, differ from those in the early church. This is a point that must be taken seriously as one moves from the second to the twenty-first century.

Secondly, discipleship entails—as its root suggests—discipline, a disciplining or training of the body. In the case of the martyrs and ascetics, bodily transformation was central to their prosecution of the Christian life and to their ability to effectively witness to those around them. In both cases, the body serves as the site for the contest between God and the powers of evil; as such, their bodies—perceived as non-traditional, as transcending normal human limitations—are themselves witnesses. Clearly, the specific bodily transformations that occur in these cases are necessarily dependent on deep immersion in liturgical practice. Liturgical practice, then, provides an indispensable source of disciplinary training.

Thus, one might ask, as liturgical practices have changed to become less embodied—as it might well be argued they have in contemporary Western churches—have they become less effective in forming persons as Christian disciples? If so, the possibilities of finding a link today between liturgy and the Christian life become increasingly remote. Does the turn to “ethics,” then, provide a real solution to this problem, or does it rather forestall the conclusion that modernity has stripped liturgy of its power to mediate God’s presence?

The witness of the Christian tradition suggests that it would be more conceptually and theologically accurate to speak of the relationship between liturgy and discipleship rather than the relationship between liturgy and ethics. The foregoing analysis could be continued through the tradition, turning, for example, to St. Francis’s experience of the stigmata, to the Eucharistic devotions of medieval holy women studied by Carolyn Walker Bynum, and even the witness of Bishop Oscar Romero in contemporary Latin America. With this dynamic so clearly a part of the Christian tradition, we are challenged to consider the ways in which liturgy is the real work of the Christian life<sup>58</sup> and the ways such liturgical immersion might mediate a bodily transformation directed toward the forms of Christian witness that are needed today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I thank Christian A. Scharen for working with me to put together the panel from which the papers included in this volume issued. I also express my deepest appreciation to Susan A. Ross and Vigen Guroian, who agreed to prepare papers, as well as to our respondents, Don Saliers and Stanley Hauerwas. The efforts and enthusiasm of all of these good colleagues led to a lively and invigorating session. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers of the paper who took seriously the work requested of them. My work is better because of theirs.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Ramsey, "Liturgy and Ethics," *JRE* 7 (1979): 140-171; and D. E. Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," *JRE* 7 (1979): 173-189. The conversation on the relationship between liturgy and ethics among Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox long preceded the Protestant academy. Given the context of this paper, however, the following remarks will focus primarily on the latter discussion.

<sup>3</sup>The remainder of the papers compiled by Frederick Carney into the landmark issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* are as follows: Margaret A. Farley, "Beyond the Formal Principle: A Reply to Ramsey and Saliers," *JRE* 7 (1979): 191-202; William W. Everett, "Liturgy and Ethics: A Response to Saliers and Ramsey," *JRE* 7 (1979): 203-214; Martin D. Yaffe, "Liturgy and Ethics: Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig on the Day of Atonement," *JRE* 7 (1979): 215-228; Ronald M. Green, "Religious Ritual: A Kantian Perspective," *JRE* 7 (1979): 119-238; and Philip J. Rossi, "Narrative, Worship, and Ethics: Empowering Images for the Shape of Christian Moral Life," *JRE* 7 (1979): 238-248.

<sup>4</sup>Mark Searle, "Liturgy and Social Ethics: An Annotated Bibliography," *Studia Liturgica* 21 (1991): 220-235.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Susan A. Ross's article, "Liturgy and Ethics: Feminist Perspectives," in this volume.

<sup>6</sup>For a more detailed overview of the field of liturgy and ethics, see my "Eucharist as Basic Training: The Body as Nexus of Liturgy and Ethics," *Theology and Lived Christianity*, ed. David M. Hammond (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2000), 257-286.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, the work of Vigen Guroian, as well as my article "Suffering, Ethics, and the Body of Christ: Anointing as a Strategic Alternative Practice," *Christian Bioethics* 2, (1996): 172-201.

<sup>8</sup>In this paper, I shall follow this established practice, also including under within the concept of "liturgy" extra-ecclesial practices, such as prayer, fasting and other ascetic activities.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, John A. Gurrieri, "Catholic Liturgical Sources of Social Commitment," in Daniel F. Polish and Eugene J. Fisher, eds., *Liturgical Foundations of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Rembert G. Weakland, "Liturgy and Social Justice," in Peter C. Finn and James M. Schellman, eds., *Shaping English Liturgy* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1990); H. Kathleen Hughes, "Liturgy and Justice: An Intrinsic Relationship," in *Living No Longer for Ourselves: Liturgy and Justice in the Nineties*, Kathleen Hughes and Mark R. Francis, eds. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991); R. Kevin Seaholtz in "Liturgy and Social Consciousness," in Mary E. Stamps, ed., *To Do Justice and Right Upon the Earth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993); and Searle, "Liturgy and Social Ethics: An Annotated Bibliography."

<sup>10</sup>For the most part, a complete reading of this history will not be provided here. The remarks in the next two pages presuppose work conducted for an M.A. course I have taught three times over the past five years; the examination of the body of the paper, however, provides an example of what such a reading might look like.

<sup>11</sup>It is important to emphasize, of course, that this is relative to contemporary standards and notions of social justice. For within their own socio-cultural contexts, solidarity with and hospitality to the poor, charity of a different nature than one encounters today, tending to the vulnerable, etc., were key components of their lives. Some twentieth-century figures (Day, Ford), of course, exhibit a more explicit relationship to issues of "social justice," although for

others (Bonhoeffer, Merton, Romero) who are often portrayed as champions of *sola* social justice, a more nuanced reading of their narratives tells a more complex story. This suggests, however, how recent a construct this is and how important it is to contextualize our normative claims.

<sup>12</sup>I use the term "misguided" in a technical and not a pejorative sense.

<sup>13</sup>The distinction between "ethics" and "discipleship" in this context is subtle yet important. I will intentionally refrain from offering a definition of "ethics"; I think it is more important to focus on the ways the term is used within the conversation on liturgy and ethics rather than forwarding my own definition at this juncture. Regardless of definition, however, the terms connote different categories of practice, one philosophical, the other theological. Given that liturgy is a theological practice, it is more properly paired with a theological practice. The distinction is also one of priority in a teleological sense. One might suggest that "ethics," or some facet of ethical analysis, is a component of "discipleship"; for example, as Don Saliers suggested during our session, the moral imagination is certainly a part of discipleship. While this may well be true, this sort of ordering is rarely made explicit within the conversation on liturgy and ethics. Ethics (however construed or defined) for the most part functions as an end in itself, detached from the broader theological context of the end, purpose, or goal of Christian practices and the Christian life.

<sup>14</sup>In this paper, the notion of "discipleship" will be used in a broad sense, denoting those who understand themselves—and who were understood by their contemporaneous Christian communities—as "following," "imitating," or "in communion" with Christ.

<sup>15</sup>This latter argument continues my previous work in this area which has critiqued the conversation on liturgy and ethics for its failure to attend to the bodily dimension of liturgy and the Christian life and has focused on "the body" as a fulcrum around which the link between liturgy and the Christian life pivots. See Lysaught "Eucharist as Basic Training."

<sup>16</sup>See Everett Ferguson, "Early Christian Martyrdom and Civil Disobedience," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1(1993): 73-83.

<sup>17</sup>"The Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by Maxwell Staniforth; Revised translation, Introductions and new editorial material by Andrew Louth. (NY: Penguin, 1968), 115-135. Citations from the Martyrdom itself in the text and notes will be referenced with text numbers rather than page numbers.

<sup>18</sup>Boniface Ramsey, "Martyrdom," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 632.

<sup>19</sup>Maureen A. Tilley, "The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr," *JAAR* LIX/3, 1991, 467. Brent Shaw, in his "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 269-312, provides a parallel and much more extensive account of how the bodies of the tortured served as sites of resistance in for early Christian and non-Christian martyrs and torture victims. Shaw argues that the efficacy of *patientia* or endurance derived as much from the axiological rules of Greco-Roman culture as from the dynamics of embodiment, and that Christian martyrs were, in part, effective because they championed an inverted value scheme.

<sup>20</sup>Tilley, "The Ascetic Body," 471-474.

<sup>21</sup>The martyr narratives do not display this dynamic directly. They do not witness extensively to the ascetic preparation that the martyrs underwent. Such a connection must be inferred from the evidence the texts present—particularly specific actions of the martyrs—within the context of broader historical and textual investigation. The texts do, however, display liturgical practices much more frequently than ascetic practices. Especially by reading the experiences of the martyrs in liturgical terms, the texts suggest that liturgical practices contributed to the total—including bodily—transformation the martyrs underwent, enabling them to withstand and triumph over the trials to which they were subjected.

<sup>22</sup>Staniforth, 117. For commentary and translation of the Martyrdom of Polycarp see "Polycarp of Smyrna" and "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Early Christian Writings*, Staniforth, 115-135.

<sup>23</sup>Maureen A. Tilley in "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in *Searching the Scriptures, Volume Two: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza (New

York: Crossroad, 1997), summarizes the current state of academic opinions on the authorship of the text and concludes that, "Scholars now believe that the *Passion* contains the stories of the martyrs in their very own words. Thus the reader has access to the life and world of at least one Christian woman of the very early third century. For no other document can we say: this woman speaks to us in her own words" (833). The following analysis utilizes the translation of "The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity," by Maureen A. Tilley in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 387-397. Citations in the text and notes will reference chapter and line rather than page numbers.

<sup>24</sup>*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* reaches us in the form of an epistle—a letter to be read and circulated in order that the memory of his ministry and death live on. The epistle opens "In this letter, brothers, we are sending you an account of the martyrs, and in particular of the blessed Polycarp; whose witness set the seal, so to speak, on the persecution and brought it to an end. It was almost as though all the preceding events had been leading up to another Divine manifestation of the Martyrdom which we read of in the Gospel [referring to the Passion of Christ]; for Polycarp, just like the Lord, had patiently awaited the hour of his betrayal – in token that we too, taking our pattern from him, might think of others before ourselves. This is surely the sign of a true and steadfast love, when a man is not bent on saving himself alone, but his brethren as well" (1). *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity* is likewise intentional: "Therefore, we judge it imperative to place in order and produce these written accounts for the glory of God. In this way people weak in faith and those on the verge of despair will not regard the grace of close association with the Divine as present or sent only in ancient times to those worthy of martyrdom or visions. They will realize that God always accomplishes what God promised not only for people who might be converted by such testimony but also for those who already believe in God's favor. So brethren and dear children, we "announce to you what we heard and felt so that you who are present now may recall the glory of the Lord," and those who now understand by hearing "may be in communion with" the holy martyrs, and through them with our Lord "Jesus Christ, to whom is glory and honor for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Jn. 1.1 and 3)" (1.5-6).

<sup>25</sup>See also Tilley, "The Ascetic Body," 470.

<sup>26</sup>Tilley notes that a hallmark of martyr narratives is that the martyrs are always presented as in control. They always have the upper hand in the disputations with the government officials. They always carry themselves with a demeanor of joy, calm, and courage. To the end, Polycarp evidences this pattern, instructing his executioners on how to dispatch him: "The irons with which the pyre was equipped were fastened round him; but when they proposed to nail him as well, he said 'Let me be; He who gives me strength to endure the flames will give me strength not to flinch at the stake, without your making sure of it with nails.' So they left out the nailing, and tied him instead. Bound like that, with his hands behind him, he was like a noble ram taken out of some great flock for sacrifice: a goodly burnt-offering all ready for God" (13-14).

<sup>27</sup>Staniforth, 117.

<sup>28</sup>Bodily transformation occurs on multiple levels for Perpetua. Tilley's analytical commentary traces Perpetua's transformation from dependence upon the traditional network of male figures who surround her (her father, her child, her brother Dinocrates, her judge, her executioner, men associated with her church community, the devil) to a position of independence, intercessory power and ecclesiastical authority over them. What is more, as she notes, "in each case, the narrative mentions prominently aspects of body and its positioning in space," and it is these references to bodies that provide the clues to both the meaning of the story of the martyrs and of the larger Christian story ("The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," 836). Intriguing experiences include the drying up of Perpetua's breast milk and her metamorphosis into a man.

<sup>29</sup>Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," 849.

<sup>30</sup>Tilley goes on to note that in the narrative, "Only a woman, Perpetua, protested. This woman who could not be called other than Christian (3.2) could not allow her body to be used this way. In a biting reversal of his order (and in line with many martyr stories), the tribune

commanded that the women be sent to the arena naked, that is, not in control of their bodies or the way that they were perceived. They were to be attacked by a deliberately provoked cow.... This was too much even for the jaded members of the audience at the arena. They were not amused, for they saw only the vulnerability and obvious motherhood in the naked bodies of Perpetua and Felicity. So the women were robed again in their own clothes as Christians and they were returned to the arena." ("The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," 850).

<sup>31</sup>Tilley describes the experience of hysterical fugue as follows: "The martyrs as ascetics could escape pain through the practice of hysterical fugue, an "altered state of consciousness" in which language about realities and the realities represented are decoupled. The links between emotions and their normal objects are also severed. The fugue state often occurs when a person cannot control an intolerable situation. Fugue can entail changes in self-identity, focussing on the body, such as disowning pain. Ordinarily, psychiatrists count this as a dysfunctional coping mechanism; however, in a situation of chronic pain such as torture, observers such as Amnesty International count it as a valuable coping mechanism. Without hysterical fugue as a compensatory mechanism, the victim would be unable to escape the pain and, more importantly, the resulting psychological trauma. In the case of the martyrs, hysterical fugue allowed the victims to continue to interact with the torturer without feeling disabling, disintegrating pain," ("The Ascetic Body," 473).

<sup>32</sup>On the importance of *sufferentia carnis* or patient endurance in the flesh for martyrdom see Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," and Shaw.

<sup>33</sup>Staniforth, 117.

<sup>34</sup>St. Antony begins the desert movement, so the story goes, in response to hearing at Mass the Gospel injunction: "Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor...and come follow me" (Mt. 19:21).

<sup>35</sup>Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (NY: Vintage, 1998), 7.

<sup>36</sup>Palladius, *Historica Lausiaca* 71, in Cuthbert Butler, ed., *Palladius: Historia Lausiaca*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898, 1904), 2:169. Cited in Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and 'The Body from Nowhere,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 137.

<sup>37</sup>For historical background on desert asceticism see Benedicta Ward, trans., "Forward," *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xvii-xviii; and Samuel Rubenson, "The Image of St. Antony," in *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 89-125.

<sup>38</sup>It is Simeon Stylites, in fact, that specifically Lecky scathes above. For further background on Simeon Stylites see Robert Doran, trans., *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 1992).

<sup>39</sup>Herbert Thurston, "St. Simeon Stylites the Elder *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume VIII, © 1912. (Online edition can be found at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/s.htm>, © 1999). For an entertaining cinematic send-up of Simeon's life, which seems to present a relatively accurate depiction of stylitism, see Luis Buñuel's 1965 short film, *Simon of the Desert*. In Buñuel's film Simon is tempted by the devil who appears to him as a woman and transports him to a modern night club in New York.

<sup>40</sup>For a detailed historical account that debunks many of the stereotypes about the early desert ascetics, including the general belief that "early monks [were] poor, uneducated peasants...inspired by a fundamentalist theology [who] fled a degenerate society and a Church in disrepute," see Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 89-125.

<sup>41</sup>Ward, xxiv.

<sup>42</sup>See for example, "That One Should Show Hospitality and Mercy with Cheerfulness," *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Book XIII, in Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, 118.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, Sayings II.7 in Waddell, 70, and Saying 27 of "Anthony the Great," in Ward, 7.

<sup>44</sup>Thurston recounts Simeon's busy agenda: "Even on the highest of his columns Simeon was not withdrawn from intercourse with his fellow men. By means of a ladder which could



always be erected against the side, visitors were able to ascend; and we know that he wrote letters, the text of some of which we still possess, that he instructed disciples, and that he also delivered addresses to those assembled beneath . . . Great personages, such as the Emperor Theodosius and the Empress Eudocia manifested the utmost reverence for the saint and listened to his counsels, while the Emperor Leo paid respectful attention to a letter Simeon wrote to him in favour of the Council of Chalcedon." Athanasius, *The Life of St. Antony*, Robert T. Meyer, trans., (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950) likewise attests to the constant stream of pilgrims.

<sup>45</sup>Miller (138) cites others who have developed the thesis of the relationship between ascetic activity and visibility: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 327; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24; and Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>46</sup>Miller, 145.

<sup>47</sup>Ward, xxv.

<sup>48</sup>Ward, xxiv.

<sup>49</sup>Miller, 139.

<sup>50</sup>Miller, 140.

<sup>51</sup>Miller, 140-141.

<sup>52</sup>Miller, 149.

<sup>53</sup>Miller, 146.

<sup>54</sup>Miller notes that metaphors of light are multivalent and not only function to depict bodies that defy the constraints of time and space (as does light), but also function to approximate representation of the unrepresentable: "Metaphors of light as evocative of the 'true' body were so useful because one cannot 'see' light....The narrative enterprise of the desert reporters was actually a difficult one, for they were trying to show or describe something that is 'inherently refractory to representation,' an Adamic body in the here-and-now, a living 'man from heaven.' In part they accomplished the task of representing unrepresentability by their use of metaphors of light, an in part by their straightforward naming as angels those bodies that they perceived as the super-bodies of paradisaal plenitude" (143).

<sup>55</sup>Book XX, v., Waddell, 132.

<sup>56</sup>For this passage and the following, see Meyer, 26-29.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>As Dorothy Day said, "The Mass is the work."