

## **ABSTRACT**

### Martyrdom and Religious Freedom

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Martyrdom functions as a powerful ecumenical witness today, a time in which an estimated 100 million Christians worldwide face persecution for their faith. By owing allegiance to God and conscience above and beyond the demands of the state, Christian martyrs have long been among some of the most eloquent defenders of religious freedom. Since the time of the Roman Empire martyrdom has been a necessary consequence of the dual loyalties of the Christian citizen: first to the spiritual community and second to the human society in which the Church exists.

In faith, martyrdom is understood as a gift for the whole Church, affirming “the freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21) who are both witnesses and partakers in Christ’s resurrection. The “healing of memories” of painful histories in which Christians were executed at the hands of other Christians have become moments of reconciliation and dialogue among believers. Christians who fulfill the demands of conscience toward the worship of God and love of neighbor, even under the duress of religious persecution and martyrdom, are beacons and bulwarks of religious freedom for all.