

Giulio Malaguti



# Vitale e Agricola

Memory and message of the XVIth Centenary  
of the transfer of their remains

*To my brother Don Dario*

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Remains

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE BIENNIUM OF THE FAITH

The 1993-95 biennium of the faith sees the ecclesiastical community in Bologna engaged in profound reflection regarding their Protomartyrs Vitale and Agricola, heralds of the Christian faith. It is in fact part of the XVIth Centenary (393-1993) of the transfer of their remains from the Jewish cemetery to a Christian burial place. In order to celebrate these events with greater attention and joyfulness, I have agreed to the request of several members of our congregation to write down the reflections emerging from our Parish meetings over the last of few months, in order for them to be able to continue fuelling the enthusiasm of the group which took part and can reach many others who, although wishing to do so were not able to participate owing to family commitments or through pressure of work.

His eminence Cardinal Giacomo Biffi's fine presentation to the volume: *Vitale and Agricola. The cult of the Protomartyrs in Bologna through the centuries on the XVIth centenary of the transfer*, will serve us as a guide. In it the Archbishop underlines three fundamental aspects to be borne in the mind during the biennium:

- a) The memory of certain past events.
- b) The message of which they are the bearers.
- c) The present day relevance of the Protomartyrs.

It will be my duty to follow the route marked out by the cardinal to favour the growth of both personal and community Christian life.

## I. MEMORY

### 1. Good and bad memory

#### *a. Remember!*

Is it possible to live without memory? How sad it is when a person is afflicted by illness and becomes incapable of relating to the past and often not even to the present; it is all part of our experience to meet men and women who no longer know their children or their spouse.

Equally ruinous is sclerosis within the church. The loss of consciousness of the great events of former times, forgetfulness or ignorance of the past do not permit us to us to read the present and to construct a future. For this reason the word of God ceaselessly invites both the ancient and the new Israel to keep memory alive.

In Exodus, Moses spoke to the people thus: "Remember this day on which you

have come out of Egypt, from your condition of slavery, as the Lord has led us there with mighty hand" (Ex. 13.3), and in Deuteronomy "Remember the days of ancient times, contemplate once more the long past years" (Dt. 32.7), and Isaiah preaches: "Remember the distant past ... I am God, and no-one is as me" (46.9). Above all in Deuteronomy and Tristo-Isiah and in some psalms (78:105) the call to historical memory is particularly insistent. The inspired author enumerates the great events of the previous centuries, the miracles performed and the words pronounced by JHWH, to conclude that Israel will be saved now too because events which have already taken place and the words already pronounced and kept are its guarantee. In the temptation of the desert Jesus drives out and overcomes the devil with the memory of the miracles and words of God.

As the negative aspect of remembering, JHWH reproaches his friends for their forgetfulness: "They forgot his works and the wonders he had shown them" (Ps. 78.14). Israel is warned: "Beware, beware of forgetting: let not the things your eyes have seen flee from your heart for all the days of your life" (Deut. 4.9); fathers are urged to teach them to their sons and daughters so that by keeping their authenticity intact, they may walk in the ways of the Lord.

Present day faith in that salvation promised by the real and living God is kept alive by the memory of the past. The past of the divine act lets us grasp the time dimension of the present. To reactivate the memory is like lighting God's fire which warms the hearts of men to cleanse them and lead them to eternal life.

The history of Israel and of the Church is not like that of the ancient empires which we learn about at school, it does not consist in memorising dates and wars won or lost. The history of the Church is one of constant continuity down the centuries, it is a single cycle which God arouses to arise and brings to completion. In its essential core, the Church is the body of Christ and the people of God. As a child is born, becomes adult and then and then ages and passes harmoniously from one age to another, so the history of salvation which is the act of God and His Church in the world has known no break from the creation to the present day, it develops uninterrupted as the grain of mustard to when God pronounces its ripeness.. In this sense, the fullness of faith lies in a careful understanding of the Sacred Scriptures together with their tradition. Tradition is what God has worked and still works, and has said and still says in the world for men , so they may live in communion with him.

This is the spirit with which we must remember the martyrs Vitale and Agricola: by consulting the ancient documents, meditating on the words of Saint Ambrose in his discourse. *Exhortatio Virginitatis*, by reading Vittricio di Rouen's *De Laude sanctorum*, Paolino da Nola's *Carme XXVII* and the *Vita Ambrosii* by Saint Ambrose's biographer Paolino di Milano. God founded our Church in the passion of the martyrs. What the liturgy says of the martyrdom of saints Peter and Paul in Rome can be applied to them: «Plantaverunt vineam sanguine suo», with their blood Vitale and Agricola laid the foundations of the Church in Bologna. The historical

event of the slave and master who, by helping each other confessed their faith through extreme suffering and died for Christ and his Church and who proclaimed to the world Christ the Lord is the work of the Almighty, charisma, a gift given to them by the Holy Spirit for everyone. We are healed now and for the future because of their blood.

In the death of the martyrs God today defeats the forces of evil; God triumphs in their bodies, if someone has been bitten by the serpent Christ heals him, their bloody death is a testimony of the presence of the Lord in our midst; the suffering of the martyr is part of that which befalls our crucified Christ, who yet reigns fully from the cross. Christ reveals himself today in their torture and lament, the Holy Spirit speaks through their words. These are the great wonders that the martyrs reveal to us today and which are to be lived in this XVIth centenary of their transfer.

### *b. Don't remember... !*

The prophet Isiah who with such perseverance keeps alive faith in our coming salvation through the memory of the wonders of past times also warns us that there is also a dangerous memory of past events which is dangerous and which should even be removed; the Israelites must remove it: "Think no longer of ancient things, no longer heed the past (Is. 43.8): Do not "think", do not "heed", do not "remember" , stop complaining looking backwards disconsolately; in short the "laudatores temporis acti" are wretched for the simple reason that they do not connect the divine act of the past to its current presence and indefectible divine love to the everyday life of today. In reality they demonstrate their inability to read past time when they do not connect to the present day living presence of God our Saviour in their midst. The reproach for a bad memory is for all of these.

For us today remembering the extraordinary events of the past, the first documents of our church in Bologna, the persecutions and the martyrs Agricola and Vitale do not mean learning by heart dates and facts or reading ancient documents such as St. Ambrose or the Angelica 123 code etc. but perceiving that God who has assisted the people of Bologna through those centuries to be deeply faithful, to be the Lord of the peoples and of the universe and who is in our midst on our path today.

Speaking against the prophets of doom at the beginning of the Second Vatican ecumenical Council, John XXIII had grasped in that in our times there were the seeds of a new springtime for the church which is what we should all do in celebrating the Protomartyrs. The presence of God in them is the certainty that our pledge to bring Christ to the men of our times will be successful.

Thus memory plays a fundamental role in human existence and in that of the church, it allows us to live and adopt the past, to preserve it in the present and use it for the future. This is the real meaning of the XVIth centenary of the transference

and of the biennium of the faith in sight of a new evangelisation.

## 2. Historical data on the martyrs Vitale and Agricola

### a. Political and ecclesiastical events connected with their transference.

*St Ambrose and certain political events of his time.*

Historical data regarding the passion of our patron saints reach us through Ambrose (340 - 397) that great bishop of Milan. He is a most valuable witness to these facts, even if not the only one, as other contemporary writers of his times, or of a short time later remember them in their works. It is for this reason that we turn special attention to him, as his standing as a man of considerable political importance, his high intellectual ability and his merits worth as a supreme minister, which we would briefly like to refer to here, is a further guarantee of how much he has handed down to us. Moreover both firstly as a civil governor and then as archbishop of the church was also entrusted with the direct administration of our city.

Ambrose was a member of a distinguished Christian family from Rome, born in 340 in Treviri (in Germany) where his father was a senior imperial official, he completed his studies in Latin, rhetoric and law in Rome where he spent his youth (340 - 368). In 365 when he was professionally qualified he embarked on an administrative career as a lawyer at the prefecture, he was a member of the pretorial prefect council and in about 370 he was nominated consular is, governor of the Emilia-Liguria province with Milan as its seat. His high rank assigned him the duty of supervising public administration, of administering justice, of looking after public buildings and postal service stations. As *consularis* he had the right to a place with the title of *clarissimus*.

When the bishop of Milan Assenzio died in the autumn of 374, it was the Christian community's task to elect his successor. At that time the nomination of the bishop did not come from Rome as it does today, rather it was the entire diocesan community of priests, deacons and laics gathered together in the cathedral with the attendance of the regional bishops which nominated its herd. At that time, the church in Milan, like others, was split into two strongly opposing factions, on the one hand the orthodox Christians and on the other those Christians linked to the Arian heresy, and of whom the deceased bishop was one. During the gatherings it was not infrequent for there to be uproar and violence when each side strove to dominate the other. Due to his position as governor it was Ambrose's duty to maintain public order. In order to avoid clashes he would often go to the basilica to oversee the assembly. In one of those meetings the governor, who was still a catechumen, spoke to the gathering to urge those present to reach an agreement



on the person to appoint and on the importance of the harmony that should reign in the Christian community. The words he spoke about the rivals were so wise, balanced, persuasive and impartial that in the general silence, so the story goes, a child's voice was heard to propose the consul as bishop. The Catholics considered him one of their own, the arians considered him ideal due to the impartiality and moderation of his civil government and moreover he was not among the official candidates of either of the rival parties.

The appointment took Ambrose by surprise and accepting would change his life radically. He would have to become Christian, be baptised, accept the celibacy of the church and would no longer be able to think of marriage. Initially he refused using every pretext to avoid the assignment, but when in addition to the entire Christian population, the emperor also invited him to stand down from his civil appointment to take on that in the church, he accepted the unanimous nomination of the two warring factions. In the space of a week he was baptised and ordained bishop (December 7th, 374).

Right from the beginning he revealed his style of conversion to the Christian faith and as a great minister. He turned over his worldly goods to the church (he was from a wealthy senatorial family). He reserved the right of use to his land for his sister Marcellina who was consecrated to virginity by pope Liberius. He devoted himself to holy studies to complete his religious training and to perform his new task capably. From great administrator of justice he became an excellent bishop who was always heedful to teaching, to the sanctification of souls, to guiding his people and to charity. In 387 he was to have the great joy of baptising and welcoming into his church that illustrious teacher of rhetoric who he taught in Milan and who would then become bishop of Tagaste, Saint Augustine. The new bishop also exerted considerable influence on the civil administration of Milan, the problems of which he knew well. He exerted considerable influence on the emperors, one of whom, Valentinian II, was his devoted friend. Even though he was closely linked to the imperial authorities, Ambrose cannot be held responsible for certain legislative provisions taken against the pagan cults, yet many historians believe him to be involved in certain government decrees which were issued during the period of his episcopate.

### *Saint Ambrose in Bologna*

The political side of his character led him to voluntary exile in Bologna in 393. On May 15th 392, while on a visit to the imperial troops in Gaul, his friend Valentinian II was found dead. The official news which circulated spoke of suicide, whereas the unofficial news which both historians and the people found to be much more reliable was that due to disagreements with the emperor. General Arbogaste had killed him and then had him hanged on the rope. Ambrose officiated at his funeral in the capital Milan on an August Sunday in 392. General Arbogaste now revealed his

secret plans, on August 22nd of the same year and with no authorisation he proclaimed as emperor Eugene, a man who had come from state administration and who thus became a usurper.

In the summer of 393 Eugene and Arbogaste determined to descend on Italy to take possession of the capital. Ambrose who did not wish to back what had taken place with his presence in the city and an obligatory visit to the emperor, resolved to leave his diocese and go into voluntary exile. He travelled to Bologna where he stayed in the house of his friend Eusebius and here he remained for all of the autumn and winter. In the first few months of 394 he moved to Faenza and then to Florence: He would only return to his diocese in early August 394 when Eugene and Arbogaste had left the capital to make war on Theodosius. During his stay in Faenza he was invited to Florence by the widow Juliana "for the dedication of the basilica of Saint Agricola" as says the historian of St Ambrose Franco Gori (*Opera Omnia di S. Ambrogio. Virginità e vedevanza/1*, Milan, 1989, p. 80). Paolino di Milano, the bishop's secretary and biographer, writes: "In the same city (Florence) he also founded a basilica where he lay to rest the remains of the martyrs Vitale and Agricola, whose bodies he had exhume in the city of Bologna ... and while the were being laid under the altar which is to be found in the same basilica great was the joy and exultation of the entire community of the faithful". In March of next year, 1994, the bishop of Milan Carlo Maria Martini will travel to Florence following to footsteps of his predecessor to celebrate Holy Communion in the same church (up now called St. Lorenzo) in which in 394 St Ambrose St Agricola remains so triumphantly welcomed (see A. Paredi, *Sant'Ambrogio*, p. 291). The jubilant Florentine church will thus remember the XVIth centenary of that ceremony and that distant and happy meeting.

### *Saint Ambrose in Florence*

Giuliana was a widow and nun who had formed a monastery and was present with the other consecrated virgins, among whom were three of her daughters, at the consecration of the church of St Agricola which she had financed. On that occasion Ambrose's pastoral commitment to sustain and spread the canons of religious life emerged anew. His speech Exhortation to virginity given in 394 during the consecration of the basilica, urges the virgins to the love of Christ which is so strong as to exclude all earthly love. The life of consecrated souls is in no way a relinquishment of loving, but rather is a greater and more mysterious love than is human love. Christ is love, his arrows are arrows of love with which he strikes those who seek him. In his exhortation the bishop, albeit fortuitously, gives brief but essential news of our martyrs, which however was not the theme of his sermon. He was coming from Bologna where he had taken part in the great celebration of the entire Bolognese church for the exhumation and transference of Agricola's remains from the Jewish cemetery to a Christian burial place, and moreover was bringing

with him certain relics of the martyr which had been offered to him as a gift by Eustasius the bishop of Bologna. It was all of these circumstances which led him to begin his sermon with certain reflections on the protomartyrs, thus saving them from oblivion as happened in the case of St Procolo. The transference of which he spoke in his *Exhortation* took place in 393 and this year, 1993 we celebrate *THE SIXTEENTH CENTENARY* of that event. We believe that the best way to pay homage to our beloved Ambrose and to our martyrs Agricola and Vitale is to read with great care Ambrose's words rather than relying on a summary however faithful it may be.

## **b. The words of Ambrose: Exhortation to Virginit**

*Introduction. The palms of the martyrs, triumphs of Christ*

I. 1. «Those who are invited to a sumptuous banquet usually take away gifts offered by the host to the guests. I have been invited to a banquet in Bologna where the transference of a holy martyr has been celebrated and have kept for you sacred and gracious gifts. On those occasions when the emperors triumph princely gifts are given but those I bring you are also triumphal as the palms of the martyrs are the triumphs of Christ our Lord. In truth, I was not on my way here to Florence but as I have been called by you and so as not to come to you with too little I have had to bring to me that which had been prepared for others, so that what I lack of what you expect in me, may be found in greater measure in the martyr».

*Agricola and Vitale. Master and servant before Christ.*

I. 2. «The name of the martyr is Agricola and when he was alive his servant was Vitale who now is his companion and fellow martyr. The servant went ahead to prepare the place for his master, the master followed him certain that through his servant's loyalty he would already find the place prepared for him. We are not exalting the merits of others as the servant's martyrdom is the fruit of the master's teaching. The master has taught and the servant has implemented. But nothing is to be taken away from the servant. How can what Christ has given be belittled? The slave has also learned very well how to please Christ in the service of a man. The master, though has doubly earned his praise, both in his teaching of the servant and in his own martyrdom. After they had deserved to be equals they competed with each other in order to help each other. Agricola sent ahead Vitale to his martyrdom and Vitale called Agricola to himself».

I. 3. «Thus, a man's social position creates no obstacle to his dignity, neither does the prestige of the family constitute merit. Whether free men or slaves we are all as one in Christ and whatever good each of us has done we shall receive from the Lord.

Slavery in no way diminishes our being Christian nor does freedom add anything to it. On this point, consider how little importance a man's social condition has: Paul the apostle says: "Were you called to the faith as a slave? Do not worry about it as he who is called to faith in the Lord becomes a free man in the Lord. Equally he who is called to the faith as a free man become the servant of Christ". But Christ did not give any more to the free man than to the slave, but rather did he give to both in equal measure. Indeed, before Christ slavery and freedom have the same rank and it is impossible to accord preference in establishing the merits of slavery and freedom as there is no greater honour than that of serving Christ. Paul is indeed the servant of Jesus Christ as the servitude of which he boasts is glorious. Is it not exceedingly glorious to be considered so valorous as to be redeemed by the blood of Christ? But let us move on».

#### *The martyrdom of Vitale*

I. 4. «The more St Vitale was forced by his persecutors to deny Christ, the more he declared his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: and while his persecutors were subjecting him to every kind of torture, so much so that there was no part of his body free from wound, he addressed his prayer to the Lord: "Lord Jesus Christ my saviour and my God, let my spirit be received by you as I already desire to receive the crown that your holy angel has shown me" and, as he finished his prayer, he died».

#### *The esteem of the Pagans for Agricola*

I. 5. «St Agricola was considered to be of such gentle disposition as to be loved even by his enemies, and for this reason they delayed his martyrdom. But this honour paid him by his persecutors, was more painful for him than any cruelty as it denied him his martyrdom. Finally, as St Agricola did not comply with their proposals he was crucified. Thus may we understand that the flattery of his persecutors was not thoughtful but deceitful. They wished to frighten the master through the torture of the servant Christ changed their expedient into grace so that the martyrdom of the servant should become an invitation for the master».

#### *The thoughts of Ambrose on the two names*

I. 6. «Both martyrs have a name which is fitting to martyrdom so much so that they seem called to martyrdom by their very names. One was called Vitale and it was almost as if he had to earn real life, eternal life by despising life itself. The other was called Agricola in that he sowed good fruits of spiritual grace and watered the plantation of his merits and the virtues of all with the shedding of his own blood».

#### *Burial in a Jewish cemetery*

I. 7. «They had been buried in Jewish ground among their tombs. The Jews wished to be buried with those little slaves whose Lord they had denied. Thus one day Balaam also said: "Let my soul die among the souls of the just"; during his life, however, he did not share the works of those among whose souls he wished to die. They too honoured when dead those they had persecuted when alive. Thus there did we seek the remains of the martyrs, almost as we pluck a rose among the thorns».

#### *The celebration of the Translation*

I. 8. « When the holy remains were transferred we were surrounded by Jews. All the exultant and joyous throng of the Church in Bologna was also present. On seeing the martyrs the Jews said: "The flowers have appeared in the ground". The Christians said: "It is harvest time; now the time has come when he who reaps shall also receive his reward. Other sowed and we gather the fruits of the martyrs". Hearing the voices of the applauding Church the Jews again said to one another: "The voice of the dove has been heard in our land". Which has been appropriately interpreted as: "The day announces the word to the day and the night shows his knowledge to the night. Day to day, Christian to Christian, night to night and Jew to Jew". Thus did the Jews showed they had knowledge of the martyrs but not of the Word rather that their knowledge of the martyrs is not according to the knowledge of he who alone is good and true. Indeed by ignoring God's justice and wishing to vindicate themselves by themselves they did not accept God's justice».

#### *The remains. Trophies of the cross*

I. 9. «Thus I have brought you gifts I have gathered with my own hands, namely trophies of the cross, the grace of which you learn to know in the works. The devils themselves certainly also recognise it, let others amass gold and silver extracting them from hidden veins, let yet others gather necklaces of precious stones, for that is a fleeting treasure and often also the cause of ruin for those who possess it. We have gathered the nails of a martyr, and we have gathered many of them so much that the wounds caused by them were more than were his limbs. You would have said that while we were gathering his nails the martyr shouted to the throng of Jews: "Put your hands in my side and no longer be incredulous, but believe". We have gathered the blood of the triumph and the wood of the cross».

#### *The gift of the remains. The dedication of the basilica of St Agricola*

I. 10. «It was not possible to deny these remains to the holy widow who had requested them. Therefore receive these gifts of salvation which now lie under the

holy altar. Thus is that holy widow Juliana who prepared and offered to the Lord this temple which today we dedicate. She who in her children has already consecrated to the Lord temples of purity and integrity is worthy to make such an offer. While wishing to say Juliana I said Judea. The tongue has not erred but has specified precisely as Judea is the soul which confesses Christ. Indeed God was known in Judea that is to say where he was acknowledged, not where he was denied. Thus is there a spiritual Judea where the most important side is to be found and the intellect is purer, since salvation comes from the Judeans. Thus has the error of the tongue drawn attention to the testimony of holiness »

### *Juliana. Christian widowhood*

I. 11. «Thus let us honour this widow, she does not aspire to the honour which our words would render her because it is written: "Honour those widows who are truly widows". Indeed she has met the commandment of the Apostle, her good deeds bear witness to and so has she educated and brought up her children perfectly.

When she lost her husband was there anyone who did not pity her for being abandoned and wretched? But she wept more because a minister had lost the holy altar than because she herself had lost her husband and her children their father. Indeed , although she had been deprived of the support and comfort of her husband, yet in her merciful mind did she give yet more importance to the cause of the Church».

## **II. THE MESSAGE**

### **1. Bologna. The church of the Saints Vitale and Agricola in Arena. Martyrdom.**

#### **a. Martyrdom - monument witness in the Holy' Scriptures**

It is no longer usual for us today to find the Italian word «martirio» (martyrdom derived from the Latin *martyrium* and from the Greek *martyrion* with the meaning of «monument-witness» to indicate a building devoted to worship erected in honour of Christian martyrs. Restore such a meaning would permit us to understand more directly the significant value which certain houses of worship possess in a diocese when they are named after those witnesses of the faith who have shed their blood. I should like to revive this aspect of the word in order to restore the full sense of the church of the Saints Vitale and Agricola for the Christian community in Bologna.

It is appropriate to return, albeit briefly, to the semantics of the word with some well-known examples.

The Greek word *martyrion* = *witness* in the meaning of monument is also already known in classical language, although our attention will be turned to biblical Greek following the Septuagint Bible for the Old Testament in a literal translation.

In Genesis, Labano reaches an agreement with Jacob and says to him: "Thus, here and now you and I shall set an agreement and there will be a testimony (*eis martyrion*) here between you and I", and said to him: "See no witness (*martyrs*) is between us..." after taking a stone, Jacob placed it like a stela. Jacob said to his brothers: "Gather the stones" and they gathered the stones and formed a pile and there ate from on the pile. And Labano said to him "Let this pile today bear witness (*martyrei*) between you and I" And Labano called it "the testimony pile (*tes martyrias*) whereas Jacob called it "the witness pile" (*martyrs*). Labano said to Jacob: «See this pile and the stela which is placed between you and me This pile serves as a testimony (*martyrei*)» and the stela itself also serves as a testimony (*martyrei*) so it was given the name of testimonial pile (*martyrei*) (Gen. 31,44-48). The pile of stones and the stela are a *martyrion* - *martyrium* - *martyrdom* - *testimony*, a *martyrs* - *martyr* - *testimony*, namely a monument which serves as a testimony (*martyrei*) of the agreement reached.

In Joshua the sons of Ruben, of Gad and of half of the tribe of Manasse build an altar «so that it may be a testimony (*eis martyrion*) between us and you (namely the rest of the tribes of Israel) and between our descendants after us» (Josh. 22,27). In future if the agreement was not honoured, the group who kept faith would be able to say to those who had broken it: «Look at the form of the altar of the Lord which our fathers made ... for it to be a testimony (*eis martyrion*) between you and us and between our sons» (Josh. 22,28). Here the *martyrion* is an altar.

In Mt. 8,4 and in the parallel text in Lk. 5,14 the material offer that the healed leper must bring to the temple becomes a testimony (*eis martyrion*), (Mt. 8,4 and in the parallel Lk. 5,14), namely that gift is a document which proves to the priests the healing has actually taken place. Moreover the dust kicked up by the sandals of the rejected missionaries also becomes a document which on the day of judgement will be a testimony (*eis martyrion*) against those who have rejected the offer of salvation (Mk. 6,11 and in the parallel Lk. 9,15).

#### **b. Martyrdom - testimony - monument in ecclesiastical literature.**

The word "martyrdom" fully acquires the meaning which it is our interest to underline above all in ecclesiastical literature and in the epigraphic inscriptions.

Among the errors attributed to the gnostic Basilide, Tertullan (III century A. D.) lists: «He refuses to acknowledge that martyrdom should be built»; the martyrdom contested by the heretic were those buildings erected in honour of the martyrs.

Eusebius of Cesarea (IV century) calls the basilica of Constantine, erected on Calvary the place where Jesus met his death, a *martyrion* (martyrdom), a testimony.

Shortly later Sozomeno (V century) will call the same basilica the "*mega martyrion*" the great testimony bearing witness to how much Christ has done for us.

Saint Augustine calls a church dedicated to St Stephen a *martyrium* (martyrdom), a testimony.

Isidoro of Seville (VII century) defines the word *martyrium* (martyrdom) «a word of Greek origin which indicates the place of martyrs, either because it has been erected in memory of the martyr, or because the tombs of the martyrs are to be found there».

Therefore "martyrdom" is the holy building dedicated to God on the appeal of the martyrs and erected on the site of their torture or on their tombs. While in the East the word martyrdom has clearly prevailed by which to name these monuments, in the West the word "*confessio*" has prevailed with the same meaning. H. Lecquerc states that «The word *confessio* has frequently served as the name for the place in which the martyr had rendered his testimony with his blood. At times the body of the tortured man had been buried in the place in which he had lost his life». Our reason for dwelling so long on these quotations is that of helping us to understand the precise but nowadays unaccustomed meaning of the word martyrdom applied to a monument erected in the places where the martyrs were tortured and in our case to the Church of the Saints Vitale and Agricola "in Arena". In ancient Rome the arena was the place reserved for the games and performances and normally where the Christians were tortured. However much the name "in Arena" may be known to us with historic certainty from the low medieval period, nevertheless its undoubted meaning is that of the testimony of the place where the protomartyrs were tortured, and so today it is for us the *martyrion* - martyrdom, (the testimony), the *confessio* (the proclamation of the faith in blood, the *martyrs* (the witness) of what has happened in this place.

Therefore I feel it is useful in this period of new evangelisation to recall to mind the specific nature of this building, so rich in spiritual values in its meaning of monument-testimony. It is filled not only with the memory of the place where the martyrdom took place but also with what the martyrdom itself implies. It is the profound meaning of the martyrdom which is implied in the *martyrion* and which will let us appreciate more and more the monument which our fathers created so that we would not lose the memory of the events which took place here.

## **2. Vitale and Agricola: heralds of the faith in Christ.**

...Although the original meaning of the word "martyr" and "martyrdom" is that of "witness" and "testimony in the course of the centuries these terms have undergone a change. Even if they have never lost their original meaning, they have



altered more and more to the point of taking on today's more usual meaning of that special testimony which is sealed with blood. The martyr is he who remains faithful to his Lord to the end, to the point of extreme suffering, namely to the point of death. From now on we will use the word "martyr" with this strict meaning and we will do likewise with "martyrdom", namely the avowal of faith with shedding of blood.

#### **a. Martyr: Man-sign**

"Sign is something which apart from the form it fixes on the senses, brings to our knowledge something other than itself. Thus a sign is a means which connects something known to something else which is unknown and is not visible; it is like a bridge which links what is immediately perceptible with what is not. In a certain sense it hides expressed reality as it is insufficient to express it in its completeness. On the other hand it reveals it, as by means of that sign we learn of the thing which is expressed.

Of the various types of signs, we are interested by that which springs from a human gesture namely a free sign determined by man's free initiative and which becomes most expressive when the act and the gesture is fully conscious and revealed by the word that qualifies it. Thus it will be useful to reflect on the message which is communicated to us by the testimony rendered with blood.

#### **b. Martyr: a sign of Christ**

The martyr does not die for an idea but for a person he feels linked to by a profound affection and love. He receives his ideas of life from this person. There is an essential connection between the testimony of Christ and the suffering which testifies it to the point of bloodshed. The martyr does not only suffer for Christ and with Christ, he is led to death by Christ's death. His own death is the revelation of that of his master. The precise idea of martyrdom then, is its "Christ like" nature.

The Acts of the Apostles present Paul's conversion in this way:"[...] falling to the ground he heard a voice which said to him: 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?' He answered: 'Who are you, o Lord?'. And the voice replied: 'I am Jesus that you do persecute' ". Jesus is present in the martyr, he is the visible sign of Christ who remains invisible to us. The witness can well make St Paul's words on the suffering born by the missionaries their own: "We carry in our bodies everywhere the death of Jesus so that also the life of Jesus will show itself in our bodies". St Ambrose calls the hands of the martyrs Vitale and Agricola "triumphs of Christ our Lord", "trophies of the cross".

In judgement the decisive and discriminating point both for the persecuted and for the persecutor is the affirmation "Yes, I am Christian". The more his persecutors

forced him to deny Christ, the more St Vitale declared to all his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, (Ambrose). Blandina, the martyr of Lyons in France, affirms: "I am Christian". The trial of Santo and Epagato is narrated in these terms:"[...] to all of those who interrogated him Santo only replied: 'I am Christian', the governor also limited himself to asking Epagato if he was Christian, and Epagato replied in a loud voice that he certainly was. This was sufficient for him to be condemned and tortured". The link martyr-Christ is explicit not only in the words but once again in the way in which the woman is martyred: "[...] Blandina was hanged from a traverse [...]. Her hanging figure seemed to the eye to have the form of a cross [...] her fellow martyrs saw with their eyes in the figure of their sister that of he who had been crucified for them.

The passion of Perpetua and Felicita is made known so that all those who will hear it in liturgical gatherings may enter into communion "with our Lord Jesus Christ" by way of the martyrs.

With his words and deeds the martyr announces that it is not his person which is of interest, but that for whom he gives his life. His intention is to show to all the world that Jesus is Christ, the Lord, the Saviour, he proclaims with all his might the rule of the Nazarene over him and the whole world.

Ambrose said of Agricola: "You would have said that while we were gathering his nails the martyr shouted to the throng of Jews: "Put your hands in my side and no longer be incredulous but faithful".

### c. Faith testified

This is the message which springs from the tortured flesh of the witnesses.

Jesus is the son of Mary, born in Bethlehem, who lived in Nazareth so is called the Nazarene, who bore the cross on Calvary, and who was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; the man who travelled the villages and ways of Palestine heralding the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the Messiah awaited for centuries heralded by the prophets, the son of David who comes to deliver Israel and all the nations from all spiritual and physical slavery of body and soul.

Jesus is Lord, "God exalted Jesus and gave him his name so that in the name of Jesus all should bow down in heaven, on earth and underground and every tongue proclaim that Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father". He is the Son of God, the creator of his mother as the poet rightly says in the Divine Comedy: "Virgin mother, daughter of your son"; his sovereignty is universal, he exerts his dominion on creation and on the history of peoples and men. He rules this world and in the other of which he is absolute Lord, on the day of judgement he will deliver irrevocable judgement: "Come ye the blessed" "Go ye the damned"; neither wealth, power, the state, sex, pleasure nor whatsoever creature are the Lords of the

Christian martyrs.

Jesus is the Saviour. All the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament tell his message. Jesus obeyed unto death and we have been healed through his blood, when we were enemies, God reconciled us with himself through the death of his son, we have been saved from desperation by his blood; through the blood of Christ we have redemption for our sins, we have been freed from our vain conduct through the precious blood of Christ and with the blood of Christ God cleanses us of every sin. This is salvation: the ability to love God and our brothers as he has loved us. Through the confession of Christ, the martyr shows the holy Father's love for man: "God has so loved the world as to give his only begotten son so as whoever believes in him shall not die but shall have eternal life [...] God has not sent his son into the world to judge it, but to save it". The initiative of salvation is of the Father; the Father has shown himself to us as the Father of Jesus Christ. For this reason we are also able to recognise God as our Father, as we have received in Jesus all the fullness of divine filiation.

In the confession of his Lord, the martyr lets us know the love of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit has descended on Jesus, rests on him, acts through him. He commands it, transmits him to his church together with the Father and gives it to his disciples, enjoins them: "When they take you away to surrender you, do not worry about what to say, but say in that hour what will be given to you, as it shall not be you but the Holy Spirit who speaks in you". And the letter of Peter: "Blessed are you who are insulted for the name of Christ, for the Spirit of glory and the Spirit of God rests on you". So the martyr is the man of the Spirit, he who speaks God's word to men as did the ancient prophets, he is a genuine prophet. Faced with torture and hardened judges the martyr is not an impassive hero, he is afraid and suffers anguish, in exactly the same way as Jesus confronting his passion, but it is the Spirit which supports him, inspires him to speak frankly and to acknowledge Christ who makes him able to offer his life for him.

### 3. Vitale and Agricola heralds of the faith in the Church

#### a. The martyr reveals the Church

In his *Exhortation to Virginity* St Ambrose tells of the great celebration of the Church in Bologna in these words: "[...] I was invited to the feast in Bologna where the translation of a saintly martyr was celebrated [...] The people of the Church were joyfully present and did acclaim [...] Hearing the exultant voice of the Church, the Jews said among themselves [...]". As is perfectly clear the entire and exceptional Christian community is gathered around its witnesses.

The martyr belongs (of necessity) to the concept of church. The community of the disciples of Jesus which lives hearing the teachings of the apostles, in fraternal communion, in the breaking of bread and prayer, namely all who are baptised in the Holy Spirit are part of a single body which is the sole community of believers, be they Jewish, Greek, slaves or freemen. In the same way the slave Vitale and the master Agricola, both reborn in baptism are brothers and form "a single thing" (St Ambrose), a sole body. The profound communion of the martyr with Christ and in Christ with his community means that if a member suffers, all suffer with him, and if a member is joyous, all are joyous with him.

The tale of the martyrs of Lyons is yet again illuminating. Several Christians, about ten of them who were imprisoned, denied Christ for fear of torture. Our affliction (of the other faithful) was immense and without measure for the pain that their weakness had caused us [...]. At that time of fear we were all anguished [...]. We did not fear torture [...] but that someone's courage could fail him and he should abandon his faith". On the other hand how many remained steadfast in their confession even through the atrocities of torture "[...] for their confessions they were as a spur and consolation".

The martyr who speaks to the world is never isolated, he is a member of the community and the representative of his brothers. In his martyrdom the bishop Cyprian identifies himself so totally with his companions that his words in the court are the word of the entire community, his death is everyone's death, his testimony is everyone's confession. So the martyr necessarily involves the community in which and for which he lives.

For this reason the martyr's account must be written down, preserved for posterity and heard again in the worship of the church which on the anniversaries gathers around the tombs and at the sites where the martyrdom took place. As the community in Bologna celebrated the translation of the remains of the protomartyrs, so is our community celebrating and exulting for its witnesses in this biennium of the faith.

## b. The Church united with its martyrs

The martyrs confess Christ and the Church which receive their testimony as that of Christ. The Church is united with its martyr, it does not abandon him when he is in prison, it assists him. It is moving how the faithful of the Church of Carthage cry to their bishop condemned to torture: "We will die with you" and before his execution how they celebrate a vigil of prayer before his house as if it were an Easter vigil. It is the deacons who take care of his assistance and who look after the relations between the community and its prisoners. That noble Roman woman Perpetua describes in dark tones her first terribly distressing day in prison and the affectionate help she received: "There was unbearable heat due to the overcrowding and the guards' attempts at extortion [...]. So Terzius and Pomponius, blessed deacons in whose care we were, came to an arrangement on what recompense to give to the guards in order that we might be transferred within a few hours to a less hard part of the prison where we might feel a little better".

The martyrs do not frighten the church, on the contrary they are its strength, its triumphs. They are the visible demonstration that God has not abandoned it, that Christ has also triumphed over the death in their bodies, and that Satan has been defeated. They are the leaders who drag the faint hearted to combat. The church rejoices for their faithfulness in torture and death and is built with their blood.

The Acts of Martyrdom by Policarpus recount the devotion with which the faithful gathered the remains of his bones burnt on the stake which were "more precious than rare gems and purer than finest gold". They laid them in a grove and there they gathered "in triumph and joy on every possible occasion and they entreated the Lord to allow them to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom in memory of all those who have already faced the same struggle and as preparation for those who will face it in future (18,2).

A church is proud to communicate to the others the passion of its martyrs and those who receive the testimony are not daunted or afraid, rather they rejoice for it. The Acts of Policarpus begin in this way: "The Church of God which is which is wandering in Smyrna, to the Church of God w which is wandering in Philomelia, and to all the communities of the holy universal church [...] have we willed to recount to you in writing, brothers, the story of all who have testified the faith and of the blessed Policarpus who with his testimony almost set the seal on it and ended the persecution" (1,1).

Persecution does not destroy the faith of the victims nor of the faithful, on the contrary the Christian martyrs are a great source of spiritual strength for the universal church and principally for their particular church. The persecutor's defeat is this, that while he destroys the flesh of the witness to destroy his faith, on the contrary he makes of him a supreme witness and causes absolute homage to be paid to the martyr and to the values he wishes to destroy.

Conscious of the fact that its son may be called to give dire testimony, the church

prepares them with meditation and prayer. The words of St Ciprian to the imprisoned Christians are magnificent: "In some way we are in prison with you [...]. Thinking of you day and night we ask god both in liturgical prayer during mass and in the private prayers we offer in our houses to protect you always and to give you the crown of glory".

The martyr has the distinct awareness of belonging to a persecuted community of which he confesses the faith, and in its turn the church receives the faith of the martyr as its own.

The anniversaries of his death are given prominence and remembered in worship: each particular church gathers at the tomb of the witnesses of the faith to preserve his memory and to read of his passion in liturgical celebration. On 4th November next we shall assemble with our bishop in the church of the Saints Vitale and Agricola to celebrate the sixteen hundredth anniversary and are part of this wonderful flow of grace to obtain from God the ability to love him and bear witness to him.

#### **4. A typical message of Vitale and Agricola: fraternal love**

In the Roman forum and the markets in ancient Rome, men women and children were on display, each with a label around his neck on which their qualities, age state of health, physical and moral qualities and price were marked. Those who needed labour in the country, in building or in the home, could buy them and take them home. It was the slave market, namely of men who were treated as if they were beasts. The master had complete power over their slaves, be they men or women, including that over life and death. He had no responsibility whatsoever for violence, ill treatment on rape and the slave had no right to have a family. The children he had by a fellow woman slave were sold to others. He, his children and his things were the property of the master who had bought them and who made use of them as he pleased. Vitale and Agricola, slave and master were subject to this law. When they both came to know what the gospel announced. Their meeting with Christ totally transformed their relationship. Agricola and Vitale were a single thing in Christ, they loved and respected each other, they were two totally faithful friends. They went to mass together on Sundays, they took Communion together and prayed together. Christ is the guarantor and defender of both of their rights, in his sermon in the spring of 394, in the church in Florence dedicated to St Agricola, St Ambrose exhorts the great Christian brotherhood of the Bolognese martyrs, and the total overcoming of class divisions. The slave is received as "consors" (partner) and "colleague" of the master. Consors = partner or associate and this means that as partners the two have equal rights and duties and that there is no difference between slave and master in the society in which they live. Even in their martyrdom slave and master vie as equals to benefit to each other. Agricola sends ahead Vitale

to prepare a place for him, and Vitale called Agricola to him. The persecutors who still used the old logic of friction between slave and master wanted to take advantage of it to break their intimate communion, they cruelly tortured the slave to frighten the master, but contrariety to their intentions the friendship in Jesus between Vitale and Agricola strengthens and grows even in torture, so much so that Vitale's martyrdom becomes a tempting invitation to the master to follow him. In the life and death of the two Ambrose sees the word of Paul the apostle fulfilled: "Freemen or slaves we are a single thing".

The typical message of the Bolognese martyrs is that of mutual love for those of different or even opposing social classes. Other slaves and masters have been martyred together but in no narration of the passion is it said that the slave and the master are partners and colleagues, only of these two is their profound equality and friendship in Christ underlined and only of these two is their mutual help in martyrdom given preeminence. The message of mutual love will be guarded with care through the centuries by the church in Bologna.

In the antiphonies of the mass for the protomartyrs in the Angelica code 123 (XIth century - Rome) the Christians in Bologna will sing in the liturgy: "Let us honour the martyrdom of the master and of the slave"; "Oh most blessed martyrs Vitale and Agricola heralds of our faith! Oh inestimable bond of love".

In the preface of the code of the University of Bologna Library 1473 ff. 328r-329r of XII century ("Vitae sanctorum et vita S. Petronii ...") it is pointed out that Bologna "the Learned" is outstanding in the whole of Christendom for the doctrine of its study by virtue of the protection of the two "scholars" Vitale and Agricola. They teach "what the duties of superiors are towards the subordinate, what the duties of the subordinate are towards superiors and what duties equals have towards their equals"; They spread the seed of learning and because of their merits "the fields of the students" who flock to Study are well tilled. They make canon law and civil law converge in perfect harmony.

It seems to me particularly worthy of note that the first decree on the freeing of the serfs should have been issued in Bologna: "In 1256 as there were in Bologna and its surrounding countryside many thousands of persons both male and female slaves who had been sold as serfs, the senate set delivered them from slavery, and paid each of the masters 19 lire for each serf at the age of 14 and over and 8 lire for those of younger age, and so set them free and decreed that no one, on pain of death, should in future call them serfs or treat them as serfs" (A.Masini, I, pg. 432). The code which contains this list bears the meaningful title of *Liber Paradisus* and opens with profoundly religious motivations.

It seems to me that the particular attention given by our people to social problems today is also a sign that the seed of the martyrs is still bearing fruit. Vitale and Agricola, slave and master, are with their profound communion both in life and in death, the strongest affirmation of human rights.

### III. BOLOGNA AND ITS MARTYRS

#### 1. The martyrs of yesterday

The memory of the past the recovery of our Christian roots and of what was and is foundation of the church in Bologna, is in consideration of a new future. Living does not mean vegetating, it means knowing how to link ourselves to the past to go forward. The deeper and more alive memory is, the more the more possible it will be to build on those foundations in order to become ever more faithful to the mission entrusted to us as his disciples by Christ.

The martyrs of the early centuries have not been surpassed, they were not only the strength of Christ and the Holy Spirit in those times, but they are also such for the people of Bologna today. The martyr can say as did St Paul: "I am happy for the suffering I bear for you, and in my flesh complete that which is missing from Christ's pain for the benefit of his body which is the Church". It is not that Christ's passion is incomplete and thus needs completion, in reality it is Christ himself who has joined his church to himself, his pure and certainly participating body has desired it in the task of salvation. Therefore, it was not only in the past that the martyrs sustained the church in Bologna, but they have always done so and also continue to do so today, as the passion of Christ which took place in his body almost two thousand years ago is never surpassed and distant from us. It is the passion of the first martyr which, in his redeeming strength, makes the martyr's sacrifice present.

So how happy and profound is that intuition of our Minister who has set the biennium of the faith and that new evangelisation in the context of the historical word of the protomartyrs reminding his faithful their strength and their living presence in the church of today.

St Augustine rightly said: "The whole earth is crimson in the blood of the martyrs, the sky blooms with their crowns, the Churches are adorned by their graves, the seasons are marked by their anniversaries". To celebrate the sixteen hundredth anniversary of the translation of the mortal remains of Agricola and Vitale is being part of in that wonderful flow of strength and spiritual grace that derive from them, which strengthen the Bologna of today and that of the future and which is a constant invitation to imitate the supreme succession of Christ.

#### 2. The martyrs of today

The problem of the martyrs "of today" was already alive in the Christians of the first decade of the third century and for whom the martyrs of the first century were not even two hundred years back, two hundred years which for the life span of a man, however, is a huge meter. We have an explicit and ample testimony of this in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* who were martyred in 202 A. D. Their



contemporary Christians justify the account of their martyrdom to their distant brothers: "The ancient demonstrations of faith which testify to the grace of God and which bring about the growth in man's faith have been collected in writing so that by making those extraordinary facts come back to life by reading about them, honour to God and comfort to man would ensue. So why then should not those more recent testimonies which equally meet both ends be written down? [...] So today [...] we consider every other action by the Holy Spirit to be intended to strengthen the Church and feel ourselves called to narrate and proclaim the testimonies to be glory of God by reading them. Also so that infirm or seriously ill faith should not judge the glory of God the exclusive privilege of the ancients [...]". God keeps his promises all ages as a testimony for both believer and non-believer.

In the Gospel Jesus prophesied suffering and hate in the world to the church: "I shall send you as sheep among the wolves", the position is somewhat awkward for as far as we know it is the wolves which eat the sheep and not vice versa. "Beware of men for they shall turn you over to their courts and they shall whip you in their synagogues, and you shall be brought before governors and kings on my account, to give testimony to them and to the pagans". His disciples must be ready to bear witness in blood. In the same way what it was required of the new born Church that Christ's passion should be completed in his pure body by the passion of his disciples, so the eternal Church will be asked for the testimony of the martyr to affirm that there are periods of history without martyrs is to deny the existence of the Church in that period. We only have to discover them and to gather their memories for them to survive as a testimony of Christ and the Church in Bologna in these years. Certainly due to the faithful allegiance to the Gospel lived concretely through a history which is tied to political events, on to the demonstration of Christ's succession which is closely linked to the social situation, it may turn out to be more difficult to distinguish the profession of faith from the adherence in the martyr of today to a political ideology, and yet with the help of the Holy Spirit this should be possible. The Monte Sole communities lived through a dramatic political period. On the one side were the German troops united to Nazism one of the most violent and persecutory movements of all times (their lagers reveal a cruelty which could never before have been imagined) and on the other a violent reaction bordering an imbecility and recklessness with almost daily acts of oppression and tyranny. In this situation each side tends to make of the martyr either a traitor or a hero and tries either to make him part of its political ideology or to expel him from it. He is however, neither traitor nor hero, but rather the visible presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit among us. Christian conscience must know how to see the sign of Christ and his church in the martyrs of Monte Sole. If her companions in faith saw Christ crucified in Blandina the martyr of the Church in Lyons hanging open armed in her martyrdom, why should it not be evident today in the priest Ubaldo Marchioni, shot to death in church and burned on the altar like a burned offering, that Christ celebrates his mass with the flesh of his disciple?

If Monsignor Romero who was killed at the altar while celebrating Communion mingles his blood with the blood of Christ, what short sightedness prevents us from seeing in him the presence of our Lord Jesus and his community in El Salvador which he dies for in a heroic act of loyalty to his faith.

Exact evaluation is certainly necessary as is accurate historical analysis, but Christ the Lord and Saviour is not only to be seen through the eyes of history, but also through the eyes of faith. The past and present fully complete each other in the life of the church and are the seeds of a new future.

Don Giulio Malaguti

Bologna, June 25th, 1993

### **N.B.**

Worship of the protomartyrs has grown notably above all due to St Ambrose's enterprise and has moved two directions: a) worship of the pair (Vitale and Agricola celebrated together). Today in Italy there are four parishes named after them of which that of Calo Brianza has a particular link with Bologna, b) Single worship (Vitale alone and Agricola alone). There are 34 parishes named after Vitale. As for other martyrs "germination" splitting or dividing has also taken place for St Vitale. Once, having forgotten or ignored St Ambrose's testimony, an imaginary tale of the martyr was created perhaps around Ravenna. The St Vitale citizen of Bologna became a soldier from Ravenna the considerable historical influence of which firstly as capital of the Western Roman Empire and later the seat of Teodoric and of the exarchate led to the fact that the cult of St Vitale was more widely spread as the soldier from Ravenna than as the slave from Bologna who had been martyred with his master.

I did not consider it fitting to deal with these problems here as they have been amply and scientifically dealt with by scholars of the subject in the volume entitled VITALE AND AGRICOLA - THE CULT OF THE BOLOGNESE PROTOMARTYRS THROUGH THE CENTURIES ON THE OCCASION OF THE 16TH CENTENARY OF THEIR TRANSLATION, by Prof. Gina Fasoli, prefaced by Giulio Malaguti and Paolo Prodi, EDB, Bologna 1993.

## INDICE

INTRODUCTION.....	5
THE BIENNIUM OF THE FAITH .....	5
I. MEMORY.....	5
1. Good and bad memory.....	5
2. Historical data on the martyrs Vitale and Agricola .....	8
a. Political and ecclesiastical events connected with their transference.....	8
b. The words of Ambrose: Exhortation to Virginity .....	11
II. THE MESSAGE .....	14
1. Bologna. The church of the Saints Vitale and Agricola in Arena. Martyrdom. ....	14
a. Martyrdom - monument witness in the Holy' Scriptures.....	14
b. Martyrdom - testimony - monument in ecclesiastical literature. ....	15
2. Vitale and Agricola: heralds of the faith in Christ. ....	16
a. Martyr: Man-sign .....	17
b. Martyr: a sign of Christ .....	17
c. Faith testified.....	18
3. Vitale and Agricola heralds of the faith in the Church .....	20
a. The martyr reveals the Church.....	20
b. The Church united with its martyrs.....	21
4. A typical message of Vitale and Agricola: fraternal love .....	22
III. BOLOGNA AND ITS MARTYRS .....	24
1. The martyrs of yesterday .....	24
2. The martyrs of today .....	24
N.B. ....	26

