

The Call of Martyrdom  
1.15.19  
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Reflections on Our Pilgrimage to Roma  
December 14-22

What is a martyr? One who voluntarily surrenders his/her life for and to God. The martyr says yes to God, no to self. The martyr takes God's gift of life and gives it back to the Creator. The martyr takes up the cross and says "Here I am, Lord."

One short week in Rome has shone me several examples of martyrdom, instilling in my heart a resolve to say yes to God's call. The transformation I have experienced through the pilgrimage is a change in my heart toward a deeper recognition of what God wants of me, and what God asks of me in my life as a child, father, spouse, friend, colleague, and member of the family at Pepperdine University. I am reminded that I am to look for his daily call and lifelong command to follow Him. Not just listen, but heed and obey.


Rome reminds me that finally, ultimately, and most significantly, we are all called to give our whole life to God, to follow Abraham, the father and faith, and to become a disciple of Jesus, the shepherd and high priest of faith. God commands us to give back, to give away our greatest gift - the gift of life itself. To follow God is to follow his lead, all in, full cost.

I felt the call reaching into my heart in three ways on this trip: through our visit to the Coliseum, the Jewish Ghetto, and Caravaggio's paintings of the martyrdom of Peter and calling of Matthew. None of these reminders of martyrdom could have happened without our being in Rome. Pilgrimages require a journey, a trip, a visit to places, not pictures of places. You can't plow a field by turning it over in your mind. You can't go on a Pilgrimage in the easy chair in the living room.

**Colisseo** - site of gladiator combat and martyrdom. This is an ancient and timeless reminder of human sacrifice at the hands of other humans. Men and women suffered, endured persecution, and gave up their lives for God.



The Romans' greatest condemnation was to say - Be gone. You are no more - as declared by their **Damnatio Memoriae**. This sentence was reserved for those who had committed heinous crimes. By contrast, the martyrs were "eliminated" because of their devotion to God. This causes us to see the extremes of memory: those damned for eternity for their unjust living vs. those who love God and give their life for God - and in this way they are glorified, revered, live and are remembered forever.



## Damnatio memoriae

La *damnatio memoriae*, la "condanna all'oblio" è una pena accessoria comminata a persone di pubblica rilevanza condannate per reati di particolare gravità, come l'alto tradimento (*crimen maiestatis*) e che colpisce in età imperiale principi deposti, membri della casa imperiale, individui che avevano cospirato contro i regnanti.

Il provvedimento, votato dal Senato, implica la distruzione e la cancellazione di ogni traccia visibile del nome e dell'immagine del condannato, quindi l'abbattimento delle statue e la mutilazione dei ritratti, la scalpellatura del nome sulle iscrizioni e sui monumenti, persino sulle monete. Può prevedere anche l'annullamento retroattivo di ogni atto pubblico del condannato. Questa distruzione sistematica e violenta di ogni traccia materiale legata alla memoria del condannato rappresenta un'intenzionale e consapevole riscrittura della storia e un caso emblematico di manipolazione pubblica della memoria, anche visiva.

Geta, dopo la sua uccisione per mano di Caracalla nel 212, Plautiano, il potente prefetto del pretorio di Settimio Severo, ucciso nel 205 e Plautilla, sua figlia e moglie di Caracalla, esiliata nel 205 e poi uccisa nel 211, di cui nella Mostra è esposto il ritratto scalpellato, sono solo alcuni casi di età severiana.

La *damnatio memoriae* fu infatti sistematicamente adottata in età severiana per tutti i casi di imperatori deposti e di membri della dinastia caduti in disgrazia, e colpì Didio Giuliano, Pescennio Nigro, Clodio Albino, Macrino, Eliogabalo, Giulia Soemia e Giulia Mamaea.

L'immagine restituisce i ritratti della *domus* imperiale, Settimio Severo e Giulia Domna nel registro superiore, Caracalla e Geta fanciulli in quello inferiore. Il volto di Geta è stato eraso a seguito della *damnatio memoriae* [qui un rimando all'altra sezione della mostra] dopo il 211. La tavola può essere stata originariamente esposta in un santuario per il culto della famiglia imperiale, ad esempio in un accampamento militare in una provincia orientale.

## Damnatio memoriae

The *damnatio memoriae* or "condemnation to oblivion" was an additional sentence passed on prominent public figures condemned for crimes of particular gravity, such as high treason (*crimen maiestatis*). It was inflicted on imperial princes, members of the imperial house and individuals who conspired against the rulers.

The measure, voted by the Senate, involved the destruction and cancellation of every visible trace of the name and image of the condemned, hence the demolition of all their statues and the mutilation of their portraits, the obliteration of their names on inscriptions and monuments, even on coins. Sometimes it even required the retroactive annulment of every public act by the person convicted. This systematic and violent destruction of every material trace of the memory of the condemned person was a deliberate and conscious rewriting of history and an emblematic case of the public manipulation of memory, including all visual records.

Geta, after being slain by Caracalla in 212, Plautianus, the powerful prefect of the Praetorian Guard of Septimius Severus, killed in 205 and Plautilla, his daughter and Caracalla's wife, exiled in 205 and put to death in 211, whose obliterated portrait is on display in the exhibition, are only some instances from the Severan age.

The *damnatio memoriae* was systematically adopted in the Severan age for all cases of deposed emperors and members of the dynasty who fell into disgrace. Its victims included Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, Macrinus, Eliogabalus, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea.

The image depicts portraits of the imperial *domus*, Septimius Severus and Julia Domna in the upper register, Caracalla and Geta as children in the lower one. Geta's face was obliterated as a result of the *damnatio memoriae* [qui un rimando all'altra sezione della mostra] after 211. The panel may have been originally displayed in a shrine for the cult of the imperial family, such as a military camp in an eastern province.

Tondo severiano  
Tempera su legno, 30,5 cm  
200 circa  
Altes Museum, Berlino

Severian tondo  
Tempera on wood, 30,5 cm  
c. 200  
Altes Museum, Berlin



## The Jewish Ghetto

We visited the Tempio Maggiore di Roma, the great synagogue adjacent to the Tiber, to see how the Jews have remained loyal to God in their religious practice, amid Roman occupation and rejection.





Adjacent to this temple is the Ghetto di Roma (Jewish Ghetto of Rome), established by the papacy in 1555 as a way of attempting to convert Jews as well as effectively control and *imprison* thousands of Jewish citizens. Though not behind bars, literally, these Jews were forced to live in a state of house arrest. Their persecution was both geographic and psychological.





## Caravaggio

Art has a way of moving, compelling the soul. To stand before the work of Caravaggio is to have one's imagination and spirit transported to a different place, a different state of mind. We were able to visit the churches where these paintings are displayed. This makes worship and meditation real. Each work struck me with the power of God's role in the lives of Peter and Matthew, two of those Jesus called into his service. Two that died willingly for their LORD. First, the Calling of Matthew, then



The Martyrdom of Matthew





Finally, a haunting yet glorious account of martyrdom, is Caravaggio's Crucifixion of Peter





So, the Roman pilgrimage lesson of martyrdom for me is this: unless we die, we do not live, nor do we transcend spiritual death. Instead, our life is spent as the flame wisp and the vacant pursuit of self. Our call is to follow God, to take up our cross, and live forever in his embrace. Our future is all about service to God, not self. This means that our call acceptance is a life lived in martyrdom, wherein we say: not my will (my ego, my career, my wants and desires and self, but your will - your commands, your work be done - it is in the Lord's Prayer and in the words of Abraham and Isaiah: "Here I am").

But, wait, how can we do this? How can we muster the courage? This, then is the final, great revelation about martyrdom, about giving our life up. None of us can do it. I cannot obey. I cannot answer the bell, the call. I cannot give up my life. It is impossible for me, and it is impossible for you, for each of us. It is/was impossible for those martyrs whose lives we venerate. So, where does that leave us on our pilgrimage? Lost, frustrated, confused? NO.

ONLY GOD can pull this off. Only God can work in and through us to give our lives to him. Only the power of God working in and through these people and in and through you and me makes it possible. It IS possible, therefore, through faith, but not my own work, my own doing. Only through the mystery and power of God can any of this happen. God gives me life and then asks for it back again. I cannot do it. I cannot muster the courage or will, but He can. He can.