

Martyrdom in time of peace and the relation of Christian identity to παρρησία

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Introduction

The word παρρησία derives from πᾶς (all) and ῥῆσις (saying, speech), that is, ‘the ability to say anything’. It is therefore to be rendered as ‘free speech’, ‘frank speech’ or ‘boldness of speech’, emerged in the life of citizens of the classical Greek cities from the fifth century BC when they obtained the civic privilege to speak freely in political meetings. From the third century BC when democracy in *poleis* yielded control to oligarchy, *parrhesia* changed from the privilege in public forums to a personal practice of speaking the truth. The notion had been influenced by the Hellenistic philosophies, especially Epicurean, Stoic and Cynic, and came to be seen as the virtue in connection to self-knowledge and self-control. Thus, *parrhesiasts* par excellence did say only what they knew to be true. It is interesting to note that *parrhesia* expresses an integral part of friendship from Isocrates onward. The Epicureans regard *parrhesia* as a quality of friendship, while valuing friendship highly in their community. They appreciate *parrhesia* as an instrument of moral correction and treat in detail the way in which their community was to engage in the nurture of its members. In the Roman society, *parrhesia* came into circulation as an imported word from Greek. This was translated into *libertas* and used to denote both the free status of citizens and their freedom of speech. *Libertas* was a key concept in their society because it connected the two values—free speech and free status. It made clear the fact that citizenship and a free status were a prerequisite for freedom of speech. In the mission and expansion of Christianity, frankness or boldness became a *topos*. While *parrhesia* is seen as the original state of humankind in later Christian writings, in which Christ is seen as the one who has restored the freedom of speech, the basic connotation of ‘speaking openly’ is well addressed by Jesus’ words in John 16:25: Jesus says to his disciples, ‘the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father’. This passage indicates that speaking plainly also implies a certain danger. The tension has always been present in the concept of παρρησία. Indeed, speaking the truth frankly to power can sometimes be a dangerous thing to do. In a number of narratives this term is used as description of the martyrs who confess their faith in Christ before Roman officials. They have also been described as *parrhesiasts* par excellence because of their boldness and fearlessness.

Before the 1980s when Michel Foucault's work on *parrhesia* entered into our circulation, in which he described the various forms of *parrhesia* and called attention to the Christian martyr as the perfect model for the *Parrhesiast* as such, foci had been already on *parrhesia* within the field of patristic studies in the 1960s. Giuseppe Scarpat (*Parrhesia: storia del termine e della sue traduzione in Latino*, Brescia, 1964) attempted to define *parrhesia* from the emphasis on a 'frankness' or 'openness' that was formed through Christians' relationship of trust (*fiducia*) with Christ, grounded upon divine love. Due to a very swift definitional claim, he could not make arguments so much as he simply asserted. Gerhardus J. M. Bartelink ('Parrhesia', in *Graecitas et Latinitas Christianorum Primaeva*, Suppl. III, 1, Nijmegen, 1970) presented a more comprehensive view of the evidence than his predecessor, Scarpat, and adopted a pragmatic framework for authors and texts under a difference between positive and negative aspects of the term *parrhesia*. He considered the relational foundations and pragmatic conditions that linked the word to the socio-political lives in the Greco-Roman world. While Foucault's viewpoint seems to stand in a relation of continuity with these studies in a field of Patristic studies, it is very likely that Foucault did not make clear reference to them. Surprisingly, treatments of *parrhesia* in Early Christian texts are largely "passing mentions" rather than focused investigations of the topic. Few of these academic authors seem aware of Foucault's writings on *parrhesia*.

It is interesting to note that in the late fourth- and early fifth- centuries, the African people had been concerned about another type of martyrdom, that is, the 'deathbed martyr', the Christian who suffered illness without the aid of pagan remedies such as 'unlawful charms' (Augustine, *Sermon* 335D,3). Augustine compares those gathered at the deathbed to 'flesh and blood [...] raging against the holy martyrs.' These martyrs appeared in some of his sermons (*Sermon* 4, 286, 306E, 318, 328 and 335D). In this paper, I shall focus on *Sermons* 4 and 335D with the interest that these narratives are a tool in Augustine's support for a definition of martyrdom in time of peace, thereby arguing the correlation between the *parrhesia* and martyrdom. The martyr narratives known to Augustine will be the primary object of this proposal.

Libertas amicitiae in the exchange with both an unnamed friend and Jerome

In *Confessions* 2, Augustine refers to the 'shining frontier of friendship' and writes that friendship is a delightful bond, forging a unity out of many souls. He does not understand how friendship ought to be in *Confessions* 3, but as beginning to realise the importance of rejecting relationships that encourage participation in sinful behaviour. In *Confessions* 4, he describes his close friendship with an unnamed

young man after his return from Carthage to Thagaste to teach, by referring to as 'sweeter to me than any sweetness I had known in all my life'. Augustine the Confessor admits how he grieved over the sudden death of his friend. But he sees this grief as reprehensible. At the time he regarded this relationship very highly and recognised the truth of Horace's expression that this made him see his dearest friend as the half of his own soul.

I felt that my soul and his had been but one soul in two bodies, and I shrank from life with loathing because I could not bear to be only half alive; and perhaps I was so afraid of death because I did not want the whole of him to die, whom I had loved so dearly.

Indeed if he looks back on this period, he loved his friend more than he loved God. But on the other hand, it was Augustine himself who was the problem in this friendship: he had persuaded his friend to join Manichaeism. Along with this view, it is admitted that Augustine the Confessor, by speaking of himself as a bad example, finds in this reminiscence something important for a frame of reference for thinking about friendship.

He was about to lose his friend by himself. According to the narrative of Augustine, his friend was baptised a Christian after deathly illness. Augustine stood by his side as he lay ill. When the friend awoke, Augustine tried to make light of the baptism he had received on his deathbed, but the friend looked uncomfortable and did not respond to the joke.

[H]e recoiled from me with a shudder as though I had been his enemy, and with amazing, new-found independence (*mirabili et repentina libertate*) warned me that if I wished to be his friend I had better stop saying such things to him.

Augustine waited until his friend recovered his health to resume the conversation, but he died shortly afterwards from a return of fever. The manner in which the friendship ended left Augustine with the final rebuke of the friend who had advised him with amazing and immediate frankness. He had attempted to leave Augustine from Manichaeism, but at the time of reporting this narrative Augustine still did not understand the importance of rebuke in friendship. He would rather see the frankness as an act of hostility rather than friendship. However, the acceptance of frank speech about himself is inherently coupled with the view of seeing his dearest friend as his alter ego, and the motif of this speech is to speak openly, so to speak, as if to himself. In this regard, Augustine was unable to respond to the hopes of the friend for his own progress.

An example of Augustine's positive evaluation of frank speech can be found in his exchanges with Jerome. The first letter of their correspondence (*Ep.* 28) was

probably composed between 393 and 395. What is interesting to note about this letter is Augustine's seemingly contradictory attitude concerning friendship in the eyes of Jerome. Augustine does not take the step of facilitating his unknown correspondent Jerome with a letter of introduction, given the relationship that Jerome already has with his close friend Alypius. In seeing himself as a second, another Alypius, Augustine uses the *topos* of *alter ego* in friendship and expects that the *topos* would provide an effective bond between him and the potential friend. On the other hand, in contrast to the subtlety of such an opening section, the letter concludes in a way that is too frank towards Jerome. For Augustine asks to be treated as an equal to the addressee, Jerome, who has already established his reputation as a prolific biblical exegete and translator. He criticises Jerome's interpretation of Paul's rebuke to Peter in Galatians 2:11–14 (*Ep.* 28, 3, 3). He takes issue with Jerome's translation and calls him a 'defense of a lie (*patrocinium mendacii*)'. Thus, Augustine requests Jerome in the following letter to 'take up genuine and truly Christian severity with love to correct and emend that work, and sing [...] a *παλινωδίαν*', that is, to disavow his error (*Ep.* 40, 4, 7). Consequently Jerome took such criticism as a blatant violation of the laws of friendship.

I am not so dense that, if you hold different views, I would think that you did mean injustice. But if you criticize my statements close up, demand an account of my writings, compel me to correct what I wrote, challenge me to sing a *παλινωδίαν* and restore my sight, in this you do injury to our friendship, in this you violate the laws of our relationship.

Jerome also responded to these criticisms, claiming that Augustine held heretical views. It was only when Augustine not only insisted on adhering to the 'laws of friendship' but also explained that he did not intend to unilaterally harm the other that the theological discussion between them finally resumed.

About ten years after their first correspondence, Augustine again received several letters from Jerome (*Ep.* 72, 75 and 81) and wrote to him (in 404 or 405, *Ep.* 82). Augustine seems to have abandoned for the moment any attempt to force Jerome into an epistolary conversation to correct his interpretative errors. However, he decided to accept Jerome's invitation to engage in such an exchange of letters. Augustine wanted to have a serious discussion under the rule of avoiding mutual aggression. Indeed, mutual rebuke is acceptable in the form of a friendly exchange of letters, and this is the way that is most in keeping with Christian friendship (*Ep.* 82, 3). This is because friends should be expected to correct each other's errors, not to flatter each other. And an exchange of letters, which should be based on *caritas*, develops to a higher form in frank correction. Augustine reminds Jerome that a true friend does not flatter, but presses for correction.

May we, nonetheless, enjoy not only mutual love for each other, but also a freedom of friendship [...] may we do this in fraternal love with a spirit that is not displeasing in the eyes of God. But if you do not think that this is possible between us without a harmful offense to love itself, let us not do this. For that love that I want to have with you is certainly greater, but this smaller love is something better than no love at all.

In the formulation thus conceived, Augustine conforms the concept of *caritas*, which has been relied upon in the conventional epistolary conversation, to his own view of the mutually corrective exchange of letters. It is a development from mutual love to friendship with the Spirit. And Augustine sees it as a truly Christian friendship in the exchange of letters, characterised by a Pauline frankness of speech (*apostolica libertas*). It is the activity required in the Christian community of correcting each other's errors with love.

Here it is clear that Paul understood what they were looking for, namely, [...] something that he could have done with *that freedom* [*ea libertate*] in order to show by it that those sacraments ought neither to be sought as if they were necessary nor condemned as if they were sacrilegious.

[H]e neither acted out of pretense when *with the freedom of an apostle* [*libertate apostolica*] he honored those old sacraments, as was fitting at that time when there was need. [...] the same thing, therefore, holds with regard to those actions in which he adapted to the tradition of the Jews *with a wise freedom* [*libertate prudenti*], not a servile necessity—or, what is more unworthy, with a false rather than a faithful ministry.

So even a learned man like Jerome can make mistakes, and these mistakes need to be corrected. Against this view, on the one hand, there existed the view, like Jerome, that criticism of a correspondent breaks the rules of friendship. However, when Augustine insists on a Christian form of 'frankness of speech' in the light of the scriptural passage about Pauline practice of friendly, charitable correction, it is not only the view that friendship is based on love in a Christian way, but that there is also a Christian influence on classical 'frankness of speech'. It should be noted that friendship is not only based on brotherly love (*caritas*), but that the classical 'frankness of speech' is seen in a Christian way. Augustine's claim is important in this respect. Indeed, it is through the active engagement of community members in such 'frankness of speech' that community develops in a collective way, characterised by openness and commitment.

The parrhesia in martyrdom

The question of how Christians behaved in the late antique North African society is still under discussion in the consequences of their conflict and belonging in certain contexts. I have already examined how in small social bonds, such as relations between friends, the behaviour of community members could be modified through 'frankness of speech' to a certain extent. This also applies to the martyr cult that was overtly favoured in North Africa during Augustine's lifetime. It should be remembered for this cult that by the fifth century the martyrs of the preceding centuries were more revered than ever, while within the community of Christians they could no longer become martyrs as a result of the end of persecution. Augustine, therefore, repeatedly and coherently opposes the tendency to emphasise the violence and bloody deaths of the martyrs and to celebrate them as spectacle and enthusiasm, as has been the case so far. On the contrary, Augustine rather holds that the morals of martyrs should be celebrated, and their excellence as *exempla*. Quite simply, Augustine concentrates on a certain internalisation of the martyrdom and tries to use various rhetorical devices to strip it of its pretence rather than its ceremoniousness. Thus, in several sermons, Augustine tells the story of a Christian who suffers illness without the aid of 'illicit remedies' (*Serm.* 335D, 3). The Christian is invited to follow traditional ritual practices, but refuses, and becomes a martyr on his sickbed, as an example to persuade the congregants of the interiority of martyrdom. I would like to consider the frame of reference for the martyrdom and its 'frank speech' and the role that the story plays in the principles of Christian identity, by taking up the story of the 'martyr on the sickbed' from Augustine's sermons.

Sermon 4, 36–37

The first sermon I will consider is *Sermon 4*. This sermon is one of the more than forty of Augustine's sermons that have an anti-Donatist content, and was preached in Carthage, dated to 22 January 403. It is a lengthy sermon on the story of Jacob and Esau, which, as Augustine himself admits, is too long and repetitive. He develops his view of salvation and ecclesiology. Augustine states that the martyrs are strengthened by God, who gives them the strength to endure suffering and pain, the capacity to fight against the devil, and the faith and wisdom to repel those who persecute them. And Peter, like all the other martyrs, said that he was ready to die because the coming of the Holy Spirit had 'filled him with spiritual confidence'. At the end of this lengthy sermon, Augustine, on the other hand, summarises the previous arguments and claims that praise for the martyrs is possible by thanking God who gave them strength, and by learning from their virtues. He then

emphasises that it is necessary to resist temptation and sin from the devil, just as the martyrs had to fight against those who persecuted them. It is possible to be a martyr not by dying physically: 'You will always be crowned and depart from hence a martyr, if you overcome all the temptations of the devil.'

This sermon calls us to imitate the example of martyrs, which leads us to the same crowning glory that was bestowed on them. Along with this internalisation of martyrdom, as already mentioned, he vividly describes on the one hand those who suffer on their sickbeds, on the other hand he does not depict their victory as a kind of spectacular displays, but as an event in the heart.

I am sure you have *all seen* how many things the devil can suggest. But where is it all happening? *You see this man* very weak, *you see him* gasping for breath in bed, *you see him* hardly able to move his limbs, hardly able to move his tongue: [...] *Outwardly* they don't seem to be able to move, and *inwardly in the heart* they have such strength, they are fighting such a battle! But where the battle is *hidden*, the victory is *hidden* too.

Characteristic alongside these descriptions is the direct speech of martyrs on his sickbed. Here, unlike some other sermons (*Serm.* 335D, 3; 335D, 5 and; 286), the tempter's words are not actually shown, but the sickbed martyr, in response, is urged to receive the impious cure, saying:

'I would rather die than employ such remedies. God scourges me and delivers me as he wills. If he knows it's necessary, let him deliver me. If he knows I must depart from this life, whether I'm sad or happy about it, let me follow the will of the Lord. In any case, after a short time I am to depart to the Lord, and the question is what face I shall put upon it. The devil's remedies don't provide me with what God provides me with, eternal life; so why should I damn my soul just to buy a few days for my body?'

And it is added that he won great achievements by fighting as a martyr on his sickbed, not through death, but through the interior battle with the tempters..

[T]his exhausted man is beating the devil. Many people have been crowned with victory for fighting the wild beasts in the amphitheater. Many also beat the devil on a bed of sickness and are crowned for it. Outwardly they don't seem to be able to move, and inwardly in the heart they have such strength, they are fighting such a battle!

Sermon 335D (= *Lambot 6*)

The next *Sermon 335D* (= *Lambot 6*) was probably delivered near Hippo around 424 or later. In this sermon, Augustine does not preach to the congregation about a particular martyr, but rather, in response to the reading of Psalm 36: 8 'They will get drunk on the plenty of your house', he teaches how the reward of holy drunkenness. The teaching is about how the martyrs will be given their reward of divine drunkenness. For the sake of this instruction, the exhortation to imitate the martyrs in this sermon is made through the story illustrated by critically ill patients, lying on their sickbed, which is repeated twice, in section 3 and in section 5, which concludes the sermon. Instead of following the practice of drunken feasts at the martyr shrines, Augustine lays far more emphasis than his congregation on the change of the focus and scope of the veneration of martyrs.

How many times do I have to say these things? They should surely turn their attention to those at whose memorial shrines they get drunk; if they had approved this sort of behavior, they wouldn't have been martyrs.

Instead of communing with the dead through feasting and drunkenness at the shrines of martyrs, he claims that people should imitate those whom they venerate. Augustine, therefore, directs attention to those who fight against demonic forces on their sickbeds, just as the martyrs did under imperial persecution.

With regard to the descriptions of martyrs on their sickbeds, the same characteristics can be recognised in *Sermon 335D* as in the preceding sermon (*Sermon 4*): for example, the description of what kind of the martyrs' deeds and suffering, or the repetition of their words to attract the congregants' attention.

A man indeed who's [...] sick [...] weak [...] lying on a sickbed [...] He's languishing [...] scarcely able to move his limbs [...]

You are lying on your sickbed, [...] You can't move hand or foot, [...] The fever doesn't leave you, [...]

The martyr in the narrative is as if directly speaking to the congregation: 'I won't do it; I'm a Christian. God prohibits this sort of thing. These are the sacraments of demons. *Listen to the apostle*: I do not wish you to become the associates of demons (1 Cor 10:20).' Augustine, on the other hand, interrupts his martyr to address the congregation: 'There you can see God's athlete, you can hear the voice of Christ's athlete.' These sensory devices, so to speak, function in the direct speeches of the tempter and the resisting sickbed martyr.

But the one who says, 'I won't do it'—when a friend suggests it, a neighbour mutters something about it, or a neighbour's maid, sometimes even his own old nurse—who says, 'I won't do it; I'm a Christian God

prohibits this sort of thing. These are the sacraments of demons. Listen to the apostle: I do not wish you to become the associates of demons (I Cor 10, 20)'—well, he gets this answer from the one who is suggesting it: 'Do it, and you'll get well. So-and-so and such-and-such did it. What? Aren't they Christians? Aren't they believers? Don't they hurry off to church? And yet they did it and got well. So-and-so did it and was cured immediately. Don't you know Such-and-such, that he's a Christian, a believer? Look, he did it, and he got well.'

These direct conversations between them are repeated in the latter half of the sermon's narrative.

But lo and behold, a neighbor at your bedside, and a friend and a maid, even perhaps, as I said, your old nurse, bringing wax and an egg in her hand and saying, "Do this and get better. Why prolong your illness? Tie on this amulet. I heard someone invoke the name of God and the angels over it, and you will get better. To whose care will you leave your widowed wife, to whose care your young children?" But he says, "I won't do it, because I'm a Christian. Let me die in such a way that I don't thereby die forever." Listen to the true voice of the martyr. See if it isn't the very thing the pagan used to say: "Sacrifice, and you will live." But, "I won't," he says.

And similarly in this sermon, the great achievements he is led by fighting as a martyr on his sickbed are expressed respectively both in section 3 and section 5

He's languishing and conquering, scarcely able to move his limbs and fighting battles to the finish. [...] He will depart to his Lord, his forehead signed with the cross of Christ, whom he has not insulted with unlawful amulets. Shall Christ, then, not give him what he promised, seeing that he himself protected him when he was engaged in mortal combat? Most certainly the Lord protected him, so that he should not suffer any evil, and assisted him in the contest, so that the devil would be conquered by him.

You are lying on your sickbed, and are one of God's athletes. You can't move hand or foot, and you're fighting battles to the finish.

It is clear that the three stories about martyrs on their sickbeds in the two sermons considered here have a similar structure to each other. The focus of my consideration is the meaning of the direct speech of the martyr and the tempter. The story of the martyr on his sickbed meets the conditions of *parrhesia* as defined by Michel Foucault (*The Courage of Truth*, II, 330). In other words, expressing himself with full assurance and

speaking out his thoughts, engaging in argument with the tempter, and even going so far as to put his life in danger, is characterised as *parrhesia*. It is the trust in God's love for the martyr in his sickbed that enables him to speak with confidence what he has to say.

In the final part of the sermon, Augustine recounts the superstitious behaviour of the old nurse: '[...] a neighbour at your bedside, and a friend and a maid, even perhaps, as I said, your old nurse, bringing wax and an egg in her hand and saying, "Do this and get better. Why prolong your illness? Tie on this amulet. I heard someone invoke the name of God and the angels over it and you will get better".' It is not specified whether or not the old nurse was a Christian, nor if she was aware that some Christians refused to tie amulets on their bodies. All the same, this example makes clear that old, pagan, customs are not easy to eradicate, certainly in a situation when one's life is at stake: and some of her contemporaries maintain that the boundaries between the Christian and the non-Christian may not have been so clear. And as a clear contrast if compared to these ambiguities, Augustine links the martyrs on their sickbed with the martyrs of the amphitheatre: for example, in *Sermon 4*, 'Many people have been crowned with victory for fighting the wild beasts in the amphitheater. May also beat the devil or a bed of sickness and are crowned for it.'

Although his congregation now lives in a time of imperial privilege after the period of imperial persecution, this setting of contrast teaches us about what is centred at the heart of martyrdom. This is an age in which martyrdom is to be understood in terms other than merely in terms of spectacular heroism or in terms that are clearly visible to the audiences' eye. The martyrs on their sickbeds force us to revise our understanding of martyrdom. Augustine shows the congregants that the environment in which martyrdom occurred has already clearly changed, and also presents the impossibility of martyrdom in such a distinct way in our social and religious environment. He shows the possibility of always being involved in martyrdom in an internal way that no other Christian can see except God, and the martyr who fights against temptation in everyday life is shown as an *exempla* to imitate, even though s/he is not a hero, so to speak.

Concluding remarks

In friendship, in the mutually corrective exchange of letters, and in the expression of one's own faith in a community of faith, 'frankness of speech' presented the possibility of functioning as a useful tool for Augustine. It is clearly admitted that it can act as a stepping stone in identity formation, not only for oneself, but also for one's friends, one's colleagues of the intellectual community, as well as for the

members of the community, by bringing about progress from a previously familiar and sometimes erroneous situation. This 'frankness of speech' contributes to the formation of each member as an active subject through mutual linguistic exercise within the community, and the community with such a public identity as a model can maintain the collective health of the community through constant renewal communication one another. Augustine requires the congregation for having such a *parrhesia* as their means for the formation of Christian identity.