

THE FIRST HOMILY CONCERNING THE FORTY MARTYRS (Part One)

[M.749 & J.137] I believe that persons who have undergone many harsh experiences can give us encouragement because the sufferings which they and others have endured are a source of special joy. A shepherd rejoices when he sees his abundant flock gathered together; although his pen is large, he expands it to accommodate a great number of sheep. Similarly, Peter saw a throng gathered about the Lord and exclaimed, "Master, the crowd surrounds you and presses upon you" (Lk 8.45). While the divine Apostle says that the crowd is pressing him, the people are not crushed. How can this example illustrate my reflections? Who will give me a clear trumpet's voice that this multitude may cry out even louder and reach the ears of those assembled here? What can I gain from these words, and how can I make them useful for you who are now gathered together? Job gives us many illustrations of fortitude, while the author of Proverbs presents them in the form of riddles. What can we say about the holy Apostle [Paul]? Although his enigmatic words transcend human reason, [J.138] his epistle to the Ephesians reveals the ineffable mystery of the cross. The Psalms contain these and other mysteries as indicated by their commemoration and inscriptions, and a reading of them gives us an opportunity to understand their hidden secrets. However, I feel that we should not discuss their significance which applies to another time; instead, I prefer to wait for an appropriate occasion to reveal their meaning.

What is my intention? I realize [M.752] that the mandate which the Lawgiver of our [human] nature inscribed on these divine tablets enjoins us to respect our parents insofar as this is possible. He says, "Honor your father and mother. This is the first commandment with a promise, in order that it may be well with you" (Eph 6. 2). If this law containing a promise is important and benefits the person who keeps it (honor regarding one's parents refers to the person who fulfills the law), we should closely examine its aim which bestows grace upon the person who fulfills it. When our earthly parents responsible for our upbringing no longer require assistance because they have departed this life, we are freed from the obligation to fulfill the law. However, the law bids us to execute our obligation because neglecting it is of no advantage. What, then, should we do out of love for the [law's promise] when our parents are dead and we cannot discharge our responsibilities? There is a solution to this predicament. I am not speaking of someone else's parents; you are my parents who are dear to me. Since our predecessor foreshadows [J.139] the dignity belonging to our parents, how do we fulfill your law of honor? A son who is kind and considerate of his aged father supports him in his infirmity and is always ready to help him. In this way the father sees himself rejuvenated through his son whose strength refreshes and renews his aged, trembling hand. Furthermore, his weakened feet find new support and vigor by such prompt assistance. Should his sight fail with time, the old gentleman has a keen sighted guide to help him with life's necessities. You who are fathers to me certainly do not lack assistance.

How do we obtain the fruit of the law's blessing? What gift can we offer you since you lack nothing? What bearing does an account of your present blessings have upon the honor I owe you? I should mention them now because they adorn your lives

and are already present. Allow me to make a few general, pertinent observations about the earth's fertility, [M.753] bounty and abundance. I also allude to a river which envelopes a plain and forms a pool. Its overflowing water isolates inhabited areas, floods carefully cultivated fields and brings ruin upon populated cities. Other persons speak of similar matters with arrogance and enthusiastic praise concerning their homeland. A man of this world [J.140] who knows how to judge the goods of this life adds to these accolades and if it seems fitting, another river. I am speaking of persons recognized by the notoriety of their names and who make such rivers known throughout the world. Beginning with our region, they amplify in time their own city by conferring glory and honor upon themselves. If we include the founders of cities and colonists or add to our account those who have fared well in combat through inflicting defeats in battle and other recorded deeds, these examples do not suit our objective. A Christian is ashamed at anything contrary to the faith and rejoices at praise coming from persons who love Christ much like those in the shadow of a notable person exult in his victories. Let us therefore concentrate upon the subject at hand and consider your notable deeds. Let us be silent about this world's glories despite their numerous accounts. Neither heaven which is the most beautiful and greatest object of creation, the heavenly luminaries, the earth's breadth, nor anything physical can compare with God's inspired word which alone is worthy of admiration. Because I am acquainted with the divine commandment, none of these wonders captivates me.

If, as the Apostle [Paul] says (1Cor 7.31), heaven, earth and anything else in the universe passes away, how can we praise the fertility of the earth and water? Although you may consider your place or one similar to be surpassing, the [divine] word regards them as nothing. Therefore [J.141] let us direct our admiration to that which is more worthy of praise. Instead of relying upon words, we should observe your noble attributes. Who does not know your fruit since you have produced an abundant crop of witnesses and a bountiful harvest [M.756]? Consider this holy field and the sheaf of martyrs. If you wish to know what I mean, you do not have to look far. What is this place which composes such a throng? What does this yearly commemoration say to you? What do our accounts bestow upon their memory? The prophet says, "There are no speeches nor words" (Ps 18.4). Is it only their voices which loudly announce our admiration? If you examine the place, he [the prophet] says that it is the amphitheater of the martyrs, and if you consider the day, it loudly heralds their crown. I hear the day proclaiming the martyrs and the heavenly lights glorifying another such person; heaven honors one martyr while earth heralds yet another. The martyrs' miracles are sufficient evidence for adorning them; the same applies to the beauty of their crowns and their noble victories against the devil. Such are their accounts and the support they receive from the angels; the earth gives its fruit to God, and the Lord entrusts his plant to me. He is the source of the vine's branches which resembles a prosperous vineyard; it propagates other branches without making them lose their vigor. They herald the blessing of today's festival while others foreshadow the place where the martyrs are assembled.

But what can my stuttering voice and hesitation accomplish since I can hardly express myself before such an assembly? I prefer to recount their noble [J.142]

accomplishments because the beautiful dwelling of the forty [martyrs] reveals that they are engaged in a common struggle; they establish a settlement and enjoy mutual hospitality in such places. Therefore anyone who enjoys a special grace through their martyrs' achievements does not lack a revelation of them. A person dwelling in Christ receives his fullness. But how can this benefit us when it fails to speak [of the martyrs' deeds], and what is their source? It is the goodness of youth which we admire, the grace of the elect, their distinguished beauty and the magnificence of these young shoots which stands before us. Do you see their thunderous voice and perceive their words which guide us who are tossed about by the sea to the safe harbor of silence? If God's grace allows us to hear of a similar silent repose, he will assist us because glory belongs to him forever and ever. Amen.

THE SECOND HOMILY CONCERNING THE FORTY MARTYRS (Part Two)

[M.757 & J.145] Yesterday the martyrs who summoned the people are now presented as guests to the Church. This is a joyous occasion whose yearly observance benefits those assembled for the festival, and we must reciprocate in similar fashion. Although yesterday's commemoration was insufficient when we received [the martyrs] as our guests, we should make them feel welcome today. In other words, even a small portion left over from such an abundant banquet is adequate. What is the meaning of this small portion? You certainly recall our remarks about that sweet multitude which earnestly prayed for those assembled together to beseech their intercession. The Church is a teeming multitude which resembles the sea surging with the throng of persons who are always hard pressed. It resembles the ocean's roar whose waves resound as they dash against the shores of our ears. We now leave behind the noise of this tempest when we recall the martyrs' concern for our plight. This is our intention because neither those who do not share these struggles nor any [J.146] ignoble crowd failing to pursue humility can attain this dignity. Rather, persons by reason of their sound physical constitution, beauty, power and strength are numbered among those soldiers who have preceded them. Furthermore, their virtuous life and admirable decorum reveals them as a race perfected and ennobled by the martyrs' grace. If our

remarks show that we can participate in their sweetness, we should follow in their steps and reach the arena of combat under their guidance.

Once there was a certain military detachment which defended a city against a barbarian invasion. Before some of these men experienced a divine apparition, they put greater faith in their military tactics, and it was not by chance that one exploit of their faith is recounted. A war arose against the barbarians where everyone was occupied with opposing the enemy's threat which pressed upon them like water. This was due either to the soldiers' inexperience or to the greater providence of God, and was a matter of interest to Christians and unbelievers alike. Since they lacked a fountain or spring, they were in danger of [M.760] capitulation through thirst. Then the nobles [of the city] realized that they could not resist through force of arms, and that they were in danger of capitulating to the enemy. Leaving behind men in the camp who lacked faith, they withdrew in imitation of that miracle which occurred in the time of Elias the prophet [J.147]. By joining their voices together [in prayer], they escaped calamity and their desperate situation. They found strength, and their prayers were transformed into deeds. When they persevered at prayer on their knees, a cloud formed by a violent wind appeared over the enemy camp. A fierce rumbling sound fell upon them, and many lightening bolts produced such an onrush of water that it brought complete destruction. Their prayers had a two-fold result: victory over the foe and relief of their thirst. This account enables our band of soldiers to be united with them and their generous virtue encourages us to imitate them.

The story of Job (Job 1.7+ & 2.1+) teaches us that mankind's harmful adversary served to make him pleasing; by proving Job, he was found sincere, just and blameless. Similarly, the adversary looks with evil intent upon [the martyrs'] good deeds and struggles. He also takes into account the mature demeanor present in the prime of their youth. He sees sound bodies adorned with restraint, the armed chorus leading them in battle array to God, a beautiful sight to behold. Their spirits are exultant; they are quick footed, powerful, trained, and in every circumstance they triumph by reason of the soul's virtue which is visible through their physical splendor. He [the adversary] jealously follows them as he wanders throughout the world. Not only does he see one sincere man, but the divine [J.148] assembly of all those who are true, just and reverent. He first attempts to persuade the army's leader to worship idols. If he fails by not slaying those who worship Christ's name, the barbarians are not victorious.

We have alluded to the noble confession of those persons who attained perfection through the sufferings which the enemy suddenly yet mercifully inflicted by the sword, for their iron bonds heralded that the time had come [M.761] for retaliation. However, these fetters were an elegant adornment and a pleasing sight to the Christians. This illustrious, chosen band of young men which excelled all others was closely united and resembled a crown or pearl necklace radiant in every respect. They exemplified the saints who were united in faith and bound to each other. Every man shared the loveliness of his compatriot. The wonders of heaven display this harmony, for example, during a clear night when the stars' brilliance is distinguished from others by forming a single common beauty. The prophet Ezekiel says that this

vision of the saints resembles torches which turn to and fro (Ezk 1.130), and that the beauty of this [divine] form is fond of dwelling within them. Wisdom says that the greatness and beauty of creatures enables us to form an image of hidden beauty (Wisd 13.5) because the soul's purity is visible, and man who is visible is a noble habitation of what lies hidden. How great is that loveliness which belongs to the angels [J.149] and supernatural beings! Demons are distressed at the sight, and they readily acknowledge this fact. By reason of their greatness, such men are soldiers of Christ armed with the Holy Spirit, champions of faith and towers of the divine city. They resist every infliction of torture, fear, threats and foolish, shameful ridicule; they appear to offer their bodies to such outrages, but these are merely shadows. Such persons who are in the flesh defeat the flesh and have contempt for death; they disdain all fear of tyrants and appear more noble. How lovely are those trained in such bodily victories! How wonderful is their training when applied to combat against the devil! They are not armed with swords, shields, helmets nor leg protection; rather, they are armed with the full armor of God which the divine Apostle [Paul], the leader of the Church, illustrates: a shield, breastplate, helmet and sword (Eph 6.11+). These weapons are used against the enemy's forces, but divine grace supports them against the devil's troop which has the power to inflict death. This troop takes its stand in the tribunal, the place of decisive contest, where blood is shed; here [the devil's band] makes it threats and fights against those who patiently resist it.

These adversaries who want us to renounce our faith in the Lord or to suffer death [M.764] are resisted by strong men who remain faithful unto death. Although they threaten them with fire, cast them into pits and inflict other torments, they have one voice and holy confession which Christ hears. Resistance against this torment of the enemy's appalling insults [J.150] troubles his heart and is like a stone in David's hand slung at the enemy's helmet (1Sam 17.49+). We behead the enemy when as noble soldiers we cast, as it were, our confession in Christ. But the [martyrs'] account continues and leaves these matters behind while jumping over any obstacle. It boldly advances to matters which are unutterable and mentions them as if they were visible because a bold confession in Christ is encouragement and praise from above. The citizens of the heavenly city honor their success which brings joy to the entire assembly of heaven. This is the marvel which the angels behold among men and which these spectators of our lives saw in that conflict between the devil and men. How different is this marvel compared to that first struggle when the serpent vanquished Adam (Gen 3.1+)! One person did not sustain this evil attack which sought to do harm through a sound pretext; rather, everyone was affected by this assault and fell. However, all these conflicts of the enemy were reduced to nothing and were ineffective. [The devil] offered hope but they spurned it; he terrorized them but they scorned it; he threatened them with fear but they overcame it. There one fear was to be separated from Christ, for to be with Christ was their only value since everything else seemed like laughter, shadows, nonsense and fanciful dreams.

The text now speaks of these invisible attacks and mentions the transcendent power which brought success to the contestants. It encourages those who are disheartened and talks about the transcendent powers which support them because he who is just guides them in combat to obtain crowns of glory. The commander-in-chief

of the divine army has prepared rewards for those who are victorious, and [J.151] the Holy Spirit bestows various gifts. Because they confess faith in the Trinity, the divine Persons, in turn, dispense grace. What do I mean by this? I am speaking of that more honorable grace pertaining to our first contestants, Adam and Eve. Although they rejected human nature because of sin, these contestants were guided through the fall to what was lost. [Our parents] were driven out from paradise and dwelled upon the earth. They brought death upon themselves (for the weapon of death is sin), while [the martyrs] rendered death ineffective. Although death was fortified by sin, patient [M.765] fortitude blunted the sting of passions. Therefore we may rightly say, "Where, oh death, is your sting? Where is victory, oh hell" (1Cor 15.55)? What is more miserable and vile than the tree's fruit? Its color and sweet taste disgraced us and disparaged the grace of paradise.

The sun's rays do not attract these noble contestants; instead, they freely shunned it in order not to lose the true light. What does scripture say about Eve (I hastily mention the request made by our first parents)? "She saw that [the fruit] was lovely to behold and pleasing to taste" (Gen 3.6). As a result [of tasting the fruit], the blessing of paradise was lost. We also include those perceptible objects which we treasure as the heavens, sun, earth, people, as well as our country, mother, brothers, friends, relatives and colleagues. What can be sweeter and more enjoyable than cherishing them? Children, you know the affection you have for your parents. You who are fathers know how you should attend to your children. You who admire the sun know how agreeable it is. You who earnestly express brotherly love are certainly familiar with this natural affection. Youths, you know the value of your fellow [J.152] comrades. Nevertheless, all these are insignificant because one good alone exists and that is Christ himself. [The martyrs] rejected them in order to gain him. The saints reckoned the time spent in chains as nothing; they spurned it since their desire matured into perfect love.

Persons concerned for their physical well being train for wrestling and thus become more confident for competition. Similarly, those who have been trained by fetters and imprisonment for their faith have received a crown. Such trials are means of attaining perfection, the aim of their endeavors. Now is the time. These are the days of struggle. We are at the threshold of the Paschal feast and the mystery of the holy Forty Days. These days are a time of propitiation and closely resemble the saints' crowns. Do I appear overbearing and talkative by speaking to you of your very own marvels? But to appreciate their value, let us hasten to the goal for which the saints strive. The day [of their martyrdom] was very cold. I certainly do not have to inform you about the cold since today's weather gives you a clear idea about it. The chill even penetrates the walls; both you who are strangers and natives are fully acquainted with its severity. I have also heard that another phenomenon occurs in your winters, namely, that the constantly flowing rivers freeze over, and their waves congeal to stone. The nearby lake turns [M.768] into land, and horses can ride upon its hardened waves. I also know that inhabitants of this area often acquire water by melting it. For example, they take water which became hard as stone and break it up much like a piece of copper or iron. Such was the season of the [martyrs'] contest [J.153] and the time of their miracles when the north wind blew so vehemently.

When [the martyrs] confessed the Lord's name in public, they acknowledged that they have been crowned and perfected through death by such a bold proclamation. The tyrant decided that their contest was to be carried out by exposing them to the cold. How ineffective were his words and utterances, and what an insult to their dignity! He proclaimed the sentence of death by freezing and punished them by venting his wrath. However, the joy of these youths in the freezing cold made light of their tribulation and alleviated the [tyrant's] retaliation. Suffering was the course for these athletes; their path was both sacred and severe, and their struggle crowned their confession. They shared the same zeal for victory. No one ever beheld such fervor since they were of one mind as if they were to remove their garments in a public bath. They gave voice to Job's words, "We have come into the world naked and leave the same way" (Job 1.21). "We bring nothing into the world and cannot take anything out of it" (1Tim 6.7). Having uttered these comforting words, they exposed their bodies to the cold. Once the natural elements ran their course, the martyrs attained victory. Their [human] nature experienced grievous pain, but the heroic character of these athletes contended successfully against it. After a short time they quenched their pain, and the cold vanished while the strength of their souls increased. [J.154] Their body's beauty darkened, withered, and their healthy color disappeared. Their fingers fell off in the cold, and they were soon disfigured while the penetrating cold shattered all their limbs and physical sensation. Soon their flesh became ashen; it swelled and was torn from the bones as they endured death's anguish. In this fashion their agony was prolonged for three days. When sensation [M.769] left them, they remained in this same place and achieved victory against the enemy.

Who can adequately describe their dignity and divine mission once their holy bodies were triumphantly carried to the fire? How did grace protect them from the devil's assaults? Who can speak of that mother, the source of [the martyrs'] witness, who relinquished what was so dear to her? Although she was not dragged away, she was their inspiration and saw that their humanity remained strong in virtue without succumbing to pride. On the other hand, abuses were hurled against [the martyrs] since their vigor had distinguished them. Their noble behavior now assisted them in their witness at the point of death when they were immobilized by the cold and were weakened by shortness of breath. While still alive, [the martyrs] suffered great pain, and with dim and cloudy vision they recognized their mother. She consoled and comforted their dying, weak hands in order to exhort them in their noble struggle. Can a mother bear anything like this? Are not her feelings moved as she sunders her tunic to embrace their frozen arms in an attempt to warm them? Her attempts were futile, and we have nothing further to say. Let us learn from [J.155] the fruit of the tree: a tree cannot produce good fruit when it is rotten (Mt 7.16-18).

Although the martyrs' achievements are noble, special praise befits their mother who is saved by giving birth as the Apostle says (1Tim 2.15). God is responsible in his defense of that nature common to women. He says, "Neither are you my son nor the fruit of my pain, but because you have received God, he has begotten you. Run to your father and do not forsake your friends. Do not come in second place to your crown, and let your mother's prayer not be in vain. Do not sadden her since you have

triumphed with a crown of victory." Having said this and having received strength well beyond her nature, that is, having been fortified by the Spirit, she forsakes what belongs to her, assumes a joyful countenance and advances to the struggle. Next we see that the saints engage in combat in the air, sanctify fire by taking on its form and by being transformed into flames. They also assume the form of water and fulfill divine revelation as a result of all these trials. They resemble the three youths who sing praise in both cold and heat: cold by having been frozen and heat by having been burned. As a result, they are transformed into fire and water (cf. Dan 3.23).

Now that we know the account of their witness, let us continue since [M.772] time permits it. When man was banished from paradise, a revolving fiery sword guarded its entrance (Gen 3.24) because God in his providence did not wish man to obtain the tree of life, taste it and thus achieve immortality. You recall the questions presented to us and remember our response. But if we were to thoroughly examine every point, we would [J.156] not have enough time. However, the question is as follows: If paradise is inaccessible for the saints and if the revolving sword hinders access for such athletes, what about the promise held out for those who have struggled for their religion? Will they have an inferior position like the thief even though the Lord said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23.43)? The thief did not approach the cross voluntarily, but he was aware of the treasure of salvation which was nearby. Because he happened to be present at the right time for saving his life, the thief wisely asked, "Lord, remember me in your kingdom" (Lk 23.42). Although he was worthy of paradise, did the flaming sword hinder the saints from entering? A solution exists for this dilemma. Scripture shows that the revolving sword does not always oppose those who enter paradise. It hinders unworthy persons but is behind those who are worthy and opens an open path to life. The flame passed right through persons by reason of their courage and causes them no harm. We who freely and boldly enter paradise are strengthened by the [martyrs'] intercession through a noble confession in our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

CONCERNING THE FORTY MARTYRS, The Second Letter

[M.773 & J.159] According to law and ancient custom which is accepted by most people and is observed even to now, Roman soldiers put on their armor and move to a suitable, level field at the beginning of each month. There they have a track for their horses and a place to practice tactical maneuvers and every kind of military operation. These soldiers commemorate this time of year, especially that particular day. For my part, I recall the martyrs by having spoken about the forty soldiers of Christ the other day. Because they excel in zeal and are armed for combat, I offer a tribute to their valor which is a cause for admiration. They are an adornment for the Church, a joy for the people and glory for God who had strengthened them. However, an account of these martyrs' virtues are especially profitable for young persons in the

full flower of manhood. Beholding their example is fine, but it is better to hear about them because words enable their teaching to enter the soul. However, we are in danger of receiving either a good or unsatisfactory report. I have heard it said that such accounts produce images by giving rise to thoughts; concepts and reflections belonging to the mind give birth to thoughts. Thus you should prepare a **[J.160]** quiet, undisturbed and attentive mind to bestow fitting honor upon the blessed martyrs. In this way their memory will teach you about piety and the love of God.

I have two reasons to fear because we should not disrespectfully treat the subject under discussion by reason of our inability to explain it. That is, a hazard exists when anyone believes that any victorious deed **[M.776]** depends upon our words or when the man whom we are considering [that is, Basil] crowns the saints by reason of his own wisdom. He is a visible miracle of [divine] providence, a teacher among Christians who takes the best from what does not belong to [the Church's teaching]. [Basil] is an image of philosophy, a model and warning for bishops, and a teacher whose words are united to his deeds. [Basil] is certainly extraordinary and enjoys good repute among people with the exception of those who blaspheme Christ. No one person can challenge the sun which gives both light and heat; similarly, no one can censure the great Basil unless he is enriched with every adornment of virtue. This noble man praises those who are exalted because he worships [God]; he reveres the saints whose intercession bestows rewards upon deserving persons. It behooves me not to remain silent because [Basil] wonderfully proclaimed those miracles accomplished by the martyrs. We are not addressing their struggles but of the attention required by you who are listening to me. A person draws benefit from whatever is helpful, especially when it comes from one who has better resources at his disposal.

Thus the forty soldiers under the Roman emperor's authority served as Christians by obeying their faith and religion. A certain man at that time worshipped many gods (for these demons were fond of suggesting evil) and persecuted the Christians by promulgating a new decree. He ordained their acquiescence by offering incense to demons. If they refused, they should be put to death and before this, they must all submit to having their bodies mutilated. Then those blessed soldiers conducted themselves bravely before the tyrant's cruelty and abhorrent decree against God. Once separated from the other soldiers, they formed a battle rank because they were distinguished and fortified in the love of Christ. These soldiers were confident in the Spirit's power and openly resisted the decree issued by such brutal men. Acting **[J.161]** in full accord and with one voice, they professed our faith. They considered the cares of this life as transitory and exposed their bodies to all kinds of torment. When that cruel tyrant who issued such a harsh decree observed the saints' attitude, he cunningly matched it with passionate vengeance and planned a new, extraordinary torture for these intrepid souls. "If I menace them with the sword, they will not be disturbed and will refuse to submit. If I threaten them with other torments, they will bear them nobly. They are experienced in such things and will sustain blows and wounds because trained soldiers are accustomed to such hardships. If I devise other torments, they would bear them nobly and would remain unaffected by wounds and blows. These soldiers do not fear fire because they are constant." He was now

compelled to find some torment designed to inflict sharp, prolonged pain. What did that crafty evil man devise against the saints? He carefully looked around until [M. 777] he found a place and time when they could be exposed to inclement weather. The time was winter and the location, Armenia, was a province known for its harsh climate. The inhabitants of this place do not shun the sun's heat which makes corn grow. Their vines are well known, and its grapes are renowned in the surrounding areas. Such reputation comes from those among us who have lived in India. In this place [Armenia] winter has not loosened the ground for sowing, and the harvest occurs when it begins to snow. Winds afflict the harvesters if they do not wear warm clothing for protection against the winds' violence. Late autumn and spring do not exist because the evil of winter sweeps it away.

It was in this district and during winter that the saints were completely stripped of their clothes in contrast the time when the king of the Assyrians put the disciples of piety in the Babylonian furnace where they remained unharmed (Dan 3.1+). Consuming fire cannot be compared to the sharpness and devastation of frigid cold. Fire is like iron which kills right away, whereas cold prolongs [J.162] suffering before death. Afflictions associated with the cold generally last longer and are much more severe since they cause sores and carbuncles. Furthermore, doctors attempt to cure such infirmities by applying cold to bodies. Thus persons as well as irrational animals with a colder, heavier and more sluggish constitution have difficulty performing physical activity. On the other hand, bodies with warmer, more energetic movement are more spirited, whereas those which are sluggish and have a dense physical constitution experience constraint. For example, at the sound of a whip, a horse immediately begins to run, whereas an ass is slow and hardly moves except when urged by a club. Because a panther is nimble and lean, its warm body enables it to leap across valleys, while a bear moves more slowly.

It is not time to speak about such matters; instead, you should consider the endurance of those men who submitted themselves to retaliation. Winter enables us to walk across navigable rivers by freezing the water. Rocks crack open when cold penetrates them and inflicts bodies by turning their flexible nature into stone and by breaking solid objects. Thus congealed wine oil assume the form of their containers. The delicate nature of glass and earthen vessels break. Animals living in mountainous regions and open fields perish and lose their natural ferocity. Deer and gazelles kept in stables neither fear dogs nor flee because the greater fear [of cold] casts out the lesser terrors of [M.780] cowardice. Birds dwell with men and live under the same roof with them. Men dig up water and extract it with stone instruments, and neighbors do not socialize with each other. Such is the time of year when the tyrant vented his wrath against the martyrs. It is fitting that this great, harmonious and blessed cohort contend with help from on high. In this way, their example may urge numerous other martyrs to attain the incomparable glory which belongs to their religion. They stood firm [J.163] with trembling limbs, and their minds were constant before God in a struggle witnessed by angels, men and demons. The angels awaited the departure of their souls for the purpose of conducting them to their destiny. Men awaited their end and tested the endurance of their human nature to discover if their fear and hope for the future would triumph over pain. The demons were especially curious to see these

athletes fall and come to ruin, but their expectations were dashed because God had strengthened them. The tyrant scrutinized the agony of each and every [martyr]. He placed a foot or finger in [cold] water and another limb in warm water which then turned cold. The chill of winter cut the martyrs' battle order just like violent, blustery winds which flatten lofty trees. This battle order embodied other noble plants which adorned paradise. We trace our lineage to these [martyrs], the soldiers of Paul and Christ's bodyguard, who overthrow [pagan] altars and raised churches. They were conscripted to fight against the barbarians and the common enemy of humanity.

The inevitability of death does not constrain them; rather, liberation is in their power if they surrender. A bath was placed close by in order to tempt them; its door remained open and bade them to enter. The tyrant stood by and cunningly offered it as alluring bait for their freezing bodies. He exhorted them to desert the cold just like that father [the serpent] who tempted our first parents to taste the tree's [J.164] fruit (Gen 3.1+). Instead, the [martyrs] remained steadfast knowing that patience which bears such trials will come to their aide. Daniel was inspired by God (Dan 1.8+). Although tempted to eat abundant sweet food and drink, he despised and rejected this offering to idols and preferred food made from wheat. [M.781] He thrived on his fasting and was healthier on this diet than those who ate such offerings. This special gift of trust in God is bestowed upon faithful servants in their tribulations.

But those jealous of such noble deeds were close by and threatened to mutilate this noble cohort. It happened that these forty men was slightly depleted, for at the point of victory one man gave up because of the cold. What a pity! He deserted his comrades, and accepted the bath at the tyrant's cunning, thereby sparing bodily destruction out of love for this life. By giving up hope and by failing to overcome the transient nature of life, he committed a transgression. To the martyrs he resembled despicable Judas; being neither a disciple nor a rich man, he was drawn to the noose. Nobody was surprised since the devil was accustomed to act with evil intent against those whom he enslaved. The devil flattered him by various deceits in an attempt to defeat him. Once overcome, he immediately trampled upon this man and made him a laughing stock. He boasted at his shame and exulted at him because he was enticed to commit such a shameful deed. The Psalm (Ps 7.3), in turn, has many names for this inconstancy which assumes the form of a foe and avenger. The devil is never an ally nor confidant to man, for he pretends [J.165] to be a friend when assuming a mask of deceit. However, [God] is our ally [God] in our weakness and cultivates good words and deeds. He provided Abraham with a sheep for sacrifice against his enemy who is recognized as a blasphemer and witness among persecutors (Gen 22.1+). However, one of the tyrant's attendants was made worthy to see the angels coming upon the martyrs and the holy spirits surrounding them. At this point we recall Paul who beheld Christ's glory on the way to Damascus; having immediately changed his mind and having taken off his clothes, he joined those who were freezing to death (Acts 9.1+). He became a convert, confessor, martyr and was washed by the bath of regeneration in [Christ's] own blood (Tit 3.5), that is, the blood of death and not blood resulting from murder. This man was crowned and became worthy of honor, for by him the Church of God now had forty men. His admirable disposition did not break the martyrs' rank, and his conversion served to make a perfect number [forty]. For his part, the devil

was made a subject of triumph and ridicule, for although this soldier suffered, the devil was deprived of his persecution and quarry.

We now see that these men gifted with a three-fold blessing attained what they set out to accomplish. The despot who sought vengeance quickly bestowed victory upon the martyrs once death overtook their bodies in battle and ordered that the habitation of these holy souls be handed over to the flames. In this fashion he imitated savage beasts and cruel men. Having ripped apart [M.784] the garments [bodies] of men who have fled, he lacerated their clothes and burned their homes once they escaped. One of the martyrs rightly said to him, "No longer do I fear your cruelty, oh foolish man. I will tremble when our souls draw near to these frozen bodies, not [J.166] the tormentor's arrogance which vanquishes the courage of the saints. Although this terror has passed and remains stuck in the mud, you do not realize that I have fled the body. The intense assaults ranged against us have been a means of securing fortitude."

Why should we delay? The bodies have been consumed by flames. We have scattered their ashes and burnt remains, and the entire earth praises these saints. I will share in their merits by placing my parents' bodies beside the remains of these soldiers. In this way they will rise at the resurrection with those who are filled with greater confidence. I know they will prevail because I have witnessed their courage and faith before God. I wish to commemorate one person who spoke of their noble testimony because I am close to Ibora, the village and resting place of these forty martyrs' remains. Here the Romans keep a register of soldiers, one of whom was a guard ordered by his commander to protect against invasions, a practice common to soldiers in such remote areas. This man suffered from an injured foot which was later amputated. Being in the martyrs' resting place, he earnestly beseeched God and the intercession of the saints. One night there appeared a man of venerable appearance in the company of others who said, "Oh soldier, do you want to be healed [J.167] of your infirmity? Give me your foot that I may touch it." When he awoke from the dream, his foot was completely healed. Once he awoke from this vision, his foot was restored to health. He roused the other sleeping men because he was immediately cured and made whole. This men then began to proclaim the miracle performed by the martyrs and acknowledged the kindness bestowed by these fellow soldiers.

I will now speak of an important matter which concerns me. At one time we were observing the first feast day when the cinerary urn containing [the martyrs] remains was transferred to a church. When I was young, my mother [M.785] (for her life in God wonderfully adorned this feast day) asked me to participate in the celebration. Although I was not present and counted among the congregation, she urged me even though I was occupied and failed to comprehend her request. I therefore did not delay to attend this feast and put aside my numerous concerns before attending the synod. At the time I was keeping watch at night in the garden where people honored the saints' remains by reciting psalms. A vision then appeared behind those who were sleeping and seemed to enter the garden where the night watch was posted. When I approached the gate, a multitude of soldiers stationed at the entrance rose up, brandished their weapons in a threatening manner and prevented anyone from

entering. They beat me with the exception of one who appeared more human and then fled. When I woke up and realized that I abandoned my calling, [J.168], I understood what this fearful vision of soldiers had wanted and shed many tears in my perplexity. I bitterly wept over the saints' urn that God pardon me and that the holy soldiers forgive my insensibility.

I have mentioned this for the purpose of strengthening our faith because the martyrs are alive; they are our bodyguards and companions who even today serve and adorn the Church. The *tessarakoste* [40th day or observance of the martyrs' feast] of the forty martyrs is a splendid, renowned feast which celebrates their memory and is of greater importance than other monthly feasts. The hardship of winter is thus no longer severe, nor do I bitterly complain of its ferocity. Instead, it has become an occasion to recall their persecution and serves as a holy phalanx. Similarly, the mother of the seven Maccabeans (cf. 2Mac 7.1+) loved God with her soul instead of her body and did not reproach the cruel tyrant of Antioch in Syria. She courageously bore the punishment leveled against her sons (She was well disposed towards this desolation and considered her bereavement as a support). She suffered, for example, when Stephen was stoned (Acts 7.1+) but saw that he was brought to life. Thus we should receive mercy from these combatants of God who come to our help because they enabled us to become not only instruments of doing good but by engaging in combat. Our enemies do good when they are hostile and thereby cause no dishonor. The devil assists Job instead of harming him (Job 1+); the king of the Assyrians helps Daniel (Dan 3.1+); the three youths in the furnace profess God's grace (Dan 3.24); Isaiah praises the Hebrews when he was sawed in half (cf. Heb 11.37); Zachariah blessed his murderers [J.169] while standing between the temple and altar of incense (Mat 23.35-7); John proclaimed God's help when Herod beheaded him (Mat 14.1+); the Apostles [blessed] those who bound and persecuted them; all the martyrs loved [M.788] their persecutors and could not hold fast unless these athletes maintained their courage.

What greater love do we have than this faithful multitude of witnesses who displayed fortitude and unanimity? Let us neither be insensitive nor ungrateful towards them. With intercessors like these, we never lack their prayers and entreaties. The witness of their trust and hope is God when he spoke with Abraham. Abraham interceded with God not to destroy the city if he found ten just men in Sodom, not simply forty (Gen 18.32). We, like the Apostle, have a great cloud of witnesses and pronounce blessed those who rejoice in hope, persist in prayer, and recall the saints (Heb 12.1). The forty martyrs are powerful opponents against our enemies and worthy advocates before the Lord. Let a Christian depend upon their hope, resist the devil's temptations, rise against evil men and the seething wrath of tyrants which resembles the sea's ferocity. They should also be unconcerned with earthly matters which occupy most people, including any assistance which comes from the sky (cf. Gen 1.29-30). The bountiful grace of Christ is sufficient for every necessity and circumstances, to whom we should attribute all glory forever and ever. Amen.