This article was downloaded by: [KU Leuven University Library]

On: 20 June 2013, At: 02:51

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpdh20>

"Schoolrooms for Our Souls". The Cult of the Martyrs: Homilies and Visual Representations as a Locus for Religious Education in Late Antiquity

Johan Leemans^a

^a Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Published online: 28 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Johan Leemans (2000): "Schoolrooms for Our Souls". The Cult of the Martyrs: Homilies and Visual Representations as a Locus for Religious Education in Late Antiquity, Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education, 36:1, 112-127

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0030923000360106>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Icons

“Schoolrooms for Our Souls”. The Cult of the Martyrs: Homilies and Visual Representations as a Locus for Religious Education in Late Antiquity¹

Johan Leemans
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Focusing on the role of the martyr as example, this article analyses the process of religious and spiritual education which took place in the context of the martyr cult in Cappadocia and Pontus in ca. 350-400 AD. The message that the martyr embodied in an exemplary way Christian values and hence was worthy of imitation, was conveyed in a double way: orally and visually. Orally this happened in the homilies, delivered during the annual feasts, held in the martyr's sanctuary; visually this message was conveyed via the wall-paintings in this sanctuary. Given the strengths and weaknesses of both ways of communication, it becomes clear that they formed valuable complements to one another.

Introduction

While making a tour through a museum devoted to daily life in a somewhat remote past, one feels wonderment. One sees centuries-old beds and realises that people were much smaller than today. The kitchen and tableware on display show that cooking and eating habits have changed a lot. The clothes, which were fashionable in those days, would now be suitable attire only at a costume party. Beyond this emotion of wonderment, however, there is also a reassuring feeling of recognition. However different the current way of life may be, people still do very much the same things and largely have the same concerns as their ancestors.

This article discusses the role of the martyr as an example in moral and religious education² in Late Antiquity. Despite the less tangible subject, it might, just like the visit to the museum, also evoke feelings of recognition. Recognition, because it deals with the role of the example in education, a familiar topic

¹ Abbreviations: GCS: Griechische christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte; GNO: Gregorii Nysseni Opera (the so-called “Leiden edition”); LCL: Loeb Classical Library; PG: Patrologia Graeca; RAC: Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum; SC: Sources Chrétiennes.

² In Christian Antiquity moral and religious education virtually coincided. Therefore I do not distinguish between the two. By “education” I indicate all sorts of learning processes, both inside and outside the school.

throughout the history of education until today. In contemporary theory of moral and spiritual education, the goal of the educator is to encourage the learner's creative and individual appropriation of the tradition to which he belongs. Authenticity, individuality and autonomy are key words. In this process the attitude, the person of the educator has a crucial role, which should be indicated by the term "model" rather than "example". Examples set such high standards of excellence that they are beyond the reach of the learner and consequently discourage him. Saints from a distant past belong to this category. Persons perceived as models, on the contrary, are rooted into the world of the learner and are therefore able to keep challenging him.³

This model-example concept can help to elucidate the entirely different late antique idea of education, in which the contemporary stress on the individual and the opposition between model and example were absent.⁴ The rationale of education in the Late Roman Empire was exactly the opposite: to produce exemplary beings, beings that imitated their example as well as possible, striving for the ideal of *paideia*, of humanism, which was embodied in exemplary persons of past and present. This principle of *imitatio* was not only present in the schoolroom but permeated the entire civilisation. "The Greco-Roman world was a civilisation of *paideia* in the same way as our own is a civilisation of advanced technology".⁵ In such a society, in which not innovation but imitation was the norm, the example was of crucial importance. In the Christian communities this role was (partly)⁶ fulfilled by the saints and martyrs whose life and death kept inspiring and encouraging ordinary Christians to imitate them. The above-mentioned model-example paradigm can help to elucidate the martyr's role in the process of spiritual education as it took shape in the communities of the Early Church. In Late Antiquity model and example did not oppose each other, as they do in contemporary theory of education, but were rather in line with each other. In fact the martyr in his person united both roles. On the one hand he was, during his life, rooted in the daily reality the early Christian communities shared (model); on the other, he superseded that reality in that he became, after his death, the revered martyr honoured with a cult and belonging to the supernatural world (example). Beyond being model and example, the martyr also pointed to his own source of inspiration, the Example of Christ. Thus, through his own life and death as well as through his reference to the ultimate Example of Christ, the martyr inspired Christians to perceive their own life as an *imitatio Christi*.

³ See, with reference to further literature, the concise treatment by B. Roebben, *Een tijd van opvoeden. Moraalpedagogiek in christelijke perspectief* (Nikè-reeks; Didachè) (Leuven, Acco, 1995), pp. 203-206.

⁴ H.-I. Marrou, *A History of Education in the Ancient World* (New York NY, Sheed & Ward, 1956), pp. 96-101 and 217-226; P. Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity", *Representations*, 1, (1983), pp. 1-21.

⁵ P. Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar", p. 1.

⁶ Other important exemplary figures the Christian was encouraged to imitate were praiseworthy biblical characters (e.g. Job, David, Peter, Paul) and the "heroes" of the ascetic life whose *Vitae* circulated widely. The earliest and most influential writing in this category was the *Vita Antonii*, in which Athanasius moulded a new literary genre that was to become the model for all later hagiographical literature.

I intend to show this process of spiritual education at work in the context of the cult of the martyrs, which Asterius described in a homily as "schoolrooms for our souls". After a general introduction on the cult of the martyrs and an assessment of its possibilities and limits as a locus for religious and spiritual education, I will discuss both the oral and visual media that were used to communicate to the gathered community the message that the martyr was an example worthy of imitation. It will become clear that both ways of communication in a very lucky way complemented each other. Having thus demonstrated the potential impact of the martyr's example, I turn to an evaluation of the extent that it also *de facto* fulfilled this potential.

To enhance the coherence of the exposition, the material drawn on is limited in both time and geography. I choose to address the issues involved with regard to the situation in the Roman provinces Pontus and Cappadocia (both today in Turkey) during the second half of the fourth century. The martyr cult in this region and period is relatively well known. This is due to the so-called Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianze and Gregory of Nyssa⁷) whose writings are of paramount importance, not only for our subject but for our knowledge of the history and theology of this period in general. For our purposes, their martyrial homilies - the homilies held on the occasion of a martyr's annual celebration are especially important. Besides the encomia ("orations of praise") of the three Cappadocians, those by Asterius of Amaseia should also be included⁸. The ensuing treatment of the martyr cult in Cappadocia and Pontus is one instance: a similar argument could be made for many other regions or cities (e.g. Augustine's North Africa or the Constantinople of John Chrysostom).⁹

⁷ There exists a vast secondary literature on the Cappadocians. I single out a few of many valuable studies. For their theology a very good recent work is A. Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Outstanding Christian Thinkers) (London, G. Chapman, 1995). For the historical background excellent surveys are *inter alia* R. Teja, *Organización económica y social de Capadocia en el siglo IV, según los padres Capadocios* (Acta Salmanticensia. Filosofía y letras, 78) (Salamanca, Universidad de Salamanca, 1974) and B. Gain, *L'Eglise de Cappadoce au IV^e siècle d'après la correspondance de Basile de Césarée (330-379)* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 225), (Rome, Pontificum Institutum Orientale, 1985).

⁸ Basil: "Sermon on Julitta" (PG 31, col. 237-261); "On Gordius" (*Ibid.*, col. 489-507); "On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste" (*Ibid.*, col. 507-526); "On Mamas" (*Ibid.*, col. 589-600). Gregory: "On Theodore" (GNO X, 1/2, pp. 59-73); "On Stephen I and II" (*Ibid.*, pp. 73-94 and 95-107); "On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste Ia, Ib and II" (*Ibid.*, pp. 135-142; 143-156; 157-170). Asterius: "On Phocas" (Ed. C. Datema, *Asterius of Amaseia. Homilies I-XIV* (Leiden, Brill, 1970), pp. 111-127); "On the Holy Martyrs" (*Ibid.*, pp. 135-146); "The Description of Euphemia's Martyrdom" (*Ibid.*, pp. 153-155); "On Stephen" (*Ibid.*, pp. 157-175).

⁹ The most recent contributions are by T.J. Van Bavel, "The Cult of the Martyrs in St. Augustine: Theology vs. Popular Religion?", in: M. Lamberigts & P. Van Deun (Eds.), *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 117) (Leuven, Peeters, 1995), pp. 351-363; G. Christo, *Martyrdom According to John Chrysostom: to Live is Christ, to Die is Gain* (Lewiston NY, Mellen University Press, 1997).

The cult of the martyrs¹⁰

During the first centuries of its existence Christianity went through an eventful history that, in retrospect, takes the appearance of a "success story". A small Palestine missionary movement became in less than three centuries a *religio licita* (Edict of Milan, 313) and less than seventy years later acquired the status of official religion of the Roman Empire (381). Aside from Julian the Apostate's vain attempt to restore the pagan religions in their previous privileged position (361-363), this evolution indeed only went crescendo.¹¹ Yet it did not come about without difficulty: the young religion was confronted many times with persecutions. Taken as a whole, these show a rather kaleidoscopic appearance: there were great differences in intensity, depending on the period or region involved, and the reactions of the Christians also differed greatly. Some chose to give in and sacrificed to the pagan gods (the *lapsi*); others fled their persecutors to survive without defying their faith. Of those who were tortured and suffered for their faith, some survived (the *confessores*) but most died a martyr's death.¹² Both during the final stage of their lives, while they were awaiting their execution, and after their deaths, these martyrs enjoyed the highest esteem of their brothers in the Christian faith. This was expressed in their being honoured in a cult, of which their relics and tombs became the focal point. To commemorate the martyr's life and death the local community gathered each year around the tomb on the anniversary of the martyr's death or funeral. During the first centuries this cult was celebrated more or less in hiding, which was possible because of the location of cemeteries outside

¹⁰ The best general account remains H. Delehay, *Les origines du culte des martyrs* (Subsidia hagiographica, 20) (Brussel, Société des Bollandistes, 1933²). Succinct overviews: T. Baumeister, "Heiligenverehrung I", in: *RAC*, 14 (1988), col. 96-150; V. Saxer, "Martyr-Martyrdom", in: *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, vol. I, (Cambridge, J. Clarke, 1992), pp. 531-536. Specifically for Cappadocia and Pontus the most extensive survey is M. Girardi, *Basilio di Cesarea e il culto dei martiri nel IV secolo. Scrittura e tradizione* (Quaderni di "Vetera Cristianorum", 21) (Bari, 1990), pp. 147-233. See also J. Mossay, *La mort et l'au-delà dans Saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Université de Louvain. Recueil de travaux d'histoire et de philologie, 34) (Leuven, Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1966), pp. 238-270.

¹¹ At the same time it should be stressed that this is the presentation we find in the Christian sources. It goes without saying that historical reality never takes that linear and systematic a development and shows many differences according to the period and the region involved. Moreover the processes that brought about the christianisation of the originally pagan Roman Empire as well as the relations among the three great religions (Judaism, Christianity and the *plethora* of literally hundreds of pagan religions) have been and still are a matter of intense scholarly discussion. For a good survey of the problems and the solutions proposed, see D. Praet, "Explaining the Christianization of the Roman Empire: Older Theories and Recent Developments", *Sacris Erudiri*, 33, (1992-93), pp. 5-119. The most original recent contribution to the debate is undoubtedly R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton NJ, University Press, 1996) with the critical reactions in, *inter alia*, the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6, (1998), pp. 161-269.

¹² Good surveys of the persecutions in W. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: a Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1965); R.L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco CA, Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 102-168 and P. Maraval, *Les persécutions des chrétiens durant les quatre premiers siècles* (Bibliothèque d'histoire du christianisme, 30), (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992).

the city walls and because of the resemblance between the pagan and the Christian piety towards the dead. When Christianity grew and certainly from the moment it enjoyed imperial support, the cult of the martyrs was celebrated more openly and with greater splendour. The information on the martyr cult in the works of the Cappadocian Fathers gives a picture of this cult during the last decennia of the fourth century when it reached its fullest expansion. Magnificent sanctuaries were built, which not only became the centres of this cult but also offered other facilities such as a hospital for the sick, a hospice for pilgrims and a salvation army *avant la lettre* for the needy. Yet it is good to remember that not much earlier, in the years 361-363, under the pagan emperor Julian, Christians, especially in Asia Minor, were persecuted and some of them suffered martyrdom.¹³ So, the cult of the martyrs was more than an institution referring to a distant past it also bore reference to a nearby past many people living in the Cappadocia and Pontus of the last decennia of the fourth century had experienced personally. This gave rise to some new martyr cults, but no doubt the cults of "old" martyrs were also looked upon with fresh eyes.

At the heart of the martyr cult were the martyr's relics, i.e. the bones and other remains. These were its tangible centre and guaranteed the real presence of the martyr. This is perfectly consonant with the *Lebensgefühl* of man in Antiquity, for whom the divine, the *numinosum* was almost palpably present!¹⁴ This explains another feature of the martyr cult: the invocation to the martyrs, testimony to the widespread belief that it was profitable to ask favours of the martyrs.¹⁵ Yet the belief in the power of the martyrs went further. It was believed that touching the relics or even only being in their neighbourhood had a supernatural and salutary effect. "He who touches the bones of a martyr", says Basil, "partakes in the sanctity and grace that reside in them".¹⁶ About the relics of the female martyr Julitta, he says that they sanctify both the place where they rest and the people who assemble there.¹⁷ According to Gregory of Nazianze, "the bodies of the martyrs have the same power as their holy souls, whether one touches them or just venerates them. Just a few drops of their blood, the signs of their suffering, can effect the same as their bodies". As effects caused by the veneration or touching of the martyr's relics, Gregory mentions the chasing away of demons, the curing of the sick, the causing of visions and predictions of the future.¹⁸ A combination of the second and the third element we find in Gregory of Nyssa's narration about a limping soldier who received, while sleeping in the sanctuary of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in Ibora,

¹³ E.g. the martyr Euphrosyne, whose cult became, thanks to the zeal of Basil, one of the most important in Caesarea. Deeds of the martyr: Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History* V, 11.7-11 (Ed. J. Bidez & G.C. Hansen, *GC*, 50, pp. 209-210). Euphrosyne's cult: Basil, *Letter* 100 and 252 (Ed. R. Deferrari, *LCL*, vol. II, pp. 182-187 and vol. IV, pp. 18-21).

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. "Seeing the gods", ch. 4 of R.L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 102-168.

¹⁵ Some examples: Basil, "On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste", 8 (Ed. *PG* 31, col. 523); Gregory of Nazianze, "On Cyprian", 19 (Ed. J. Mossay & G. Lafontaine (*SC*, 284), pp. 84-85); Gregory of Nyssa, "On Theodore" (Ed. *GNO* X, 1/2, pp. 70-71); "On Stephen II" (*ibid.*, pp. 104-105).

¹⁶ Basil, "Homily on Psalm 115" (Ed. *PG* 30, col. 112).

¹⁷ "On Julitta" (Ed. *PG* 31, col. 241).

¹⁸ Gregory of Nazianze, "Against Julian" I, 69 (Ed. J. Bernardi (*SC*, 309), pp. 178-179).

a vision and was cured.¹⁹ A final usage related to the power of the relics is the *inhumatio ad sanctos*: the burial in the immediate vicinity of the martyr's relics.²⁰

While it was of course possible to visit the sanctuary of the martyrs during the entire year, the cult of each individual martyr reached its yearly peak during the annual celebration on the anniversary of the martyr's death or funeral. Then the entire community made a pilgrim's journey to the martyr's sanctuary which was usually outside town.²¹ Basil compares the mass of believers to a swarm of bees, Gregory of Nyssa to a colony of ants. There is ample other evidence that many people participated in these feasts for the martyrs (*panegureis*).²² They were an essential part of popular religious devotion in Late Antiquity. However, the presence of these large crowds produced the emergence of various other than strictly religious and liturgical aspects of the martyr cult. The celebration also took on social aspects: it became an opportunity to meet people, presumably including people one did not meet on ordinary occasions such as other liturgical services or markets. This gathering of large crowds also generated commercial activity, which sometimes took excessive forms that could distract people's attention from the religious aspects.²³ Beyond this commercial activity, there were of course also activities of sheer pleasuremaking, which sometimes provoked the irritation of the ecclesiastical authorities. So in one of his homilies Basil voices his indignation about

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste II" (Ed. GNO X, 1/2, pp. 166-167).

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste II" (Ed. GNO X, 1/2, p. 166); Gregory of Nazianze, "Carmina II, 20" and "II, 76" (Ed. PG 38, col. 20 and 50). For a discussion of these passages and for the *inhumatio ad sanctos* in general, see Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints, corps et âme. L'inhumation "ad sanctos" dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du III^e au VII^e siècle* (Études Augustiniennes), (Paris, 1988), esp. pp. 66-73. The powers these relics were believed to have, seem very strange to us. That such convictions belong, however, to a past less remote than we might imagine, is illustrated by the following extract from a local newspaper, reporting a theft of relics on 23 January 1999: Chandler, Arizona (AP) – Centuries - old sacred bone fragments and the reliquary box in which they were displayed have disappeared from a Greek Orthodox church. The pebble-sized fragments date from the third and fourth centuries. "These are very highly venerated", said Rev. Philip Armstrong, priest of St. Katherine Greek Orthodox Church. "The relics of saints are considered to be sources for healings, for answered prayers and for the blessing of premises. It is really a grave loss spiritually to us. "The fragments were gifts from monasteries and other Orthodox church sources. The oldest is from St. Gerasimos of the third century. Others were from fourth century saints, including St. Demetrios, St. Paraskezi, St. Rafael and St. Charalambos.

²¹ E.g. Basil, *On Gordius* 1 (Ed. PG 31, col. 489); Gregory of Nyssa, *On Theodore* (Ed. GNO X, 1/2, p. 70); Asterius, *Homily on the Holy Martyrs* 1.1 (Ed. C. Datema, p. 135). Cf. H. Delehay, *Origines*, p. 36-38.

²² Bees: Basil, *On Gordius* 1 (Ed. PG 31, col. 489); ants: Gregory of Nyssa, *On Theodore* (Ed. GNO X, 1/2, p. 70). Some other examples chosen at random: Basil, *On Mamas* 2 (Ed. PG 31, col. 592); Id., *Letter* 95 (Ed. R. Deferrari, LCL, vol. II, pp. 154-157); Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* 1a (Ed. GNO X, 1/2, p. 137); Asterius, *On Phocas* 9.2 (Ed. C. Datema, p. 123); Id., *On the Holy Martyrs* 1.1 (*ibid.*, p. 135).

²³ Basil, *Homily on Riches* (Ed. PG 31, col. 281C); Id., "Long Rules" (*Ibid.*, col. 1020B-D).

some inebriated women who danced in a martyr's sanctuary in a sexually provocative way.²⁴

Yet for these ecclesiastical authorities too, the annual *paneguris* was not an exclusively religious occasion. For the bishop it was an opportunity to invite his colleagues and discuss ecclesiastical business or to tighten the relations with dignitaries from the secular realm. One telling and very recognisable example is Basil's short *Letter 142* to the *numerarius*, a kind of financial supervisor and assistant of the provincial governor. The bishop of Caesarea expresses his regret that the *numerarius* did not attend the great *paneguris* for the martyr Euphrosyne. The reason of this regret is that Basil had convened all his *chorepiscopoi* (suffragan clerics) at the feast to introduce them to the official. He had hoped that this introduction would lead to the granting of fiscal immunity to some of these *chorepiscopoi*.²⁵ Another example: on occasion of a *paneguris* Basil hoped to play an intermediary role in a conflict between a number of people from Caesarea and Valerianus, a young acquaintance of his.²⁶

By way of intermediary conclusion I point at two elements that had a notable influence on the process of spiritual education in the context of the martyr cult. First: through his relics and the devotion with which these were treated the martyr was tangibly present, which might have enhanced his potentiality to be perceived as an example. On the other hand, the supernatural expectations attached to these relics might have created a distance between the Christian and the martyr but, given the great importance of the example in late antique education (cf. introduction), I do not think that this would have prevented the late antique mind from perceiving the martyr as an example. Second: the martyr cult and its annual celebration can certainly be seen as a locus for religious and spiritual education, although one has to bear in mind that it was not a classroom with pupils eager to learn but rather a market with many activities going on vying for the visitor's attention.

Homilies: the oral presentation of the martyr as an example

All in all, the annual celebrations of the cult of the martyrs must have been very busy, noisy, buzzing gatherings of enthusiastic people who enjoyed themselves, combining the religious with the more mundane aspects of the occasion. Among the elements constituting this religious aspect are the following: the veneration of relics, the invocation of the martyrs, the incubation (spending the night in the martyrrium with the purpose of receiving visionary dreams or being cured from health problems), the offering of ex-voto's to thank for the favours received through the intercession of the saint.²⁷ Besides these more individual ways of

²⁴ Basil, *Homily on Drunk People* 1 (Ed. PG 31, col. 445).

²⁵ Basil, *Letter 142* (Ed. R. Deferrari, *LCL*, vol. II, pp. 344-345).

²⁶ Basil, *Letter 278* (Ed. R. Deferrari, *LCL*, vol. IV, pp. 162-165).

²⁷ A good survey of these and other activities going on in and around the martyrrium, both during the year and on occasion of the *paneguris*, can be found in P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: histoire et géographie. Des origines à la conquête arabe* (Paris, Cerf, 1985), pp. 183-245. For incubation, see M. Wacht, "Inkubation", in: *RAC*, Lfg.

participation there were also liturgical celebrations. In the night before the feast day of the saint there was a vigil (mainly consisting of the singing of Psalms, songs of praise and litanies) and on the day itself a solemn eucharistic celebration.²⁸

One of the highlights of these liturgical gatherings of the community and its friends was an oration, or some orations, by the bishop and/or by people who were invited for this purpose. The preacher, being free to choose the topic of his homily, surprisingly enough, did not always deliver an encomiastic oration on the martyr whose *paneguris* was being celebrated. In fact we see very different topics treated in homilies of which we know that they were delivered on the occasion of a *paneguris*. Asterius' *Homily against Avarice* is a case in point, Gregory of Nazianze's *Homily on Low Sunday* another one.²⁹ The most interesting example is Basil of Caesarea's *Homily on Psalm 114*. The introduction of this homily reveals that it was delivered on occasion of a *paneguris* that Basil had promised to attend. The faithful were present at midnight, probably for the vigil. Basil arrived the following day at noon. He apologises for his late arrival and promises to make up for it by keeping his sermon short. At the time of his arrival the people were singing Psalm 114 and Basil seizes thereupon to make a commentary on this Psalm the subject of his homily, rather than delivering an encomium on that day's saint.³⁰

Most of the time, however, the sermon given during the liturgical services of a *paneguris* took the form of an encomiastic oration, commemorating the martyr's life and death. He/she was presented as a model of moral values and true Christian attitudes and praised for his/her constancy in faith.³¹ These orations had also a clear exhortative aim: the basic message was to exhort the audience to imitate the example of the martyr. These were, however, by no means the only themes treated by the preacher. The genre of the encomiastic oration gave the preacher the

138 (1997), col. 179-265.

²⁸ The evidence is rather scanty. The following passages can be mentioned: Basilus, *Homily on Psalm 114*, ch. 1 (Ed. PG 29, col. 484); Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Marina*, 33, l. 6-7 (Ed. P. Maraval (SC, 178), pp. 248-249); Id., *On Theodore* (Ed. GNO X,1/2, p. 69, l. 12-14). See P. Maraval, *Lieux saints*, pp. 214-218.

²⁹ *Infra* we quote a fragment of Asterius' *Homily against Avarice*, which makes abundantly clear that the homily was delivered on the occasion of a martyrial feast. As for Gregory of Nazianze's *Homily on Low Sunday*, several passages in the text (Ed. PG 36, col. 608-621) make clear that it coincided with the *paneguris* for saint Mamas, a martyr from Caesarea. See J. Bernardi, *La prédication des Pères Cappadociens. Le prédicateur et son auditoire* (Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de l'Université de Montpellier, 30) (Paris, PUF, 1970), pp. 251-252.

³⁰ Basil, *Homily on Psalm 114*, ch. 1 (Ed. PG 29, col. 484). For other examples and discussion see C. Datema, "De homileet en de heilige", in: A. Hilhorst (Ed.), *De heiligenverering in de eerste eeuwen van het christendom* (Nijmegen, Dekker & van de Vegt, 1988), pp. 105-114, 109-114.

³¹ I explicitly make this gender distinction to highlight the existence of female martyrs. The most famous are probably Felicitas and Perpetua. In the Cappadocian realm there was the martyr Julitta, a rich widow from Caesarea, to whom Basil devoted an encomiastic oration (Ed. PG 31, col. 237-262, esp. 237-241). For female martyrs, see e.g. E. G. Hinson, "Women among the Martyrs", *Studia Patristica*, 25 (1993), pp. 423-429; S. Hall, "Women among the Early Martyrs", in D. Wood (Ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Studies in Church History, 30) (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), pp. 1-23.

opportunity to touch upon a host of other themes. Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily on Theodore* is a beautiful example. Besides the story of Theodore's life and death the following themes are glanced at: the transience of human existence, the status of the soul, life after death, anti-pagan and anti-imperial polemic. These encomia present themselves as multilayered discourses, in which many themes are woven into the narration about the martyr and thus often come to enrich the basic message of the sermon: the presentation of the martyr as an example worthy of imitation.

While this message is always present underneath, it was sometimes also expressed quite explicitly. Such passages often employ a vocabulary from the semantic field of "education". This points to these homilies being explicitly and purposefully designed by the preacher as part of an educational process. The ensuing quotations illustrate this point. The testimony of the few quoted passages could easily be corroborated by many others.³²

We find a beautiful example of this in the introduction of Asterius' *Homily against Avarice*, from which the title of this essay was taken. It was clearly delivered on the occasion of a *paneguris*. To the (rhetorical) question why the martyr cult was institutionalised and why it was kept in honour and passed on from generation on generation, he answers: "It is clear ... that these (sc. yearly gatherings in honour of the martyrs) were instituted out of zeal for the true religion and that the gatherings are organised as *schoolrooms for our souls* with the purpose that we, by bringing honour to the martyrs, imitate their perseverance for true religion and with the purpose that we, by carefully listening to the gathered *teachers*, might learn something useful that we did not understand a while before, be it about the certainty of a tenet, the solution of a Scriptural passage which is hard to interpret, or a word that corrects our moral attitude".³³

In his *Homily on Phocas*, the most important martyr of Pontic Sinope, the same Asterius expounds at length on the theme of the martyr as an exemplary figure. We should keep in mind, he says, that theoretical research is important, but that the educational value of the practical example is greater. He who wants to learn geometry, astronomy and the like starts with theoretical introductions but completes his training by practice and learning from the master's example. The same holds true for him who wants to pursue the ideal of virtue and true religion: for such a person the ultimate example to learn from is the martyr. The passage abounds in terms belonging to the vocabulary connected to education.³⁴

Gregory of Nyssa assesses from another angle the contribution of the martyr cult to presenting the martyr as an example worthy of imitation. He points to the importance of the telling of the story of the martyr, which is precisely what is done in the martyrial homily. About these homilies, he says: "But best of all, they are a rich source of moral lessons, both for nourishing the minds of the young and for bringing men to maturity. Hearing is the most crucial of the senses and no less

³² Some other explicit examples: Basil: *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* 1 (Ed. PG 31, col. 508-509); *On Mamas* 1 (*Ibid.*, col. 589); *On Gordius* 1-2 (*Ibid.*, col. 489-493); Gregory of Nyssa, *On Theodore* (Ed. GNO X,1/2, p. 62; 69); Id., *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste II* (Ed. GNO X,1/2, pp. 159-160; quoted *infra*); Asterius, *Homily on the Holy Martyrs*, 2-3.1 (Ed. C. DATEMA, p. 135); *Ibid.*, 11.2 (*Ibid.*, p. 141).

³³ Asterius, *Homily against Avarice* 1 (Ed. C. Datema, p. 27).

³⁴ Asterius, *Homily on Phocas* 1 (Ed. C. Datema, p. 115).

important for instruction than sight. For it is through the ears that hearing leads doctrine vividly into men's souls, and it is of no little concern whether what is recounted is actually good or bad. For when bad things are said, inevitably they engender delusions of like nature within men's minds. But reflection and a mind's uninterrupted attention make a man eager to perform what he contemplates. Therefore render me a peaceful and undistracted hearing that the blessed martyrs may be fittingly honoured and that you through their memorial may be instructed in holiness and love of God".³⁵

This passage clearly refers to the existence of visual illustrations of the life and death of the martyrs, illustrations that were, in Gregory's opinion, not to be preferred to the oral communication of the message of the martyr's example. Before discussing the visual representations of the life and death of the martyrs and their value to communicate a message of constancy in the Christian faith, I would like to cast some doubt on Gregory's confidence in the suitability of these homilies to convey this message to the attending community. I am quite confident indeed that the bishop of Nyssa did overestimate the value of this mode of communication. If this is true, it only enhances the value of the visual representations.

My rather critical assessment of the martyrial homilies as means of communication is grounded in the following four elements. First, I think that the preacher's audience on these occasions³⁶ consisted of people belonging to all layers of society. Given the great popularity of the *panegureis*, which were, as we have seen above, an essential part of popular devotion, one can reasonably expect that many people attended who had only had the most elementary education. Combined with the fact that these homilies were real masterpieces of rhetorical art, phrased in a very refined language, employing an elevated style and following a pattern prescribed by the handbooks of rhetoric,³⁷ one wonders how many attending could follow and understand the entire sermon. Second, there is some evidence, though not conclusive, that the majority of those present did use in daily life a kind of

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste II* (Ed. GNO X,1/2, pp. 159-160). The English translation by Anna Wilson was prepared for the acta of the Belfast Colloquium on the XL Martyrs of Sebaste (forthcoming).

³⁶ R. MacMullen, "The Preacher's Audience" (*AD 350-400*), *JTS*, 40 (1989), pp. 503-511 shows, largely on the basis of John Chrysostom's homilies, that on the occasion of *panegureis* people belonging to all classes were present, whereas homilies on exegetical and theological themes attracted a more limited and highly educated audience. This provisional conclusion awaits confirmation from in-depth preacher-audience research, which is currently very much en vogue.

³⁷ Many monographs have been written on the rhetorical background of the Cappadocians. I refer here to two excellent surveys: C. Klock, *Untersuchungen zu Stil und Rhythmus bei Gregor von Nyssa: ein Beitrag zum Rhetorikverständnis der griechischen Väter* (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 173), (Frankfurt a. M., Athenäum, 1987) and W. Kinzig, "The Greek Christian Writers", in: S. Porter (Ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C. - A.D. 400* (Leiden/Keulen/New York NY, Brill, 1997), pp. 633-671. With regard to the homilies discussed in this article, there is only an article on Gregory of Nyssa's *On Theodoret*. M. Esper, "Enkomiaistik und Christianismus in Gregors epideiktische Rede auf den heiligen Theodor", in: A. Spira (Ed.), *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa. Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Mainz, 6-10 September 1982)* (Patristic Monograph Series, 12) (Cambridge MA-Philadelphia P.A., 1984), pp. 145-159.

native Cappadocian language and consequently did not know Greek very well.³⁸ Third, the martyrial homilies contain some evidence that the crowds were not always careful listeners and - probably more often than the surviving texts reveal - sometimes interrupted the preacher by shouting or making so much noise that he was forced to stop.³⁹ Fourth, the *panegureis* were, as already said above, not classrooms with pupils eager to learn but markets with many activities going on vying for the visitor's attention. Therefore, it would be all but surprising if those attending the liturgical celebrations during the *panegureis* and listening to the preacher's encomium on the martyr sometimes lost interest and turned to more worldly matters. One thing might have compensated for those handicaps and enhanced their understanding of the sermon: since the story of the martyr was part of local history, probably most of those present knew it and were thus helped to follow the homily.

All this leads to the conclusion that Asterius, Basil, Gregory clearly were convinced that the martyr was a good example for the religious education of their flock. Imitation of his or her example could enhance their constancy in the faith and perseverance in the virtuous life. While this concern is always present underneath, the orators sometimes voice it in more explicit passages. Moreover they cast these ideas in a language that often contains words from the semantic field of "education." Yet, laudatory and done with the best intentions as these attempts might have been, we do not have the impression that these homilies were the most suitable way to convey this message. In what follows it will be argued that these oral ways of communicating the message of the martyr as an example were in a most lucky way complemented by visual representations of the martyr's life and death.

Wall paintings: the visual presentation of the martyr as an example⁴⁰

As regards the visual representations of the martyrs, we are dependent on some testimonies in the literary sources since there are no archaeological data for the martyr cult in the period and region under discussion. This shortfall, however, is largely made up by the detailed and quite extensive character of the available descriptions. Asterius of Amaseia in a short passage in his *Homily on Phocas* compares the shrines of the martyrs to inscribed stones. Just as inscribed stones tell the story of the one honoured, so the pictures on the shrine describe in detail the

³⁸ Evidence for the existence of such a language: Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 29.74 (Ed. PG 32, col. 208); Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* II, 406 (GNO I, p. 344). See K. Holl, "Das Fortleben der Volkssprachen in Kleinasien in nachchristlicher Zeit", in: *Gesammelten Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* II, (Tübingen, Mohr, 1928), pp. 238-248 and now S. Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men and Gods in Asia Minor. I. The Celts in Anatolia and the Impact of Roman Rule* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.170-176, *passim*.

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* Ia: the orator has to stop because the noise of his public (Ed. GNO X,1/2, pp. 141-142).

⁴⁰ I am thankful for the insights found in P.C.J. Van Dael, "Biblical Cycles on Church Walls: 'Pro lectione pictura'", in: J. Den Boeft & M.L. Van Poll-van de Lisdonk (Eds.), *The Impact of Scripture in Early Christianity* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 44) (Leiden/Keulen/New York NY, Brill, 1999), pp. 122-132.

agony of the martyrdom. For us, Asterius says, who as pupils of the martyrs want to learn from their example how to preserve the faith in difficult circumstances, both the narration of the martyrs' deeds during the homily and their depiction on the shrine are important resources.⁴¹ This is an important passage for two reasons: it proves that the martyrs' shrines were decorated with portrayals of his trials and, even more important, that Asterius perceived these pictures as a resource to learn how to preserve the faith in difficult circumstances.

A more detailed description can be found in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily on Theodore*. This encomium contains a description of the great sanctuary of the martyr in Euchaïta (Pontus), where it was pronounced. The passage reads: "... a building splendidly wrought both with regard to size and the beauty of its adornment, as befits God's temple, a building in which the carpenter has shaped wood into the likeness of animals and the mason has polished slabs to the smoothness of silver. The painter, too, has spread out the blooms of his art, having depicted on an image the martyr's brave deeds, his resistance, his torments, the ferocious faces of the tyrants, the insults, that fiery furnace, the martyr's most blessed death and the representation in human form of Christ who presides over the contest-all of these he wrought by means of colours as if it were a book that uttered speech, and so he both represented the martyr's feats with all clarity and adorned the church like a beautiful meadow; for painting, even if it is silent, is capable of speaking from the wall and being of the greatest benefit. As for the mosaicist, he made a noteworthy floor to tread on."⁴²

So, apart from the elevated style and lengthy circumscriptions, we learn that Theodore's actions before his conviction were depicted somewhere on the walls of his sanctuary. These probably included his burning of the great temple of Amaseia, as well as the events leading to his death: the interrogation by the prefect, the torture, his death on a pyre. Christ was also portrayed somewhere on the picture, thus highlighting the martyr's ultimate inspiration and encouraging the spectator to perceive his/her own life in the same way the martyr did, as an *imitatio Christi*. As demonstrated by the ensuing testimonies, Christ's presence was a recurring feature on these wall paintings.

The most famous testimony on this kind of pictures is Asterius' description of the martyrdom of Euphemia of Chalcedon.⁴³ If Asterius' information is historically reliable,⁴⁴ the picture was in the saint's sanctuary in Chalcedon where

⁴¹ Asterius, *Homily on Phocas* 1.4 (Ed. C. Datema, p. 115).

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Theodore* (Ed. GNO X,1/2, p. 62). The English translation was taken from C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (Sources and Documents in the History of Art), (Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 36-37.

⁴³ Asterius, *Description of Euphemia's Martyrdom* (Ed. C. Datema, pp. 147-155). English translation in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 37-39.

⁴⁴ W. Speyer has convincingly argued that this text was conceived as a purely literal work, a "Missionsschrift für gebildete Heiden". He may well be right, but this does not diminish the value of the text as a source for the visual representations on the walls of the martyr's sanctuary (W. Speyer, "Die Euphemia-Reden des Asterios von Amaseia. Eine Missionsschrift für gebildete Heiden", in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 14 (1971), pp. 39-47 [Id., *Frühes Christentum im Antiken Strahlungsfeld* (WUNT, 50) (Tübingen, Mohr, 1989), pp. 91-100]).

the bishop of Amaseia probably saw it. Asterius' text is too long to quote in full but largely confirms what we already know from the earlier mentioned passages. The pictures portrayed in great detail Euphemia's interrogation before the court, her torture, her final stay in prison devoted to prayer and her consummation by fire. An important new element is that this text explicitly states that the decoration was a series of paintings. Moreover the transcendent element was not absent. Gregory of Nyssa stated that Christ was depicted in the paintings of Theodore's sanctuary. For similar reasons the Cross was depicted on the wall-paintings of Euphemia's sanctuary: a foreshadowing of her imminent martyrdom and a reference to her Saviour with whom she would be united.

I think that these detailed portrayals of the end of the martyr's life on the walls of the sanctuary or anywhere else were an effective way to present him/her as an example to be imitated. The above-mentioned passage from Asterius' *Homily on Phocas* confirms that at least the ecclesiastical authorities perceived it in that way. In general, word (the homily) and image (the paintings) were considered throughout Antiquity as equally valuable means to achieve the same purpose of communication.⁴⁵ Basil says in his *Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* that "what the sermon shows of the story through hearing, the silent picture puts before the eyes by imitation".⁴⁶ At the same time, it was recognised that each sense had its limits and possibilities. Gregory of Nyssa, while acknowledging the equality of seeing and hearing, reflects at length on the advantages of the latter.⁴⁷ The opposite, one finds at the end of (Pseudo-) Basil's *Homily on Barlaam*,⁴⁸ where the homilist highlights the superiority of visual representations: "Arise now, O splendid painters of the feats of martyrs! Magnify with your art the General's mutilated appearance. Adorn with your cunning colours the crowned Athlete whom I have but dimly described ... May I behold the struggle between the hand and the fire, depicted more accurately by you (than I have done); may I behold the Wrestler, as he is represented more splendidly on your image. Let the demons weep ... Let the burnt yet victorious hand be shown to them once again. Let Christ, too, who presides over the contest be depicted on the panel".⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Good survey in G. Lange, *Bild und Wort: die katechetischen Funktionen des Bildes in der griechischen Theologie des sechsten bis neunten Jahrhunderts* (Schriften zur Religionspädagogik und Kerygmantik, 6), (Würzburg, Echter Verlag, 1969), pp. 13-29.

⁴⁶ Basil, *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* 2 (Ed. PG 31, col. 509A).

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* II (Ed. GNO X,1/2, pp. 159-160). See the citation supra, on p. 122.

⁴⁸ Basil, *In Barlaam*, 3 (Ed. PG 31, col. 483-490, 489-490). Barlaam is believed to have suffered martyrdom in Antiochia during the persecutions under Galerius and Maximinus Daia (early fourth century). He was forced to hold some incense and to stretch his hand over the sacrificial fire. If he let the incense drop, he would have sacrificed to the pagan divinity. Barlaam remained steadfast; he did not sacrifice and had his hand burnt. The authenticity of this encomium transmitted under Basil's name is uncertain. J. Bernardi, *La prédication*, excludes the homily while A. Olivar, *La predication cristiana antigua* (Bibliotheca Herder. Sección de teología y filosofía) (Barcelona, Herder, 1991), p. 83 equally self-evident includes it. The *Clavis*, another basic work, states that "homiliam nostram spuriam esse inter omnes constat" (*Clavis Patrum Graecorum. II. Ab Athanasio ad Chrysostomum*, cura et studio M. Geerard, (Turnhout, Brepols, 1974), p. 150.

⁴⁹ Translation taken from C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 37.

Even allowing for some exaggeration and the rhetorical topos of false modesty, Basil seems well aware in this passage of the possibilities of visual representations and the appeal they might have to the spectator. He explicitly states that the work of the painter is more colourful, accurate and splendid than the words of the homilist. Gregory of Nyssa relates in great detail the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac in a sermon *On the Divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit*. In doing so, he tries to arouse the emotions of his public. He also recalls having seen a painting of the same event that used to draw tears in his eyes, "so clearly art evokes the story".⁵⁰ These two passages show that while homilists were aware that detailed descriptions in colourful tones might evoke the emotions of the audience, they also acknowledged that images could have the same effect and thus be an influential and valuable companion to their spoken word.⁵¹ Besides their "immediate character" and their appeal to the emotions, other elements also contributed to making the visual representations in the *martyria* excellent media to communicate the message of the martyr as a model worthy of imitation. Contrary to the homilies they were accessible to everyone, educated and uneducated, clearly functioning as a kind of *biblia pauperum*.⁵² A final feature of the visual representations was that they were always present, not only on the celebration day of the martyr. The *potential* exhortative value of the homilies, in which this exhortation was unequivocally voiced, was perhaps greater than that of the soundless wall-pictures, but the latter were much more easily accessible and their message easier to understand. The latter is especially true when we remember the high value attributed to the example in the value system of Late Antiquity (cf. introduction). Moreover, we can be sure that the story of the life and death of the martyr was part of the collective memory of the community. Thus it is not that far-fetched to surmise that the inspiring memory of the martyr was brought to life for all who saw and commented on the wall-paintings. All in all, one can conclude that when compared with the martyrial homilies, the paintings on the sanctuary walls were lucky complements and more than that.

Conclusion

In the above it was argued that in the context of the martyr cult the martyr was presented as a model to imitate. This message was conveyed in both oral and visual ways that complemented each other. In the homilies there are clear educational overtones such as in the description of the martyr cult as "schoolrooms for our souls". Bishops like Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Asterius clearly were convinced that these homilies were good means to exhort their flock to adopt the

⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit* (Ed. GNO X,2, pp. 138-139).

⁵¹ Many other examples, also from non-Christian authors from Classical and Late Antiquity, in G. Lange, *Wort und Bild*, pp. 16-30, passim.

⁵² P.C.J. Van Daal, *Biblical Cycles*, collects evidence that, at least in the West, mural decoration was considered as "the books of the illiterate" and to a degree even as a replacement for the Scriptures. For Cappadocia and Pontus in the period 350-400 AD explicit testimonies are not available.

Christian attitudes so eminently exemplified by the martyrs. I think the suitability of these homilies to communicate this message must be nuanced. This only enhances the importance of the visual representations which were meant, at least according to one explicit passage of Asterius, to have the same exhortatory effect.

I think I have shown at least that the martyr, through the oral and visual representation, was a potential example to be imitated and that he/she was, in the eyes of the bishops such as Basil, Gregory and Asterius, also intended to fulfil this role. Given the great importance the civilisation of Late Antiquity attached to the example and to its imitation, we can be fairly sure that it *de facto* also fulfilled this role. In these ways and within the sketched limits, a process of spiritual and religious education took place, in which the martyr functioned as a model worthy of imitation. At the same time the presence of Christ, both in the homilies and on the wall paintings, pointed beyond the person of the martyr to his/her ultimate Source of inspiration. In this sense the local manifestations of the martyr cult were indeed "schoolrooms for our souls".