

## Blankenburg Appeal

# Readiness to suffer for Christ

Every day the mass media report on horrible sufferings which are inflicted upon many human beings, including natural catastrophies as well as the criminal or political use of force. In this context, however, that form of religious persecution is often overlooked which, especially today, in some countries means suffering and death for many people. In this framework martyrdom, i.e. suffering and death of defenceless persons because of their faith and testimony for Jesus Christ, is of central significance. Such martyrs have at all times, being spiritually united with the One who was crucified, received from Him the power to endure.

In the present situation this message is called for anew. Therefore, the participants of the congress of the International Christian Network (in German: *Internationale Konferenz Bekennender Gemeinschaften*), held from October 15 through 18, 2006, in Germany in Blankenburg, Thuringia, under this theme, have formulated the following appeal. They are addressing it to their fellow Christians in various denominations and to all those who are carrying responsibilities in society. This text is an abbreviated version of a pastoral memorandum published under the same title.

Throughout the last two thousand years there has, time and again, been suffering because of the gospel, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the years following it have been the most bloody era in this respect. Never before have so many Christians been persecuted and murdered as now. At the Blankenburg congress this was corroborated by moving reports. On this subject comprehensive documentations exist, prepared with scholarly scrutiny, but unfortunately these facts usually escape public awareness. Especially in the western world, accustomed as it is to a permissive, tolerant, affluent pleasure society, such facts might stifle that naïve dream of a global, multi-cultural peace on which so many are basing their present feeling for life.

However, Jesus Himself and the apostles admonished the believers that “we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Very soon after His departure they came to experience, both spiritually and physically, how true this admonition was, spelling out personal martyrdom for them, too. From the clear promises of God about their participation in His future kingdom the martyrs of the Early Church already gained the strength

to consider their sufferings for Christ as a special distinction and to face their martyrdom with joyful anticipation.

On its very first pages the Book of Acts already tells us about the persecutions which the disciples and the Early Church had to face because of their unswerving testimony for Christ. So we learn about Steven, the first martyr of the Apostolic Church, and this is followed by the chronicle of martyrs throughout history, written as it is in blood-red letters.

The first few centuries after Christ were essentially shaped by the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperors, especially Nero and Diocletian. Thus the martyrs came to be of particular significance for the internal purification and the external expansion of the church at that time. In the records on martyrdom it was documented how steadfastly and joyfully they maintained their testimony under all questionings and tortures up to their very death. For subsequent generations, too, the reading of such reports in church services was a source of strength.

The list of martyrs extends through history, including those who were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ by the gruesome dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or by religious fanatics of this day.

Unfortunately, however, we often have to realize that rarely Christians and congregations are touched vitally by the sufferings of persecuted brothers and sisters outside their own horizon. Hence churches and individuals pay much too little attention to commemorating the Christian martyrs of our time.

Moreover, occasionally our churches are, due to an ill-conceived, vague concept of tolerance, in danger of adapting their faith to the spirit of this time and to loose sight of the central message on the salvation of mankind by Jesus Christ.

## What needs to be done in this situation?

- 1) There is a need for a **deepened fellowship with Christ**. Only in this way will His Church be able to remain faithful to her worldwide challenge.
- 2) There is a need for a profound **concentration on the biblical Word**, particularly with regard to everything which it contains concerning that steadfastness of faith which endures even beyond martyrdom.
- 3) There is a need for specific **information about present persecutions** of fellow Christians and for intense intercession for them. If we mention them by name in our intercession, this is a power which even the persecutors cannot ignore. It is important that such intercession should be specific, fervent, unanimous, and persevering (Acts 12:12). In this regard it is

quite helpful to use prayer lists, updating them regularly. Furthermore, it is encouraging to learn about answered prayers, thus being challenged to give thanks (Acts 4:23-41).

- 4) There is a need for **vigilance concerning the trends of the time**. In the political and social sphere as well as in private life, a growing disregard for the Christian faith and its ethical values which have shaped Europe for more than thousand years is evident.
- 5) There is a need for that form of tolerance which Jesus exemplified by His life. He lovingly proclaimed that He Himself is, for all people of the world, “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Therefore, **genuine tolerance** does not mean to give up this truth, but rather to be ready for suffering and martyrdom when spreading it in a spirit of authentic love without ever using force.
- 6) There is a need to **recognize the dangers which are threatening Christians** in the western world at present. For the time being they are apparent in legislature, science and education. Here Christians are sometimes socially ousted, ridiculed, deprived of professional promotions or treated with intolerance, thus becoming victims of repressive intolerance under the disguise of so-called tolerance. We have to anticipate the possibility that, in the not too distant future, the present state of sublime oppression may give way to outright persecution. This would have to be expected, in particular, if a state should become totalitarian in the course of globalisation, or if a syncretistic merger of religions, or if a form of Islam which aims at islamizing the world by force, introducing the sharia as public law even in Europe were to emerge. Such dangers appear realistic, especially in Germany, in view of a rapidly accelerating process of demographic extinction of the indigenous population.
- 7) There is a need to **practice Christian fellowship** faithfully, both on the local and on the global level. After all, in this 21st century, the credibility of the Christian message will depend on how true it is that “all of them may be one” – those whom God has given to His Son (John 17:21). May this oneness grow visibly at the dawn of suffering and martyrdom!