

**Readiness to Suffer for Christ**  
*A Pastoral Directive*  
**from the Second Ecumenical Congress of the International Christian Network  
in Bad Blankenburg, Germany, 15 – 18 October 2006**

**Direction**

*1. Suffering For Following Jesus – a Worldwide (Global) Experience*

Jesus has called us into a fellowship with Him that gives life on the one hand, yet, on the other hand, is also connected with taking up the cross upon ourselves. This is suffering hundreds of thousands of fellow Christians in other regions of the world have to endure even today. Yet, it is something that has been predicted for the whole church of Christ as a destiny to come. Many signs indicate that the genuineness of our discipleship is crucially evident by whether or not we are ready to be actively connected (related) to those who suffer for their faith and will have to suffer for their faith in the future. Of course, the Church in our part of the world is lulled to sleep in a illusory peace. Therefore, it is necessary to wake her up so that she may take seriously (accept) her calling of suffering for Christ.

*2. Suffering For Christ's Sake –  
Theme of an International Congress of Confessing Churches*

Out of concern for the lack of awareness of the Biblical meaning of martyrdom and the grave reality of the persecution of Christians in the past, present, and in the coming days, the *International Christian Network* made this the theme of its second Ecumenical (or Eighth European) Conference of Confessing Churches, which met together in ecumenical cooperation with representatives of the different denominations and fellowships from October 15-18, 2006 at the conference center of the German Evangelical Alliance in Bad Blankenburg, Germany.

The goal of this gathering was threefold:

1. strengthening and awakening the spiritual-theological awareness of the deep significance of martyrdom for the Christian faith;
2. appealing for solidarity with fellow Christians around the world who are suffering for Christ;
3. strengthening European Christians in their own situations of suffering which are now even appearing here as well and preparing them for a future, possible martyrdom.

We summarize the results of our conference in this pastoral, advisory document as follows:

- In this, we address primarily *fellow Christians and churches* to allow them to have a part in the vital spiritual insights gained anew in Bad Blankenburg, which are vital for them as well.
- At the same time, we turn to the *leaders in churches and Christian organizations* with the plea of giving wider scope to the significance of martyrdom in their service than was previously the case.
- We appeal to the *professors and lecturers at theological colleges and seminaries* to put greater emphasis in teaching and research on the often neglected martyriological dimension of the Christian faith.
- Finally, this directive is also addressed to *leaders in government and society* in the hope that they will promote greater attention to the universal right of religious freedom and be actively involved in working for the protection of persecuted Christian minorities.

### ***3. Martyrdom as a Particular Form of Suffering***

Since the Fall of man, people in every age have had painfully to realize that, as a result of sin, suffering is part of their destiny on earth, which they experience either as individuals or collectively. Our global news network makes us aware almost daily how much large groups of people somewhere in the world even today must constantly suffer from catastrophes such as earthquakes or genocidal tribal wars.

Among the different forms of human suffering, there is one that has almost been forgotten for a long time, but which we, as responsible Christians, are becoming increasingly aware of today with renewed clarity: *Martyrdom as suffering and dying for one's faith*.

#### **a) The Relevance of Different Kinds of “Martyrdom”**

Because of their origin in church history, the terms “martyrdom” and “martyr” have been used almost exclusively in history to refer to persecuted Christians. More recently, though, they have been more broadly used with respect to religious history. Indeed, even fighters who have been killed as a result of their militant political views have frequently, though mistakenly, been referred to as “martyrs”. Suicide bombers, mostly Islamic fundamentalists, who, in pursuit of their religious and political goals, seek to kill as many people as possible with them in their fanatically-sought suicide, warrant special attention.

#### **b) The Uniqueness of Christian Martyrdom**

The Christian concept of martyrdom is fundamentally different from such modern interpretations of the word: For one, the martyr suffers death by giving up his own life without becoming aggressively violent. Furthermore, his suffering and death at the hands of

enemies of the Christian faith are undergone because of his confession in word and deed of Jesus Christ and His Gospel. Therefore, the term *martyr* is – as an original Biblical word – derived from the Greek word “μαρτυρς” and means “witness”. Correspondent to that, “*martyrdom*” (Gk. μαρτυριον) means bearing witness to the Lord even unto death. Jesus Himself called His disciples to be His witnesses (Lk. 24:48; Acts 1:8; see also Joh. 15:27). In this respect, in its original sense, the word “martyr” cannot be seen apart from the person of Christ.

From this, we conclude:

*Martyrs in the Biblical sense are Christians who, with the Holy Spirit's help and aware of the dangers connected to it, give testimony in word and deed to their Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ and to the truth of the Gospel proclaimed in His Church in the face of the enemies of the faith and suffer death as a result.*

*Among these may also be counted Christians who have died in their willingness to fulfill God's will even under threat of death from their persecutors acting out of hatred toward God and toward the Christian Church, either by being killed directly or from injuries sustained through persecution and mistreatment.*

For Christians who publicly profess their faith, there are **preliminary stages and forms of suffering for Christ** on the road to martyrdom as a testimony in blood<sup>1</sup>: different forms and severity of persecutions, beginning with mockery, isolation, discrimination and going all the way to imprisonment, torture, and forced exodus. All of these forms of the persecution of Christians today are the subject of this pastoral directive.

### **c) The 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the Height of Christian Suffering throughout History**

Of course, there has been suffering for the sake of the Gospel in all periods of church history. Less known, however, is the fact that the Twentieth Century and the subsequent years was and still remain the bloodiest epoch of Christian history since the birth of Christ. Never in the past has there been so much persecution of Christians as there is in our present age.<sup>2</sup> There are numerous contemporary eyewitnesses to this as well as extensive, carefully documented reports that deserve widespread attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Even the Ancient Church Fathers made a distinction between martyrs who spilled their blood for their faith and *confessors*. The latter also publicly confessed their faith at great peril, though they escaped death.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to Chuck Colson, “more people have become martyrs for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in all the previous 19 centuries combined”. See Nina Shea (Ed.): *In the Lion's Den: A Shocking Account of Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians Today and How We Should Respond*. Broadman & Holman: Nashville (TN) 1997, p.IX. – The Catholic relief organization “Church in Need”? (Kirche in Not) counts the number of Christians killed for their faith at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at around 170,000 annually.

#### **d) The Danger of Conscious Repression**

What are the reasons for the lack of attention given to contemporary martyrdom in many parts of the world by the secular media and, unfortunately, also by church circles as well?

- Since World War II, we in the West have enjoyed freedom in a state of peace which we take for granted – irrespective of past experiences in history and looming crises. We do not want to allow our thoughts to encroach upon it at all. Therefore, many people, even Christians, respond apathetically to the news of persecutions and lack empathy.
- Reports of the persecution of Christians in countries overseas disturb the harmonious ideal of the conditions of religious life in other countries and cultures people have liked to create since the Enlightenment and they also like to have for their own life in the wake of the modern idea of tolerance. The sentence: “There is salvation in none other than Jesus Christ” disturbs this understanding of tolerance.
- Sometimes it is also cowardice, as taking a public stand for endangered religious freedom could possibly endanger one's own political and economic interests or ecumenical and interreligious relations.
- Another cause is the blinding unbelief and the cold-heartedness that comes with it in the former Christian states of Western Europe.

We would like to oppose this irresponsible attitude and to direct attention to Jesus' call to suffer for His sake, a call that concerns us all, and to what that call means for wide circles of Christianity. But, at the same time, we would like to encourage Christians by pointing out the promises of blessing in light of both what the Bible has to say about it as well as things experienced by martyrs of all ages. This is our concern in publishing this pastoral directive.

### **I. Suffering – A Basic Experience of God's People**

#### ***1. The Election of the People of God – an Excluding Fellowship with God***

Church Father Augustine once said: “From Abel until the end of time the pilgrimage of the Church proceeds between the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.”

According to I Thess. 3:3 and II Tim. 3:12, suffering for Christ's sake is a fundamental characteristic of the Church that remains true to the faith. Her election places her in a particularly close relationship to God, *on the one hand*; yet, *on the other hand*, it excludes her from the rest of humanity. Almost inevitably, this causes jealousy and hate (Mt. 10:22; Joh. 17:14; I Joh. 3:13), which, as in the case of Abel, can even result in murdering one's own brother for religious reasons (I Joh. 3:12).

#### ***2. Old Testament Examples of Suffering Because of Reverence For God***

The mystery of the suffering of the righteous allowed by God is the subject of the Book of *Job*. The agonizing question of God's justice is answered expressly, not in the traditional way as suffering punishment for some evil or sin that was committed (that is, everyone reaps the consequences of his own deeds). Instead, God considers patient Job to be a “righteous man” (Ezek. 14:14 and 20), and by his humble, patient acceptance of his undeserved torments he becomes an example for us. It is his obedience that stays faithful to the end through which God ultimately brings to a good goal. (James 5:11). As an Old Testament *typology of Christ*, Job points to Christ, God's completely sinless suffering servant. This is true in a similar way also for the *Old Testament prophets* (James 5:10 f.). Conflict, persecution, and martyrdom were all characteristics of true prophets. Thus, Stephen could ask the Sanhedrin before his own death as a martyr: “Which of the prophets have your fathers not persecuted?” (Acts 7:52; cf. I Thess. 2:14-15). Jesus also reminds the disciples who are either persecuted or await persecution: “Likewise they persecuted the prophets” (Mt. 5:12). Righteous people ready to suffer, above all, God's messengers, the prophets of the Old Covenant, are thus the forerunners of the New Testament martyrs (Mt. 24:37; Hebr. 11:35-38).

### ***3. Israel's Path of Suffering***

*Israel, the people of God*, also had to experience the fact that her election also brought some suffering with it because of her calling. This began with her slavery in Egypt and even continued on at later periods. Suffering as punishment played a prominent role (Lev. 26:14-39; Dt. 28:16-68) because of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, who could even use Gentile peoples as a rod of punishment against Israel (Isa. 5; Jer. 25:1-14). For this reason, the Psalmist laments, in the name of his people, her predicaments: “*You have made us an object of scorn to our neighbors, mockery to those who persecute us . . . for your sake we are killed daily and are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*” (Ps. 44:14, 23). This experience also characterizes the later history of suffering of the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem until the end of this age.

## **II. Jesus' Call to Discipleship – Fellowship with God's Suffering Servant**

### ***I. 1. Jesus as the Model of Suffering because of Obedient Faith***

All Christian martyrdom has its basic foundational orientation and footing in Jesus Christ, the “*faithful and true witness*” (Rev. 1:5; 3:14). He, who lived as the eternal Son of God with His Father in complete bliss, took upon Himself after His incarnation torture and death freely and in unwavering obedience freely as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of rebellious humanity. In this way He suffered the depths of all human pain for our assurance (1Pet.

2:21-24; Heb. 2:14-18). In doing so, suffering also became for Him a test of obedience (Heb. 5:8).

Since His earliest childhood, Jesus was persecuted when Herod's pursuers sought to kill Him and His parents had to flee with Him to Egypt (Mt. 2:13-18). In Nazareth, His first sermon in the synagogue there met with bitter resistance: *"They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the city was built, in order to throw him down the cliff."* (Lk.4:29).

Finally, He stood up as a witness to the truth during His questioning before the judges (Joh. 18:37). In this, He reinforced this truth, particularly through His courageous perseverance even to death, which God confirmed through His glorious resurrection. (Phil. 2:9).

Martyrs in every epoch of history have received strength to endure to the end through fellowship with the Crucified One, who Himself endured to the end.

## ***2. Jesus' Admonitions to His Disciples***

### **a) Prophetised Suffering**

To Jesus the crucifixion was not at all a tragic failure of His mission, but, rather its very fulfillment. This is evident from the three prophecies of suffering upon which the Lord bases His suffering with the Father's plan to save the lost (Mt. 16:21; 17:22f; 20:17-19 and par.). In this context, He announces to His disciples that He also expects a similar destiny (fate). They would be at odds with the world that opposes God just as He Himself was. (Joh 15:18-21). For this reason, Jesus' call to discipleship is one of discipleship to the cross (Lk. 9:23). In it, Christ's own passage through suffering to glory finds its fulfillment and continuation (I Pet. 2:21; Rom. 8:17). Christians are called to bear the reproach (humiliation) of Christ (Heb. 13:13). Because of this, every true disciple of Jesus must, in the most extreme case, also be basically prepared to suffer martyrdom.

This fearsome announcement was made more acceptable to the disciples by the fact that Jesus tied to it encouraging promises for those suffering for His sake.<sup>3</sup> He truly identifies with those who are suffering (Matt. 25:31ff.) and promises to be always present among them and to send them the Holy Spirit as the Helper (Mt. 28:20; Joh. 14:16). Even people who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, find it (Mt. 10:39) and will sit some day in the future with Jesus at the table in His Kingdom, fed by Him and taking part in His Messianic reign (Lk. 22:28-30; Rev. 1:6). This hope of a future reward is clearly based in Jesus' promises. It emphasizes the inseparable bond of Christ's witnesses with Him in death and life. This was what gave the early Christian martyrs the strength to consider their suffering for Christ as a

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<sup>3</sup> Josef Ton: *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*. University Press of America, New York/Oxford 1997, p. 103-105.

special reward and even to look forward with joy to their martyrdom. Even the apostles considered it a special honor to suffer reproach for Christ's sake (Acts 5:41).

### ***3. The Satanic Background of the Persecution of Christians***

The world's hatred toward Christians is ultimately inspired by the even deeper *hatred of Satan*, who has been fighting against God ever since his primeval rebellion against Him. With the Fall of Adam, the Devil tries to drag humanity down into its own destruction. In a perversion of God's plan of redemption, he pursues this plan by strengthening his kingdom on earth as the “prince of this world”. Because Jesus totally stripped him of his power on Golgotha, the anger of the dark powers is directed completely against Him and all who confess Him. Satan also uses people – even religious, sometimes even so-called “Christians”! – to serve his ends.<sup>4</sup> This is why the Risen Christ asks Saul, who had become a persecutor of Christians for deeply religious reasons, when He meets him on the road to Damascus: “*Why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4) and answers Saul's inquiring response: “*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*” (Acts 9:5). Accordingly, the Church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God (cf. Joh. 15:20a) and it suffers sometimes even at the hands of well-meaning people who mistakenly think they are honoring God in persecuting Christians. Karl Hartenstein writes here: “The more clearly the Church knows and testifies concerning Christ, the more certainly she will have to expect the opposition, protest, and hate of the Antichrist.”<sup>5</sup> All Christian persecution has, in this respect, a demonic component and can only be explained (understood) as such in its irrational brutality. Therefore, the Church of Jesus will find no peace on earth before the Final Judgment has definitely been passed on the Devil and all remaining power is taken away from him. But, the Church herself has an important part in this victory through her willingness to suffer martyrdom. (Rev. 12:11).

### ***4. The Suffering Experienced By the Early Church***

Soon after Jesus' departure, His disciples would have to experience in body and soul the truth of Jesus' preaching about the martyrdom awaiting them. The Book of Acts tells us about persecutions that came down upon the disciples and the early church because of their fearless testimony of Christ (Acts 8:1). The Lord revealed to *Paul* how he would have to suffer much as an apostle for His name's sake (Acts 9:16). We hear of *Stephen*, the first martyr of the Church (Acts 6f.), whose story was followed then by the long chronicle of

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<sup>4</sup> Joaquin Alliende, a spiritual leader of “Kirche in Not“, writes in the preface (foreword) of one of these published reports, “Repressed Christians need our voice”(2005, p. 7): “The Devil really exists and continues to fight tirelessly against Christ and those who belong to Him . . . If the Church stays faithful to her Bridegroom Jesus, then it is no surprise that she is persecuted. It would be more surprising and even very troubling if she were not persecuted and if the powerful people of this world, who enjoy a privileged mouthpiece today in the mass media, even applauded her.”

<sup>5</sup> K. Hartenstein: Wann wird das geschehen? Stuttgart 1951, p. 15.

martyrs throughout the ages written in blood-red letters.<sup>6</sup> Christians prepared themselves for this fate and a part of the earliest instruction early Christian missionaries taught their new converts was the admonition that “*We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.*” (Acts 14:22).

### **III. Purpose and Blessing of Suffering For Christ**

#### ***1. Martyrdom As the Most Radical Form of Missionary Testimony***

From the very beginning, the real cause of martyrdom was missionary preaching, which, as the message of the victory of Christ, declared war on the powers opposed to God. This occurred by the order of the One who had traversed the path of suffering to the very end (Lk. 24:26; I Cor. 1:23). Jesus understood His own evangelistic preaching and that of His disciples as testimony for the truth in a world that, for the most part, did not believe in Him and even opposed Him. Wherever opposition grew to the point of rioting, this could lead to use of force against Christian witnesses to the truth – even to their imprisonment and death. Fully aware of Jesus' warning and His own fate, these preachers were prepared for a similar demise. From this time on, being prepared for martyrdom became an essential part of the true missionary awareness of mission.

#### ***2. The Convincing Power of Martyrdom***

This kind of willingness to suffer for Christ gives the message a convincing power which does not fail to leave an impression on hardened hearts. Time and again it has been seen that even opponents of the Biblical claim to truth have, after initial resistance, opened themselves to it when they – like Saul once did with Stephen (Acts 7:57) – observed the suffering of their victims, which these endured assured of their faith and out of love for their Lord. The Word of God, in the mouth of Christians called to give an account, used by the Holy Spirit to convict (Lk. 21:1-15; Joh. 16:8,11), is thus confirmed here additionally by the patiently shed blood of the witnesses (Rev. 12:11). In doing so, it was very important then and it is also an example for us today that the Christians who were tortured and put to death were not filled with hate or vengeful feelings. On the contrary, they kept their focus on the salvation of their persecutors and therefore even prayed – following Jesus' own example (Lk. 23:34) –: “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*” (Acts 7:60). The complete devotion of the witnesses of faith is apparently a powerful missionary means God uses in situations of particularly strong resistance to the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, Tertullian, an early Christian writer from North Africa, wrote:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The World Catechism of the Catholic Church (Par. 2474) refers to the carefully compiled testimonies of the martyrs of the early (and Patristic) Church as “the archive of truth written in blood”.

<sup>7</sup> Josef Ton, *op. cit.*, S. 426.

<sup>8</sup> Apology 50,13

“*Sanguis martyrum – semen christianorum*”, i.e., “The blood of the martyrs is the seed for new Christians”.

### ***3. The Intensification of the Relationship with Christ through the Fellowship of Suffering***

*The secret of our suffering for our faith* is that it draws us even closer to Jesus Christ who suffered first for us and whose suffering continues in that of His witnesses. For Christians, suffering with Christ is even the greatest sign of love for Him, just as Christ first suffered out of love for us (Eph. 5:2).

In thinking about giving His own life as a substitutionary sacrifice on the cross as well as a similar sacrifice, which He expected from His disciples, Jesus said: “*Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friend.*” (Joh. 15:13).

We gain power from Him, the source of true life through this loving relationship. Martyrdom is, therefore, less due to human courage than to the grace of God. This is why Paul writes to the Philippians (1:29): “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him*”. In this way the *Spirit of God* also rests upon those who are insulted for Christ's sake (1Pet. 4:14). Since the days of early Christianity, believers have experienced again and again that Christ is never closer to His followers than at the moment when they are transformed inwardly into His likeness by their persecution and they get to know Him personally in a deeper way as the Crucified as well as the Resurrected One (Phil. 3:10f; Col. 1:24 et. al.).

By no means whatsoever is it our intention to glorify the suffering of the Christian. For even the Early Church warned against forcing oneself into martyrdom in the hope of a heavenly reward. We are not talking at all about suffering because of something that is unnecessary, false, or something done wrong (I Pet. 4:15). And yet, there is a unique promise that holds true for genuine Christian suffering (Mt. 5:11; I Pet. 1:14; James 5:11).

### ***3. The Building Up of the Body of Christ Through Martyrdom***

The living power that is activated through dying with Christ first helps the individual Christian who is suffering. But, not just him alone! Because he is the head of the Body of Christ, His Church, blessings that Christ gives are also shared with the other members. The pioneers of early Christianity experienced this in exemplary fashion in their ministry (II Cor. 4:7-15). Paul writes about himself and Timothy: “*For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*” (II Cor. 1:5). This is true first for the local congregation, but, at the same time, also for the whole worldwide Church. In this respect, the suffering of the Church is an important means of her growth, both inwardly in grace as well as outwardly. When Christ leads His Church into suffering, He

has a special plan for her: He counts her worthy of participating in His suffering and then also in His glory (Col. 1:24). Thus, profound joy grows up from this kind of suffering when a person accepts it in faith (I Pet. 4:13).

#### **IV. The History of Suffering of the Church of Jesus Christ**

##### ***1. The Martyrs of the Early Church and Their Message For Us***

Martyrs have a message that goes beyond their deaths. This was the case even in early human history as well with Abel (Heb. 11:4), and, in the complete sense, it is still true for the martyrs since the Christian era. Beginning in the Apostolic Age, but particularly, the Church in her first two centuries was fundamentally characterized by persecutions – in three increasingly implacable phases, each linked to the names of the Roman emperors *Trajan – Decius/Valerian – Diocletian*. *Nero's* persecution of Christians at the beginning was probably not directed at their supposed treason, but, presumably grew out of his own despotic tyranny through which he only wanted to pass the blame on to them for his own crime in the burning of Rome.

During this entire period martyrs gained crucial importance for the internal purity and the external spreading (growth) of the Church. Even during their lifetimes, through their theological activity they gave the Church her profile with their sheer numbers. By enduring until death, they contributed vitally not only to the Church's survival, but, also, after the changes that came with Constantine, to filling Christians with certainty that the Christ-Logos would one day be worshipped in the whole then-known world (*Origen*). Their brave, even joyful testimony of faith filled with love through interrogation and tortures even to death was recorded in the Testimonies of the Martyrs and read in worship services as a source of strength even for generations that followed.

Many witnesses of Christ from this early foundational period of Christianity have found their way into the Church's traditional calendar of saints. Their abiding message is: The fellowship of suffering with Christ produces its fruit!

##### ***2. Persecutions in Later Epochs of Church History and the History of Christian Missions***

The example of the Patristic Church was repeated again in the further course of the Church with the evangelizing of the European peoples as well as in other parts of the earth.

Everywhere the preaching of the Gospel, after glad initial reception, called forth also increasing opponents. For the traditional religious and political authorities saw their power, anchored in the traditional religion, endangered. Thus they considered Christ, the king espoused by the missionaries, as their rival. For this reason, they turned against not only the foreign ambassadors but also against their converts. No native church remained unscathed from this baptism of fire, neither in its beginnings nor now and again in the period that

followed. This had lasting importance for her further course in that the faith of later generations, threatened by lukewarm faith and apostasy, could be revived by the memory of the “spirit of the first witnesses”.

### ***3. Persecutions by the Totalitarian Ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

In our introduction we called the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the bloodiest in the history of Christianity. To substantiate this, we must now add that this fact is well-established in the worldwide triumph of totalitarian ideologies, especially that of modern *Nationalism*, *National Socialism*, and *Communism*. Tens of thousands of pastors and Christian lay people disappeared in Gulags and concentration camps, were mistreated and murdered; millions of others were intimidated and discriminated against. – To these could be added radical *Islam (Islamism)* as well as *fundamentalist movements in other religions* that bear similar ideological traits.

A wide trail of blood leads through Turkey, Sudan, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Uganda, all the way to Vietnam and to other totalitarian states. Even Germany experienced a persecution of the Church during the “Third Reich”. While this was never directed at the two mainline state churches as a whole, it still occurred against those vocal leaders who spoke out publicly against the claims of racist Nazi ideology and its brutal consequences. Some were killed only for refusing to give the mandatory “Heil Hitler!” salute and giving instead a traditional German greeting “Gruss Gott!” - conscious of the fact that all salvation comes alone from Jesus Christ.

The most comprehensive, brutal, and most consistent persecution of Christians of all times was done – and is still done even today regionally – by those states that base their claim to power on Marxist ideology in its different variations, such as, for example, in Soviet Russia from 1917 – 1936.

In order to understand the character of modern ideologies that oppose the Gospel, it is important to realize that this is based in their origin. For while they may point to elements of the redemptive message of the Bible, they nevertheless pervert it into their own pseudo-messianic teaching of salvation. This places the person who liberates himself in the place of the divine Redeemer Jesus Christ and, consequently, turns against Him and those who confess Him.

### ***4. The Ecumenicity of the Martyrs***

Even early Christianity thought in terms of a worldwide fellowship of suffering (I Pet. 5:9). One effect of modern Christian persecution is that it, in many ways – though certainly not

always and in all places<sup>9</sup>! – has led to a discovery of a common basis and mutually relevant challenges to their faith among those directly affected from different church denominations. In this, denominational barriers, which once had separated them, lost their importance in favor of the basic Christian testimony of truth demanded by the immediate situation. Prisoners could comfort and strengthen one another in their sufferings even up to their execution. They recognized in this a hopeful approach to interconfessional understanding in faith and to spirituality of suffering for Christ that draws its strength from common roots. The late Pope John Paul II rightly spoke of an “*ecumenicity of the martyrs*”<sup>10</sup>. He based this view as follows: [n. 84] “I believe that it [i.e., fellowship that transcends denominational backgrounds] is already complete in this, what we consider the peak of the life of grace, death as a martyr, the most intense fellowship possible with Christ, who shed His blood and through this sacrifice allows those who once were far away to come near (cf. Eph. 2:13).” – Even the Ecumenical Decree of the Second Vatican Council points this out when it states [Ch. I, 4]: “It is proper and healthy to recognize the riches of Christ and the work of the powers of the Spirit in the lives of others who give testimony for Christ, sometimes even in giving their own lives.” Therefore we can understand the common suffering of Christians of different backgrounds also as a way in which Jesus' high priestly prayer for the visible unity of His followers is fulfilled, “*that the world may believe*” (Joh. 17:21-23).

The renewed discovery of the catholicity (wholeness) of the Church also means the discovery of the important connection between the “embattled Church” on earth and the “victorious Church” in heaven. The “fellowship of the saints” does not only include the Christians of our own generation, but also those believers who have already completed their course of life on earth. This is particularly true for the martyrs – even those “from everywhere under heaven” of the age yet to come –, and that, of course, also means: from all kinds of churches (Rev. 6:9-11; 7:9, 14-15). Their conforming testimony can become more and more a special divine comfort for the Church in her pilgrimage.

Of course, this insight also makes us painfully aware that, in church history – in some places even still today! – there have, unfortunately, been religiously-motivated persecutions of Christians by other Christians of a different denomination.<sup>11</sup>

In his word of greeting to the Ecumenical Conference in Bad Blankenburg, the Archbishop of Cologne (Germany), *Joachim Cardinal Meisner*, writes: “Let us also not forget that there

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<sup>9</sup> In this way, the churches in Korea were deeply split in the years 1937 and 1938 over the questions of whether the Shinto worship forced even upon Christians by the Japanese was a patriotic ceremony or idolatry. Pastors committed to resistance became heroic martyrs. Cf. Dong-Hee Sohn: *Die Straße zum Himmel*, Brunnen Verlag Giessen, 2006, p. 46-54.

<sup>10</sup> Encyclica *Tertio millennio adveniente* of Nov. 10, 1994 No. 37

<sup>11</sup> This used to occur particularly where a territorially-established church succumbed to the temptation of political power and allied herself with the ruling powers in order to maintain her power.

were martyrs of the different churches in the conflicts of the Reformation period who fell as victims to the violent acts of the other churches!” The memory of this puts a traumatic strain on many well-meaning ecumenical efforts at unity. A “cleansing of the memory” is needed here which leads to mutual requests for forgiveness and to recompense by showing love in action.

## V. Persecution of Christians Today

The map of the repression and persecution of Christians today includes about 40 nations, particularly those in North Africa, the Orient, as well as East and Southeast Asia.

### 1. *The Processes of Persecution Arising in Different Situations*

Persecution occurs today predominately in three socio-political and religious contexts:

- 1) *under totalitarian regimes* – often with ideological superstructures (China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba);
- 2) *in corrupt systems of government*, which do not fulfill the divinely mandated task of the governmental authority to maintain order: areas in countries that do not have full control and where chaotic conditions exist, such as in parts of East Africa or Central and South America (drug cartels, revolutionary guerrillas, or private armies);
- 3) in the context of *religious absolutism*: 10/40-Window<sup>12</sup> (Islam), Sri Lanka, and Bhutan (Buddhism), parts of India (Hinduism).

Superficially, the reasons for religious persecution in these situations appear different, namely, state security measures, simple disorder, and religious competition. Seen spiritually, though, it is, all cases put together, the diabolical principle of rebellion against God at work.

If persecution can be categorized into the three contexts listed above, then a process in the development into persecution can be observed elsewhere. It is rare that direct persecution comes about without certain *preliminary stages*. Depending on the situation, there can be either a spontaneous *suspicion* by an adherent of a different religion *based on ignorance* or a clearly based *rejection because of alienness*.

A major turning point is reached as soon as those in power fear that people like the Christians, who recognize a higher power than they, present a potential danger for their basis of power. From this time onward the following process is consciously set in motion:

Initial *tolerance* – in the sense of an openhearted live-and let-live – turns into a reluctantly granted *toleration* because of mistrust (suspicion) or rejection. During these two phases there is a targeted campaign of *disinformation*, which mostly only leads to *discrimination* and then to *pogrom-like riots*, until it finally comes to *systematic persecution*.

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<sup>12</sup> I. e., the geographic belt that stretches between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel north from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

Because the preliminary stages of systematic persecution first take place in a gray zone, people do not often even realize that a true danger exists.

## ***2. Persecutions in Islamic Countries***

In the almost 2000 year history of the Church, there has hardly been any other politico-religious system that has so continuously fought, oppressed, and persecuted the Church of Jesus Christ than that of Islam.<sup>13</sup> These tribulations even appear to be increasing in the newly dawned 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the latest developments and events in the countries primarily dominated by Islam show.

The reason for this certainly lies in the fact that, since its origins, Islam has been a post-Christian religion, i.e., one that presupposes Christianity historically, yet rejects it; one which already has an anti-Christian orientation anchored in the Qu'ran. Mohammed saw himself as one who surpassed all previous prophets, including Jesus (*Isa*), and he expressly denies His divinity and death on the cross.<sup>14</sup> This is why he ultimately demands the fight – even to kill! – against all who refuse his claim as a prophet and his teaching. In doing so, he also clearly meant Jews and Christians.<sup>15</sup> With the spread of Islam in previously Christian areas, Christians were made *dhimmi*s who had to pay tribute. All who resisted – for example, as some did for a time in Spain<sup>16</sup> – were put to death in mass executions. Even today, the death penalty is called for anyone who falls away from Islam by converting to Christianity<sup>17</sup>, which can even be meted out on the relatives of converts and which is also carried out in some places. In several Islamic countries today, for example, Saudi Arabia, any practice of the Christian religion is strictly prohibited. In some areas ruled by Islamist movements, such as in parts of Indonesia, in Sudan, and in northern Nigeria, Christians are either cut to pieces individually or in groups, sold into slavery, and their houses and churches are ransacked.

Still, some Muslims in these places, too, convert to the Christian faith, and some of them even become martyrs.

## ***3. Persecutions by Further Religions***

There is even tribulation and suffering of Christians in the Holy Land – among Jewish Christians as well as those of an Arab background. Persecution of Christians occurs also in some countries of Asia where a traditional religion makes up the majority of the population

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<sup>13</sup> Bat Ye'or: *Der Niedergang des Orientalischen Christentums unter dem Islam, 7. – 20 Jahrhundert*. Resch Verlag, Gräfelfing 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Sura 4, 157-158

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Sura 5, 33ff.; 9,5; 9,29; 9,111;

<sup>16</sup> Hans-Peter Raddatz: *Von Allah zum Terror*. München 2002, pp. 92-98.

<sup>17</sup> Sura 4,89; 16,106. This corresponds to Islamic verdicts (*fatawas*) of all Islamic schools of law, as well as one Hadith (a traditional saying of Mohammed passed down by oral tradition) according to Bukhari, chap. 26, from the *Book of Mutual Consultation*, p. 339, according to Hadith No. 461 “The word of Allah ... .” 42,32; 3,159: The Prophet said: “If anyone changes his religion, then kill him . . . .”

and claims to be or become a state religion. This is true for Buddhism in Sri Lanka and in Bhutan and for Hinduism in parts of India and Nepal. Even in these places there are acts of violence periodically against the property, houses of worship, and cultural institutions, and even against the lives of Christians.

#### ***4. Persecutions in Communist Countries***

In Eastern Europe, when the giant Communist bloc of power collapsed through the downfall brought about by God in the years 1989 / 1990, freedom was given again to our brothers and sisters detained there in prisons and work camps because of the testimony of their faith. Still, Marxist ideologies of terrible opponents of Christian churches have lingered in those countries of *Asia*, in which they have served the strengthening of despotic systems in connection with national-political motives. This has been the case till now particularly in the *People's Republic of China*, where government policy regarding religions has become strict again after a time before of flexible tolerance. This continues to be true in *Vietnam*, but especially in *North Korea*. In an undivided Korea, the Christian faith enjoyed an amazing vitality up to the outbreak of civil war in the year 1950. Yet, with the Communist takeover began a brutal suppression of the churches on the northern half of the peninsula. Today, the North Korean state is the one where the most severe degree and the greatest extent of persecution of Christians can be found. In view of its aggressive *Juche*-Ideology<sup>18</sup> the regime of *Kim-Yong-Ill* allows only at a few places a deceptive show of freedom of Christian worship. According to estimates, about half of the 200,000 people presently languishing in the hermetically sealed off work camps are Christians.

#### ***5. Discrimination and Tribulation of Christians in the Western World***

While one cannot talk of the persecution of Christians in Western Europe in the traditional understanding of the word, there are still milder degrees of trouble in different, often hidden form. This can begin with the mockery of Bible-believing Christians in school classrooms both by classmates as well as by teachers, based on a rationalistic worldview. This embedded itself during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution first among the “educated among the despisers of Christianity” and later achieved greater broad acceptance through the demagogic propaganda of atheistic ideologues.

Another, more uncomfortable preliminary form of persecution is the *derision* and *social exclusion* through the media of people who dare to defend through public statements and action basic ethic values taken from Christianity against a libertine lifestyle. – One particular part of this is their involvement for the absolute right to human life and human dignity from conception to death in protest against abortion and euthanasia. More recently,

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas J. Belke: *Juche – A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion*, Bartlesville OK (USA), 1999.

it has also been adhering to the monogamous marriage between a man and a woman as the only God-ordained form of sexual union (Mt. 19:1-9). Under the massive pressure of homosexual organizations and the publications of liberal parties in agreement with them, laws have been passed in Western democracies which punish moral criticism of same sex unions as “discrimination”. Christians that live by Biblical principles are not hired for positions as government officials. Exclusion in the form of discriminatory hiring practices and promotions also occurs in science and academia, even when their rationalistic principles are proven to be based on untenable hypotheses. This kind of behavior can even be found in theology and the Church in the criticism of the “fundamentalism” and “intolerance” of Biblically-oriented Christians.

A development is emerging here which, with a change of governmental system, ultimately threatens to turn into open persecution (Rev. 13:16f.).

## **VI. Our Responsibility for Persecuted Christian Brothers and Sisters**

### ***1. The Apostolic Challenge of Participation in the Sufferings of Fellow Christians***

It is important to realize that Christ has laid a special blessing upon suffering for Him and that this blessing is given to promote the edification of His entire worldwide Church. Yet, this blessing can only then be realized for us, when we ourselves consciously enter into the fellowship of suffering with Him and with our persecuted fellow Christians. This demands constant communication between all parts of Christianity. With his image of the Church as the Body of Christ Paul strongly points out the mutual responsibility of the members for one another. An event (circumstance) that affects one member has an effect upon all others and calls for the participation of all others: “*When o n e member suffers, then a l l the members suffer with him and when o n e member is honored, so all members rejoice with him*” (I Cor. 12:26). During his own imprisonment, the Apostle himself could experience this kind of participation of his churches, though it occurred, of course, in varying degrees (Phil. 4:14-16). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews also warns us expressly (13:3): “*Remember those in chains . . .!*” These thoughts always benefit both parties. In thinking about the suffering Church, the Church that lives in freedom can learn something important.

### ***2. The Dilemma of the Often Unheard Cries for Help of Persecuted Christians***

Still, we must very often recognize that the active participation of Christians and churches in the suffering of persecuted brothers and sisters outside of one's own narrow perspective is in disorder. This cannot be excused by a presumed lack of information as this is readily available.

In truth, our feelings of religious self-sufficiency or even cowardice as well as the local patriotism of our churches are all partly to blame. Also at fault is a widely-held view of “Christian fatalism”. One accepts the destiny of fellow Christians as presumably unchangeable, which we can hardly influence at all. In reality, though, just the opposite is the case, as numerous answered prayers prove and even the apostles themselves experienced (cf. II Tim. 3:11).<sup>19</sup>

Often persecutors exploit the apparent or real isolation of their victims suffering for their faith in order to further humiliate them. Therefore, it is also extremely important that our persecuted brothers and sisters be strengthened and encouraged by the experience of their fellowship with other Christians and trusting in God's help, to resist growing opposition and open hate with inner power. But, the leaders of our churches especially should also show more courage and decisiveness.

It must be said with all seriousness: A Church that abandons her martyrs and neither prays for them nor courageously defends and cares for them, destroys in the process not only the spiritual fellowship with all the members of the body of Christ, but, ultimately, she betrays Christ Himself, the Head of His body, who suffers with His members. In speaking directly about the neediest of those who follow Him and proclaim His message, Jesus said:

*“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* But, He also said: *“. . . whatever you did not do for one of the least of these (my brothers), you did not do for me.”* (Mt. 25:40,45).

### ***3. Helpful Advice for Attaining Ecumenical Fellowship in Suffering***

#### **a) Sources of Information and Supporting Organizations**

The possibilities of finding out about the situation of persecuted Christians globally as well as at the local, individual level are numerous and comprehensive. There are relief campaigns from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches dedicated totally to helping with the spiritual and physical needs of persecuted Christians

We are grateful that representatives of different churches took part in our 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Conference of Confessing Christians in Bad Blankenburg, Germany and gave us important information in the form of detailed reports and personal testimonies of individuals involved along with literature and audiovisual media. These organizations also invite the public to their own events and conferences and make available a wealth of materials, for example, on the Internet. The tragic deaths of contemporary martyrs are depicted in biographies published recently in large editions. There are also accurate published studies about the history of the persecution and destruction of entire churches and Christian elements of the population in different countries. The complete martyrologies, i.e., compendia of martyrs of

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Brother Andrew: „Da änderte Gott seine Absichten“, Neuauflage: : „Gott versetzt Berge – wenn wir Ihn bitten“.

our age, compiled and published in recent years for the Catholic and Lutheran churches in Germany, are also substantial.<sup>20</sup> Besides these, there are even organizations that concentrate entirely on researching current instances of suppressed religious freedom, publishing detailed reports on these, and actively appealing to governments on behalf of Christians who are imprisoned and threatened by the loss of home, property or even their own lives.

### **b) The Power of Intercessory Prayer**

The most essential way to help our persecuted brothers and sisters of the faith, one every person can do, is to pray and intercede for them in Jesus' name. Jesus tied great promises to prayer (Mt. 7:7-11; Lk. 11:5-8; Joh. 14:13f. et.al.), and the New Testament scriptures, in referring to Old Testament examples, particularly that of Elijah (Jas.5:16b-18) – place great emphasis on them (e.g., in Eph. 6:18; Phil. 1:3f; I Thess. 5:17).

For imprisoned and endangered Christians, this means a great relief in their situation when they know and sometimes even feel directly, that they are being carried by the fervent prayers of their fellow Christians around the world. Through this, joy can even awaken in them to give testimony before their fellow prisoners in prison to their faith and the reasons why they were put there (cf. Phil. 1:13, 19). Specifically mentioning the names of those persecuted in intercessory prayer is a power even persecutors cannot ignore. It is important that this kind of intercessory prayer takes place fervently, continuously, specifically, and with oneness of heart (Acts 12:5 and 12; see also the example of Acts 4:23-30!). Regular, updated prayer lists are quite helpful in doing this.

It is also encouraging to find out again and again about answered prayers and to be spurred on by this to give thanks. Moreover, it is moving to see that this kind of intercession is mutual, as one often hears that the persecuted church in other parts of the world is praying for us in the West! In this manner, ecumenical fellowship even grows out of intercessory prayer!

### **c) Other Forms of Participation and Solidarity**

Besides prayer, there are numerous concrete ways to show solidarity with persecuted Christians. In some cases, it is possible to write them letters or even visit them personally in their prisons, and, where possible, to send their relatives, who suffer from separation from them, comforting signs of unity through letters and visits. In places where these people have to starve because their providers are gone, material help (in the form of packages or money) can relieve their situation. Yet, an even greater need is emotional support, even by sending them Bibles and Christian literature.

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<sup>20</sup> Helmut Moll Hg.): Zeugen für Christus. Das deutsche Martyriologium des 20. Jahrhunderts, 2 Bde., Paderborn, 4. Aufl. (ed.) 2006; – Harald Schultze/Andreas Kurschat (Hg.): „Ihr Ende schaut an ...“ Evangelische Märtyrer des 20. Jahrhunderts. Leipzig 2006.

It is amazing what kinds of help that can be mobilized in our Western nations when victims of natural disasters are involved. Is not similar readiness to help necessary by those who call themselves Christians for those particularly who are victims in spiritual catastrophes?

It is important to intervene, for example, by signing petition or appeal letters addressed to those authorities and governments responsible for imprisonment and massacres.<sup>21</sup> Even the democratically-elected Western governments should be challenged to exercise diplomatic pressure by pointing out the human rights guaranteed in the U.N. Charter. National economic interests should not stand in the way. Beyond this, supporting organizations provide specific leadership here on how it is best to proceed in specific cases.

## VII. Getting Prepared For Pending Suffering For Christ's Sake

### 1. *The Prophetic Announcement of End Times Persecutions*

In contrast to the optimistic visions for the future widespread today even among influential Christians, the prophecies of the Bible foresee clearly an altogether gloomy final stage of human and church history. Even the prophet *Daniel* sees in Chapter 7 of his prophecy the succession of four world powers, which flows in the form of a brutal, atheistic system of power whose rulers speak blasphemous things and torment the saints before God intervenes to take away the power of this system and the eternal Kingdom of God is established.

Jesus Himself takes up this vision again and confirms it in the words He speaks about the end times on the Mount of Olives (Mt. 24:15-25 and par.). Later, *Paul* (in I Thess. 2) and *John in Revelation* (chap. 13-19) place themselves within the same tradition. In this, the coming of the Antichrist and his false prophet and also an apocalyptic woman, the whore of Babylon, all play a role. The last one is one in which expositors see an apostate church of world unity that blends all religions, makes alliances with them, and participates in their bloody persecution of the church that remains true to Christ. According to this, the Church will suffer a severe martyrdom in the end which will cost many of her members their lives (Rev. 17:6; 6:9-11).

According to the Biblical-prophetic view, the anti-Christian persecutions of the Church of Jesus Christ will not disappear with the intended progression of history. On the contrary, they will increase and, to such an extent, that killing Christians is seen as worship of God (Joh. 16:2). But, by their courageous dying testimony in trusting the redeeming “blood of

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<sup>21</sup> At a conference in 1988 that followed the final acts of Helsinki, the Vatican listed the following **ten rights** which a state must respect and defend: “1. The right of parents to teach a faith to their children, 2. the respect of religious convictions in educational institutions; 3. the right to religious instruction either in private or in organized groups; 4. the right of every religious community to train their clergy in their own institutions; 5. the right of religious communities to hold services in buildings set aside for such; 6. the right to the exchange of religious information and the purchase of religious writings; 7. the right to establish media for religious purposes and to have access to other media; 8. the right of free, unhindered assembly, including making pilgrimages within the country and abroad; 9. the right to equal opportunity without discrimination with respect to economic, social, or cultural matters; 10. the right of every religious community to organize itself according to its own manner.”

(Quoted in the March 9-10, 2002 issue of the Kath. Sonntagszeitung für Deutschland).

the Lamb”, the Church of the true worshippers of God will overcome in the end (Rev. 12:7-12a). Christ who comes again will unite them to Himself and give her members part of His Messianic dominion as priests and kings (Rev. 1:6; 20:6).

## ***2. Preliminary Stages of Anti-Christian Temptation and Persecution***

This prophetic view has been taken up time and again in the course of church history and adapted to the respective current situation, particularly when the spirit of the times took an anti-Christian form and faithful Christians were persecuted, sometimes by the cooperation of state and hierarchical power. Even when the awareness of living really close to the end of the world was later proven to be false, the memory of that apocalyptic prophecy was still legitimate. For these prophecies were not simply meant to be for the final phase of history. Instead, they took on in certain contemporary ways their historical, locally-restricted preliminary form, anticipating in part what was later to follow (I Joh. 2:18; 4:3). In this way they should serve as orientation, a warning, and an encouragement to each generation. Therefore, it is legitimate to look carefully and diacritically and to see in certain disturbing political, ideological, societal, and even ecclesiastical and theological trends of the present a preview of future developments.

Of course, there are, thank God, and will still be faithful churches in Europe and even individual spiritual renewals. Nevertheless, for two centuries, the Western world has been in a process of secularization which has made Christians and churches susceptible to false offers of salvation from different religions and ideologies. The overall situation of our culture is characterized, in part, by a growing animosity towards Christianity<sup>22</sup>. Among others, this is evidenced by the fact that Christians are increasingly being driven out of responsible positions in public life and by the fact that the ethical norms of the Bible and the universal claim of Jesus Christ against other religions is being branded as an expression of fundamentalist intolerance.

Of course, after the collapse of National Socialism and established Marxist Socialism-Communism, these are relatively mild forms of suffering seen today. As described above, they are evidenced in the forms of exclusion, ridicule, denial of promotions, and intolerance toward Biblical convictions in legislation, science, and education. As a result, in calling for “tolerance”, Christians themselves have become victims of the repressive “humanistic” intolerance of “good people”.

However, we should just be aware of the possibility that in the not too distant future, the present status of subtle attacks could be replaced by open persecution. This would be

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<sup>22</sup> In commenting on the prohibition of references to God in a draft for a European constitution and the failed appointment of Italian minister Rocco Buttiglione as EU Commissioner (because of his Biblical views on homosexuality and the role of women in society), Jewish American law professor Joseph Weller (quoted by Backes in his book: *Sie werden euch hassen*, p. 9) even speaks of a growing “*Christophobia*” in Europe.

expected, *first of all*, from a state becoming more and more totalitarian in the wake of globalization, *secondly*, by religions that united with others in a syncretistic way, as well as by, *thirdly*, Islam, which is striving for the institution of *Sharia* law. Not to be excluded, though, is, *fourthly*, the danger that, following political developments, even parts of national churches unite into a secular-ecumenical anti-Church and, in a perverted form of censure, excommunicate Biblically-oriented Christians as enemies of the gospel and of peace presumably understood right only by them and thus give the secular courts free hand to convict and condemn them.

We are not saying this out of a panic mood, but, rather, very cautiously, as we are fully aware that there have also been positive factors that have prevented such from happening. Perhaps the Church of Jesus Christ has been granted yet another phase of external peace, especially, so that she may bring her mission to evangelize all the peoples of the earth to a conclusion (Mt. 24:14; Mk. 13:10; cf. II Petr. 3:9). Still, it is true that we must inwardly prepare ourselves for a serious development according to what the Biblical pronouncements say, which is all the more apparent today in the “signs of the times”.

### ***3. How Can Christian Churches Be Prepared For Suffering?***

#### **a) Deepened Fellowship with Christ**

The most important requirement for looking present and future suffering square in the eye is that every confessing Christian consciously and inwardly allows himself to be drawn further by the Holy Spirit into fellowship with Christ, which exists since his baptism (Röm 6, 3-5). This occurs through an intensive prayerful walk with Him, through constant strengthening from His means of grace, word and sacrament, and in obedient attention to His living example and His message. In doing so, one must always bear in mind in following Christ that His own way passed through suffering into glory and that He wants to lead us the same way in our life of fellowship with Him (see Rev. 7:17). In the New Testament, even lukewarm and discouraged Christians are exhorted to remember the readiness they had in the past to suffer for Christ (Hebr. 10:32-36).

#### **b) Careful Attention to the Biblical Word**

In every age, persecuted Christians, like those persecuted in the Old Covenant (Jer. 15:15f) – have experienced that temptation teaches one to pay attention to the Word. For what the Scriptures want to tell us in the deepest way can never be learned purely theoretically, but only when we find confident direction and comforting strength in the midst of trouble and doubt in its teachings, promises, and warnings. It is important in all of this to stand firm in all circumstances. The faithful church in Philadelphia is therefore promised God's deliverance from the coming hour of anti-Christian temptation because she has kept the

Word against all temptation and not denied Jesus' name. Indeed, through the testimony of the church that remains faithful, some among their anti-Christian persecutors can even be won for their Lord (Rev. 3: 8-9)!

### **c) Vigilant Discernment of the Spirits**

The deceptive and threatening character of a movement characterized by the spirit of the times cannot often be recognized at first glance, as famous Christians found out when National Socialism emerged. It is because the Antichrist uses a method of accommodation to the general mood of people and the imitation of the good, even propagating now and then a supposed “positive Christianity”. For this reason, an emerging inner-church anti-Christianity can also emphasize such spiritual elements which are especially honored in the individual confessions and traditions of piety (Cf. I Joh. 2:19). But, the fatal thing about it is that the necessity of the cross of Christ and following Christ to the cross are not mentioned in favor of a more catchy “feel-good Christianity” (cf. Phil. 3:18-19). The Holy Spirit does not differ from the false spirit by the fact that He makes the majority of the Church happy, but that He clearly confesses the Christ whom God gave to die for our sins and whom He raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25).

### **d) Faithful Care of Christian Brotherhood at the Local and Worldwide Levels**

It is particularly difficult, if not impossible, for faithful Christians to stand firm as individuals in times of suffering, whether it is from the pressures of the world or from a church that denies the Biblical Christ. In such times of distress we are dependent more than ever on the *Philadelphia*, brotherly love. Sometimes we will really find its strengthening effect only in small prayer cells and home Bible study groups as the church of confessing Christians in the once “Christian West” also now finds itself in the position of a minority. Still, in view of this oppressive situation, our awareness of the worldwide *Una Sancta*, the *one holy Church*, can lift us up. The Apostle Peter warns (I Petr. 5:9) the young churches living in the Diaspora of Asia Minor to stand firm in the faith and resist the Devil who threatens to devour, knowing that “*your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings*”.

## ***4. Biblical Instructions and Promises for Perseverance In Martyrdom***

With respect to her current temptations and her difficulties, the faithful church can rely on Jesus' constant presence and on the help of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Christ Himself constantly represents us as our High Priest before His Father (Rom. 8:34; Hebr. 4:14-16). In doing so, He includes all Christians who hope in Him in His promise to Simon Peter before he was tempted: “*I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail.*” (Lk. 22:32a).

With respect to the final testing of fire at the end of time, about which we do not know to what extent we also will be put to such a test, all of the promises are true which the Risen One gives in His letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, presuming they remain faithful to Him. These promises may not be misinterpreted as a general assurance of an all-encompassing goodwill of God. Instead, they are given especially to the church prepared for martyrdom. For this reason, leaders in churches and fellowships will have to take their task seriously in an entirely new way to strengthen their brothers (Lk. 22:32b). Instead of preaching a “cheap” grace where God saves everybody in the end, those who have the office of bishop or shepherd today must encourage their sheep to accept suffering for Christ and so make them ready to stand firm in the end times.

### **VIII: Consequences for Action of Churches and Individual Christians**

Persecution and martyrdom are, as we have recognized, an essential part of the Church and being a consistent disciple of Christ. For many parts of Christendom today, they are, in fact, a serious reality. Therefore, we may no longer treat them as a subordinate topic in church life. Instead, they should become a normal part of the life of every Christian family (praying for persecuted Christians even in the evening prayers with children!) and local congregation. They should be mentioned again and again in regular worship services, as well as in all conferences, retreats, and other events.

- Remembering all in the world who suffer for Christ should have a regular place in the general *intercessory prayer* in every *Sunday worship service*, praying for these generally as well as, more importantly, listing by name specific countries and individual Christians who are persecuted. In the same way, remembering the martyrs can be anchored in the *liturgy of the Lord's Supper*, as it was according to early church tradition.
- Sunday sermons should be devoted to the topic of the testimony of blood twice or three times in the church calendar year. Particularly good days for these are *St. Stephen's Day* (Boxing Day, December 26th), which the German Bishop's Conference has declared as the World Day of Prayer for Persecuted Christians, or also the “*Worldwide Day of Pray for Persecuted Christians*” in November, initiated by the World Evangelical Alliance in 1996.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the *Apostles' days* could be selected to preach on this topic as well as the Sunday *Exaudi* (i.e. Sunday before Pentecost), whose text taken from Joh. 15:26-16:4 goes back to early Christian times and speaks clearly of martyrdom. The exemplary character of Christ's suffering

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<sup>23</sup> In the Protestant mainline churches of Germany, no such institution exists and it has been recommended that the Catholic initiative of 1994 be followed to thereby show ecumenical unity in remembering the martyrs.

(I Petr. 2:21), besides His substitutionary atoning suffering, could also be preached about on *Good Friday* and in the *Easter Week devotions*. But this topic can be discussed in almost every other sermon when elements in the text itself refer to it. In doing so, preaching can gain immensely in vividness and urgency.

- A single concrete request for persecuted Christians should be prayed for each time at church prayer meetings. Individual members of the congregation can receive prayer information sheets for their personal intercession and prayer with their families.
- Representatives of relief organizations for persecuted churches or even individual foreign Christians who themselves come from situations of persecution, can be invited as guest speakers for special church evenings and events of individual groups (missions circles, youth groups).
- Religion or confirmation classes can make much more of an impression on students when the life stories of martyrs are presented.
- Informative literature on the situations of persecuted Christians, such as the newsletters of different organizations and biographies of classical and contemporary martyrs, should be laid out on tables with periodicals and events related to this should be announced and publicized in showcases in front of churches.
- An offering should be taken up at least once a year to support persecuted Christians.
- This financial help should be brought personally to imprisoned Christians or their families by relief organizations and accompanied by personal letters of encouragement.
- Every congregation and every individual should become involved, where necessary, in defending religious freedom that is threatened, either by supporting written petition campaigns or sending own letters to native politicians as well as to the ambassadors of the countries involved.

Preaching and teaching in churches must be redeveloped in view of widespread ignorance concerning the essence of Christian martyrdom and a paralyzing slackness of the power of Christian testimony. Preaching and teaching in churches should show what a high calling the witness of the triune God has in our age and world and how this can be understood so clearly that the fear of a possible loss of physical life stands behind the fear of God (Mt. 10:28-31).

In all our active involvement for our Christian brothers around the world who suffer for the sake of their testimony for Christ, we should always keep in mind that their suffering is of benefit to us and to the whole body of Jesus and that they stand, as it were, on the front lines for us. Let us be admonished: *“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”*

(Hebr. 13:3). For Christ Himself will ask us in the Final Judgment if we visited Him, as He lay in prison in the form of His persecuted brothers (Mt. 25:36,43)!

Yet, above all pastoral admonition to remember those who now stand in martyrdom and to prepare ourselves for the seriousness of holding on firmly to our Christian faith, stand the great encouraging words of the Lord who is coming again, as He spoke them to the church in Smyrna - distressed, perhaps even frightened and fearful of suffering:

*“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”*

*“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10).*