

## The Christian World Mission Today – Tenth Lecture

### *The Place of Martyrdom in Christian Mission*

Among the various great religions, it is Christianity that has set forth martyrdom as a vital expression of its faith. This expression is so important that there has never been a Christian generation which did not add another purple page to the dramatic chronicle of martyrs. Christians gained thereby an existential insight into martyrdom's deep spiritual significance for the life of the Church. The Latin Church Father *St. Augustine* once wrote:

*„From Abel until the end of this age the pilgrim church proceeds between the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.”<sup>1</sup>*

For St. Augustine, the time of the Church begins, we note, with the sons of our first parents. It lasts until the conclusion of the history of this fallen world. From her origin to her perfection, it is central to the very nature of the faithful Church to be hated and persecuted by the world. The Church cannot be the Church and can never reach her eschatological destination in the Kingdom of glory if she does not accept this calling but rather shuns suffering and tries to reach a peaceful arrangement with an ungodly world.

I am afraid that a large section of world Christianity is in severe danger of losing sight of this truth. Therefore, the purpose of this final lecture is to remind my listeners of a very elementary but costly truth. It is the connection between the Church on earth and the Kingdom of Heaven.

#### **I. Martyrdom – an Essential Mark of Christ's Church**

When Jesus called his first disciples to follow him, he allowed them initially to witness a certain period of marvelous events. They heard his powerful preaching about God's Kingdom. It attracted thousands of people who listened with amazement to him. They saw his mighty signs. They convinced them that Jesus was no ordinary person, but the expected Messiah who acted with the authority of God.

What, however, happened, when Peter expressed this faith in his historic confession, „*You are Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16: 16) ? Jesus suddenly changed the apparent course of events. He did not confirm contemporary Jewish messianic expectations that he would liberate Israel from all suffering and oppression. Instead, he confided a painful secret to his disciples which they found inconceivable. Consequently, they reacted in horror. This was

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<sup>1</sup> Augustinus, De civitate Dei, Lib. XVIII, Cap. LI, 2 migne, patres latini, Series I, Vol. XLI, p. 614.

true especially of Peter. He cried, „*God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you!*” (v.22) What was the shocking information that nearly turned Peter away from being a confessor and made him instead a tempter, a Satan, as Jesus called him? It was the disclosure that Jesus, according to God's mysterious providence, had to make his final journey to Jerusalem. There he would have to suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests. He would even be killed. Jesus revealed to them that his present ministry would not be crowned with great earthly success. Rather he would have to die before his final triumph – life out of death – would be accomplished.

Moreover, this would be not only His fate alone. No, his followers, too, would have to accept the same destiny. They would have to take up their own crosses and follow him on the road to Calvary. They must be ready to lose their lives for his sake in order to find them (Matt 16:24f.). Jesus had to repeat this hard lesson several times before the disciples could grasp and accept it. But in doing so, he did not present this instruction as a mere inconceivable law. No, he proceeded to uncover for them the reason why his followers willingly had to accept hatred and persecution as their unavoidable lot:

*„If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world the world would love its own; but because you are not of this world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘a servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account because they do not know him who sent me”* (John 15:18-21).

Behind the hatred of the world stands the primeval hatred of the prince of this world who rebelled against God. He wants to subdue this world to his rule. He knows, however, that this usurped position is going to be taken away from him by God's own Son. It is He whom God had appointed to be the Redeemer and real Ruler of the world. Satan reacts to this in fury! His hatred is directed primarily against Jesus Christ himself. He wants to crush him in order to prevent his work of redemption from taking place. But he cannot succeed in this. Thus his wrath turns against the followers of Christ. They still live in this world; they are sent into it in order to bring all nations under the authority of Christ. They would do so by proclaiming to them the gospel of his atoning death and glorious resurrection. Therefore, they become the new target of Satan's fierce attacks.

The disciples were very soon to experience the truth of Christ's prediction. In the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the persecutions that immediately after the establishment of the Church were directed against the apostles because of their fearless witness to Christ's resurrection. We read about *Stephen*, the first Christian martyr. He was lead the long line of future martyrs whose name were to be written in the honorable chronicle

of the Church militant. The Christians accepted this. Amongst the first instructions which the early missionaries gave to their converts was the warning, that „*through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22).

Paul admonished the young Christians not to be scandalized by watching his own sufferings in consequence of his ministry. In his epistles we find several catalogues of his internal and external tribulation, he had endured. He regarded them as the normal fate of a Christian warrior. At the same time he saw in those tribulations a confirmation of the truth of his message, which he would not deny under any pressure or circumstances.

The NT writings also contain the conviction that in future such persecution would increase. It would happen, the closer the time of the witnessing Church draws to its completion. The nearer the day of our final redemption draws through the glorious return of Christ, the sharper will be the attacks of the demonic adversary. He will try to shake the faith of Christians and to divert their loyalty from their heavenly Master.

In Jesus’ great eschatological sermons on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24) and in the book of Revelation, persecutions appear as an apocalyptic feature. They are the experience of the final battle between the opposing kingdoms of Christ and the Antichrist. At that time, alas, many lukewarm Christians will despair. But this encounter will culminate in the visible return of Christ. Antichrist then will be destroyed, and Christ will establish his Kingdom in power and great glory.

## **II. Martyrdom in Mission History**

What Jesus had foretold to his disciples was experienced by them in many individual and corporate persecutions. Under Nero, two of the chief apostles – Peter and Paul – lost their lives. According to tradition all other apostles, except John, became martyrs as well.

Whenever Christian missionaries entered a new cultural territory to claim it for the Lord, the traditional religious and political authorities saw their power endangered. They, therefore, turned in enmity against both the foreign messengers and their indigenous converts.

The “apostle to the Germans” (Winfrith) *Boniface*, in 754 A.D. was slain together with his companions by the pagan Frisians. – In 1316 – during his fourth visit to North Africa – *Ramon Lull*, the first known missionary amongst the Muslims, was stoned to death by an angry crowd after producing 5 influential converts. – During Japan’s “Christian Century” (1549-1639) the Tokugawa government proscribed Christianity altogether – without, however, being able to quench it. At Nagasaki two times Christians were cruelly persecuted. Today still the “Twenty-six Martyrs” of 1597 and the 51 Christians of the “Great Martyrdom”

in 1622, who were crucified, are still commemorated. 62 Catholic missionaries were murdered between 1614 and 1640. – In **Uganda**, after a promising missionary start during the reign of king Mutesa, his son Mwanga in 1884 reverted to traditional religion. He began persecuting the Christians, eventually killing more than 200 of them in a cruel way. There is no single national church and no generation that has been spared such fiery trials. This is recorded in every textbook of mission history. Especially **Korea** several times has made its own experiences of martyrdom, beginning with the persecution of Catholic Christians soon after the arrival of the first Chinese missionaries in 1784. Protestant Christians were persecuted both during the Japanese occupation and after the communist take-over.

One pathetic fact is hardly known even amongst Christians, because the secular media have paid little attention to it: The twentieth century was the bloodiest in the entire history of Christianity. More Christians died for their faith than in all previous centuries together. This tragedy still continues also in the new millennium. Never since the time of Christ's birth have so many persecutions of Christians taken place as in our day. A broad track of blood leads through Armenia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Korea, Soviet Russia, Vietnam, China, Sudan and other totalitarian states.

During the first two decades of this century one of the oldest churches, the **Armenian Church**, had to endure heavy attacks. During the years 1915-1918, 1.5 million Armenians were butchered, one of the most horrible genocides in history. – In *Germany*, under Adolf Hitler, both Protestants and Catholics, who actively resisted his totalitarian Nazi ideology, were put into concentration camps. Several of them were martyred: Paul Schneider, Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe and others.

The heaviest blood toll, however, was demanded by states which gave or still give their ideological allegiance to **Marxist Socialism** or Communism. It is an undeniable fact that in all Marxist-ruled countries the Church has been or still is, to different degrees, subjected to hostility and attack. Today Christians are persecuted in 3 communist countries: North Korea, Vietnam and China. Open persecution may relax at times, either because it appears opportune to the government to do that or because the churches have yielded to the pressure and have entered into compromises. Yet the declared goal of the Marxist state remains the same: to subdue and eliminate the Christian religion.

We have to realize that anti-Christian acts by communists are not simply expressions of the irresponsible display of brutal power inherent in any totalitarian system. Rather, we have to remember that hatred of the Christian faith lies at the very root of Marxism-Leninism. As a

schoolboy, *Karl Marx* had a loving faith in God. But as a university student, he turned suddenly against God in an enmity which was metaphysically inspired. Consequently, in the introduction to his dissertation he wrote: „The confession of Prometheus – ‘I hate all gods’ – is its (philosophy’s) own confession ... against all heavenly or earthly gods that do not recognize man’s self-consciousness as the supreme godhead ...”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, *Vladimir Lenin* hated religion and in particular the Christian Church. From his youth and out of the depths of his soul, he called himself a „personal enemy of God”. In 1909 he wrote: „We have to fight against religion. This is the ABC of Materialism and thus, consequently, of Marxism too. ...”<sup>3</sup> Until the collapse of the Soviet Empire, therefore, the Communist Party according to Article 6 of its revised constitution (1977) was duty-bound to „struggle against religious prejudice.”

The reason why all convinced Marxists hate Christianity is the same: The gospel claims that Jesus Christ is the only way for the redemption of mankind in his coming heavenly Kingdom. This constitutes a direct contradiction of the Marx’s teaching. For he claimed that by following his materialistic ideology man will be able in his own strength to erect the so-called „Kingdom of Freedom”, the “classless society”.

The first church which under Communism was to undergo a terrible outrage of anti-Christian hatred was the Russian Orthodox Church. Since the ill-famed October Revolution, it has been subjected to a persistent chain of persecutions. These gradually affected also the other churches in the expanding Soviet empire. We do not have time to trace the terrible history of persecutions in the Soviet Union from the first outburst of brutality during these years 1918-1922. Already then ten thousands of churches, monasteries and seminaries were destroyed; others were vandalized or dedicated to secular and even anti-religious functions. The Lutheran Church in the Baltic states experienced a similar fate. In 1937, the Church in Estonia had 850.000 members, of whom 250,000 later emigrated. The 1981 census showed a remaining active church membership of only 60,742 practicing Christians.

The struggle of the unregistered evangelical Baptists to live their faith without yielding to the unacceptable legal restrictions on their religious rights is impressive. It has been particularly made known through the sufferings of the family of *Georgi Vins*. The death of General-Secretary *Leonid Brezhnev* did not result in any lessening of the pressures upon believers. On the contrary, the Alliance of Exiled Evangelical Baptist Churches several years later informed the public about the renewed problems of their fellow Christians in Russia. Under the

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<sup>2</sup> K. Marx in the Preface to his doctoral thesis, „Über die Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie,“ in: K. Marx, Frühe Schriften, Vol. I, H. J. Lieber, ed. (Darmstadt: 1962), p. 21f.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Richard Wurmbrand, *Marx and Satan* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1986), p. 59.

government of *Andropov* our brethren experienced the harshest measures which had been taken against churches of any denomination in many years.

After the downfall of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe the role of the fiercest enemy of Christianity was overtaken by **Islam**. The religion of the prophet Mohammed has been critical and even hostile to the Christian Church right from the start. Mohammed had acquired some biblical knowledge during his journeys to Christian areas as a merchant. But he either misunderstood them or purposely distorted them in order to enhance his claim to be Allah's final messenger, even greater than Jesus. Consequently he eliminated all biblical affirmations which give to Christ the central place in the history of salvation. Mohammed denied that Jesus was God's Son, he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, Christ's sacrificial death at the cross and his resurrection from the dead. He severely scolded those who clung to these doctrines. He threatened them to receive eternal punishment and even instigated his followers to deal severely with them. Although Islam officially does not command its adherents to convert Christians by force, nevertheless it placed them to a very subordinate position, which gradually led to the shrinkage or even disappearance of the ancient churches in the Middle East and in North Africa.

### **III. Persecution of Christians Today**

Nowadays fundamentalist Islam assume an extremely hostile attitude towards Christianity. They identify it with American imperialism and a decadent morality, that poisons the fidelity of the Muslim world. Moreover Christians are hated because they impede the Muslim strategy to establish Islam as the one true religion for all mankind. Christianity is also hated because many Christians support the right of the Jews to re-establish the state of Israel in Palestine and to make Jerusalem, the ancient City of king David their capital. For Muslims claim that "El Kuds" is one of Islam's 3 most sacred towns. – Religious fanaticism of islamist movements is sometimes aggravated by nationalism, tribal feuds, social envy and terrorism. El Kaida is an extremist group, but its brutal acts are acclaimed by Muslims all over the world. They justify them as legitimate expressions of *jihad*, which Mohammed had commanded to his follows as means to spread his religion and to fight infidels and apostates. There does not exist a clear border line that would separate islamist jihadists from a "peace loving" Muslim majority. For the ultimate goal of Islam is to introduce the *sharia*, the law of Allah, as the sole right in all countries of the world. Christians who are bound by Christ's biblical commandments could never accept this. Therefore they are adamant opponents to such arrogated claims.

Thus Islam is a constant opponent to the Christian Church and its mission. Mission is forbidden in all countries which have a Muslim majority. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is regarded as an unforgivable sin. Every Muslim is entitled to inflict the death penalty upon the apostate. The closest relatives parents and brothers, sometimes do not hesitate to comply. Amongst the 10 states in which Christians are persecuted most severely and systematically 6 are Islamic countries: Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, the Maldives, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. But brutal persecutions are also committed in other countries with a Muslim majority, especially Indonesia and Sudan.

Let me give you a few examples: In **Pakistan** in 2002 several Christian institutions were raided: A boarding school for missionary kids, a mission hospital, and several churches were attacked by guns and hand grenades. On Christmas eve three young girls were killed during church service, 15 others were injured. In February 1997 30.000 Pakistani Muslims attacked the Christian village Shanti Nagar. They destroyed 16 churches, several other Christian buildings and 5.00 private Homes of Christians, (This information was supplied by the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, led by Patrick Sookhdeo, in London. In **Indonesia** lately several hundred churches were destroyed, one every week. On the Molukian Islands islamistic *dihadists* (from *jihad* = “Holy War”) systematically have attacked Christian villages. During 2001 and 2002 9.000 people died, most of them Christians.

In **Iran** 7 prominent evangelical pastors were murdered or executed by the secret police during the 1990s.. The Bible Society was closed. The reason was that the government had found out that the number of Protestants had risen from 700 in 1980 in 6.000 in 1988. Converts from Islam emerged from all levels of society.

In **Egypt** in 1997 11 Christians were shot to death in a church in Fikriya. The following day shooting continued: 2 farmers, one Christian policeman and a passer-by were killed. – In 2002 many churches have been destroyed by extremist Muslims in **Northern Nigeria**, which has a Muslim majority. During the fights between Muslims and Christians, 4.000 of the latter lost their lives.

The highest number of Christian victims was reported from the **Sudan**. During the 40 years’ warfare of the Islamic North and the Animist or Christian inhabited South caused unspeakable suffering. The number of people killed reached nearly 2 millions. Other 3 millions were expelled, more than 10.000 were enslaved, particularly women and children. Many of these were forced to join Islam, some of those who refused were even crucified publicly!

In recent years an annual **International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**, sponsored by the WEA, has been conducted. Last year 60.000 Churches in 114 countries participated in it. At that occasion it was reported by Prof. Thomas Schirrmacher that presently about 200 Millions of Christians are seriously threatened to loose their lives. They live in such countries in which Christians often are attacked, most of them Islamic countries. Unfortunately governments of democratic countries are rather reluctant to oppose this violation of human rights. In their diplomatic deliberations with totalitarian states they usually shun to risk their political and economic advantages. Because of this several Christian organizations have been established that expose the inflictions on the life of persecuted Christians and plead their cause to influence world opinion. Amongst them there is Brother's Keeper, Keston College, Christian Solidarity International and Voice of Martyrs.

The list of anti-Christian states is topped not by an Islamic state but by Stalinist **North Korea**. At present 100.000 Christians are imprisoned there. In the ill-famed "Prison No. 15" alone 6.000 believers are kept under brutal conditions. Here that communist persecution of Christians is continued which started soon after Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945. Even in South Korea Christians were exposed to it during a communist student rebellion, which took place in October 1948 in the cities of Yeosoo and Soonchun. A terrible massacre was waged against so called "reactionary people" who were regarded as being opposed to a communist take-over, especially confessing Christians. It was at that occasion the two sons of Rev. **Yang-Won Sohn, Dong-In and Dong-Shin**, were executed brutally. The persecution of Christians by North Korean communists reached its climax, when in June 1950 the North Korean invasion of South Korea was repelled by the forces of the United Nations, led by the USA. On their retreat, North Korean communist soldiers kidnapped all pastors of Seoul and many from other places. They deported them to North Korea and slaughtered most of them. During these events even Pastor Yang-Won Sohn himself was executed. He could have escaped, but he did not want to desert his congregation. He wanted to be a fearless witness, a martyr in the true sense. Even in prison when he was interrogated by the police, he used this trial as an opportunity to witness. He admonished his persecutors to repent and turn to Christ. When he and his fellow prisoners were driven to the place of execution, Yang-Won Sohn witnessed earnestly to the other prisoners around him with his last ounce of strength. His daughter Dong-Hee Sohn describes this moving scene with the



following remark: “My father knew that the time had come for him to die, and so he preached with all his might, realizing that it would be the last chance for many of them to be saved.”<sup>4</sup> – Today many anti-American students demonstrate for the reunification with North Korea under the slogan “Peace now!” But how many of them are aware of the severe persecution which the communists once inflicted and still are inflicting on their Christian compatriots? Do they really take into account the risk for South Korea, if such unification would be achieved not on the basis of true democracy, guaranteed liberty and human rights, but rather under the conditions which North Korean communists have in mind? In that case history would repeat itself. Christians and other outspoken South Koreans as well would face a horrible lot!

#### **IV. The great blessings of Martyrdom to Christ’s Church**

The history of Christian martyrdom is indeed a pathetic one. The prospect of no end of anti-Christian persecution in our world is surely frightening. Yet let us not look only at the atrocities of the enemies of the faith and at the pains endured by believers. Because then we merely have seen one side of the picture given to us in the quotation from St. Augustine. In order to see martyrdom in its true perspective, we must also look at it from the other side. Let us now speak of the consolations of God.

A Christian’s natural reaction to the prospect of suffering will normally be one of anxiety and the desire to escape. This we saw in the case of Peter. But when Jesus announced to his disciples the divine necessity for his and their suffering, he did not stop at the painful prospect. Neither did he ever interpret such suffering as a tragedy. For him persecution was no proof of failure. In immediate connection with his announcement he spoke also of the glorious outcome of the atoning death of the Son of Man: *„... and on the third day he will rise again!”* (Matt 16:21).

The death of Christ is the divinely appointed pathway to his never-ending triumphant joy. The same also applies to the members of his body, the Church. For them, too, suffering and death for Christ’s sake are part of their transition into everlasting life and joy. This joy does not begin only when their tribulations have ceased. It emerges during their afflictions, although its source remains hidden to the world. God’s consolations, of which St. Augustine speaks, are experienced against the dark background of our present grief.

What is the secret of Christian suffering for the sake of the faith? It is that it unites us deeply to Jesus Christ, who is the source of our true life. The apostles regarded their afflictions as a privilege, and they taught their church members to see theirs likewise. In this way they proved

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<sup>4</sup> Dong-Hee Sohn: *My Cup Overflows*, (translated by Ava Lawrence), Christian Literature Crusade, Seoul 2001

to be worthy followers of their Lord. For He himself became God's suffering servant. In such affliction, a close fellowship is constituted between Christ and the believers. We are connected also with the apostles who were our fathers and forerunners in the faith. From his prison in Rome Paul wrote to the Philippians: „*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict you saw and now hear to be mine*” (Phil 1:29f). From NT times until the present, Christians' have made similar experiences. It is that Christ is never appears so close to them as when they are conformed to him in their trials. *David Yang*, a Chinese martyr under Mao Tse-tung, wrote out of his own painful experience:<sup>5</sup>

*„The Lord's heart is so much filled with compassion that he cannot have pleasure at the sight of his suffering children. But in order that we grow inwardly, that we reach spiritual maturity and become conquerors, he sometimes delays our liberation. He sustains us with the power of endurance until the end so that we obtain the crown of glory. The faith that is tried by fire is more precious than refined gold.”*

It is the crucified and risen Lord to whom Christians are united in martyrdom. When they accept a share in his dying for our sake, they also experience the power of heavenly life which resurrected him from the dead. The new man, who is restored to the image of God, is created in us spiritually at our new birth. He is still hidden and must grow to curb our old nature until the day of our resurrection. Then, finally, we will be revealed as true children of God at the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ, our firstborn brother (1 John:3:1-3). This hidden, new man in us is strengthened mightily and made to grow just when our psycho-physical nature is thrown into a process of affliction: „*Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*” (2 Cor 4:16). At the moment of our apparent breakdown, the regenerating power of resurrection takes proper effect in us. We experience Christ's defeat of death, and in the midst of all afflictions He makes us more than conquerors (Rom 8:37). What Luke reports of Stephen was experienced also by several of the blood martyrs of the ancient Church: In the moment of dying they saw the risen Lord calling them to his heavenly glory.

Such visions are extraordinary blessings. Nevertheless we can be assured that Christ is specially near to all his suffering brethren. He imparts to them a degree of sustaining grace which surpasses all blessings we receive through the means of grace under normal conditions.

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Reynolds: *Pathway to Glory* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1968), quoted from the German edition (Giessen, 1969), p. 17.

Such strengthening under suffering for Christ's sake is given not only for the sake of the afflicted Christian himself. Endurance of pain and even death is at the same time a mighty endorsement of the truth of our testimony. The word *martyr* means „witness”. Witnesses are called in connection with court trials. They are to give evidence and to help establish the real circumstances surrounding an event about which the contesting parties hold opposing views. Accordingly they may give conflicting accounts. In the book of Isaiah (43:9f), the conflict between Israel's faith and the religion of her pagan neighbors is depicted in a metaphorical court case. The conflict is between Israel's God, Jahweh, and the pagan idols. In this trial God wants to establish the truth that he alone is God, the sole Ruler of history and witnesses. Out of their own experience of God's mighty acts of redemption, they are to provide the evidence that they found miraculous salvation in him alone.

Likewise, Jesus calls his apostles to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). They are to preach his gospel not only as a set of doctrines and moral rules, but as divine realities. They have experienced the transforming power of Christ's death and resurrection in their own lives. These plain men dared to speak in front of the hostile Jewish authorities. Their boldness was a most impressive fact that added greatly to the attraction of their faith.

But this convicting force was even increased when the Jewish and pagan world saw their readiness to sacrifice their lives as an endorsement of their witness. In view of their impending death, their final words spoken to their prosecutors assumed a sacred dignity. It impressed everyone deeply. In some cases this persuaded the persecutors to themselves embrace the faith of their victims! These testimonies were remembered by their fellow Christians and written down in the chronicles of their martyrdom. They were read in the Christian assembly as a source of strength, even for future generations. *Tertullian* gave expression to a universal experience of the Early Church when he coined the famous statement: „*Sanguis martyrorum est semen ecclesiae*” – “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

The example of those ancient Christian martyrs has found a remarkable repetition in our time. It happened in the experience of persecuted Christians especially in the Soviet Union. They, too, discovered what could be the best situation to become evangelizing witnesses: It was then when they were taken into the court room in order to answer the cross-questioning of their judges. We know of many instances where these martyr Christians spent much time and diligence in order to prepare their plea to the jury. They did not plead for mercy or lenience. Rather, they tried do utilize the situation as a unique opportunity to preach the gospel to an influential atheistic audience. Some evangelical prisoners even cast their speeches for their

defense into the form of poems. These were stenographed by their friends and printed by the *Samizdat* underground press. Thus they became a source of spiritual strength for their likewise endangered fellow Christians. When in 1966 *Georgi Vins* was about to receive his first sentence of imprisonment for ten years, followed by deportation, he recited before his judge a poem from which I quote the following verses:<sup>6</sup>

*Not for robbery, nor for gold  
Do we stand before you.  
Today, here, as in Pilate's day,  
Christ our Saviour is being judged.*

*No! you cannot kill the freedom of belief  
Or imprison Christ in gaol!  
The examples of his triumphs  
Will live in hearts He's saved.*

*We call upon the Church of Christ  
To tread the path of thorns;  
We summon to a heavenly goal,  
We challenge perfidy and lies.*

*Fresh trials now and persecution  
Will serve alone to strengthen faith  
And witness God's eternal truth  
Before the generations still to come.*

As we have seen so far, martyrdom has a great meaning for the spiritual upbuilding of every believer and for the Church's witness to the world. At the same time, martyrdom also has an *ecclesiological function*: It gives a deeper dimension to the brotherhood of all Christians. The mutual loyalty of Christians going through similar trials is encouraging. Together they make discoveries of hidden truths in the revealed Word of God, truths of which the Church had formerly only a shallow perception. What is really important in our doctrinal traditions is often found out just in situations where our faith is put on trial and when we are asked to give account for the hope which is in us. A conviction which is so precious to a believer that he risks his freedom and even his life rather than to give it up will not easily be dismissed as merely speculative. Rather, it will be made subject to a new investigation of its abiding spiritual significance. I have never heard of a single Christian who became a martyr for a so-called „demythologized” gospel, I mean a gospel stripped by rationalistic minds of its transcendental foundation.

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<sup>6</sup> Samizdat: Chronik eines neuen Lebens in der Sowjetunion, ed. pro fratribus (Jesuitenplatz 4, Koblenz, 1975), p. 31.

I am also convinced that the true solution of the ecumenical problem will not be found by mere theological debates. Nor will it be achieved by sociopolitical action programs which demand no particular religious faith but might even be motivated by ideological utopias. A real mutual understanding of Christians from different confessional traditions, however, was gradually being reached in our time elsewhere. It was in concentration camps where Catholic, Evangelical and Orthodox believers had to suffer for the same basic convictions. This happened both in Nazi Germany and in communist countries. There they celebrated their common faith by worshiping together, and they also shared what was dear to them in their own particular traditions. In his Samizdat publication „The Voice of the Apostate,”<sup>7</sup> S. Denisov tells us that those who had fallen away from the faith had to undergo a period of public penitence. Only then they were allowed to reenter the Church. This penitence consisted in forming small, new fraternities praying together that the Church may find its unity again. Denisov concludes: „. Only by joining all God’s loving forces can the battle be won.”

*„The forces of hell cannot destroy the Church in her wholeness. But which self-centered confession that opposes the others dares to claim for itself such fullness? When the Lord founded his church, did he say that her fragments will be isles of freedom?”<sup>8</sup>*

Finally, the discovery of the wholeness of the Church also means rediscovering the important links between the militant, the suffering, and the triumphant Church. When we confess the communion of saints, we should remind ourselves that the body of Christ embraces as its members not only the Christians of our own generation. It comprises also those believers who have already finished their earthly course. This testimony, too, can be a divine consolation for the pilgrim Church. We are, indeed, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1). The testimony of Peter, Paul and John, the testimony of *Perpetua* and *Felicitas*, the testimony of *John Hus* and *Thomas Cranmer*, and the testimony of the Ugandan martyrs still speaks to the Church today. Remarkable is the testimony of *Ivan Vasiljewitsch Moisejev*, that Russian soldier who in July 1972 was tortured and drowned in the Black Sea. Until the last moment he fearlessly preached and defended his faith. It is still heard by the Church of Jesus Christ today.<sup>9</sup> These witnesses exhort us even in our hardest trial never to throw away our confidence which has a great reward (Heb 10:35). The last message that Ivan Moisejev sent to his friends concluded with the eschatological promise given to the martyr church in Smyrna (Rev 3:11): „*Hold fast what you have so that no one may seize your crown.*”

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>8</sup> M. Meerson-Aksenov: *The People of God and the Shepherd* (1972):

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

I hope we now realize the great significance martyrdom has for the spiritual health and growth of Christ's Church. But what have we to observe who at present are not persecuted? How can such blessing take effect in the whole Church of Christ today?

### **V: Martyrdom calls for solidarity in Christ's Church**

The Pauline understanding of the Church as one body implies a close interdependence between all Christians. An event that deeply affects one member will necessarily concern all other members. Paul states: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26). The first condition for this corporate participation in joy and in suffering is, of course, a lively communication between the members. It can, however, be difficult if they are physically separated by political barriers set up to prevent such interaction. For a long time this had been the fate of the oppressed Christians in the Soviet Bloc states. Happily, not even the Iron Curtain was able to cut all lines of communication. During the time of suppression many channels were dug through which news and petitions could be passed on to us and effective aid sent to them. Outstanding work was done by organizations such "Faith in the Second World" in Zürich or Keston College in Great Britain. They provided us with scientifically established information. Special relief agencies were formed for channeling material support to our fellow Christians. Institutions such as *La Voix de l'Orthodoxie* ventured to broadcast spiritual nurture to our starving fellow believers. Secular organizations sharing similar concerns were the International League of Human Rights and Amnesty International. Courageously they brought cases of violated human rights to the knowledge of the public. Moreover, they pleaded the cause of the oppressed before international secular and religious forums. – We also received most authentic descriptions and analyses of the spiritual situation in eastern countries by persons who were leading spokesmen of the dissenters' movement. They tried to alert the Christians in the democratic West and other free countries to the growing communist suppression of freedom and also to the unexpected spiritual renewal that had gone on in Soviet Russia despite such suppression.

But how did churches and individual Christians in the West react to such information and urgent requests for support? Here we face the scandalous fact that only a responsible minority showed any sign of active concern. The agencies for mission and relief in eastern countries managed to attract their faithful supporters, it is true, and certain democratic institutions did have the courage to champion the cause of persons whose rights are encroached upon in contradiction of the Act of Helsinki. But in contrast to this, the majority of our western

denominations and their local churches showed very little response to the suffering of our fellow Christians in socialist countries in Eastern Europe. The same, unfortunately, is still true today with regard to areas of persecution in Asia and Africa, especially in Islamic countries. Despite the abundance of reliable information made available to us, very little of it appears in the official religious news services and church papers. Our persecuted brethren urgently plead that we intercede for them. Such intercession, however, mentioning names and concerns, is virtually absent from the worshiping life of most congregations. Such is the case although lists with detailed topics for intercession are sent freely to the pastoral offices.

The same indolence has been practiced for a long time by the Church at large as it is represented by the WCC. As a matter of fact, after the churches of the Eastern European countries were accepted as members in New Delhi in 1961, the WCC kept silent. This lasted until the dramatic collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1990. Never did the Council dare to boldly denounce the violation of human rights – including religious liberty – in communist states.

There were several reasons for this:

*First*, the WCC was afraid that such intervention might cause these eastern churches to resign from membership. The WCC did not take into account, however, that the leaders and delegates of these churches did not really speak on behalf of their members. They rather were acting on the instructions of their communist government, at least in matters relating to politics. Therefore, the persecuted Christians actually felt betrayed by their own leaders. Consequently they tended to form their own underground communities.

The *second* reason, however, was the political philosophy cherished by most staff members and accredited advisers of the WCC. It was a radical Socialism which has much sympathy with Marxist social analysis. The ecumenical authorities have tended to treat Marxism as an ally against a common enemy: This was those political and economic systems which the WCC regards as the main causes of human oppression – e.g., western capitalism and white racism. This rather simplistic and one-sided view has often caused blindness to the even greater evils which are created by Marxist Socialism – e.g., in Eastern Europe, Ethiopia or North Korea. The WCC has always gone into great detail to expose and actively combat actual or alleged offenses in countries of southern Africa, Latin America, and even of the entire NATO Alliance. By its special funds for its Programme to Combat Racism (PCR), it even supported Marxist guerilla movements in southern Africa which raided mission stations. After gaining governmental power these started to encroach upon the liberty of Christian churches. – In the same year (1970) that the PCR was launched, the WCC also inaugurated a Program for Dialogue with Other Religions and Ideologies. But it has never contemplated

starting a program to combat anti-Christian ideologies that dehumanize the lives of whole peoples who desire simply to live according to their Christian convictions. Geneva argued that in delicate situations a cautious pleading with totalitarian governments could achieve more to alleviate the suffering of individuals than a dramatic public denunciation. This is true to some extent, although the Russian dissenters were calling for another course of action.

A similar line of caution was followed initially by the *Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization*. It did not want to endanger its supporters in communist countries. This policy stood, however, in open contrast to the spiritual position laid down in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974; for Paragraph 13 says in quite unambiguous terms: „We also express our deep concern for all who have been unjustly imprisoned, and especially for our brethren who are suffering for their testimony of the Lord Jesus. We promise to pray and work for their freedom. ...” Happily enough the Congress Lausanne II in Manila 1989 brought a significant improvement. It gave clear prominence to the testimony of our brethren and sisters in areas of restriction and oppression in such nations as Nepal and China.

### **Conclusion**

I have tried to show that demonstration of solidarity is necessary not only for the sake of the most afflicted members of Christ’s body. At the same time it also opens up channels through which the particular blessings received by them in their trials are used to revive the other members of Christ’s body. What should we say about a Church that forsakes her martyrs, that neither prays nor fearlessly cares for them? Firstly it disturbs the spiritual communion between all members of Christ’s body. But moreover such church will eventually betray Christ himself, the Head, who still suffers with the members of his body. In view of his needy followers and members Jesus said:

*“Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. ... As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me”* (Matt 25:40, 45).

Let us become more mindful of the eternal consequences which our Lord attributed to such action or inaction on behalf of the least of his brethren! Our solidarity with those suffering for Christ’s sake and our readiness to face persecution ourselves deeply unite us with Him in his reign of grace now. Moreover it strengthens our hope that we together with them will share in his reign of glory. The widow of Yang-Won Sohn commented the martyrdom of her husband and her sons biblically when she remarked: “Only those who take up the cross with Christ can share the glory along with Christ.” For Jesus himself says (Matt 5:10):

***“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.***