

## The Christian Tradition of Suffering: An Exhortation to Contemporary Protestantism

One cannot read the New Testament and a great many patristic texts and not discover that a common denominator to all who followed Christ was the experience of suffering; whether in the forms of rejection, hatred, deprivation, or some sort of persecution. Beginning with the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10), the imperatives for a blessed life offer us a self-portrait of Jesus, who is himself the Blessed One. This portrait shows an identification with poverty, gentleness, grief, hunger, and thirst for uprightness, mercy, purity of heart, a desire to make peace, and the signs of persecution. At the same time, Jesus promises, “you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved (Matt 10:22). What is the disciple’s response? “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (or hurt you), so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”

From the gospel accounts to Acts to the earliest records of Christian executions, the church was born into a tradition of persecution and martyrdom that formed its identity. The faith of the “chosen people” was essentially a religion of suffering and martyrdom. The twin aspects, suffering and bearing witness went hand in glove.<sup>1</sup>

Thus far, surveys of retrieval theologies<sup>2</sup> make no mention of this issue, which is a serious omission, since there is a superfluity of literary evidence to show that suffering for and with the Christ who suffered through persecution was a central part of the early church. This

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<sup>1</sup> G.S.R. Thomas, “Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church,” *Journal of Religious Hist.* 5 (1969), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church*, eds., W. D. Buschart and K. D. Eilers (Downer’s Grove, IVP Academic, 2015); *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Theology*, eds., G. Flynn and P. D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

facet of Christian experience is just as much a part of the theological inheritance as any other theology. In all the presentations and dialogues on theological retrieval taking place, westerners who rarely suffer on account of their faith, are in danger of forgetting this elementary feature of the church's distinctiveness. But what is meant by such a retrieval unless we are in the midst of a church enduring some form of persecution?

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To begin historically, we should ask how did the early Christians respond to the reality of religious persecution. How did they understand the experience? And how did these experiences, especially the threat of martyrdom or its actuality, shape the identity and history of the church as a whole? To be persecuted, to suffer, even to die for one's faith, all these have been a feature of Christian existence right from the beginning.

Of course, the origins of religious persecution is found in Jesus' interpretation of His own way to the cross. Jesus foretold His own suffering and death, and He promised life to all those who would share His suffering and death. "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel will save it (Mk 8.34-36). From these and other sayings in the gospels it becomes quite clear that Jesus warned His disciples that to follow Him would mean to share His existence -- that is to say, to suffer hatred, rejection, persecution, even unto death. Jesus, who proclaimed the final Word of God as His will for Israel and humanity, expected hostility and resistance.

Paul agrees with the gospel tradition that his Christian existence as an apostle of the Lord necessarily leads to suffering and persecution. He is ready to face the consequences of his calling, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). He

would rather desire to depart and be with Christ, but as suffering is a part of his mission to the world, he considers himself to be more useful to his brethren when alive. One could say that Paul enhances the theological consequences of Jesus' interpretation of suffering and persecution for Christians' existence after the death and resurrection of the Lord. The early Christians thought that suffering and persecution is the hallmark of the elect.

Most commonly when the subject of divine election is raised it is the context of soteriology, but turning to I Pet election is no less about being the chosen of God to suffer and endure persecution. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's suffering, that you may also rejoice and be glad. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Peter virtually quotes Jesus when he states "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." But the issue is not merely about if we should suffer, Peter brings it as a mandate: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

His exhortation foreshadows the writing of the church fathers Tertullian and Origen, in which they want to encourage their brethren to endure the persecution. Suffering for Christ becomes nothing less than a part of salvation history. From the very beginning of the incarnation, "Truth and hatred came into existence simultaneously."<sup>3</sup> It is in the very fabric of God's economy and so too, for the Christian disciple.

Let me put a point on what I've said thus far from the witnesses of the apostolic era: that suffering for the Gospel is normative for the Christian tradition. We will see different

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Apol* 7.3.

expressions of this norm in subsequent centuries, but the theme that God blesses his church with persecution will continue to shape the Christian spiritual-ecclesial culture. To slightly reword John Webster, “that Christian tradition about the Christian’s relation to God and God's call to suffering in the world must be deployed if the cultural-historical situation of Christian theology is to become comprehensible”<sup>4</sup>

Now we must take this idea further. Persecution or suffering was not the catastrophic side of Christian witness; a crisis meant to be tolerated as best as possible if, for any other reason, that it should stop. Whether we directly share in a persecution (literally, *persecutio*, those pursuing us or taking action against us), we are still an indigenous part of the witness that endures hatred, hostility or rejection. This situation constitutes the earliest preaching being lived out as “aliens” and foreigners”. Once we recognize that suffering or persecution is normative to the Christian life, we will “refuse to relegate the threat of suffering or even martyrdom to the fringes of history or remotes of the globe.”<sup>5</sup> We will stop regarding persecution as a great tragedy that befalls the church.

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There are several kinds of post-apostolic sources used to assess the Christians’ reaction and expectations when confronted with persecution. Like the NT, the voices from the patristic era do not question whether Christians will suffer, but only consider how the church ought to prepare for it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval”, 585.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Hovey, *To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today’s Church* (Brazos, 2008), 14.

<sup>6</sup> I know of no text in the early church that expresses surprise at the onset of persecution.

**1. Apologetic literature** that ranges over genres and rhetorical styles from the second to the fifth centuries. As Christians increasingly became severed from Judaism, the issue of establishing *mos maiorum* became the ultimate criterion in matters of determining religious legitimacy between Christians and pagans. “Because they brought with them a new religion and a hitherto unseen moral, the Christians were very easily seen as “extremists” in the public eye, especially by conservative intellectuals who had a monopoly on culture.”<sup>7</sup> To Tacitus, Christians were simply “haters of mankind,” an attitude which easily fed from the Romans’ aversion for the Jews. The latter’s religious, cultural and ideological dimensions fueled that older ethnical antagonism pitting Romans against Jewish communities.<sup>8</sup>

It is very problematic to identify a particular law that allegedly made Christianity a *religio illicita* because it is all but certain that there never was one. The rescripts of Trajan and Hadrian<sup>9</sup> show there was no special legislation concerning Christians, moreover, Greek and Latin apologetic texts consistently refute the pagan assumptions that Christians were guilty of *crimina* or *flagitia* attributed to them without investigating whether such charges could be verified. Being labelled a Christian was cause enough for persecution.

I don’t have the space here to examine just how we should interpret the conflict between nascent Christianity and *Romanitas*. Typically, it is regarded as a clash of two cultures (as one finds in Frend’s *Martyrdom and Persecution*). But we may also reckon Roman aggression and Christian response as a moving dynamic; that is, the local governments had to come to terms with Christian existence and its rapid growth while, in the process, the Church was coming to

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<sup>7</sup> M. Sordi, “The Persecution of the Christians in the Early Centuries AD,” in *Worldwide Human Rights and Religious Liberty* (Bern: Switzerland, 2013), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus writing of *Against Apion* is a good example of this antagonism.

<sup>9</sup> Recorded by Justin at the end of his I Apol.

understand itself, as vulnerable community, always being subject to the threat of suffering or loss. There is no question that the church was being molded by these factors.

A few specifics may be added. When Christians were arrested or brought before a magistrate, it was not simply for a lack of pious observance toward the gods or the emperor.<sup>10</sup> This makes perfect sense given the ways philosophically-minded Romans expressed doubts themselves about the existence of the gods or the possibility that such knowledge is viable. Echoes of Plato can be heard. To take but one example, Minucius Felix' pagan interlocutor Caecilius spoke for many when he denies any certainty about knowing the divine. And yet it is "much more reverent and better to accept the teaching of our forefathers as a guide to truth, to cherish the religious practices handed down to us, to adore the gods whom your parents taught you to fear rather than to know more familiarly!"<sup>11</sup>

As long as these cultic acts are correctly and consistently practiced, the gods become benefactors, preserving households, cities and whole nations. Conversely, if these things are ignored, it shows a lack of proper respect which leads to instability and defeat. And yet, when Christians were apprehended were they expected to show proper fealty by sacrificing to the gods

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<sup>10</sup> At least before the persecution of Decius (249-51) when it was decreed that all inhabitants in the territories of the Roman Empire must offer a ritual sacrifice to the gods before an official commission. From the time of Cyprian of Carthage (martyred in 258) to Augustine, a leading pagan complaint against the Christians was that they did not offer worship to the gods with the result that the empire was afflicted by plague, famines, and invasions.

<sup>11</sup> *Octavius* 6.1. This squares with the succinct encapsulation of how to think of *religio* provided by the pagan Valerius Maximus (mid-1<sup>st</sup> c.): "Our ancestors desired that fixed and formal annual ceremonies be regulated by the knowledge of the pontifices; that sanction for the good governance of affairs be marshaled by the observations of augurs . . . Also, by hallowed practice, observances are paid to divine affairs: by prayer, when something must be entrusted; by vow, when something is demanded; by thanksgiving, when a vow is discharged; by entreaty [for a favorable sign], when an inquiry is made by entrails or lot; and by sacrifice, when something is accomplished through formal ritual, whereby, too, the warnings of prodigies and lightning are expiated" (*Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings* I.1,1).

or the emperor. In doing so, they would be absolved from the most heinous charge of atheism. Minutes from extant trials demonstrate that little stock was placed in the concern about Christian eating infants or committing incest, despite popular fears to the contrary.

The more common cause for persecution was as Tertullian states it, “you blame us Christians for all public death and destruction. If the Tiber overflows, if the Nile recedes, if the heavens stand still, if the earth heaves, if some pestilence rages, if famine lays waste, you all cry out with a single voice: “It is the work of the Christians.”<sup>12</sup> Augustine will have to refute this very same accusation 200 years later. Christian defenses (Melito, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch) frequently stressed that Christians are loyal to the state because of their prayers for the emperor, but this strategy never seems to have made a good impression because Christians, during the trial minutes we possess, would not swear their allegiance to the genius of the emperor and they considered the gods either as demons or demonically inspired fabrications.

Writing *apologiae* was one kind of response to persecution,<sup>13</sup> which increasingly demonstrated Christians were intellectual equals to their pagan contemporaries. However, it must be said there was very little pagan response to these Christian texts with the possible exception of Celsus whose, *True Doctrine (Lógos)* may have been, in part, a riposte to Justin’s two apologies. Otherwise, we have no evidence that emperors or provincial governors ever read the apologies.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ad Nat.* I.10.

<sup>13</sup> Attempts to categorize apologetic literature suffers from the superficiality of our dividing them in ways that would have been unfamiliar to the ancients. Nevertheless, we may arguably categorize apologetic texts as: 1) those that seek some common ground on the basis of a mutual understanding that justice is necessary (Melito, Justin, Athenagoras); 2) those that challenge the Roman prerogative to charge Christians with any accusations that the Roman do not already commit themselves (Tertullian, Arnobius, Augustine); 3) Those in letter or dialogical form (Cyprian; Octavius; Ambrose) that build on a pre-existing relationship; 4) those that threaten the existing establishment with judgment (Lactantius, Firmicus Maternus).

For our immediate purposes, it is more useful to look at other literary forms that are extant from the times of Christian persecutions.

**2. Judicial or court-room minutes of Christians being arraigned before a governor or magistrate.** These are usually short and clearly written by Christians for Christians. I want to look at the earliest known proceedings and try to cull the Christians response to their persecutors.<sup>14</sup>

Pliny's letter to Trajan is most familiar to us. It is valuable since Pliny was never able to attribute actual crimes to the Christians. Nevertheless, Pliny assumes from the beginning of his examinations of at least two different groups of Christians brought before him that those who admitted to being "Christian" implied guilt. In the case of the second group arraigned in his court, an unknown number of these denied that had ever been Christian or were not anymore.<sup>15</sup> Their denials were not enough. Only after they had worshiped images of the emperor and the gods and cursed Christ were they allowed to go. It is clear from Pliny's letter and Trajan's reply that they were not operating according to any special laws that dealt with Christianity.

In the trial of Justin and six others arrested with him, Justin is asked about Christian teaching which he uses as an occasion to teach the pith of the Christian message to the prefect. It had no effect on the prefect, but the reader is permitted to see just what the essentials of Christianity include. Then each is asked if he or she is a Christian to which each responds with fearless enthusiasm, "I am by God's command" or "by the gift of God" or "I share in the same

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<sup>14</sup> I am skipping over the arraignments of Paul recorded in Acts which would rightfully be considered the earliest "hearing" of a Christian by a Roman magistrate.

<sup>15</sup> This almost casual remark reinforces the account of Lyons/Vienne where Christian could and did defect, a point rarely included in martyrdom *acta*.



hope.”<sup>16</sup> They are said to have “fulfilled their testimony by their act of faith in our Savior.”<sup>17</sup>

Another opportunity is presented in the notice given concerning Apollonius’ hearing, who responds to several questions of the proconsul by sharing the Christian view of God Almighty, Lord of heaven and earth.<sup>18</sup> The latter is a frequent enough response in martyrdom *acta* that deserves further investigation.<sup>19</sup> For our present purpose it is enough to say that such formulaic answers laid stress on the uniqueness of God as creator and providential sustainer, which, implicitly drew attention to the exclusivity of the Christian God and hence in Christian belief.

We should also mention the minutes recorded of the Christian tried at Scilli in North Africa. Twelve Christians, who are all Roman citizens, are before the court of Saturninus who says at the outset “If you return to the your senses you can obtain the pardon of our Lord the emperor.” One of the Christians offers to explain the “mystery of simplicity,” but this is quashed by the proconsul who warns not to malign our sacred rites.” Instead, the twelve are told to swear by the genius of our emperor, which they refused to do.

**3. Martyrs’ *acta*** written not long after the execution of Christians, accounts also written by Christians for Christians. Both #2 (the proceedings) and especially #3 contain poignant moments

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<sup>16</sup> H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Clarendon Press, 1972) provides the three recensions of the trial’s report, 43-61.

<sup>17</sup> *Of Justin and his Companions*, 6 (Musurillo, 53).

<sup>18</sup> The Martyrdom of the Saintly and blessed Apostle Apollonius, 8. This lengthy account (Musurillo, 91-105) is apparently the result of a late tradition that has elaborated on the brief notice which Eusebius, HE V.21 relates, “he made a most eloquent defense before them all about the faith to which he bore witness.”

<sup>19</sup> László Perendy, “Deum qui fecit caelum et terram: Identifying the God of the Christians in the Acts of the Martyrs,” in *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antiquity: Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*, ed., J. Leemans (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2010), 221-39. Theophilus of Antioch claimed that these words represented showed that God made all things *ex nihilo* and that they were the epitome of the prophets’ teaching (230).

when the *martus* does indeed bear vocal witness to the Christian teaching. The martyrdom of Polycarp is well known.<sup>20</sup> The Smyrnaean who wrote the narrative states that all the martyrdoms that took place were in accordance with God's will: "For we must devoutly assign to God a providence over them all" (2.1). As Polycarp was threatened with being burned to death, we are told he was filled with a joyful courage; his countenance was filled with grace, and not only did he not collapse in terror, rather it was the governor who was amazed" (12.1). Just before his burning he prayed, "I bless you because you have thought me worthy of this day and this hour, and to have a share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ" (14.2). One hears a decided echo of Jesus' own prayer to the Father.

In the course of the description of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, the reader encounters a full description of how Christians suffering for the faith should respond to the deep hatred which the populace had for them. The series of events that took place is positioned in the context of conflict between Satan and the church. Against the Adversary, "God's grace . . . raised up sturdy pillars that were able to endure all the attacks" (i.e., tortures) (7). Among the two groups of Christians who were imprisoned, the first were those who clung to their confession, but the others were "unprepared, weak and "still-born". Their fearfulness gave Satan an opening, prompting them to deny Christ. Such betrayals were taken very seriously. Jesus' words, "he who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt 10:22) was taken literally in early Christianity. When the narrator of the martyrs' passions refer to their salvation, this was indeed the effect of their sacrifice. Dealing with the lapsed was a deeply spiritual matter.

For the others who underwent horrible tortures "they were comforted by the joy of their hope in [God's] promises, their love for Christ and the Spirit of the Father." The aged bishop,

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<sup>20</sup> Translated in Musurillo, 3-21.

Pothinus, clung to the life of Christ that he might triumph in him” (29). Fighting for the victor’s crown, the rest of the Christians “were intensely eager to imitate Christ,” though they did not want the title ‘martyr’, yielding that title to Christ alone.

In the early 160s, the condemnation of Ptolemaeus and Lucius constitutes a large part of Justin’s second apology where the latter bear witness on the martyrs behalf.<sup>21</sup> The writer/editor of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas states the necessity of recounting deeds about the faith in ancient times [which] were a proof of God’s favor. Being catechumens except for Saturus, this chronicle has little by way of proclamation, but it is redeemed by the visions, dreams and special insight which Perpetua and the others possess while in prison. It is impossible how much of the report has been embellished for the sake of editor’s purposes and yet the reader cannot fail to be caught up in the editor’s almost ecstatic finale: “O most valiant and blessed martyrs! **O truly called and elected unto the glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ!** Which glory he that magnifies, honors and adores, ought to read these witnesses likewise, as being no less than the old, unto the Church's edification.”<sup>22</sup>

**4. We have several instances of protreptics**—exhortations addressed to imprisoned Christians not to deny their confession as Christians. One can hear Biblical language and passages being reworded and utilized in the course of these texts.

Tertullian’s *Ad Martyras* (likely his first written work<sup>23</sup>) is perhaps the most tender pieces of hortatory found in early patristic literature. The imprisoned are called both “blessed” and

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<sup>21</sup> Which is copied by Eusebius and included in his *Historia ecclesiastica*.

<sup>22</sup> *Of Perpetua and Felicitas* 21.11.

<sup>23</sup> R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum*, “La Chronologie des ouvrages de Tertullien” (Études Augustiniennes), 567; CCSL II.1627.

“elect,” as well as referred to as “martyrs” which they are still alive. At first Tertullian urges them to hold fast so that there would be no dissensions among themselves. He writes, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit who entered prison with you.” Without saying so, it seems there was a sufficient amount of defections among those incarnated for Tertullian to write to them. He continues to bolster this group by stating that they are “anointed by the Holy Spirit (3.4) and as Jesus himself experienced, the flesh is weak but the spirit is willing. Indeed, they are indwelt by the Spirit that they are able to even now put to death the body’s temptations, fears, etc. (4). Finally, Tertullian presents the idea (2.2-4) that as Christ’s blessed ones, they are able to transform what lies all around them: the prison is no longer a prison but a place of salvation; that they bring light into a place of darkness;<sup>24</sup> and the foul smells of their confinement is made sweet by their presence.

About fifty years later, the bishop of Carthage dispatched a letter to the Christians suffering in prison. At the height of the Decian persecution, Cyprian wrote the African confessors: “For what can I wish greater or better in my prayers than to see the flock of Christ enlightened by the honor of your confession?”<sup>25</sup> With a large number of Christians fleeing, bribing officials, or simply sacrificing to the gods as per the edict, it was vital to shed light on those who refused to buckle under the pressure and were suffering the consequences.

But all whom the prison has shut up in a glorious multitude, animated with equal and similar warmth of courage to carry on the struggle as soldiers of Christ, ought to stay in the divine camp so that flatteries may not deceive the incorrupt firmness of faith, nor threats terrify, nor crucifixions and torments conquer because, 'greater is he who is in us than he who is in this world:2 Earthly punishment is not more able to cast down than divine protection is to raise.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Perpetua makes reference to the heat and the pitch blackness of the prison (3.5).

<sup>25</sup> Ep. 6.1.

<sup>26</sup> Ep. 10.1 (FOC 51.24-5).

It may seem remarkable that Cyprian can assure the confessors that God is defending them in the midst of their persecution, but defending them against the greater enemies of flattery or threats that might cause them to falter in their testimony (martus).

Origen too penned a protreptikos to martyrdom and, without any dependence on Tertullian or Cyprian, makes very similar comments to these Egyptian Christians suffering through their bondage in prison. Long before when he was a teenager and his father was imprisoned on account of being a Christian, Origen is said to have written him to hold fast despite the family's needs.<sup>27</sup> He now writes in the same form, exhorting faithfulness in the midst of their trials. He assures them that they are chosen by God, "Whoever wishes to belong to the chosen generation obediently listens to God" in opposition to the pagans (5). Hope always comes to those in tribulation so that our earthly afflictions need not stifle our soul. Even when confronted with judgment seats and swords, God gives what we need to stand (4), as you undergo the separation of the body from all earthly temptations that might cause you to prefer the world. They must remember that the devil will fill their hearts with thoughts of denial. With this in mind Origen asks them to bear witness (martyrium) without indecision (11). But Origen was more than a man of words. In just a few years, Origen gave his own testimony unto death.

One last piece of evidence we must consider is Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* which itself comes closest toward developing a theology of persecution. The segmented construction of the *HE* shows that Eusebius evolved in his perspective of the purpose of persecution. Initially, he portrays it as an attack upon the "Divine logos" which translates pagan opposition entailed an attack on the divine message and on the Logos himself, the source of that message. Very much like heresy, persecution is spawned by demonic forces in an attempt to turn others away from the

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<sup>27</sup> Eusebius, *HE* VI.2.6. His father died in prison.

truth (IV.7.2). Divine providence may turn the tables on the persecutors to the extent that they help, rather than hinder, the spread of the divine message. By book eight, Eusebius briefly decided that the church was being judged for its laxity on account of its multitudinous gatherings in many cities.<sup>28</sup> But it was more important that persecution force Christians to scatter to different parts of the earth (II.3.1-3; III.5.2) and compel individual Christians to bear valiant witness to the truth (IV.8.5; VI.5.1-7; VIII.6-9).

**5. Finally, we include panegyrical (or hagiobiographical) memoriae** of one who was martyred or suffered many years earlier and now their “birthday” is replayed for the edification of the Church. Often these are in the form of *vitae* or homilies which rehearsed the events of suffering that became memorials of celebration. There are scores and scores of these texts. I’ll simply mention Basil’s *Life of Gordius* (c. 373),<sup>29</sup> Chrysostom’s *Homily on Julian of Antioch*,<sup>30</sup> or the homily on Phocas<sup>31</sup> by Asterius of Amasea (ca. 400) in passing. Like the martyrs in the previous categories, the saint is completely faithful, courageous and provides Christian testimony unto death. Since they are largely in the mode of panegyrics, there is a certain romanticism in these accounts meant also for the edification of the church. But this is a subject for another essay.

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Having admittedly only scratched the surface of the extant evidence in these five categories, I would like to draw some conclusions as part of constructing a basis for a theological

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<sup>28</sup> *HE* VIII.1.7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Gordius was martyred during the reign of Licinius.

<sup>30</sup> Martyred c. 305, sometimes distinguished as Julian the Martyr.

<sup>31</sup> Phocas of Sinope, martyred during the persecution of Diocletian.

retrieval of Christian suffering as an indelible part of the church's resources. The church had no clear-cut monolithic response to the experience of religious persecution, and we can find instances where overzealousness of those determined to die as martyrs undermined "those who suffer according to the will of God (I Pet 4.19). Still, certain patterns begin to emerge when we combine the apostolic and patristic data. None of these are meant to be extremist or provocative.

1) Persecution is natural, if not constant, to the Christian condition. The attitude toward this kind of suffering easily carried over from the apostolic to the patristic era, the latter which concretized its place in the Christian life.

2) We find no ancient writer who hesitates in the general opinion that persecution was for the benefit of the church. It may be like Eusebius who at one point believed the persecution was necessary in order to purge the church of its laxities, but the majority regarded it as itself fortifying both the church's resolve and its message.

2) The early *acta* show that the moments of confrontation were always more than a political or social situation gone sideways. There was a spirituality called for on the part of the sufferer that understood the conflict in cosmic terms: "the world hated me; it will hate you." A particular point of interest is that what distinguishes Christian martyrdom from other religious forms is that the Christian martyr does not die in order to be copied such that others would seek a martyr's death. The martyr follows Christ, but does not expect that others must do the same.

3) The sufferers for Christ were regarded as holy and appointed vessels for God's witness (Polycarp, Cyprian, Gordius) They were highest form of emissaries for the sake of the Gospel; God's soldiers or athletes in a contest to win the crown of victory.

4) Reaction to persecution was an essential part of the Christian witness. Their fearlessness toward death consistently baffled pagan magistrates or onlookers. Indeed, Christians developed a

reputation of demonstrating uncommon courage in the very acts of their martyrdom,<sup>32</sup>  
begrudgingly acknowledged by their pagan contemporaries.

5) Weakness and vulnerability in persecution/death were regarded as victories—the sufferer was an overcomer of the “rage of the nations” (Ps 1), hatred and fearfulness of the world, like Christ, “I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). In some cases, an acute irony is enacted as those who are tortured are shown to have overcome their persecutors. The torturers were exhausted and became infirm from their strenuous efforts<sup>33</sup> whereas the saint remained steadfast, strong and unbroken.<sup>34</sup>

6) The conflict between Christian and cosmos (all that stands against Christ) is not regarded in merely spiritual terms; there is place/space/physicality; where the persecuted are in a heat with the Evil One whose manifestations are of a most mundane character. The earthly contest between Christ and Satan is replayed through the martyrs’ sufferings and the temptation of denying their identity as belonging to Christ.

7) The reality of the persecutions conveyed transparency to the biblical stories and models. As much as early Christians credited the martyrs with moments of special revelation before death, the latter sometimes envisioned their persecution as a revelatory experience, a way that connected them intimately to the Living Christ. It was a revelation that allowed a glimpse into

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<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Nat* I.18; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.5.

<sup>33</sup> The Martyr Balaam 3: “The executioners became stiff from whipping him, but the martyr was discovered to be more vigorous [than they]. The hands of those flogging him became totally debilitated but the resolve of the one being flogged did not bend.” Trans and ed., Pauline Allen, “Loquacious Locals: Two Indigenous Martyrs in the Homilies of Severus of Antioch,” *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 12.

<sup>34</sup> In the letter from Vienne and Lyons, the tormentors of Sanctus became frustrated with their inability to break him they applied red-hot brass plates to his body. The narrator says his body was one whole wound and no longer looked like a man. And yet Sanctus arose to his feet and stood, regaining its former shape and use of his limbs. “Thus by the grace of Christ the second torturing proved for him not punishment but healing” (apud Eusebius, *HE* V.1.24).



the unceasing struggle between the Lord and the Adversary. Christ's defeat of Satan is renewed and continued through the martyrs' victory over their adversaries who are agents of the devil. This revelation allowed the church to look beyond the world that would come to an end and then the judgement.

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In light of these observations we still need to ask what exact practice or perspective should the contemporary church (in North America/Europe) be retrieving. I confess that I am still mulling over possible answers and believe my answers to be at best tentative.

On one hand, the experience of suffering on account of a local persecution is very spacialized, where the gospel is being proclaimed and opposed in particular times and places. Try as we might, it is near impossible for those who have never known suffering for their faith through deprivation, imprisonment or torture to grasp this side of the Christian obedience. This is why it is important for churches that have not suffered should nonetheless recognize that they are of the same body of Christ and are committed to identifying with the witness of those who do suffer. It is very easy to regard the experiences of Christians in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria or China as irregular or alien-like events when it comes to living faithfully. This is the hurdle that every Christian needs to cross. The reality of doing so is to fortify and prepare Christians for those times--present or future--where civil disobedience may become the price of loving and obeying God. The mode of the suffering Church suggests that loyalty to the Kingdom of God may come into deep conflict with other loyalties—family being the hardest.<sup>35</sup> Given the way in which so

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<sup>35</sup> For Evangelicals, who have been ingrained with the idea that cultivation of the family is among God's highest callings, are faced with challenges to this ideal in Jesus' teaching as well as the early church's very secondary regard of family ties when compared to suffering as a witness to the gospel of the church family.

many Protestant churches are embracing the ideologies of contemporary culture, it is critical that the Church's self-understanding is re-oriented through developing the moral skills necessary to perceive that its future suffering is always in God's hands and remains a distinct reality. Not unlike ancient Christians, it is occurring within our own time that orthodox Christians are regarded as intolerant, bigots and racists. The ability of the church to share in the glory of Christ's suffering will depend on what resources it decides are indispensable for its continued existence if it seeks to be faithful to both the church's Scripture and Tradition.

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