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THE HOLY CROSS: SUFFERING, PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM – A MARK OF THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN AGE

by the Albert B. Collver III

Christian suffering, persecution and martyrdom continue in the modern age, but this will be turned into blessing by the Lord.

IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION, “those who had been slain” cried out with a loud voice to the Lord, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth (Rev. 6:10)?” The word used to describe the martyrs who cried out to the Lord from the altar in heaven is from the verb σφάζω (*sp-hazō*), the very same word used to describe Jesus as “the Lamb who had been slain.” The martyrs had been slain like their Lord, Jesus. Like the blood of Abel, the blood of the martyrs calls out to the Lord for justice and the vengeance of the Lord upon the wicked. In a similar way, the Lord’s church on earth cries out to be a witness to the world and for deliverance from all evil. Ironically, the more the church prays to be a witness to the world, the more likely the church is to experience the cross and suffering, which in itself becomes a witness.

Dr. Martin Luther, in his *On the Councils and the Church*, identified seven marks or notes of the church,¹ that is, seven items that indicate the church of God is present on earth. These marks or notes of where to find the church, the people of God, are an explanation of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, which says the church is found where “the Gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” In *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther begins with the Word of God, followed by an enumeration of the

ways the Gospel is delivered to the Lord’s people — Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution and Holy Ministry. Dr. Luther also adds: prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving (Phil. 4:6); and the holy cross. Prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving provide the context in which the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered. It is a description of what goes on where church is located, where the people of God are gathered. To all of this, Dr. Luther adds a seventh mark — the holy cross, which includes suffering, persecution and martyrdom.²

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the church has passed through a century where more Christians, numerically, have been persecuted and martyred than at any other time in history.

This theme of suffering, persecution and martyrdom has been a topic of theological reflection since the Book of Acts. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the church has passed through a century where more Christians, numerically, have been persecuted and martyred than at any other time in history. We live in a time when governments that once championed freedom of religion are turning increasingly hostile to the message of the Gospel. “Free” societies that al-

low for the public expression of nearly any thought, idea or action increasingly cannot bear to hear the witness of the Church in the public square. At the same time, Islam is spreading among people and through lands where the Gospel once held sway. If the external threats of secular humanism and Islam were not enough, the Church is also under attack from within.

¹ Martin Luther. “On the Councils and the Church(es)” in: *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry*, eds. Eric W. Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 9–178.

² Ibid.

Once on a trip to Kazakhstan, we visited Kazakhstan’s office of the Ministry of Religion. This man had served during the communist and post-communist periods. He was a professed agnostic, who was interested in the social phenomena called religion. He said that the communists thought they needed to persecute the church to prevent its spread. Then, he noted how the mainstream Protestant church bodies had strayed from the historic message of Christianity, particularly by adopting Western society’s agenda on sexuality. He concluded by saying, “What the communists failed to do, namely destroy the Church, liberal Christianity will succeed by eliminating the teaching of historic Christianity, allowing Islam and other radical ideologies to dominate.” Indeed, as the Apostle John said, “so now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18).

Christ’s Church faces many enemies from within and without. She bears the mark of the holy cross, not as an identifier for its own sake, but as a consequence of bearing witness to and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church in every place bears the holy cross to some degree. The Church in some places bears what appears to be a smaller cross than the church in other places, yet no matter how small or big the cross, it serves the same purpose — a witness (*martyria*) to the world and as Formula of Concordia XI confesses, to “conform every one of His elect to the image of His Son.”³ It should not surprise us that the Lord’s

It should not surprise us that the Lord’s people, that His holy Church, takes on the appearance of the crucified Son of God. In fact, it is a great honor and joy that the Lord conforms us into his image.

people, that His holy Church, takes on the appearance of the crucified Son of God. In fact, it is a great honor and joy that the Lord conforms us into his image. This is why St. Paul says in Rom. 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.”

The Lord Jesus works the good of His Church through the holy cross. He worked the salvation of the world on the cross. He redeemed you and me on the cross. Through the crosses, that is, the sufferings in our lives, predestined for us before the foundation of the world, the Lord conforms us into the image of His Son. What sort of Lord predestines the holy cross? The sort of Lord who, in his divine foreknowledge, ensured that no suffering, cross or martyrdom would wrest you from His loving hand. This is the sort of Lord who has promised that the gates of Hell will not prevail against his Church. This is the sort of Lord who, in the words of the Augsburg Confession, said the Church, *perpetual mansura*, will endure forever. Be assured that suffering, persecution and martyrdom, as evil as it is, will be turned into blessing by The Lord.

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³ The Large Catechism (1529), in: *The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*, eds. Paul T. McCain, Robert C. Baker, Gene E. Veith and Edward A. Engelbrecht (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 639.