

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN Mission

September 2014 | Vol. 1 | No. 2

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Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.

Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

This journal may also be found at www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.

SUFFERING, PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM AS A MARK OF THE CHURCH IN EUROPE

by Darius Petkunas

Suffering, persecution and martyrdom — the Rev. Dr. Petkunas talks history and the present situation in Europe.

SINCE THE BEGINNING of recorded time, many have suffered for their beliefs. In ancient Rome, the popular maxim stated “*Ad astra per aspera*” (To the stars through adversities). The pagans knew nothing of the promises which God had attached to his covenant people; for them, willingness to suffer hardship was necessary if worthy prizes were to be gained. A lengthy catalogue of hardships endured by God’s Old Testament saints is recorded in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11.

When Christ promised that those who followed him would have to bear crosses for the sake of his name, he did not put this statement in the form of a proposition, as though to say willingness to bear the hatred of the world would reap great rewards. He was instead stating the simple fact that the prince of this world would see to it those who put their faith in Christ would know pain and anguish such as their Lord had so willingly taken upon himself on their behalf.

The life of the Church has been marked from the beginning by the presence of the cross, that particular form of suffering borne by those who confess the name of Christ. Clear signs of this can be seen in the martyrdom first of Stephen, then James of Jerusalem, then of all the apostles excepting only St. John, and by the death of early Roman Christians at the hands of Nero, and also, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Cyprian of Carthage and countless others who suffered at the hands of Diocletian, Julian the Apostate and other enemies of Christ. Persecution proved a very inefficient method of exterminating the Christian Church. It did not diminish;

it grew. As Tertullian declared, the blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church. Luther went so far as to state the possession of the cross of Christ should be regarded as among the sure signs of the Church, the holy Christian people.

In the 20th century, Marxist-Leninist communist ideology clearly dictated that for communism to succeed, the Church and its superstitions must be destroyed, and that

The unwillingness, or even the inability, of churches to take a bold stand and endure the consequences of recriminations and persecution represent the elimination of the seventh sign from the church’s conscience and life.

the very idea of God must be erased from man’s heart and soul. It was at first thought that scientific-atheist propaganda could accomplish this, as the Christian faith was thought to be nothing more than ignorant superstition, which could be easily overcome by secular reasoning and education. These communists soon found it necessary to employ more direct means to destroy the Church. Thousands of priests and bishops from all the traditional Christian confessions in the Soviet Union were sent to gulags, and for many of them, it was a death sentence. By the mid 1930s the Roman

Catholic and Lutheran Churches in Soviet Russia had disappeared. The communists sought to destroy the Orthodox Church in the same manner. Priests and bishops were sent away to perish, and churches were torn down and plowed over. But all this proved insufficient. It was not possible to erase the idea of God from the hearts and minds of men, or at least not from all men. Every time the government relaxed its atheistic efforts, the fires of faith again sprang up. When communism failed, supposedly-atheist countries once again declared themselves Christian. The people publicly proclaimed that they had

been and continued to be Christian people, and this continues to be true.

This commentary explicates what Luther calls this seventh mark of the Church, this bearing of the cross and what he defines as the shape which the cross takes in the life of the Church in times of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It also speaks to the present situation of the churches in Europe where law and order prevail and the oppression of Christianity is unacknowledged

Luther on the Seventh Mark of the Church

In his tractate on *the Churches and Councils* (1539),¹ Luther enumerates the marks of the true Church. He characterizes it by the marks set down in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, where the Church is described “as the assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is taught in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution.” Here, he finds the first four essential marks of the Church. The first mark of the Church “is its possession of the holy Word of God. Where this Word is preached, believed, professed, and lived, there the true *ecclesia sancta catolica* is to be found” regardless of its size. The second mark is the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. “Wherever it is taught, believed and administered correctly according to Christ’s mandate, that too is a public sign and a precious holy possession by which God’s people are sanctified.” The third mark is the Holy Sacrament of the Altar “rightly administered, believed, and received according to Christ’s institution.” Like Baptism, the altar sacrament is a public sign, a holy possession given by Christ to sanctify his people. The fourth sign is the Office of the Keys and Confession publicly exercised. “If a Christian sins, he should be reproved. If he will not mend his ways, he should be bound in his sin and cast out, however, if he does mend his ways he should be absolved.” The fifth sign is the consecration or calling of pastors and the Office of the Holy Ministry. “There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf or in the name of the Church or by reason of their institution by Christ.” The sixth mark: “The holy people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God.” Finally, “the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross.”

Luther elaborates on the seventh sign by stating that

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), 150.

Christians “must endure every misfortune and persecution... all kinds of evil.” In this way, they are conformed not by their own action and decision, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. They are punished not because they have done wrong, or because “they are adulterers, murderers, thieves or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this you may know the Holy Christian Church is here”

The source of these sufferings according to Luther is “the devil, the world and the sinful flesh. Persecution and martyrdom are not the product of paranoia or one’s own mania. They are the work of objective agents. One cannot make a close distinction between those sufferings which are caused by the devil, those which are imposed by the world, and those which have their origin in sinful flesh. All three are involved, even though empirically, it is the world which stands out most clearly.

The Shape of “the World” and its Relation to the Church

As in the Scriptures and so too in Luther’s theology, the term “world” does not necessarily stand for the secular versus the religious or spiritual. When Luther uses this term in connection with devil and the sinful flesh, “world” refers to everything that stands in opposition to God and seeks to silence His Word. There is nothing in Luther of the Neoplatonic notion found in Augustine’s theology, which sets *civitas Dei* and *civitas mundi* in opposition. Augustine characterized the *civitas terrena* as inhabited by children of Cain who devote themselves to hedonistic pleasures and earthly prosperity, while followers of Abel serve God and look to eternal life in His Heavenly City. The Church in this world is the sign which points to the Heavenly City (*res signata*). The history of mankind is a history of constant conflict between the two cities and their citizens. Luther leaves such thinking behind.

Luther instead distinguishes two realms of God activity — one ruled by his right hand, the other by His left. The realm of the right hand of God is “God’s kingdom” in the proper sense of the word (*Geisliches regiment, reich Gottis*), in which he rules spiritually through the proclamation of the Gospel. God rules by his left hand through the secular powers, the kingdoms of His present world (*Weltliches regiment. Reich der Welt*). He rules here through law and order administered by earthly powers which use earthly forms of force (“the sword”) to keep order in society.

Luther understands that these two kingdoms are quite distinct but both are necessary. He does not agree with

those who assert that the world can be ruled by the Gospel alone. He declares that where it is claimed that the Gospel provides universal principles for the earthly government there unbelievers simply mask their unbelief and use so-called Gospel principles and the rights of Christian freedom to their own advantage. Over against this Luther states that Law that operates by threats and by force is necessary for an orderly society and justice. So considered secular government serves God's purposes for the benefit of His people and Church. However, secular government may try to drive God from the picture and construct order and justice according to its own fallen purposes.

It is Luther's concern that both the spiritual and secular realms should know their proper place. The Christian lives under both realms and governments. He is *simul justus et peccator* — he is a baptized child of God whose sins are forgiven and who seeks to live in accordance with God's law and to walk in the way of righteousness. At the same time, however, he is still a child of Adam. He is still subject to temptation, to secret thoughts and desires beyond even his own understanding, always in need of forgiveness and grace. The Law stands over him with its warnings and threats, calling upon him to live a life which is in accordance with the will of God. Luther goes so far as to say: "That the righteous man of his accord does everything that the law demands and more, but the unrighteous do nothing that the law demands and for that reason it is necessary that the law should instruct, compel and constrain them to do good." The unbeliever is not *simul justus et peccator*. He is a sinner who lives only in the "kingdom of the world." He cares nothing about God's will and follows the law in order to avoid incurring the penalties which are attached to its violation.

These two realms or kingdoms are not autonomous. They are both responsible to God. Each has its own particular work to do. The Church is not to interfere in the secular realm as though it were an earthly government, nor is it to issue secular laws or look upon itself as lord over the state. For its part, the secular power does not interfere with the spiritual realm.

From this perspective Luther does not speak of the earthly kingdom in negative terms. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) would establish the principle *Cuius regio, eius religio*, and as a result, many territories became Lutheran, and the Lutheran Churches became territorial churches. In these territories, the worldly authority was to treat the Church benevolently, but they were not to become the secular arms of the Church, enforcing its doctrine and regulations on

the citizens. Church matters were left in the hands of spiritual authorities such as bishops or consistories.

Luther made it clear secular government is limited in its power and authority. Its laws and regulations are to extend no further than the physical body and physical property.

What Luther referred to as the seventh sign or mark of the Church is called into play when temporal, secular authority oversteps its limits and intrudes into spiritual affairs, where God's Word and will should reign supreme. When this happens, Christians are to follow the example of St. Peter, who when he was told by the Jewish authorities that he must not proclaim the person and work of Christ responded that in such matters one must follow "God rather than men."

Luther affirmed Peter's statement at the very time when Lutherans were beginning to feel the pain of persecution and the sword for the sake of their faith. In July of 1523, Henricus Vos and Jan van der Eschen were burned at the stake in Brussels for their confession of the Gospel, and in Ducal Saxony, Duke George was attempting to ban the sale and spread of Luther's translation of the New Testament even to the point of insisting that those who had purchased copies of it must surrender them or suffer dire consequences. Luther stated emphatically that this was no time for Christians to wobble.

To suffer under these circumstances, said Luther, was to be blessed, because it meant that God deemed his people worthy to experience hardship for the sake of his Word. To voluntarily surrender under such circumstances would be tantamount "to delivering Christ up into the hands of Herod." The New Testament and like writings were not to be surrendered voluntarily, but if these writings were snatched from their hands, they were not to resist but willingly endure outrage and hardship. The enduring of such hardship for the sake of the Gospel is a sign of the Church.

The Seventh Sign — A Historical Perspective

This seventh sign of the Church manifested itself most evidently when and where the faithfulness of the Church was put to the test by a strong state or government hostile to the Gospel. In the 16th century, Lutherans most often found themselves in the minority in many territories. They were ready and willing to affirm by word and action the faith which they confessed. Indeed, the Church and Christians who are determined to be faithful regardless of the cost are most likely to find themselves on the receiving end of trials and tribulations.

However, it is not necessary that the Church be in the

minority in order to find itself in a position of suffering and hardship for the sake of the Gospel. History indicates instances of hardship and even outright persecution developed when secular power intruded in the life and worship of Lutheran territorial Churches, even though a majority of the citizens were baptized and communicant members of the Lutheran Church. A clear example is found in the case of Prussia where, reformed rulers were determined to intrude into the faith, confession, and worship of the Lutheran Church — a clear violation of the Lutheran understanding of the clear division between the spiritual and secular powers. This was accomplished by a series of actions undertaken by Prussian rulers, which reached a high point when Friedrich Wilhelm III announced in 1830 that the name “Lutheran” was henceforth banished from the church’s official name and then declared in 1834 that henceforth Lutheran and Reformed congregations were to use a single liturgical agenda on all altars and in all churches. The first sign of concrete suffering and persecution as a result of the royal edicts came in Silesia, where, as Luther had said, the *clausula Petri* must be followed and God rather than man must be obeyed. Pastors and congregations in Breslau and in outlying areas strongly opposed the introduction of the Union Agenda and absolutely refused to make use of it.

An obedient and compliant church government was quick to suspend and impede pastors who defied the royal order. The Pastors themselves refused to recognize these suspensions because they said they were members of the Lutheran Church, not of some ersatz Union Church created by the government. They continued their ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments in accordance with their call and ordination. The results were the same everywhere. The police were sent by governmental authorities to search out these pastors and their congregations. Many pastors were arrested and jailed. They were given an opportunity to repent of their headstrong defiance but if they refused to do so, they were fined and imprisoned. Those who opened their doors to Lutheran services were given heavy fines and if they were unable to pay their property and goods were liable to be confiscated.

Despite the fact that all the eastern territories of Prussia were Lutheran, the seventh sign of the Church appeared chiefly in Silesia for it was there that Lutherans were determined to be faithful in the face of hardship. Elsewhere the Prussian Lutheran Church had in the 18th century come under the influence of Rationalism and had abandoned Lutheran confessions for what were thought to be more

modern approaches to religion. The interference of the secular power into spiritual matters provoked no more than occasional grumblings here and there by those who retained some semblance of Lutheran orthodoxy. What Luther considered an important mark of the Church was circumvented, and substituted for it was a new, more reasonable mark — the mark of prosperity and public acceptance. The result was inevitable. In the course of the reign of reasonable von Hohenzollerns, Lutheranism all but disappeared.

The example of the Prussian Church shows what happens when the Church either sees no need to make a clear confession of the truth of God’s Word or has allowed itself to be rendered incapable of articulating such a confession. If the Church has nothing for which it is willing to suffer it will not suffer, and it will not receive the blessing which hardship brings with it. Here, as Luther had correctly stated, the willingness to endure what a clear confession brings with it and the unwillingness to allow the secular realm to interfere in Church affairs and to the determination to make a bold a clear confession and bear the cross is a clear mark of the Church.

The Situation Today: Some Observations

Today secular governments do not ordinarily interfere directly into Church affairs. The Church’s long history of capitulation has made further interference unnecessary because now some Lutheran Churches in Europe are little more than creatures of the state in which faith has been replaced by ideology. One must be very circumspect in making such a judgment, however, because everywhere churches find it necessary to accommodate themselves in some measure to the secular regimes so that they may continue to proclaim the Gospel. Here one may point the experience of the churches under the Soviet Communist regime. It was the clear intention of the regime to annihilate the Christian faith and the Christian Church; for her part the Church found that its very survival depended upon its willingness to collaborate with the regime to some extent. The governmental program of organized interference with the Church concentrated its central attention on outward affairs rather than direct attempts to alter the content of the Church’s confessions. The Churches found it necessary to direct their primary attention to the faithful confession of the Christian faith. Clergy and members were willing to suffer rather than abandon their confession, to suspend their Sacramental ministry, and to quietly disappear. They had everyday acquaintance with

the seventh sign to an extent not shared by their Western neighbors who enjoyed prosperity and engaged in doctrinal and liturgical experimentation.

Care must be taken also, because many controversial issues are raised under the general banner of human rights and justice — notions which the Church would certainly never be willing to stand against. But now what floats under this banner are issues concerning human sexuality, notions concerning marriage which stand against the Word of God and Church's teachings. Furthermore, biomedical issues and concerns about social welfare and the termination of viable pregnancies are also involved. Until recent times, the Church understood all of these issues to involve sinful disobedience to the Word and will of God, but now, attempts are being made to raise doubts about this. Some Lutheran churches no longer openly protest such ethical issues, but simply affirm the popular positions advocated in the public press and the secular policies articulated by politicians. Today, these issues deeply divide contemporary Lutheranism. The unwillingness, or even the inability, of churches to take a bold stand and endure the consequences of recriminations and persecution represent the elimination of the seventh sign from the church's conscience and life.

The seventh sign has always been regarded as a secondary mark of the Church. Its absence at a particular time and at particular place does not necessarily mean that the Church is no longer the true Church. However, it often happens that where the Church is unwilling to bear the pain of the cross, other marks and signs of the Church, including the pure proclamation of the Gospel, the right administration of the Sacraments, and the proper ordering of the Holy Ministry, disappear as well.

Luther would insist that one must move beyond a simple consideration of the empirical evidence to recognize that behind it stands the ancient consolation of “the Devil, the World and the sinful flesh.” The Church and her people contend with forces which are not merely empirical and material. They are instead higher and stronger powers in heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). They must be combated with the power of God, whom the Church confesses and proclaims.

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