

ARTICLE: Persecution

As children of Adam, we tend to be hedonists. We want to be immersed in comfort and pleasure. While it is true that God created people to bestow His good gifts on them, by turning away from God through the serpent's lie, people sought an alternative source of pleasure, which was destined to fail. All people found was death; there is not, and may never be, life apart from the One who is the Giver of life.

That is why we should not be surprised when our understanding of Christian life becomes distorted in many ways. Christ said He came so that people "*may have life and have it abundantly*" (John 10:10), and we are tempted to interpret this in terms of possessions in this life. St Paul said, "*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*" (Phil. 4:13), and we find delight in thinking that we must be successful in this life, for our God is strong and powerful. Alas, by our nature, we do not want to recognise that the Lord's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

We naturally want to be on the winning side, all the more so in our Christian life, both individually and collectively. The old man in us is eager to see growth, prosperity, respect and admiration from everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Christian message, however, and the God in whom we believe run contrary to our human aspirations of the old Adam. The scandal of Christianity lies in its insistence on exclusivity. There is only one truth, only one way to salvation. By default, all other religions are misleading and pave the way to hell. That makes Christians not "friendly" in the eyes of the world. That is embarrassing. And so it may prompt some to compromise on matters of faith, hoping it will result in more peace and stability in society. That is unlikely to happen. The perception of being part of a "Christian society," once fairly common, is quickly disappearing.

As Western society rapidly reverts to non-Christian moral values, it becomes increasingly important to study the Church's rich experience of persecution and martyrdom. The main lesson we can learn from it is that this is extremely serious. It is a matter of life and death. And shallow Christianity, individualistic and psychologically oriented, is absolutely doomed in that period.

For many, Christians seem increasingly small and miserable in this world. We should not be surprised. After all, our Lord looked miserable on the cross, and only with the eyes of faith can we see Him there for what He is: the Almighty Lord and King.

It is important to realise that our sufferings caused by persecution are not incidental to our faith. If they were, the cross of Christ would also be incidental, just one step in the "salvation plan" to get over and forget about.

So, you are a Christian? Congratulations! You belong to the faith in which you are expected to suffer in this life. Christian suffering is inherently Christological and, in that sense, reflects the nature of God as He truly is.

The cross is widely recognised as the central symbol of the Christian faith. In its original context, there was nothing noble about it: it served as a frightening reminder of the shameful execution reserved for the worst of criminals and enemies of the state. There is something profound about it being a special sign by which we, as Christians, have been marked at our Baptism. It shapes our Christian life. What is it? "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*" (2 Tim. 3:12). All. No exceptions. Persecution for the faith is not something that should catch any baptised person off guard: it is inherent in the very nature of the Christian faith.

When we think of persecution and public confession of faith in such circumstances leading to martyrdom, we tend to think of cruel events in modern countries in Africa and Asia. The glorious first centuries of the Church also come to mind: the third or early fourth-century Roman arena, the crowds shouting, "Christians to the lions!" as heroic men and women who would rather incur unspeakable suffering for the "*faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3) than offer incense to the genius of the Caesar.

Indeed, both in ancient and in recent times, Christian faith and its adherents have experienced massive onslaughts. But does this affect modern Christian inhabitants of the West, particularly those of us living in Australia, on a personal level? We do not have lions roaming around us, and it is unlikely to reach that point in our lifetime. Major cataclysms may or may not occur. As Christians, we continually pray that, wherever we are, *“we may lead a peaceful and quiet life”* (1 Tim. 2:2) for as long as possible. That is our desire.

However, even in that relatively calm setting, persecution may still occur, albeit on a minor scale. Reality is usually more mundane than the lions, which does not make it irrelevant. Life consists of little things. God desires us to be faithful anyway. *“One who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much”* (Luke 16:10).

Likewise, persecution may manifest in small things we may hardly notice as they unfold. A typical example is the gradual rise of a hostile public attitude towards the Christian faith. At first, it may be reflected in the sentiment that Christians are generally inferior in education and knowledge to those who do not accept Christian claims. After all, *“Today nobody believes in the Bible anymore.”* *“You must be ashamed to be a Christian. Who are you, a stupid person?”* When our relatives and friends take such positions, it is especially hard, although Christians should not be surprised if they are hated for Christ’s name’s sake (Matt. 10:22).

Then this negative view of Christianity soon translates into legislation that makes life harder for Christians. For example, it may include stricter taxation policies and infringements on personal rights. It is worth remembering that part of the communists’ takeover of the Lutheran church buildings and other property in Russia 80 years ago was not through direct prohibitions, but rather through peculiar tax policies, strict control by the fire department and city authorities, and mounting pressure on people who attended churches, so that eventually many people stopped coming to the churches and those who continued to do so could no longer afford to take care of the church buildings.

Finally, covert persecution may come through changing the educational model, which will seek to sow the seeds of discord within families by placing children in a new milieu culturally foreign to Christianity.

Do not think that by doing nothing and simply keeping quiet you will stay out of trouble. True, you may gain some time for yourself. But sooner or later you will face the consequences of your spiritual slumber. At the same time, there is nothing you can *“do”* about persecution, strictly speaking. If it happens, it happens. To be sure, we must be active citizens and raise our voices in the public square to defend traditional Christian values and attitudes, but we must not be overconfident that simply lobbying politically for Christianity will surely allow us to avoid persecution.

Thus, if a real battle is coming, make sure you don’t enter it without proper training and ammunition. Persecutions often come when you least expect them. Be on guard!

As for the church, well, let us see how it all holds up when the trials come. Time will tell whether the house is built on sand or on stone. There are many places in the world that once had thriving worship communities, and all that is left for you to see now are the ruins of their churches. Why do you think you will surely get lucky compared to them?

Nevertheless, if you fail to confess Christ at the critical moment and make a shipwreck of your faith, there is still forgiveness for you. Return to your Baptism, as Luther wonderfully instructs in the Large Catechism. Come to confession and have your sins absolved. *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself”* (2 Tim. 2:13).

But by all means, do not think that way in advance. There are dangers in how the human mind and will operate. Once you fall and find yourself in a state of denial of faith, you may prefer to stay that way. It is like taking a drug that chemically alters your brain, making you an addict; it’s better not to play with it. Going to the casino with Satan as your opponent at the gambling table is not a good idea. Don’t take your chances.

God will wipe away all tears. Christ is the triumphant Victor. He triumphs on His cross, in His shedding of blood, and in His death. As Christ has risen and conquered death, so He will raise our

bodies too and give them immortality, no matter what happens to them in this life. The Christian life is rather a marathon than a sprint. What matters is getting to the end, which is also the new beginning. *“Be faithful unto death, and I give you the crown of life”* (Rev. 2:10).