



'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tm 3:12) – An Eastern Orthodox perspective on persecutions and martyrdom

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The purpose of this article is to offer a perspective on persecutions and martyrdom in the context of today's world, when so many Christians are under threat and even die for their faith. In the Introduction section, some short exegetical comments on 1 Timothy 3:12 and some impressive references to the religious persecutions in a Communist regime are made. The first part contains some terminological aspects and biblical references concerning the term 'witness' (martyrs, testis), from Genesis to Revelation where Jesus Christ is called 'the faithful Witness (Martyrs)' (1:5). Then special emphasis is put on the martyrdom of St Stephen, St Polycarp and St Ignatius of Antioch. In the second part, the author tries to offer a theological perspective on persecution and martyrdom. Although persecution is a deeply spiritual struggle and a result of satanic attack, it is also an opportunity for witness (martyria), while martyrdom is the fruit of sacrificial love. Acts 9:4 clearly reveals who is the main target and who is finally persecuted; hence, the conclusion is that persecutions and martyrdom represent a permanent condition of the Church, the Body of Christ. During persecutions, Christians are advised to keep their faith, but not to force martyrdom, not to self-inflict it on themselves.

Keywords: Communist prison; atheism; ecumenism of suffering; ecumenism behind the bars; persecution; martyr; martyrdom; death; birth in the kingdom of God.

Introduction

In 2 Timothy 3:10–12, the emphasis on the persecutions and sufferings that Saint Paul has experienced, especially those during his first missionary journey (at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra), is intended to encourage Timothy not only to join with him in suffering for the gospel (1 Tm 1:8) but also to recognise God's sovereign control of the situation (2 Tm 2:19). The Lord rescued Saint Paul out of all these persecutions, and he will care for Timothy in Ephesus. The persecution is 'a necessary consequence of striving for godliness; thus, persecution functions as an indication of one's pursuit of godliness' (Mounce 2000:559, 560). In verse 11, the term 'persecution' (*diogmos*) occurs twice being its theme, and is used specifically to denote religious persecution (cf. Rm 8:35; 2 Cor 12:10; 2 Th 1:4; Ac 8:1, 13:50; Mt 13:21; Mk 4:17, 10:30), while *suffering* (*pathema*) (cf. Rm 7:5, 8:8; 2 Cor 1:5, 6, 7; Gl 5:24; Phlp 3:10; Col 1:24), in this context, denotes suffering because of persecution (Mounce 2000:558).

After recalling the persecutions and sufferings, Saint Paul concludes that 'indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'. The words ζῆν εὐσεβῶς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ from 2 Timothy 3:12 (cf. Tt 2:12) denote the pious life as Christian in its nature because the true εὐσέβεια is possible only in communion with Christ. The principle that devoted Christians must expect persecutions was explicit in our Saviour's own teaching (Mt 10:22–25; Lk 21:12; Jn 15:18–21; Mt 5:10–12) (Gutherie 1996:173); the Christian piety cannot continue without persecution because the world is hostile to the Kingdom of God (cf. Jn 15:19–20; Mt 10:22, 10:38). 'A godly life' does not mean an inward attitude, nor an undisputed customised 'bourgeois' (*Bürgerlichkeit*), but a responsible endeavour supported by God's grace, for a life and a world modelled by Christian belief (Weiser 2003:275).¹

This hostility was also evident in Communist regimes. Communism, wherever has been imposed, was intended to be not only an economical alternative but also a religious or pseudo-religious one. The authentic religious manifestations were forced to limit themselves to the private area,

¹Fromm leben meint im Sinne der Past weder eine nur innerliche Haltung noch eine unangefochtene, angepasste 'Bürgerlichkeit', sondern das von der Gnade Gottes getragene Bemühen um eine aus christlichem Glauben verantwortete Lebens- und Weltgestaltung' (Weiser 2003:275).

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Note: HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

and even there – as in Albania (Broun 1986:43–60) – they were not allowed. Therefore, an elimination of the religious symbols from the public arena was done in order that the Communist state might control both the physical and the spiritual needs of its citizens. The Communist manifesto (ideology) presented itself as a new form of religion. Consequently, the prisons and the control over the Church were used to convince people of the ‘advantages’ of the new system. Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants were imprisoned and lived an *ecumenic cohabitation of suffering* or an *ecumenism behind the bars*.

Furthermore, a terrible experiment called ‘re-education’ was practised in many prisons. The main aim of the Communist leading system was to diminish and even prevent any kind of religious manifestation, as it opposed the Marxist ideology. The Christian faith will be put in parallel with science and consistently was openly confronted. Seen as ‘opium for people’, the religion, before being completely eliminated by means of physical and psychological violence, must have been excluded from the public arena. The aim was the elimination of the Christian presence from the whole of society: from schools, from the army, from hospitals. All these were to be accomplished by a consistent policy, through the elimination of all Christian symbols from the public sphere, through the professional exclusion of those who consciously declared their belonging to the Church.

For example, in Romania (Britannica.com; Condrea 2018), the number of arrests increased after 1948, once the Communist regime became stronger. Anyone who could potentially be a threat to the Communist leading system, especially intellectuals, clerics, teachers and former politicians, were the target of investigations. While the penitentiary system was filled with political prisoners (the Christians were very often accused of political actions, although their actions portrayed only their Christian identity), forced labour camps and new prisons were created. Several labour camps where many people lost their lives were put up to dig the Danube–Black Sea Canal. Among the most well-known prisons for the torture of prisoners were Sighet (Condrea 2018), Gherla, Aiud (Popescu 2004:81–82)² and Pitesti (Welton 2019; Wordpress.com 2015),³ and as for the forced labour camps, lead mines were set up in the Danube Delta as well.

The prison in Pitesti was the centre of a Communist experiment, called ‘re-education’, during that time. It involved both psychological and physical torture, resulting in the total nervous breakdown of the individual. The ultimate aim was to force prisoners to confess false and/or imaginary crimes or denounce themselves and others. This experiment resulted in numerous suicides inside the prison and was ultimately stopped.

²Confession of faith is the confession of the divine truth of our being. In the re-education process, Tutea experienced the diabolical reversal of this. Yet, paradoxically, that very experience constituted a martyrdom that was to provide him with the basis for a highly original theological and intellectual doxology’ and ‘Tutea’s Christian Confession in Prison’ (Popescu 2004:83).

³On this web page is also a very impressive video in Engl., with former Pitesti prisoners, for example, Fr. Gheorghe Calciu Dumitreasa and Fr. Roman Braga.

When our Lord died, he was put into a tomb as a mortal being. All hope was abandoned and many were full of fear and disappointment despite the Lord’s deeds. The Jews even asked that the tomb should be sealed to discourage any attempt to approach the tomb. The 20th-century martyrs were often sentenced to prison in similar tombs to hamper any hope of survival; for many years, nobody would hear anything about them (Welton 2019). But things did not turn out always as they were expected by the evildoers. Something amazing, paradoxical happened: the place of death became the place of Life. The dawning and triumphal Life sprang out of the tomb and broke the human-made seal. This event was reflected in the life of many prisoners, as they transformed their tombs into spiritual dwellings for the Lord’s sake.

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand declared, ‘[w]hat the communists have done to Christians surpasses all possibility of human understanding’ (Wurmbrand 1967:37). Tortures had not only a physical dimension but also a psychological one. After having mentioned some of the tortures applied to the Christian inmates, he comments (Wurmbrand 1967):

All the biblical descriptions of hell and the pains of Dante’s Inferno are nothing in comparison with the tortures in communist prisons ... Other things simply cannot be told. My heart would fail if I should tell them again and again. They are too terrible and obscene to put them in writing. (p. 57)

According to Pastor Richard Wurmbrand, a general image of the suffering in the Romanian Communist prisons is described as follows (Wurmbrand 1967):

I have seen Christians in communist prisons with 50 pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonful of salt had been forced, being kept afterwards without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold, and praying with fervour for the communists. This is humanly inexplicable! It is the love of Christ, which was shed into our hearts. (p. 57)

Describing the bad treatment applied to himself by the guards, Pastor Richard Wurmbrand says (Wurmbrand 1967):

The tortures and brutality continued without interruption. When I lost my consciousness or became too dazed to give the torturers any further hopes of confessions, I would be returned to my cell. There I would lie, unattended and half dead, to regain a little strength so they could work on me again. Many died at this stage, but somehow my strength, always managed to come back. In the ensuing years, in several different prisons, they broke four vertebrae in my back, and many other bones. They carved me in a dozen places. They burned and cut eighteen holes in my body. (p. 41)

At some point, a member of the family would be brought to the prison and beaten in front of his or her imprisoned relative. This happened with Pastor Florescu. As he was unwilling to betray his cellmates, his son was beaten to death in front of him. Referring to this moment, Pastor Richard Wurmbrand relates (Wurmbrand 1967):

A Pastor by name of Florescu was tortured with red-hot iron pokers and with knives. He was beaten very badly. Then starving

rats were driven into his cell through a large pipe. He could not sleep, but had to defend himself all the time. If he rested a moment, the rats would attack him. He was forced to stand for two weeks, day and night. The communists wished to compel him to betray his brethren, but he resisted steadfastly. In the end they brought his fourteen years old son and began to whip the boy in front of his father, saying that they would continue to beat him until the pastor would confess his false crimes. The poor man was half mad. He bore it as long as he could. When he could not stand it anymore, he cried to his son: 'Alexander, I must say what they want! I can't bear to see you being beaten anymore!'. The son answered: 'Father, I don't want to have a traitor as a parent.' Withstand! If they kill me I will, die with the words 'Jesus and my fatherland'. The communists, enraged, fell upon the child and beat him to death, with blood spattered over the walls of the cell. He died praising God. (p. 36)

This terrible event echoes Fr Nicolae Steinhardt's⁴ words about the cruciform character of the Christian live (Fr. Steinhardt 2005):

Wake up and see where you placed yourself: in the shade of the Cross, of a tool for torture, on which blood is shedding, on which one is hanging with his lungs, his kidneys torn apart, who is not only gradually tortured and killed, but also, and especially mocked at and especially killed like a sacrificed cow, like the killed cut into pieces with the chopper by an unknown ripper. Torn bowels, blood, mocking, nails. This is Christianity, young man. (p. 37)

Very often the persecutors were amazed when they saw Christian prisoners filled with joy although they were beaten, and when they saw Christian prisoners loving them, that is, their torturers. Tears of joy fill the eyes of the persecuted Christians. They lived in Christ, they understood that Christianity is possible, that it is real, and they have experienced it. The wonderful teachings of Christianity can be embodied; they were not idealists who yearned for an ideal, utopian world. They have tested the teachings, and their wounds and joy are witness to the teachings' veracity. Or perhaps it is the other way around because they put their trust in God from the beginning. They followed his word and did not go astray, the Christian teaching giving thus value to their suffering and joy. However, it works both ways. The Christian prisoners have been witnesses to wonderful things, although placed in the heart of suffering. Wurmbrand (1967) says:

I do not feel frustrated to have lost so many years in prison. I have seen beautiful things. I myself have been among the weak and insignificant ones in prison, but have had the privilege to be in the same jail with great saints, heroes of faith who equalled the Christians of the first centuries. They went gladly to die for Christ. The spiritual beauty of such saints and heroes can never be described. (p. 47)

When asked about the most repulsive aspect of Communism, Valeriu Gafencu, who died in prison at 31 years of age, after 11 years of very harsh conditions in prisons, and who was surnamed 'the saint of the prisons', answered (Iorgovan 2009):

4. A Jewish origin intellectual who received in great secrecy the Baptism in Communist prison, and after liberation became a Orthodox monk.

Its poverty is hard to endure, its imprisonment of man within a system is indeed serious, but nothing is more dreadful than the determination of conscience, which transforms man into a controlled tool. (p. 245)

Furthermore, when asked why God allowed the present crisis after 2000 years of Christianity, he answered (Iorgovan 2009):

This crisis is not from God, nor is it from faith, but rather from the freedom of the human conscience, In the past few centuries, man has profaned the world, devastated souls, encouraged sensuality and has fallen prey to the pride of materialism and atheism. At the same time, satanic forces are more refined and better organised in the 20th century than in the first Christian age. The way in which saints are killed by the beast and perish in the 20th century is much more diabolical, more perverse, more complete, better studied, more horrible than the way in which martyrs were killed during the age of the catacombs. (p. 245)

Following Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Father Dumitru Stăniloae,⁵ the famous Romanian theologian, who himself suffered in Communist prisons, wrote several times in his *Dogmatics* that in front of God the Father we do not have access unless we are in the state of pure sacrifice, which is possible by receiving worthily the Holy Eucharist and, in a very special way, by martyrdom.

Today many Christians are still suffering persecutions and martyrdom in different parts of the world, and this is why we must go back to the biblical and patristic references to better understand the past, the present and the future of Christian life and witness (*martyria*) in the world.

Witness (*martyrs, testis*) – Some terminological aspects

The modern term 'martyr' comes from the Greek term *martyrs*, *martyros*, which can be translated to 'witness', *testis* in Latin. *Martyrs* would seem to come from a root having the sense 'to bear in mind', 'to remember', 'to be careful', while *martyrein* means 'to be a witness' (Strathmann 1977:475); therefore, a *martyr* in the connotative sense (of *witness*) is the one who remembers with great care a certain event. The witness has seen and testified by words. The relation between *vision* and *speech* is significant. The witness remembers what he or she saw and reveals them as he or she saw them. In the Homeric poems, very often a *god* is invoked as *martyrs*, to assert the veracity of a fact or affirmation (Bădiliță 2012:12). It is worth mentioning that in Epictetus, the philosophically educated are *martyres*, with the sense of being called and brought to this position by Zeus, and 'in some cases this may involve suffering death' (Strathmann 1977:481).

5. Father Dumitru Stăniloae's *Dogmatic Theology* was published in English in 6 vol.: *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Vol. 1, *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God* (Brookline 2005); Vol. 2, *The World: Creation and Deification* (Brookline 2005); Vol. 3, *The Person of Jesus Christ as God and Savior* (Brookline 2011); Vol. 4, *The Church: Communion in the Holy Spirit* (Brookline 2012); Vol. 5, *The Sanctifying Mysteries* (Brookline 2012); Vol. 6, *The Fulfillment of Creation* (Brookline 2013); for other English translations from his works, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumitru_St%C4%83niloae; the *list of the doctoral thesis* about his work on: http://www.studiiteologie.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=41&lang=ro.

In the Septuagint (according to the *TLG*), there are 58 occurrences of the noun *martys*. *Martys* belongs to the legal world and denotes the witness before the judgement, in the first instance the witness for the prosecution (cf. Nm 5:13, 35–30; Dt 17:6, 7, 19:15). In the judgement of God, the people are witnesses against themselves (Jos 24:22), and the song of Moses bears witness (*martyrein*) against Israel (Dt 31:19, 21) (Strathmann 1977:483). *Martys* has the meaning of *witness* in all passages, from God to a sacred object; for example, *Genesis* 31:44: ‘God is witness (*martyse*) between you and me’. When making a covenant, the witness is the key element, the main guarantor. *Isaiah* 43, 10 (12): ‘(...) be my witness (*martyrese*)’. ‘I am witness to it, says the Lord’ (Jr 29:23). When God says ‘I am witness’, it means that God guarantees for the fulfilling of the respective condemnation.

Therefore, *witness* in general is part of the sacred, but this fact has been often neglected in the exegesis. The witness’s testimony is not a mere opinion but a guarantee of *the truth*, a revealed truth, unknown by others. From this point of view, the witness is kin to the prophet, who is himself a ‘man of God’, ‘spokesman’. ‘*Martyrion* always takes the sense of revelation, the revelation of divine commandments (...). Yahweh Himself is the subject of the *martyrein* contained in the *martyrion*’ (Strathmann 1977:485–486).

It is important to mention here that in Later Judaism was developed the idea that ‘the Jewish religion is a religion of martyrdom. It is born out of martyrdom and the sufferings of the righteous in the Maccabean age’ (Strathmann 1977:486). It was vital for the people to emulate the ideal of the righteous man who proves his loyalty to the faith and the law by suffering persecution and death. Furthermore, according to Strathmann (1977):

[A]lready in the early Church (cf. Orig. Exhort) it became the custom to bring the events to which we refer into close connection with the development of the early Christian *martyr* concept (...) so that in the Church’s tradition the Maccabean martyrs could even be enrolled among the Christian martyrs. (p. 486)

In the New Testament, the term *martys* appears 34 times. It has a special use in the Lucan writings, that is, a combination of witness to facts and witness in the sense of Evangelistic confession. ‘The witness to facts and the witness to truth are one and the same – the unavoidable result of the fact that the Gospel presents a historical revelation’ (Strathmann 1977:492).

A further step is taken when Stephen is called ‘thy witness’ (*tou martyros sou*) in *Acts* 22:20, but we do not have here already the later ecclesiastical martyr concept because the genitive *sou* shows that we are still in the sphere of the original sense. Although ‘Stephen is not called witness because he dies; he dies because he is a witness of Christ and because of his evangelistic activity’, nevertheless (Strathmann 1977):

Stephen is called this in an emphatic and distinctive way because by suffering death he gave final proof of the seriousness of his confessional witness. The usage here prepares the ground for the

later technical use in the Church. The fact of persecution rather than special ecstatic experiences of the martyrs led to the development of this specialized usage. (p. 494)

In the gospel according to Saint John, in his Epistles and in Revelation, witnessing to the truth is a major theme. It must be mentioned that the words *martyreo*, *martyria* and *martys* are used 150 times in the New Testament, while in Saint John’s writings, 75 times (one half of all the New Testament occurrences).

The major teachings of Saint John in connection with ‘witness’ are the following:

1. Jesus was sent by His Father to witness God’s truth (*hina martyreso te aletheia*) (Jn 18:37, 17; Rv 3:14).
2. The witness of Jesus was the capstone and fulfilment of the prophets, most prominently, Saint John the Baptist who ‘came as a witness (*martyrian*), to bear witness (*martyrese*)’ (Jn 1:6–8).
3. The darkness of the world is unreceptive and hostile to the witness of God’s truth, which is like a light in a dark place (Jn 3:19–20).
4. Believers are to carry on the Lord’s work of being a witness to God’s truth with the Holy Spirit as Helper: ‘He will bear witness (*martyresei*) about Me, and you will bear witness (*martyreite*) also because you have been with Me from the beginning’ (Jn 15:26–27; cf. 1 Jn 1:1–3).
5. The hostility to the truth that met the Lord will also be encountered by his faithful witnesses (Jn 15:18–20; Rv 20:4).

Other New Testament applications of ‘witness’ are the following:

1. Believers witnessing to other believers as an encouragement for walking in God’s ways of blessing (1 Pt 5:1; Heb 12:1).
2. When combined with the Greek pronoun ‘sym’, *symmartyreo*, the meaning conveys an inner witness given by God to the believer (Rm 8:15–16, 9:1).

It is important to underline that concerning Saint John the Baptist, the terms *martyr* and *witness* are combined:

‘He came as a *martyr*’ (Jn 1:7). Saint John testified also about the baptism of Jesus: ‘[a]nd John bore witness (*emartyresen*): ‘I have seen the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven, and remained above Him’ (1:32) and the fact that he is the Son of God (cf. Jn 1:34).

Jesus himself testifies: ‘[w]hat we know and what we have seen we bear testimony (*martyroumen*); but you do not receive our testimony (*martyrian*)’ (Jn 3:11–13). The testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ is essential because only he ‘has come down from heaven’ (Jn 3:13):

Jesus answered and said unto them: Even if I do bear witness (*martyro*) about Myself, My testimony (*martyria*) is true, for I know where I came from, and where I am going. (Jn 8:14)

Jesus was condemned because he was the king and because he came ‘to bear witness – *martyreso* to the truth’:

Then Pilate said to him 'So you are a king?', Jesus answered: 'You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come in the world – to bear witness to the truth – *hina martyresō te aletheia*. (Jn 18:37)

(...) Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession – *Christou Iesou tou martyresantos epi Pontiou Pilatou tes kalen homologian*. (1 Tm 6, 13)

In his turn, the Father testifies, 'I am the One who bears witness (*ho martyron*) about myself, and the Father who sent bears witness (*martyrei*)' (Jn 8:18).

According to the Gospel of Saint John, the Father and the Son are the *two witnesses* of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is also the content of the martyrs' vision at the time of their death.

But the Holy Spirit also testifies: '[h]e will bear witness about me (*martyresei*) about Me' (Jn 15:26–27).

In the *Acts of the martyrs*, the Holy Spirit acts as an 'advocate' of the Truth and the 'comforter' of those tortured for Truth – Jesus Christ being 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14:6). The Spirit testifies to the truth embodied unto the death by the martyrs.

Jesus the Witness ascends to the Father, leaving behind his witnesses of his resurrection, as the Book of Acts says:

When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will receive power (*dynamis*) and you will be my witnesses (*martyres*) in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Ac 1:8)

'This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses (*martyres*)' (Ac 2:32; cf. Ac 4:33). So, the essence of the testimony of the Apostles is the resurrection of the Saviour Jesus Christ, the Witness of the Kingdom of Heaven. The resurrection means victory over death, and, implicitly, the disappearance of the fear of death, which will make possible the courageous conduct of the martyrs. Because Jesus raised, death is a transient moment to the Kingdom of Heaven. Death goes out of fear and enters the horizon of faith. Death is a beginning and death releases (Bădiliță 2012:13).

Of the Johannine writings, only Revelation uses *martyrs*. In two of the five references, Jesus Christ himself is called 'the faithful witness (*ho Martyrs, ho pistos, Testis fidelis*), the First-born from the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth (*ho archon ton basileon tes ges*)' (1:5) and '*ho Martyrs, ho pistos kai alethinos*' (3:14). The phrase is taken from Psalms 88:37: *ho martyrs en ourano pistos* (Mosca 1986; Veijola 1988). In the psalm, it applies to God; here it has a Messianic reference; the sense may be seen from 1:2: *martyria Iesou Christou* (Strathmann 1977:495).

Then, 11:3 refers to the two prophets who bear witness for 1260 days and then are killed by the beast, but 'they are not witness because they are put to death, but by reason of their prophetic activity' (Strathmann 1977:495). In 2:13, although

Antipas is designated as 'my faithful witness (*ho martyrs mou ho pistos mou*)' and 'was killed among you, where Satan dwells', he 'is not a witness because he is put to death; he is put to death because he is a witness, that is in the sense of proclamation of the Gospel' (Strathmann 1977:495), and, moreover, he is called emphatically *martyrs pistos* because death cannot deflect him from witnessing. The fifth occurrence of the term *martyrs* in Revelation is in 17:6: 'the woman drunk with the blood of the saints (*agion*), the blood of the martyrs (*martyron*) of Jesus'.

We can conclude that the term *martyrs* is reserved for 'those who prove the final seriousness of their evangelistic witness by suffering death. These are faithful witnesses, and only faithful witnesses are witnesses in the full sense, true witnesses' (cf. Ac 22:20) (Strathmann 1977:495). Because of this, it could be said that in Revelation appears the semantic shift of the term *martyrs*, from the *witness* to the *martyr*. Antipas, traditionally, the first bishop of Pergamum, under Domitian, is not only a witness of historical facts or an evangelistic witness, but one who gave his life for faith in Jesus Christ, opposing Satan directly; and the theme of confronting Satan appears often in the *Acts of the martyrs* (Bădiliță 2012:13).⁶

Furthermore, in Revelation 6:9:

'I have seen under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness (*martyrian*) they had borne which they have brought', we have the connection between sacrifice and sanctification. This involves three aspects:

1. Here is an image of the Kingdom of Heaven; the slaughtered are under the altar, that is, in the central place of the heavenly sanctuary; it is the place of those who are sacrificed for their faith. Saint John sees the place of the sacrificed ones.
2. Their testimony is in a sacrificial register; the witnesses are slaughtered as the animals of the sacrifice were slaughtered in the temple in Jerusalem.
3. Sacrifice is equivalent to the testimony, or, more clearly, the testimony goes to sacrifice by stabbing.

The relationship between *sacrifice and testimony* is emphasised also in Revelation 12:11: '[t]hey have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (*martyrias*), for they loved not their lives even unto death'; and also:

And I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also, I saw the souls of those who have been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus (*martyrian Iesou*) and for the word of God Jesus. (Rv 20:4)

The *Book of Revelation* played an important role in the semantic modification of the term *martyrs*. Asia Minor, the region where this book was written and where it circulated intensely, was

⁶The Christian who goes forward to martyrdom does not wrestle with flesh and blood. Those who torture him or try to make him recant are agents of the devil. He stands in an *agon* with this great foe. The conflict with the Egyptian (Egypt is the land of devilish magic) finds particularly graphic description in a vision in the Martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions' (Strathmann 1977:507).

also the place where most of the scenes of *Acta Martyrum* took place (Bădiliță 2012:20).

As it has already been underlined, the Christian martyr's prototype is the Saviour himself, '*ho Martys, ho pistos*' (Rv 1:5), the One who sends his disciples 'as lambs in the midst of wolves' (Lk 10:3), and who warns them that they will have to 'bear witness (*martyrion*) before them and the Gentiles', and just 'who stands firm to the end will be saved (*sothesetai*)' (Mt 10:17–22; cf. Mt 5:11–12). During the terrible persecutions, when the enmity will occur even among the families, the Holy Spirit will plead for them, *and the persecutors will only kill the bodies* (Mt 10:28). Everyone who acknowledges (*homologesei*) Jesus before the people, he will also acknowledge (*homologeso*) him before the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 10:32). Here is the obvious relationship between persecution, patience in suffering and salvation (*sotheria*). It is important also to mention that during persecution the distinction between *homologeio* and *matyreio* disappears (Strathmann 1977):

[A]s may be seen especially in the accounts of the South Gaul martyrdoms in Eus.Hist.Eccl., V,1, where the two terms are fully interchangeable. Nevertheless, the term *martyris* is 'reserved for those who seal the seriousness of their witness or confession by death and it became a tt. in this sense'. (p. 505)

In their struggles, the martyrs imitate Jesus Christ, especially his sufferings; he himself fights in them and supports them together with the Holy Spirit. That is why they can suffer the most terrible pains, without a murmur or even with a smile, and also, for many of them, have the privilege of seeing the *doxa Kyriou* and of being strengthened by visions and heavenly voices; as they suffer, they are in transition to the heavenly state; being perfected, they go directly to heavenly glory (Strathmann 1977:507).

These ideas are found very clearly in the older martyrdoms, starting with Saint Stephen. He became the direct *martyris* of the Kingdom of Heaven: '[b]ehold, I see (*theo*) the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (Ac 7:56). The verb *theo*, used here according to *Lampe Patristic Lexicon*, means 'to contemplate mystically through agency of Holy Spirit and through the Word' (ed. Lampe 1961:647). Saint Stephen received during his great suffering the gift of contemplative experience, of mystic vision (ed. Lampe 1961:647). He contemplates the divine glory and Jesus *standing (hestota, stantem; while in the Creed we read: 'is seated at the right hand of the Father')* on the right hand of God the Father – as a sign of deep respect for Saint Stephen's martyrdom – awaiting to receive his soul.

Here are three essential elements for describing the martyr:

1. suffering in the name of faith that reaches the supreme sacrifice
2. the vision of the Kingdom, doubled by confession
3. the prayer for forgiveness of the executioners.

Saint Stephen not only contemplates the glory of God but also 'opens his mouth' and testifies before the Sanhedrin what he sees: '[b]ehold, I see the heavens opening up and the

Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'. With certainty in the reality of the Kingdom, the certainty gained through mystical vision, the martyr dies with serene soul, in spite of the terrible sufferings he had suffered.

Furthermore, it is impressive to see the way in which 'death as a birth in the kingdom of God' is emphasised by Saint Ignatius of Antioch. Early in the 2nd century, on his way towards trial and martyrdom, he wrote a poignant letter to the Christians in Rome, the city where he was to die. 'He wrote not about Baptism, but about his impending death' (Lathrop 1999:13):

My desire (*eros*) has been crucified and there is not in me any fire which feeds off material stuff (*pyr philoulon*) but rather there is water living and speaking in me [cf. Jn 4:10; 7:38], saying to me from within:

'Come to the Father!' I do not delight in the food of death or the pleasures of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, descended from David [Jn 7:42; Rm 1:3], and I want the drink of his blood, which is dead less love (*agape*). (St Ignatius 1959:234)

This touching text heralds Saint Ignatius' martyrdom that he both accepts and wishes for. 'The holy water' that speaks signifies the consecration by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the One who makes Christ present, the Logos, the Word of God. 'The living water' is the Spirit of God flowing inside him (Jn 4:14, 7:37–39, 19:34). The Holy Spirit conforms us to Christ (cf. Gl 4:19 'morphote'), the One that tells the saint: '[c]ome to the Father!' It is very moving to see how the baptismal grace is again fully experienced. His Baptism was not purely formal but a continuous process in which the Triune God is active (St Ignatius 1959):

The pleasures of this world or the kingdoms of this time are useless to me. For it were good for me rather to die [cf. 1 Cor 9:15] in Christ Jesus than to rule over the margins of the Earth. I seek the One who has died for us; I want him who has risen for us. *My birth is near* (...). Let me receive the pure light! Once there, I shall be a man indeed! Let me be follower to the passion of my God! (pp. 232–234)

Saint Ignatius uses here (Lathrop 1999):

[S]trong baptismal analogies: that his death will be a birth, an illumination, a patterning after the passion of Christ. It should be no surprise that Baptism and Eucharist could function in the ancient church as *metaphors* for suffering witness before the world as well as *sources* for such ethical action, for they already functioned this way in the Gospel of Mark. They continued so to function in the church of martyrs. (p. 14)

In a time of cruelty and oppression, the distance between eating the bread of God in a community and being 'ground like wheat' in the arena was not long.⁷ Saint Ignatius is about to become martyr, which he sees as a reflection of becoming a Christian and fully a person.⁸

7. 'I am God's wheat and I am ground by the fangs of the beasts so that I can be pure bread to Christ' (St. Ignatius 1959:230).

8. Saint Ignatius himself sees his martyrdom as, becoming Christian' indeed, being found truly Christian, not just in name; *To Romans* 3:2.

Of importance is the Trinitarian perspective on Baptism: 'water living and speaking in me, saying to me from within, "Come to the Father"'. The baptismal/living water is consecrated, like the primordial one, by the Holy Spirit Who speaks, that is, the Logos/the Son is speaking, inviting to the filial communion with the Father.

Nevertheless, it must be also said that a *martyr* is not everybody who throws himself in the arms of the executioners, thinking that he is dying for Christ. In fact, some Church Fathers will draw attention to the risk of forcing martyrdom. One of the deepest meditations on this theme belongs to Clement of Alexandria, in *Stromata*, the fourth book. Here Clement responds simultaneously (Clément d'Alexandrie 2001):

1. to the Gnostics who mock the testimony through the blood, claiming that there is only one form of martyrdom, namely, the 'knowledge/gnosis of the true God', hence the 'inner testimony'
2. fanatics who turn themselves to the authorities, thus causing their death. Here is how risky it is, for your own salvation, the provocative attitude of false martyrs. (ch. 9–10, 19)

Clement of Alexandria referring to our Lord Jesus Christ's words, 'When they persecute you in this city, flee ye to the other' (Mt 10:23), explains (Clément d'Alexandrie 2001):

He does not advise flight, as if persecution were an evil thing; nor does He enjoy them by flight to avoid death, as if in dread of it, but wishes us neither to be authors nor abettors of any evil to any one, either to ourselves or the persecutor and murderer. For He in a way, bids us to take care of ourselves. But he who disobeys is rash and foolhardy. If he who kills a man of God sins against God, he also who presents himself before the judgment-seat becomes guilty of his death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. Such a one, as far as in him lies, becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor. And if he also uses provocation, he is wholly guilty, challenging the wild beast. And similarly, if he affords any cause for conflict or punishment, or retribution or enmity, he gives occasion for persecution. Wherefore, then, we are enjoying not to cling to anything that belongs to this life; but to *him that takes our cloak to give our coat*, not only that we may continue destitute of inordinate affection, but that we may not by retaliating make our persecutors savage against ourselves, and stir them up to blaspheme the name. (pp. 10, 76–77, 180–182; Engl. trans. on orthodoxebooks.org:255)

Therefore, it is important to avoid an extremist attitude, a provocative fanaticism. During the persecution, Christians were advised not to force martyrdom, not to self-inflict it upon themselves.⁹ If all of them had died, then it is logical that the Christians would have perished and, implicitly, the

9. However, Saint Cyprian wrote *De lapsis* and demanded from the apostates a serious and ample penitence (*metanoia*) as part of the process of being received again in the Church. There are three classes of *lapsi*, between which the difference must be clearly distinguished, using the Latin terms: *sacrificati*, those who had actually brought sacrifices to the gods; *thurificati*, those who offered incense to the gods; and *libellatici*, those who had obtained a *libellus* for a fee or other means, without actually sacrificing to the gods, and which would be analysed on a case-by-case basis (St Cyprian 1964:2, 20, 55). *Sacrificati* and *thurificati* were re-received only when they were in danger of death.

apostolic succession, absolutely necessary to preserve the revealed truth, and also for priesthood and for the organisation of the Church in general, would have been broken. Martyrs are convinced of the existence of a future life, superior to the one here. Without the essential reference to the gospel or the Person of Jesus Christ, martyrdom is meaningless – it would be suicide.

For Clement, authentic martyrdom means 'perfection', spiritual perfection through the highest Christian virtue, that is, love (Clément d'Alexandrie 2001:19, 118, 252). Martyrdom is the physical and visible expression of the believer's love for God. A martyrdom without love would be a false one, for martyrdom, that is, the supreme confession by sacrifice, is the fruit and manifestation of love for Jesus Christ. Man's love for God originates from God's love for man (cf. Jn 15:12; 1 Jn 4:19).

Clement also distinguishes between Christ's confession by words, which he calls the 'partial confession', and that of facts, which he calls 'total', 'full'. The witnesses in front of the courts testify *by voice*, but the total, most important, confession is that of *the deeds* that are rooted in love ('καὶ ἔστιν ἢ διὰ τῆς φωνῆς ὁμολογία οὐ καθολικὴ, ἀλλὰ μερικὴ', Clément d'Alexandrie 2001:9, 71.4, 172).

In connection with the danger of persecution and death is the simple and the most popular creedal formula, as well as the briefest in the New Testament, that is, the slogan *Kyrios Iesous = Jesus is Lord*. Saint Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:3, 'No one can say *Kyrios Iesous* except by the Holy Spirit', and again 'If with your mouth you confess (*homologeses*) *Kyrios Iesous* and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rm 10:9). He does not disclose the occasion on which these utterances would be made, but the context of the first, with its reference to the alternative of saying *Anathema Iesous*, seems to suggest that Saint Paul refers to an hour when the Christian's loyalty is tested (by persecution possibly, but not exclusively).

This harmonises well with the stress laid by the early Christians on the sinfulness of denying Christ when challenged, as well as with what we know of the practice of the civil authorities of trying to induce Christians haled before them to curse Christ ('καὶ πῶς δύνανται βλασφημησαὶ τὸν βασιλέα μου τὸν σώσαντά με', Martyrdom of St Polycarp 9, 3, Musurillo 1972:8). The repeated description of Baptism as 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' (cf. Ac 8:16, 19:5; 1 Cor 6:11) certainly seems to imply that the formula 'Jesus is Lord' was used in the Christian rite. In *Philippians* 2:11, Saint Apostle Paul said that every tongue must confess (*exomologesetai*) that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'; also, *Colossians* 2:6: 'Christ Jesus the Lord, *Christon Iesoun ton Kyrion*'. The *Martyrdom of St Polycarp* reports that the imperial magistrate, doing his best to persuade the aged bishop to come to terms, asked him: '[w]hat harm is there in saying Caesar is Lord?' (Kelly 1960:15). The acclamation *Kyrios Kaisar* would seem to have been a popular one in the civic cult of the Roman Empire, and Christians were undoubtedly conscious of the implicit denial

of it contained in their own *Kyrios Iesous* (Kelly 1960:15; Mussurillo 1972:8).

Considerations regarding a theological understanding of the persecution of the Church

Both the history of Israel and the experience of the early Church (Dodds 1990:60, 105–110) teach us one essential thing about persecution: true religious life patterns will always trigger persecution. As it was shown *supra*, the well-known New Testament text to express this very nature of persecution is 2 Timothy 3:12: '[i]ndeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'. Then, an image of the situation of the Old Testament prophets presented in *Hebrews* 11:32–40 strengthens this perception: '(...) and all these, though commended through their faith – *martyrethentes dia thes pisteos*' (Heb 11:39).

Among the many books and articles on persecution and martyrdom, the one written by Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (Moss 2013), became quite well known.¹⁰ Despite the fact that in the introduction we can read (Moss 2013):

Since the death of Jesus, hundreds of thousands of Christians have been hailed as martyrs. A recent study estimates that over the course of the past two thousand years as many as *seventy million* Christians have died for their beliefs. (p. 6)

The title is misleading and was very offending for the first Christians. The author underlined that prior to the rise of Christianity (Moss 2013):

[T]here was no such thing as martyrdom (...) there are precedents for martyrdom in the ancient world, but because there was no system of posthumous rewards (heaven, hell, etc.) and no concrete word for this kind of death (*martyrdom*), these were not martyrs in some true sense. (p. 21)

Hence, we could say that it would have been better to use in the title another word, for example, *coin*, because *invent* (Boyarin 2004) in connection with *myth* and *story* has a clear pejorative sense. The book offers a lot of information and references to the early sources, although '[t]hose who know some Christian history will learn little here except, perhaps, something about the continuing intellectual dead ends of historical criticism' (Radner 2013). However, it becomes really problematic when dealing with the authenticity of all the early Christian martyr accounts, as the author states: '[t]he conclusion is inescapable that none of the early Christian martyrdom stories is completely historically

accurate' (Moss 2013:102); the Christians were mainly *prosecuted* because of political reasons, than *persecuted*; and above all, the mixture of 'the myth of persecution' with homosexuality and abortion, maybe to discourage any 'prophetic voice' of Christians on these issues and in society in general, as Prof. Radner (2013) clearly said:

Conservatives in America think that traditional Christians are *persecuted* for their positions against abortion and homosexual marriage, but this is only a latter-day expression of an early Christian *myth* that relies on fraud to demonize opponents and stoke the fires of intolerance.

The first centuries find their counterpart in the 20th century characterised by Herbert Schlossberg as the century that excelled in the persecution of the Christians (Schlossberg 1991:12) and, we can add, in the persecutions from this century because today Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world (BBC.com 2019; Caldwell 2019). It is well known that the theological writings of the first Christian centuries reflect the position, rooted in experience and in the gospel, that persecution of Christians is not an abnormality. Saint Cyprian says, '[n]o wonder we suffer constant persecution, and are momentarily assaulted by painful tribulation, for the Lord has foretold that this must occur' (St Cyprian 1987:46).

Speaking about persecution, Herbert Schlossberg says that this should be understood as (Schlossberg 1991):

[O]ne of the norms of the Christian life; not a passing problem to be 'solved', but a perpetual condition to deal with, a normal part of our expectations of life. (p. 115)

Explaining his statement, Schlossberg (1991:116) says that persecution 'is at its heart a spiritual struggle and always has been'. It is a struggle between those who want to reach salvation 'by some form of self-righteousness' and 'those who relied on God's grace' (Schlossberg 1991:115). Moreover, 'persecution comes as a result of satanic attack and is intended to strike at God' (Schlossberg 1991:117). On the way to Damascus, Saul is asked by the Risen Lord: '[w]hy are you persecuting me?' (Ac 9:4). Although Saul is persecuting the Christians, the Lord's question clearly reveals *WHO is finally persecuted*.

The Lord himself speaking about the difficulties the disciples will face relates the hatred for the Church with the one towards himself: '[i]f the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first' (Jn 15:18). Hence, the persecutions have a deeply spiritual root as *the final target is God himself*.

But why God allows persecutions?

Saint John Chrysostom teaches that persecution is brought about by the devil (St. John Chrysostom, Migne 1862:50:592.32–33; St Jn. Chrysostom 1992:82); however, God allows it for several reasons:

Firstly, God permits persecution to prove through those who survive, that the Christian faith has divine roots and also that

¹⁰The book was highly criticised by M.A.G. Haykin, professor of church history and biblical spirituality: 'Candida Moss's *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* is written for a readership familiar with conspiracy theories in which a sinister elite manipulates history for its own dastardly ends. In this case, it is the fourth-century Christian bishop Eusebius of Caesarea who has invented most – if not all – of the martyrdom narratives of the first three centuries to reinforce what he regarded as a tradition of orthodoxy' (Haykin 2014); D.R. McClarey (McClarey 2013); Glenn Moots professor of philosophy and political science (Moots 2015); E. Radner, a member of First Things' advisory council and professor of historical theology (Radner 2013); L. Huizenga, chair of the department of theology (Huizenga 2013); Dr. R. Royal, author of *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (Royal 2013). A more positive feedback (Thayer 2013).

God is in full control of everything (Migne 1862:50:592.31; St Jn. Chrysostom 1992:82):

This proves that the Christian faith is not of man, that the truth of the Christian teaching has its roots in Heaven, and that God is the one who always governs His churches. The devil receives concrete and explicit proof from God that whenever he battles with God, he can never defeat Him ... (ὅτι οὐκ ἀνθρώπινα τὰ καθ' ἡμᾶς, ἀλλ' ἄνωθεν ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν ἔχει τὴν ρίζαν ἡμῖν ἢ τῆς διδασκαλίας ὑπόθεσις, καὶ Θεός ἐστιν ὁ πανταχοῦ τὰς Ἐκκλησίας ἄγων, καὶ τὸν Θεὸν πολεμοῦντα οὐκ ἐνι περιγενέσθαι ποτέ).

We can conclude from Saint John Chrysostom's words that the devil fights with God bringing about persecution and misfortune to his people. Thus, the spiritual nature of the struggle is fully evident. The persecution of the people is an attack against God. The victory is a witness to the character of Christianity.

Secondly, persecution is perceived as a means of spreading the gospel. After Saint Stephen's martyrdom, the scattered disciples preached the word everywhere (Ac 8:4). Saint John Chrysostom goes further and argues that martyrdom is suffered in front of large audiences so that victory over the devil should have communal dimensions: 'his very death (Saint Polycarp's), will hopefully inspire the spectators to be jealous of his struggle and imitate him when the opportunity arises' (Migne 1862:50:592.33; St Jn. Chrysostom 1992:82). The Gospel would take root as the martyr's death is a sign of victory that calls for imitation. We can see from these lines how God turns the evil brought about by the devil into an advantage for the gospel.

Finally, another reason for the existence of persecution is pointed out in *Psalms* 89:31–33; persecution is also a means to discipline, a judgement of the Lord against his people, as they forget their divine status as children of God. Thus, neglecting the Law brings punishment:

If they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. (Ps 89:31–33)

Predicted for strengthening the people's faith, these things came into being as a result of sins. From these lines, we can see that the Lord foretold the consequences of neglecting the divine words. However, the love of God will be palpable even in this punishment, as the punishment itself is a sign of his love. And this view is also supported by *Revelation* 3:19: '[t]hose whom I love, I reprove and I discipline, so be zealous and repent'. The relationship between sin and punishment is underlined also by other biblical texts: *Isaiah* 42:24–25 and 59:2. God punishes his people, but his punishment expresses love. *Exodus* 32:31–33 gives us the reason of God's behaviour.

We can conclude from these lines that the purpose of the punishment (*epithimia*) is to cure, to heal, to treat the sinners in order not to be excluded from the eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Thus, God wants his people to understand this, and

in his love, he gives them signs (to prevent them from going astray). His efforts are meant to trigger repentance, earnestness and a pure heart.

Speaking about the healing essence of punishment, Saint Cyprian explains the effects of the punishment using an analogy with a medical act of curing (St Cyprian 1958:146). The same idea is echoed by Lactantius. Tribulations and adversities are seen as a blessing for the Christians and as a sign that God did not abandon them (Lactantius 1964):

When we are troubled and oppressed, then especially do we give thanks to our most indulgent Father because He does not allow our corruption to proceed to far, but He corrects us with wounds and stripes. (p. 389)

The two previously mentioned quotations show us that persecution is seen as a means to correct; it is intended to create repentance and is seen as necessary. It is a pedagogical method having a spiritual nature. Furthermore, according to 1 Peter 4:12–14, persecution is a test of the believers' faith, who must not be surprised, but they have to rejoice in sharing Christ's sufferings.

We can understand from these biblical references that the suffering in persecution is a trial of faith, but it is primarily participation in Lord Christ's suffering. Saint Peter urges the Christians to rejoice as they have this privilege. Rejoicing now brings about over joy when the Lord's glory is revealed, so they should accept this trial (1 Pt 4:12, 13).

Furthermore, troubles and persecution have a proving character: 'The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul?' (Dt 13:3). And in *Zachariah* 13:9, it is said:

I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people', and they will say, 'The LORD is our God'.

We can understand from these lines that God wants us wholly, and he tests us to see whether we love him with all our soul. Persecution is the 'supreme test of faith, the true temptation against fidelity. It is a time of suffering, of the absence of peace, and of only short-term tranquillity' (Lesbaupin 1987:76). Persecution measures the degree of one's loyalty. The true disciples of Christ are shown in the times of trial, as persecution means suffering, and suffering is a sign of love. One cannot become a disciple of Christ without love.

Saint Cyprian also teaches that persecution is an opportunity for witness (*martyria*). It is also a challenge, by which faith is tested, refined or, by contrast, demonstrated not to have deep roots: '[t]he faithful were few, then, but faithful they were, walking in the narrow, open way that leads to life' (St Cyprian 1958:217). Consequently, the way is open, universally accessible, but is also narrow, that is asking for a certain effort, and it looks as if God wants responsible people, aware of their free choice, with deep roots. Furthermore, Saint

Cyprian points to another reason for the existence of persecution (St Cyprian 1958):

The Lord wished his family to be proved, and, because a long peace had corrupted the discipline divinely handed down to us, a heavenly rebuke has aroused a prostrate, sleeping faith, and although we deserved more on account of our sins, the most merciful Lord has so moderated all things, that all that has happened seemed *an examination rather than a persecution*. (p. 217)

From Saint Cyprian's words, we can conclude that persecution becomes not only an examination meant to prove one's endurance but also to awaken a latent faith. It is a revival of the faith, as the peace made people to neglect the divine teachings. And also, very often, prosperity and luxury could make people forget God and live in listlessness. That is why persecution and punishment, or just their possibility, can push people to search for God, as the inhabitants of Nineveh, when they enjoyed security, they forgot God, but the possibility of punishment made them change.

Conclusion

In the early Church, especially during persecutions, the *martyrdom* was considered as the peak of faith and of love for Christ. The martyr was the icon of the faithful who lives the life in Christ completely. Our Lord Jesus Christ loved the Church and died for her (Eph 5:25), and the Church, through the martyrs, shows Christ the same sacrificial love. Suffering in persecution and martyrdom has a Christological foundation (Weinrich 1981):

As it was in the cross that Lord Christ worked in power, so now in the suffering of His apostle, the Crucified One is revealed as the Lord who is now present and active. (p. 50)

Saint Paul's apostolate in every way (Weinrich 1981):

[C]arries the imprint of the Cross, for the cross of Christ was the one salvific act of God and to this salvific act the apostolic existence belongs. Thus, in his work as an apostle, Lord Christ is not absent; He is present as the one through whom God decisively acted, as the Crucified One. (p. 46)

In 2 Corinthians 1:5, the afflictions which Saint Paul underwent are interpreted from a Christological perspective as 'sufferings of Christ', and this means, according to Saint John Chrysostom, fellowship with the Lord. Because the Corinthian Christians are 'partakers of the same sufferings' (2 Cor 1:7), they have also fellowship with Lord Christ: '[s]o, grieve not when you are in affliction; considering with whom you have fellowship, and how you are purified by trials; and how great gain is thine' (St Jn. Chrysostom 1989:274).

Saint Chrysostom says that for Saint Paul, having fellowship by sufferings with Lord Christ becomes the main ground of comfort and consolation: '[f]or what joy can I have so great as to be partaker with Christ and for His sake to suffer these things?' (St Jn. Chrysostom 1989:274). On the Cross, the Lord

manifested the power of his love for us, also in the sufferings of the apostle, the Lord acts in power, strengthening the suffering apostle. Saint Paul has fellowship with the Lord in his suffering but also the Corinthian community. It follows that Saint Paul and the Corinthian community are united in their suffering with the Lord.

Hence, anyone who wants to be forever with the Risen Christ must not be 'ashamed of the testimony (*martyrion*) of our Lord' (2 Tm 1:8), which means sufferings and shame. One firstly has to suffer with him in order to be glorified with him:

The Spirit himself bears witness (*symmartyrei*) with our spirit that we are children (*tekna, filii*) of God, and if children, then heirs (*kleronomoi, heredes*) – heirs of God and fellow heirs (*synkleronomoi, coheredes*) with Christ, provided we suffer with Him (*sympaschomen, compatimur*) in order that we may also be glorified with Him (*syndoxasthomen, conglorificemur*). (Rm 8:16–17)

Similarly, Saint Peter teaches us:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share (*koinoneite*) Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (*apokalypsei tes doxes autou*). (1 Pt 4:12, 13)

Finally, it can be said that persecution and martyrdom is a deeply spiritual struggle and a permanent condition of the Church. In the wonderful icon of the resurrection (*Anastasis*), from Chora Monastery in Constantinople, painted around 1320, the Lord is depicted springing out of hell and holding by hands Adam and Eve. All the martyrs, who suffered with the Lord and in whom the Lord himself suffered, are held by the Resurrected Lord to rejoice in his everlasting Kingdom which is 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rm 14:17).

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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