

PERSECUTION, MARTYRDOM AND SAINTHOOD

“Like all states of antiquity, Rome had its gods, its national-political religion. This was neither a system of beliefs nor a system of morals (the Roman citizen could and very often did believe in foreign gods). It was a ritual, worked out to the last detail, of sacrifices and prayers, a cult of primarily political and state significance... Rome demanded only outward participation in the state cult as an expression of loyalty; all that was required of a citizen was to burn a few sticks of incense before the images of the national gods, call the emperor “Lord”, and celebrate the rites. Once he had fulfilled this, he was free to seek eternal meaning of life wherever he wished...One’s personal faith or lack of it had nothing to do with religion, since religion itself had never been a problem of truth, but only an acknowledgement of the existing system, its legitimacy and justifiability.

The Christians refused to fulfill this self-evident, elementary civic duty. Their act was neither rebellion, condemnation of the state as such, nor even opposition to its particular defects or vices. Starting with St. Paul, Christians could boldly declare their royalty to Rome, referring to their prayers for the emperor and the authorities. But they could not fulfill two requirements: they could not recognize the emperor as “Lord”, and they could not bow down to idols, even outwardly, without faith in them.

In actual fact, by their refusal to fulfill a requirement that was not taken seriously even by those who had imposed it, the whole measure of Christian responsibility in the world was revealed for all ages. By rejecting the formal requirement of the state, they thereby included the state within the perspective of the kingdom of Christ and – however passively – summoned it to submit to the Lord of the world.

From this time, for two entire centuries, the line of martyrs was never really interrupted... for two hundred years a Christian could not consider himself secure, and of course this awareness of his outcast state, and his condemnation by the world, is a central experience of the early Christian.

The Christian martyr was not a hero, however, but a witness; by accepting suffering and death he affirmed that the rule of death had ended, that life had triumphed. He died not for Christ, but with Him, and in Him he also received life. The Church exalted martyrdom because it was proof of the most important Christian affirmation, the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

In the cult of the martyrs the Church laid the foundation for the glorification of saints...for the Church, persecution was the best pledge of victory.”

-Alexander Schmemmann, The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy