

THE CONTEMPORARY MARTYRS AND THE CHURCH

In the last two months I have received a lot of questions in Los Angeles and New Jersey concerning the martyrs of El-Kosheh in Upper Egypt. Among these questions:

- ❖ *Why God permits those innocent believers to be killed? and some of their corpses to be burned?*
- ❖ *What is the divine message of what had been happened?*
- ❖ *And why these attacks are repeated in Egypt?*
- ❖ *What is the role of the believers in facing injustice?*
- ❖ *What is our feelings towards the injured families?*
- ❖ *What is our real and deep desires towards all kinds of persecutors?*

TWO INVISIBLE PROCESSIONS

To acknowledge why God permits His church in Egypt to suffer severe and contentious persecution we are in need to discover what happens through the critical moments of persecution.

Through the processions occurred in the celebration of the funeral service of the twenty-one martyrs of El-Kosheh in Los Angeles and in New Jersey I was in touch with two invisible processions:

A procession under the leadership of the Crucified Lord Himself, Jesus Christ, composed of the heavenly hosts together with those who are in the Paradise, the Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs and all true righteous believers who already departed from this world. **They joyfully welcome the newly martyrs as victorious children of God**, have the right to pass through the opened gates of heaven till the throne of God. The to-day martyrs are admitted to the heavenly Church as new bright stars.

Another invisible procession also under the same Leader, Jesus Christ, the Head of the persecuted Church. It consists of the hearts of all real believers **who are proud of their fellow servants of God**, as their lives became a loving sacrifice for the sake of God.

The two processions are under the guidance of the same Leader, and the two are communities of joy. The first procession in fact looks like **the procession of the marriage celebration**, which receive the bride with joyful songs and hymns to present her to her Groom. They pass with the martyrs as to their own heavenly home. At the same time they are in grief of the violence and injustice that rules some communities in the world, especially in Egypt. They are eager to see the world as an icon of heaven not as a floor on which Satan and his angels and followers play. Violence and injustice destroy human beings, and prevent them from attaining the icon and likeness of the Lord.

The other procession move in grief. Sighs are issued from their hearts, and tears from their inner eyes. They share the first procession their grief on the wickedness of the persecutors. They also share the families of the martyrs their grief. St. Paul says, ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”*** (Rom 12:15) We have to share them their sufferings, not by words only, but by

practical love and prayers. We also are responsible to help them so that they discover that God grants His Church joy even in the time of persecution. We believe that our God is the Pantocrator, whose providence embraces all our life, and who is interested in us so that He knows even the numbering of the hair of our heads (Matt. 10:30; Luke 12:7).

Origen says, “If we are the body of Christ and God has set the members each one of them in the body that the members may have the same care one for another, and may agree with one another, and when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, and if one be glorified, they rejoice with it, we ought to practice the symphony which springs from the divine music, that when we are gathered together in the name of Christ, He may be in the midst of us, the Word of God, and the Wisdom of God, and His Power¹.”

THE PLACE OF SACRIFICE

Origen, the dean of the School of Alexandria, asks believers to seek for martyrdom as a precious chance for the soul to attain freedom and for the church to be glorified. Origen always desired martyrdom and constantly made clear, in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* as well as in his homilies, the esteem in which he held this crowning testimony to our belonging to Christ. For him, martyrdom is *the work of every true Christian*, who desires to be united with God, and to struggle for His righteousness. He says,

“I beseech you to remember in all your present contest the great reward laid up in heaven for those who are persecuted and reviled for righteousness’ sake, and to be glad and leap for joy on account of the Son of Man (cf. Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:23), just as the apostles once rejoiced when they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for His name (cf. Acts 5:41). And if you should ever perceive your soul drawing back, let the mind of Christ, which is in us (cf. Phil. 2:5), say to her, when her wishes to trouble that mind as much as she can, “Why are you sorrowful, my soul, and why do you disquiet me? Hope in God, for I shall yet give Him thanks” (Ps. 42:11). I pray that our souls may never be disquieted, and even more that in the presence of the tribunals and of the naked swords drawn against our necks they may be guarded by the peace of God, which passes all understanding (cf. Phil. 4:7), and may be quieted when they consider that those who are foreigners from the body are at home with the Lord of all (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8)².”

“I think that just as he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her (1 Cor. 6:16), so the one who confesses some god, especially in the time when faith is being tried and tested, is mingled and united with the god he confesses. And when he is denied by his own denial, which like a sword cuts him off from the One he denies, he suffers amputation by being separated from the One he denies³.”

Persecution or martyrdom do not occur as contingency event, but it is an essential characteristic of the Church, the bride of the Crucified Heavenly Groom. It is her pleasure to share her Christ His suffering every day. For example, **St. Ignatius of Antioch** who was exceedingly pleased to be martyred, expressed that by calling the Church *“the place of sacrifice”* (*Thysiasterion*)⁴. In St. Ignatius’ mind martyrdom is the perfect imitation of Christ. On his way to be martyred in Rome he wrote a letter to the believers there who tried to set a plan to save his life. He said to them,

¹ Commentary on Matthew, 14, 1.

² *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ Ephes. 5:2; Tralles 7:2; Philip. 4.

[I exhort you, not to show unseasonable kindness to me. Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. **I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ.** Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb and may leave no part of my body behind, so that I may not, when I am fallen asleep, be burdensome to anyone. Then shall I be truly a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not so much as see my body. Supplicate the Lord for me, that through these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God⁵.]

St. Peter, Pope of Alexandria was tortured because of the persecution that befell upon his children, first under Diocletian and, later under Maximin Daia. He suffered death every day for the sake of Christ. On hearing about the imprisonment of their popular Pope, the people of Alexandria gathered around the prison to save him. Their intentions were to prevent his execution, even if it meant the massacre of all of them. They were crying out, saying, "Why are you taking St. Peter away from us our chief priest and good shepherd?" Therefore, because all of the people of the city stirred up no small riot, the tribune ordered him to be guarded in the jail near the most holy church until they could tell the emperor everything that had happened concerning him. While they turned back and went off to the emperor, the whole city stood outside the gates of the prison in nightly vigil, performing services and glorifying God on his behalf.

Pope Peter could not tolerate any harm to fall on his people for his sake, so he called one of his entrusted elders and asked him to go to the ruler. The message to the ruler was: if he can arrange for someone to come at night to the southern wall of the prison which was deserted, and listen for a knock from the inner side. At that spot they should open a hole in the wall quietly, and the Pope will be right in their hands for the execution orders. The plan worked out fine, and the Pope gave himself peacefully in their hands, resembling the steps of his Lord who gave His life up for His sheep. His words were: "*It is better for me to be assassinated as a ransom for my people, and let nobody be injured*⁶."

Every true believer feels that it is a dignity and honor for him that he becomes a martyr on behalf of his Christian faith. It is his pleasure to suffer, but he hopes that others will not suffer.

FACING INJUSTICE THROUGH LOVE AND JUSTICE

Does the Church who loves even her enemy to be silent towards practicing injustice and violence against her children? Our Lord Jesus Christ who came to sacrifice Himself on behalf of every man, when one of the officers struck Him with the palm of his hand, He was not silent, but he said t, "***If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?***" (John 18:23) Our Lord loves even those who participated in crucifying Him, but He hates injustice and violence. He rebuked the violent persons. Thus, He opened the way of real love which is not separated from justice. We have to love the persecutors themselves, but hate their violence and sins.

In the early Church many apologists appeared. They defended Christianity and Christians from the charges that were against them. In c. 177 A.D Athenagoras, the dean of the School of Alexandria, wrote a plea on behalf of Christianity, addressed to the emperor and his co-ruler son. The purpose was to show the falsity and absurdity of the calumnies against Christians and ends in a calm entreaty for just judgment. He

⁵ Ad Rom. 4.

⁶ *El-Mayammer, No. 40, p.172-3; Ebn-el-Mekafaa, p. 47.*

proved that Christian worship and teachings were more reasonable and moral than those of their accusers.

THE MARTYRS IN THE PARADISE

God Himself said to Cain, "*The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.*" (Gen 4:10)

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"" (Rev 6:9-10)

Don't wonder that the blood of Abel cried to God. And the martyrs who in fact are in rest and they acknowledged that they obtained sharing in the glory of Christ, cried asking for judge revenge of their blood.

Now we can say that the heavenly hosts together with the believers here in this world, not only hear the voice of the blood of the martyrs crying, but also with all their hearts share those innocent martyrs their cry. Why?

1. They are crying as if they share the suffering members here in the world their agony.
2. They also as an icon of Jesus Christ, the Judge of all mankind, ask for justice.
3. They ask God to judge and avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth, so that the weak believers may not stray away.