

New Martyrs of Russia

The Roman Empire 1st century A.D.:

All saints.....some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

(Hebrews 11)

Russia 20th Century:

Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev led out of his monastery and shot. Before his execution he prayed for God to forgive his murderers. When his body was discovered, his fingers were frozen in the manner a bishop would give a blessing.

Abbess Elizabeth (Grand Duchess) and her companion Nun Barbara thrown alive down a mine shaft slowly dying from their wounds and starvation.

Bishop Germogen, with a rock tied to his hands, thrown alive into the Tura River.

Archbishop Joachim of Nizhni Novgorod hung upside down from the icon screen above the Royal Doors.

Father Alexander Hotovitsky, former priest in New York City, executed by firing squad.

Father John Kochurov, former priest in Chicago, shot by a mob of Bolshevik soldiers in front of his teenage son.

Father Simeon Subbotin sentenced to ten years in a prison camp where he died; one of thousands of other Orthodox clergy and lay people who perished in the camps.

Father Dimitry Ovechkin, his church closed, no one willing to hire him since he was a priest, his wife and three children destitute, sentenced to “execution by shooting”.

Father Joseph Kalashnikov accused of “participation in a counter-revolutionary organization” (the Church) sentenced to execution and confiscation of his property. He left behind a wife and five children.

With the victory of the Bolsheviks following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas in 1917, they immediately unleashed a wave of repression and persecution against any expression of religion. While some maintain that the Bolshevik persecuted the Orthodox Church because of its close alliance with the hated Tsarist regime, in reality the Bolsheviks saw all religion as the enemy. As early as 1913, Lenin spoke of religious belief as “*the most dangerous foulness, the most shameful infection*”. He added “*every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness...contagion of the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filth deeds, acts of violence, and physical contagion...are far less dangerous*”.

With their rise to power, Lenin and his Bolsheviks initiated their plan. The decree on the separation of church and state in January, 1918 deprived the formerly official church the right to own property, to teach religion in both state and private schools or to any group of minors. This measure was meant to slowly cripple the church and allow for its collapse. All theological schools were closed as well as all monasteries and convents eventually. Clergy were forbidden to wear their clerical attire in public, another means of removing the sight of religion from society. Religious holidays were abolished in 1923 and Sunday morning “voluntary” activities were introduced such as work brigades and sporting events for children. The new government for the next few years launched a campaign to seize church property. Churches were closed, and could be converted to other uses, such as government departments, collective farm community centers, and warehouses.

Thousands of bishops, priests monastic and lay people were executed, accused of “counter-revolutionary activities”. By the late 1930s, only four bishops remained alive and active in the entire Russian land. Father Valerian Golovenko describes the typical scene when a clergyman was arrested:

“The majority of arrests were conducted not in the church, but in the home, in order not to arouse the population’s ire. Men in leather jackets and accompanied by Red Army soldiers, would knock at the door of the house at night, and if the priest did not open the door himself, they would break it down themselves with their rifle butts, bust in and take the clergyman...In isolated cases they might allow him to take a small bundle of belongings, but as a rule all understood perfectly that he would not need it. Rarely the arrested would sit in a cell for a week; as a rule, he would receive a bullet in the back of

the head on the next day, and sometimes as soon as he arrived at the prison. A lock would be hung on the door of the parish church, and they would wait until people would stop coming to the church at their customary time. Then they would pillage the church.”

The 1918 martyrdom of one priest, Father John Vostorgov of Moscow, is described by an eyewitness:

I served as a gravedigger for several months. Once, at the end of the digging of the usual, long, single row ditch-grave, the guards announced that on the next morning (August 23) there would be an important execution of priests and political figures. The next day the condemned persons arrived including Bishop Ephrem, Archpriest Vostorgov and others. As soon as the victims arrived, they were placed on the edge of the grave, facing it. Upon request from Father Vostorgov, the executioners allowed the condemned to pray and to say farewell to each other. Everyone knelt and an ardent prayer flowed from the unfortunates, after which they received a last blessing from the Most Reverend Ephrem and Father Vostorgov. Father Vostorgov was the first to walk boldly to the grave. “I am ready”, he said addressing the guards. Everyone took his place at the edge of the ditch. An executioner came to Father Vostorgov, stood behind his back, took his left arm, turned it behind at his waist, and placing his revolver to the back of the neck shot him, at the same time pushing him into the grave.



Metropolitan Benjamin on trial

In 1922, the Bolsheviks arrested 50 bishops and priests and placed them on public trial. His Holiness, Patriarch Tikhon, who himself was under house arrest, was called as a witness. At the end of his defense of the accused he said:

If there is need for a sacrifice, if the innocent lambs of the Lord's flock are to die, my blessing be with the faithful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ as they suffer and die for his sake.

Eighteen of the accused were sentenced to death including His Eminence, Metropolitan Benjamin of St. Petersburg. They went to the firing squad singing “Christ is risen from the dead...”

'Soft' Persecution

Along with outright violence, the Bolsheviks initiated “soft” or subtle persecution. Anti-religious education was introduced beginning in the first grade in 1928 and anti-religious work was intensified throughout the education system. While children were schooled in scientific atheism, the government removed any opportunity for the Church to provide any alternate response. A 1929 law on “Religious Associations” prohibited any form of missionary activity including publishing of books and pamphlets. Catechism, study groups, Sunday Schools were all forbidden. Several churches remained open in select cities to prove the “tolerance” of the government but the aim of the Communists was to reduce the Church to a building where rituals were mechanically performed, removed from the daily life of the people.

A concept of “individual work” among believers was used in the 1930s and reintroduced in 1960. Atheist “tutors” would visit the homes of people known to be religious believers to try to convert them to atheism. If the believer persisted in his ignorant religious beliefs he would be reported to his school or workplace. Religious believers risked losing their job, being demoted, being expelled from school or not being admitted to institutions of higher learning. The intention was to slowly strangle religious belief and cause it to wither and die with the passing of each generation.

America Today

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” said the early Christian writer Tertullian (220 AD). Suffering and persecution caused the Christian Faith to grow and strengthen in Roman times and this remains true today. Despite the fact that the Orthodox Faith was nearly exterminated by the 1930s in Russia, the Orthodox Church has emerged from that dark period stronger than when it was protected and promoted by the Tsars. What about the Church in America? The famed American Orthodox monk Father Seraphim Rose of California prophesied in the 1980s: “Yesterday in Russia, tomorrow in America”. The persecution that Orthodox Christians faced in Russia will inevitably reach us in our land

of purported freedom. Already it is common that our children must choose between sports programs on Sunday morning or the Divine Liturgy. It is common that these choices even face them on such holiest of days as Good Friday and Pascha!

The clearest signs of the coming persecution is in the area of the Church's teaching on sexual morality. Those who dare question society's indoctrination on same-sex marriage and gender identity are labeled as bigoted, haters and face legal and economic attacks. There are dozens and dozens of examples all over the United States. Business such as the popular Chick-fil-A fast food restaurants have been boycotted, picketed, and the site of "same sex kiss a thons" simply because its founder holds to Christian teaching on sexuality. Across the pond in Britain, the BBC is "encouraging" its heterosexual employees to wear badges identifying themselves as friends and supporters of homosexual, bisexual or transgender co-workers. Last year Russell Berger, an executive at Crossfit gym was fired for not supporting gay pride events hosted by the national fitness chain.

How can it be possible that a faith that speaks of love, the dignity and value of each human person, the goodness and mercy of God become the target of such hatred and violence? Our Lord explains why:

For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (John 3:20)

Additionally, He promised that His followers would be hated and reviled:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. (John 15:18-20)

While the Communists initially used violence and terror to destroy the Christian Faith they eventually realized that a new path was more effective: a slow, strangulation of the faith through education and economic pressures. Today in America we do not yet face violence and terror because of our faith but we must beware of the ongoing indoctrination, economic threats, and lawsuits against anyone who holds to the faith of the Apostles.

- Father Edward Pehanich