

An Admonishment for Catechumens & Neophytes
Part 3
False Ideas & Wrong Attitudes Towards Martyrdom

Coming into Orthodoxy is not without struggle and temptations. As Fr Seraphim Rose says this is the Coca Cola Generation who want everything now. We do not want the trials and the struggles. We are tested to see whether we are doing it out of pride, and out of ego. Or out of genuine love to embrace God. We are tested to see whether we have fantasies that we think we are great Christians or holy Christians...etc.

Rather than approach the Faith with humility as basic beginners, we dive into the shallow end of an empty pool just because we are now baptised and think we know everything now. The baptismal waters still wet behind our ears. Typical of the Coca Cola Generation and of the crazy convert, as Fr Seraphim Rose says.

In having such an attitude, such a person's idea of struggle and martyrdom is also therefore somewhat deficient. This is understandable in that, as new converts, they are full of energy, and raring to go to tell everyone they have found the Truth and that others should also come to this knowledge of the Truth by hook or by crook. But this is crazy convert mentality again. Full of our own pride and ego, rather than approaching this in a spirit of love and humility.

Our deficient ideas of martyrdom are therefore closer to the definition of "self-sought martyrdom." It's basically prideful suicide. St Clement of Alexandria, for instance, condemns both suicide and such martyrdom when he writes, "He who presents himself before the judgment-seat becomes guilty of his own death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. Such a person...becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor" (Stromateis 4.77.1).

If we all went out with this attitude, an attitude full of pride, thinking we know it all and that others need to know it all now by hook or by crook and out of ego and not out of love and humility and compassion, then the gates of Hades will prevail. But this has not (nor ever has) been the way of the Church and of Christians. If everyone were to rush headlong into martyrdom at the first opportunity, there would be no Church. To put it in the vernacular, "we play the long game." Short term sacrifice (The Cross) for long term gain (The Resurrection). We approach martyrdom with humility when the point of no return has passed. That is what Christ did in His ministry when He would speak to His disciples saying not to reveal this or that to anyone just as yet because it was not the time for His martyrdom. And this is also why He did not resist "martyrdom" once He was before Pilate because now it was beyond the point of no return. He did not go running after Pilate to explain to Him, hat-in-hand, about what Truth is, since Pilate was clearly not interested. This is why we (i.e., our spiritual forebears) worshipped in the catacombs. This is why some Christians even today, living in Turkey, Albania, Saudi Arabia and so many other places, worship in secret and may even appear in public as Muslims with Islamic names and in private live as Christians and worship secretly as Christians and continue like this for many generations.

In the Epistle of Patriarch John XIV (1334-1347) of Constantinople to the Christians of Bithynia, Asia Minor, he says that, "those Christians who by the fear of punishment [by

the Muslims] want to believe and practice Christianity secretly, they will be also saved, provided they study God's orders as far as possible."

For Orthodox Christians our greatest desire is to worship God in His Church and we would rather be "martyred" than give that up. Yet, we know that there is a world of difference not only between martyrdom and suicide, but also between martyrdom and murder. Men and women of faith who when faced with an imminent threat to their lives, acted for the glory of God. They did not go out actively seeking torture or death. When, for example, the Church instructs us to stay home (as it has in previous epidemics as basic standard practice), it does so not because we should be afraid of martyrdom, for they tell us to fearlessly serve the sick and dying, even at our own personal risk. Rather they wisely counsel us in this way to protect us from false bravado and recklessness lest we needlessly, and perhaps pridefully, harm ourselves or others. This is the kind of struggle and martyrdom that we always speak about. Not the crazy convert idea of struggle and martyrdom that is powered by many passions, pride, ignorance, anger, frustration and so on. We never go out actively seeking torture or death and martyrdom in this un-Christian manner.

We are commanded to love our neighbors, which means to die to ourselves. That's a martyrdom.

Giving preference to all others over ourselves; giving to those in need; thinking more highly of all others than we do of ourselves; using our God-given talents to benefit others... etc. These are martyrdoms.

When others hurt us, act ungratefully, have bad attitudes or seem to be lacking in compassion, we must forgive them "*for they know not what they do.*" We must be like Christ and the early Christians who bore their neighbors' disease of sin within themselves. This is truly one of the deeper forms of intercession and love for our neighbors. To intercede is not simply to say a prayer for someone, but to also quietly bear within us their burdens.

These are the "little martyrdoms" that we can embrace with each day. And after we do so, we must not think we have accomplished anything special. We must not pat ourselves on the back and say, "Wow, we are such awesome Christians." Instead, we must do as Jesus commanded us, "So you also, when you have done all those things which you are commanded to do, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty!'" (Luke 17:10)

If we cannot handle these "little martyrdoms," how can we, in all honesty, in love, in humility, in mercy and in compassion, work our way up to the greater martyrdom?