

Global Persecution of the Church

In our first three studies of “the signs of the time” which Scripture and Church Teaching give us to alert us that we are nearing the end of the present age, we have considered 1) *apostasy* (the world-wide falling away from Jesus and the Church), 2) *global political and commercial control*, and 3) *false prophets and **the False Prophet***. While it is evident that evil is at work in all of this, we are urged to keep our eyes fixed on the imminent victory of Our Lord, which is also our victory, so that our love does not grow cold.

Today we consider the last sign we are asked to anticipate with faith: **The global persecution of the Church**. This sign is simply the logical consequence of the first three. But it does warrant special attention.

We begin by citing one of the many warnings of Jesus about the fate that awaits those who are called to bring God’s light into a world which “loves darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.” (*John 3:19*)

“Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famine and pestilences; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony. Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” (*Luke 21:10-19*)

We have already seen in the Book of the Revelation to St John that from start to finish those who belong to Jesus are involved in a pitched battle with the hosts of evil, a battle which attains cosmic proportions, with every appearance that evil is winning until the hosts of Heaven move swiftly and decisively to contain the evil one (20:1-3) and finally to eliminate him and his hosts forever (20:9-10). This is right in line with Jesus' teaching during His earthly ministry (*Matthew 25:41*).

But I suppose that for many alert Catholics the most significant expression of this sign of universal persecution is the Third Secret of Fatima which the Holy Father John Paul II chose to disclose to the world on May 13, 2000, and which received its authoritative interpretation first from Cardinal Sodano, Vatican Secretary of State, and then in greater detail from Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), an interpretation approved both by Pope John Paul II and by Sister Lucia who received the Secret in the first place over 83 years earlier. As you know, the First Secret deals with the reality of Hell, the Second with World Wars I and II, and the Third with the 20th Century as the supreme age of Catholic martyrdom culminating in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981. (Mirjana says that no dates are coincidental in the plan of God, including March 18 and June 24.)

The persecution of the Church is presented in the Third Secret as a long and arduous pilgrimage led by the Pope through scenes of war, devastation, violence, and incredible suffering. Even as the Holy Father prays for the dead and brings relief to the dying whom he encounters along the way, he does so without interrupting his steady pace upwards toward the Calvary that will cost him his own life at the hands of assassins. The fact that, in the shape which the fulfillment of this vision actually took, the bullet intended to kill the Pope failed because it did

not travel straight through his body but traced a markedly zigzag path, avoiding all his vital organs, “shows once more that there is no immutable destiny, that prayer is...more powerful than bullets...and faith...than armies.” (Ratzinger).

Moreover, this period of universal violence against Jesus and His Church foreseen in the Third Secret is once again set against the backdrop of hope, this time the hope embodied in Mary’s promise that “in the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph.” Still, we have no reason to suppose that until that Day of Triumph dawns the Church can expect anything but “more of the same.”

At this point we need to consider the vision of Pope Leo XIII which probably occurred on October 13, 1884, just 33 years to the day before the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima. Dr. Kelly Bowring guides us carefully through this disturbing and revealing episode in the apostolate of this brilliant and many-sided Pope.

[Bowring: The Secrets, Chastisement, and Triumph, pp.26-29.]

Bowring here describes the vision of the future of the Church granted to His Holiness at the conclusion of a Mass at the Vatican in which he witnessed a dialogue between Jesus and Satan: Satan was given 100 years and the power to try to destroy the Church before his fall. Thereupon, Pope Leo XIII composed the Prayer to St Michael which we often use at the conclusion of the Mass. Simultaneously, without Satan’s knowledge, Jesus also sent Mary to the aid of the persecuted Church.

The Blessed Mother informed Mirjana of this very transaction in the early days of Her involvement in Medjugorje. She confirmed to her that Satan was not counting on Mary’s interventions to thwart his mission to

devastate humanity. Those 100 years of world-wide chaos aimed at destroying the Church have been matched every foot of the way with Mary's actions to protect and even to restore Her children. Satan is furious with her, furious that one who is so humble and self-effacing stands in the way of his grandiose plans to take over the human race.

The persecution unleashed by Satan against the Church has been bloody. The 20th Century saw many more martyrs for Christ than all other centuries combined, most of them due to the spread of the "errors of Russia", as foreseen by our Lady at Fatima. The stories of the martyrs of our own time are every bit as faith-inducing and inspiring as are the stories of those martyrs, very young and very old, from the early centuries of the Church's pilgrimage on earth whom we celebrate in our daily liturgies. More than anything else, they galvanize us for our own forms of cross-bearing for the love of Christ. Christians who ignore the Church's martyrs are at a great disadvantage when they find themselves up against circumstances which followers of Jesus should see as part and parcel of their call to be His disciples: "Take up your cross and follow Me." They are ill-prepared for the martyrdom to which God is calling them. Liberal Protestants in the Soviet Union and in China, for example, melted away at the first sign of heat.

It should mean something to thinking Christians, and indeed to thinking people in general, that the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, the Most Rev. Francis George, OMI, in 2010 told his priests: "I expect to die in my bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the Church has done so often in human history."

The Cardinal Archbishop of New York, the Most Rev. Timothy Dolan's recent treatment by the Obama administration simply for insisting that the Church must continue to teach that "marriage is between one man, one woman, forever, bringing children into the world" gives chilling substance to Cardinal George's warning.

"Be prepared to put your life on the line in order to enlighten the world with the truth of Christ: to respond with love to hatred and disregard for life; to proclaim the hope of the risen Christ in every corner of the earth," Pope Benedict admonished the youth of the Church in 2008.

"We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, between the Gospel and the anti-Gospel. This confrontation lies within the plans of divine Providence. It is a trial which the whole Church...must take up...." Cardinal Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) in his message to the Philadelphia Eucharistic Congress in 1967.

We recall the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: *"Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers."* (675)

The following dialogue with visionary Mirjana from The Visions of the Children by Janice T. Connell is most instructive for us:

Q. Mirjana, is all that you do for the Blessed Mother a source of great joy to you?

A. The Blessed Mother has warned us that we would suffer much, and we are.

Q. Does that bother you?

A. [Gentle laugh.] No one likes to suffer, especially me. The Blessed Mother helps me. She says that if I pray, I will have peace. She says that we will have the strength to endure whatever comes.

Q. Will the suffering increase?

A. Yes. The faithful ones will have much to endure everywhere.

Q. What about the unfaithful?

A. What awaits them is terrible suffering of their own choosing.

At this point, I would like to cite a full section from Mirjana's interview in The Visions of the Children, the one entitled "The Secrets". It seems to encompass everything we need to know to be faithful, realistic, and ready, and it serves as an excellent bridge to next week's final theme: The Triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary that will follow on the heels of the Satan's defeat, within human history and before the end of the world.

[Here is a brief summary of "The Secrets", pp.59-61, 1992 edition:]

Q. Can you repeat what you are permitted to say about the secrets?

A. The first two secrets will be warnings for the world – events that will occur before a visible sign is given to humanity. These will happen in my lifetime. Ten days before the first secret and the second secret, I will notify Father Peter Ljubicic. He will pray and fast for seven days, and then he will announce these to the world.....

Q. Do you know the day, the minute, and the hour?

A. I know the day and the date.

Q. Does that frighten you, Mirjana?.... Can you share whether the secrets will bring good or bad news?

A. Well, the first secret will break the power of Satan, and that is why he is so aggressive now.... We should accept the messages of prayer, fasting, conversion, and reconciliation that God is sending to the world

through the Blessed Mother of Jesus. If we do this, we will not be afraid of anything, no matter what the future may hold.]

All our confidence is in Jesus and in His Mother and ours who can take weaklings like us and all the saints before us, and turn us into witnesses to life in the midst of death, to truth in the midst of lies and delusions, to love in the midst of hatred, without counting the cost, ever.

And what is required of us for this to happen? Nothing more and nothing less than this: **that we be humble and faithful Catholics** who live what every Catholic is called to live:

- 1) Prayer with the heart: the Rosary
- 2) Eucharist, as often as possible
- 3) Holy Bible: feeding on the Word of God
- 4) Fasting, for its countless benefits for others and for us
- 5) Monthly confession, at the very least

Then we will be able to “withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand”. (*Ephesians 6:13*)

Mary has told us that if every Catholic were humble and faithful, practising the faith, the whole world would be Catholic within a year.

That, dear Friends, is the call from Heaven which begins with you and me. Let each of us make it our aim daily to seek the grace to be humble and faithful Catholics.