

## THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH



The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1883)

**A**t one point in my religious life I undertook to read the Bible straight through, from cover to cover. And when one reads through the Scriptures continuously in this way, there emerges certain unmistakable patterns in the way that God deals with His people. One of the patterns that one finds is that after God had made a covenant with His people Israel on Mount Sinai, whenever the people became lax and unfaithful to the covenant, God, instead of simply abandoning them as they deserved, would punish them so as to purify them. And very frequently He would do this by making use of the enemies of Israel. God would permit Israel's enemies to get the upper hand and oppress Israel and very often the ensuing crisis would force at least some of the people to search their hearts and reform their lives and turn back to God. This was especially clear in the greatest crisis that the nation of Israel faced when the Northern Kingdom was defeated and brought into exile by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and then about 150 years

later when the Southern Kingdom suffered the same fate under the Babylonians. After these great disasters there were many who thought that this must be the end of Israel, that this was a clear sign that the gods of the nations were greater and more powerful than the God of Israel and that God had abandoned His people because of their sin. (In the ancient world, when one nation defeated another nation it was commonly thought that this was a clear sign that the gods of the conquering nation were stronger and more powerful than the gods of the nation that was defeated). But in fact, in God's mysterious providence, these were actually times of a very deep and serious and valuable purification for Israel. And what really made it possible for Israel to endure these trials and come out of them purified and more deeply spiritual were the lives and teachings of the great prophets, who in their writings revealed to Israel the deeper significance of these events which would otherwise have seemed to have been an unmitigated disaster.

And I think we see something of a similar pattern at work when we look at how God has dealt with His Church down the centuries. In the history of the Church you also find times when the Church is more faithful and fervent and times when the Church is less faithful and lax in following Christ and the teachings of His Gospel. And frequently one finds that during these times of laxity God will permit the Church's enemies to oppress her and persecute her and in this way purify her. Though, I have to admit, that in some instances it is very difficult or impossible for us to discern the ways of God and it beyond our reach to understand why He permitted certain evils to befall parts of the Church. To take one example out of many, in the early centuries of the Church the faith was flourishing in North Africa. But then with the Moslem conquests of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the faith all but disappeared from that part of the world. So as far as the Church in North Africa is concerned, the persecutions seem to have resulted more in an annihilation than a purification.

In the Maronite Church, before the beginning of Lent, we celebrate a feast of *the Renewal of the Church*. If someone were to ask you to work out a program for the renewal of the Catholic Church in our day; if someone asked you to make a list of

proposals of the things that you thought would be especially helpful in bringing about renewal in the Church, among the many proposals that you made, I don't imagine that you would think to list the persecution of the Church and the opposition of her enemies. But it seems to be a law of fallen human nature, that when we do not have the benefit of a kind of healthy opposition and resistance we easily grow slack and complacent. In our own times, one thinks, for example, of the Church in Poland. During the years under Communism, while it is true that the Church suffered much harm, it also became spiritually very strong and robust, with many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. But then after Communism fell and the Church enjoyed more freedom, the consumerism and materialism and hedonism of the West began to exercise its influence, the Church seems to have lost some of its vigor.

So I think we have to reckon with the fact that God, in His providence, will continue to make use of this way of purifying His Church and of once again raising up souls who are heroic in their witness to the truth and goodness of the Gospel. May we have a deep enough faith to recognize the ways of God and abandon ourselves into His hands. ✠