

Emily Drenen
Sts. Constantine and Helen, Cleveland Heights, OH
Metropolis of Pittsburgh
Junior Division

Topic #4

Houses of worship and congregations have always been thought of as a sanctuary of peace and serenity. Recently they have become the vulnerable targets of violent crimes. Discuss the attitude of Orthodox Christians toward this issue today.

We all agree that murder is horrible, let alone murder committed in a Church. The Church is made for worship and serving God; for the cleansing of sin, not the committing of sin. The recent violence against Christians in America and around the globe has caused some to ask: "Where can I find peace if not in the church?" We need to ask ourselves: What do we mean by peace? Is this violence new? What does the Bible tell us, and what does the tradition of the Church tell us?

Persecution has always been a part of the Christian faith. There have been tens of thousands of martyrs throughout the history of the church. There's St. Stephen, the first martyr, who died not long after Jesus Himself. There was St. Ignatius of Antioch, around 108 AD, who wrote to the Christians in Rome begging them to "Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God." (Ignatius: Epistle to the Romans). There were Sts. Boris and Gleb, in the 11th century, St. Cosmas of Aetolia, in 1729, and the thousands of martyrs under the Soviets in the 1900s. Persecution of Christians, violence and the threat of violence, has always been a reality.

How does this relate to peace?

In the Divine Liturgy we pray for peace over twenty times. But this "peace from above" that we pray for is connected to perfection, holiness, sinlessness, salvation, and repentance. We are not simply praying for freedom from war and violence.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that "in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation." (Jn 16:33) Jesus is saying that we will have hardships in the world, but we can have peace in Him at the same time. In our faith, peace and violence don't necessarily contradict each other even though most people today would consider them complete opposites. Peace in Christ and peace in the world are not the same thing.

In Acts (7:60), St. Stephen had peace while being stoned to death. Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit," (Acts 7:55) prayed for the forgiveness of his persecutors. He did what Jesus did. That is true peace; this is the peace that Orthodox Christians strive for.

Some people might think that dying for God is an extra; that it's avoidable. But, martyrdom is something that is required of us if we face it. We are not allowed to deny Christ. In Matthew Jesus says "Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." (Mt 10:33) We must stay true to the Faith no matter what we fear from this world. Fear is simply leverage to make us do something ungodly. Jesus also says in Matthew "do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Mt 10:28)

Though death and suffering are considered the worst things that can possibly happen to us in today's society, this is not true in our Tradition. We, as Orthodox Christians, do recognize the mourning and the tragedy of a martyr's suffering, but we also celebrate that they "have fought the good fight," (2 Tim 4:7) and that they've "endure(d) to the end" (Mt 24:13). They are, as the Liturgy calls them, the "triumphant martyrs."

So what does our faith tell us about violence inflicted on the Church? It tells us that, beyond forgiving these our brethren, peace and violence are not necessarily contradictory; it's only the persecutors who want us to see it this way. In light of the Gospel, we understand that being persecuted can be a way to salvation. Though those who inflict violence may lose their souls, it is not the victim who is hurt in the end. "In the world you will have tribulation," Jesus tells us, but "in Me you may have peace." (Jn 16.33) Even though they lose their lives, the martyrs actually lose nothing.