



Could We Survive Persecution?

A few decades ago a small paperback appeared titled *Tortured for Christ* in which Pastor Richard Wurmbrand described his experiences of persecution behind the Iron Curtain. He urged Americans to remember believers in the Soviet Union and its satellites, suffering deeply for their faith yet nearly invisible behind a fog of disinformation. To refute Western church leaders who promoted endless "dialogue" with the Communists, Wurmbrand needed only to take off his shirt, revealing the scars that covered his back.

As long as the Cold War endured, such stories enjoyed a wide audience among Christians in the United States. But when the Soviet Union fell, attention turned elsewhere, to the persecution of believers in China, Sudan, and other parts of the world.

That is well and good, but we still have much to learn from the experience of Christians under communism. This was confirmed for me by a book recently published in English translation, *Father Arseny: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father*, a collection of reminiscences by a wide range of people who were drawn to this imprisoned priest. The editor, identified only as "the servant of God Alexander," gathered memoirs from "factory workers, peasants, members of the intelligentsia, criminals, political prisoners, former Communists, and camp administrators of all ranks." All of these, he said, were profoundly affected by meeting Father Arseny, becoming believers in Christ and the priest's spiritual children.

The book opens with a scene of the horror of prison life: a cold, windy night lit with bonfires set to melt the ice so graves can be dug. Father Arseny is gathering fuel for the dormitory woodstove. Numb and exhausted, he fumbles with the wedge, praying all the while, "Have mercy on me, a sinner. Help me. I place my trust in thee, O Lord." A malicious prisoner has poured water on his stock of kindling; criminal prisoners hated religious prisoners, and all viewed Christians as idiots. Father Arseny shuffles through the snow under the weight of the logs, praying, "Do not abandon me, O God."

Though we didn't even know his name, many of us were indeed praying for him, and God did not abandon him. Persecution drove the love of Christ down into his heart like a wedge into wood, and Arseny developed a spiritual radiance that melted frozen hearts. This personal transformation, according to the testimonies gathered here, was accompanied by supernatural blessings.

Once Arseny and a young unbeliever, Alexei, were thrown into a metal cubicle in the minus-22-degree chill. The only way to survive would be to jump up

and down continuously for the entire 48 hours of confinement, an impossibility for the old man and the badly beaten youth. Alexei raged and wailed, then submitted to despair, but at the point of death became aware that the cell was filling with light. He saw that the priest's prison uniform had been transformed into dazzling garments, and two white-robed figures attended him in prayer.

"Go, Alyosha! Lie down, you are tired," the priest told him. "I will keep praying, you will hear me." Alexei discovered that he somehow knew the prayers and could recite them with the priest. At the end of 48 hours, authorities came to drag out two frozen cadavers and instead found the men rested and radiant, with a thick coating of frost on their clothing.

Stories like this are wonderfully gratifying to read, though of course they can be matched by many in which believers were not spared terrible suffering and death. And I cannot help wondering, could I be that strong? If I were tortured for my faith, could I endure?

It seems that, to some extent, persecution brings forth the strength needed to endure it, while too much comfort is debilitating. Many Russian Christians, it is true, say that it will take a century at least for the Russian church to recover from the long Soviet night. But in comparison to believers like Father Arseny, are we not a sorry sight? We are back-biting and gluttonous and soggy with self-pity; we revel in God's indulgent love and forget his piercing holiness. We are not Christian soldiers, but Christian babies. What can we do, who are not fortunate enough to be persecuted?

Of course, luck has nothing to do with it. God may well look at this generation, the most well-fed, comfortable generation of Christians in history, and say, "They couldn't take persecution; they're too weak."

A line from Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines* continues to haunt me. "Faith today is treated as something that only *should* make us different, not that *does* or *can* make us different. In reality, we vainly struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven."

How can we be transformed, without the benefit of persecution? The answers aren't new. Train like an athlete for the prize (1 Cor. 9:24-27); practice self-discipline; repent; fast; in humility prefer others; pray constantly. But with no outside pressure to follow this rigorous path, we can find a hundred reasons to sit down a spell and have some potato chips instead.

Nobody is going to mistake us for the radiant Father Arseny. But, with any luck, he's now praying for us.

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magazine with an increasing focus on artists. Over the years, it matured into the slick but articulate journal that it is today. Every issue lists three goals as definitive of the magazine's purpose: (1) to promote spiritual growth by using contemporary Christian music as a "window" into issues of life and faith; (2) to provide news and information about Christian artists, concerts, and other related matters; and (3) to encourage Christians to interact redemptively with popular culture.

The staff, under the leadership of publisher Styll (once president of the GMA) and managing editor April Hefner, seem well-equipped to pursue these goals. They have employed some remarkable talent, such as Brian Quincy Newcomb, who has been reviewing albums for a decade or more. His comments are invariably perceptive, incisive, and appropriately critical (neither sincerity nor piety guarantees a favorable reception); I would put him up against *Rolling Stone's* best critics, Dave Marsh and Greil Marcus, anytime.

But it is Styll himself who sets the standard for journalistic and theological integrity. With varying degrees of passion and restraint, he has guided the journal and the guild it serves with an inspired sense of when to speak out, when to withhold judgment, when to be defensive, and when to give his critics just a little more rope. A time for everything, Ecclesiastes again.

In 1991, he commented on the "dominion over the devil" theme that appeared in no fewer than five out of nine songs on the latest album by the hugely successful Christian artist Carman. This "us-vs.-them-but-we-win" theme may play well with the crowds, Styll noted, but "is ultimately simplistic and tiresome." Indeed, he continued, "it's disheartening that albums like this are so popular in the Christian market. . . . [A]pparently a large segment of the church is content with what is little more than religious cheerleading." He took a lot of flak for saying this. Apparently, what we Lutherans call a "theology of glory" is, or at least was, pretty popular with the subscription base.

Part of the value of *CCM* has come from Styll's willingness to let us see his own growth, to benefit from his own

learning. In 1995, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* broke the story that superstar singer Sandi Patty's divorce three years previous had been precipitated by an extramarital affair with her current husband. *CCM* took up the story too, but Styll wrote a separate account of his own struggle with the issues involved in reporting on the private lives of public people. In fact, he revealed that *CCM* had known of the affair but had chosen *not* to reveal it. Styll had talked with Patty and with her pastor and had been satisfied with a general policy that "confession, repentance, and discipline should happen on the church level rather than in the media." Was that the right course? The question was not rhetorical but actual, reflective of nondefensive, public meditation on a theme that has only increased in relevance. (We will see how he handles Amy Grant's recent separation from her husband, Gary Chapman.)

Again, with regard to the Carman album, Styll later acknowledged that it may have been unfair to dump on a particular artist concerning what was really a dissatisfaction with the state of Christian music in general. Such winsome humility has marked *CCM* throughout its 20 years and has helped attract readers whose interests might transcend the journal's stated subject matter.

Indeed, Styll once began an article with the words, "There is no such thing as Christian music." You can probably guess at the reasoning adduced to support this claim (if not, see the June 1991 issue), but for an editor to deny the legitimacy of the very terminology from which his journal takes its name—well, it's a little like James Wall of the *Christian Century* writing an editorial on why there can never really be any such thing as a Christian century (an editorial which, by the way, some of us would like to see him write).

For 20 years now, Styll, his staff, his readers, and the artists on whom the periodical focuses have been addressing issues of religion and culture with honesty and verve. It is now not only a fan magazine and a business review but a top-notch theological journal to boot. Any Christian library (church or school) that does not carry this magazine is woefully incomplete.

And so, to Styll, Hefner, Newcomb, and the rest of you—congratulations on 20 years!

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