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**Christian martyrdom as a catalyst for discipleship in the Eastern Orthodox Church: a case study of modern Serbian Orthodox martyrs and confessors**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the significance of martyrdom and witnessing or confessing narratives in the Serbian Orthodox Tradition for the development of a disciple identity in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The paper firstly identifies the distinctiveness of a Christian martyrdom based on Scriptural evidence and early Christian writings as a clear paradigm of identity building for the New Israel. In the second part of the article three case studies from the modern history of the Serbian Orthodox Church are contrasted to the established paradigm. The case studies are removed from the early examples in space and time and yet they demonstrate the same relationship between the early Christian idea of suffering persecution and Eastern Orthodox idea of discipleship. The article aims to prove that persecution of nominal Christians when coupled with a unique Christian non-violent and ordered response always serves as a catalyst for the development of a true disciple identity.

**Key words:** Persecution, History, Identity, Holocaust, Hagiography, Bosnian war.

Christian martyrdom as a concept was established on the Holy Cross of Golgotha since Jesus Christ was and is the *proto-martyr*, the image and the model for His disciples to follow in times of persecution. Yet He was not the first martyr in history, far from it. There was martyrdom for faith before Christ. It should be sufficient to mention Abel as the first passion-bearer, Isaac or the Maccabees, or even John the Forerunner, who as a martyr went before Christ into Hades to testify that He is coming. Yet martyrdom was never as important for Jewish identity as much as their monotheism, their history and tradition, the promised land, etc.

At the time of his arrest Jesus Christ had a clear choice of following the vastly represented and the mainstream culture of Jewish resistance to the oppressors by fighting back or a very nuanced path of non-violent defiance. In the following pages we will demonstrate how martyrdom emerged as a formative element of a religious identity only with the advent of Christianity when a new dimension was added to it. This new feature was the said non-violent response of Christians to the persecutions. Violence against a certain group or an individual based on

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faith, race or other identity factors was never a novelty, but a collective Christian response to violence is quite unique in history.

This article will look more closely into the development of this phenomenon and explore the true significance of martyrdom and witnessing of faith in the formation and preservation of the idiosyncratic Christian identity. Out of myriad martyrdom accounts this study will firstly concentrate on the model of martyrdom as set by Jesus Christ, followed by a few significant examples of the primitive Church. These will include primarily the scriptural Martyrdom of Archdeacon Stephen and the Martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna. In the second part of the article three modern-day case studies, removed from the early examples in both space and time, will be contrasted to the established paradigm. These case studies will be the Martyrdom of Deacon Avakum (1814), the Martyrdom of Elder Vukasin of Klepci (1943) and the Christian witnessing by the Serbian civilian prisoners in a Muslim-operated concentration camp during the Bosnian Civil War (1992-1995).

#### *The early paradigm*

After the martyrdom of Jesus Christ on the Cross, as described in the Gospels, the next Christian martyrdom is recorded in the Book of Acts of the Holy Apostles (Acts 7:54-60) where the author describes the murder of one of the seven original deacons, Archdeacon Stephen. The Jews stoned him to death and as he was dying for his faith in Christ, he imitated Christ until the very end, praying for the forgiveness of sins of his murderers. He did not attempt to defend himself from the mob nor did he resort to violence of any kind. His reaction is not only emulating Jesus Christ who technically died at the hands of Romans, but also of three young men (Dan 3:8-19) and Daniel (Dan 6:17-23) who suffered at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar for their loyalty to the God of Israel. Saint Stephen is also walking in the footsteps of the Maccabees where among other examples there is one describing the martyr death of a mother and her seven sons (2Mac 7) who would rather die a horrible death than betray their faith in the God of Israel, declaring through the mouth of the last son to die: “I will not obey the king’s command, but I obey the command of the law, given to our father through Moses” (2Mac 7:30). This was the first great Christian supersession where they set themselves up as the true Israel, the chosen People of God, in a new covenant standing against the new persecutors. The new persecutors, Jewish chief priests, at the same time were exclaiming: “We have no king but Caesar!” (Jn 19:15). In the years to

come, this first recorded non-violent resistance of Christ's disciples will gain an immense implication, and combined with the second supersession it will establish a firm and fertile ground for the Disciple identity.

Later nonaggression of Christian martyrs was sometimes taken for granted, even by scholars, but the initial instances were truly unprecedented and deserve special attention. Jews suffered at the hands of their oppressors, from Egyptians to Babylonians, but the collective narrative was never based on them going down without a fight. Even in the first century, in the famous case of Masada<sup>1</sup> described by the Jewish historian Josephus, Jews were described as fearsome fighters for their beliefs and their national ideals who would rather die than stop fighting the enemy<sup>2</sup>. They firmly believed that their fight was justified and they had to be aware that this kind of fight came with certain costs, including their lives, but there was no evidence to suggest that they believed in any kind of instantaneous reward from God for a passive opposition. It must not be forgotten that Christ and His disciples were Jews, living among other Jews, with the same mentality. That is why when the Temple guards came to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus Christ, his most prominent follower, Simon Peter grabbed a sword and cut one of the guards as soon as they approached Jesus.

The mere fact that the guards showed up in vast numbers and heavily armed, demonstrates that firstly Jesus Christ was not unknown to the authorities that arrested Him, they knew Him and His preaching, and secondly that they expected trouble. Moreover, Simon Peter almost vindicated their impression when he cut off Malchus' ear, defending his Teacher. Furthermore, from the question of His disciples "should we strike with the sword" (Lk 22:49) we learn that they were in fact armed and ready to fight.

What surprised everyone was Christ's reaction. Not only did He order His disciples not to resist, but He also healed the ear of the injured man. His command "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52) set the Christian standard for future times when dealing with violence. This was the moment where He had to choose either a path of active resistance as advocated by the narrative of the Judges and Kings of Israel or the

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<sup>1</sup> The Jewish uprising in the First century AD was the First Jewish-Roman War (out of three). It started in 66 AD and ended in bloodshed with a group of Jews including women and children defending the last stronghold called Masada in 73/74 AD committing a mass suicide.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, transl. by William Whiston, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999, p. 933-934.

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

non-violent response of Daniel, the Maccabees or Saint John the Baptist as indicated by the despised narrative of slavery.

Jesus explicated that if He wanted He could get legions of angels to defend Him. Understandably that would be a lesser surprise as only moments before He was praying for this precise cup to pass Him (Mt 26:39). The point was that the pacifist stand was not part of an opportunistic tactic in a situation where they were outnumbered by the Temple guards, it was a pedagogical act. His peace was a gift for His disciples, both current and those to come. This gift of peace was paired with the promise of persecution from the world: “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming when whoever kills you will think he offers God a service” (Jn 16:2).

#### *The early discipleship martyrology*

The martyrdom of Stephen occurred a short time after the passion and crucifixion of Jesus and at the same place, in Jerusalem. Stephen himself was one of the disciples and would remember the archetype of Christ’s martyrdom, His conduct in gaol and on the cross. In that sense his martyrdom is some sort of a bridge between Christ’s *protomartyrdom* and later martyrdoms in the Roman persecutions of Christians.

Historiography recorded several great persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. But it is important to contextualise these events with other current affairs at the time, such as the aforementioned Jewish uprising, followed by great animosity towards the Jews Empire-wide. Christians at the time were seen, arguably even by many Christians, as also Jews<sup>3</sup>. In that sense the first great persecution of Christians that happened under the rule of Emperor Nero, when he accused them of being the culprits of the Great fire of Rome (64 AD), contributed immensely to the development of the identity of Christians separate to that of Jews, but it obviously did not end all confusion.

From 64 AD until the early fourth century there were over ten persecutions in the Roman Empire, most of different intensity. Historiography differentiates between them by the eras of different emperors. It started with Nero in 64 AD and continued with Domitian, followed by Trajan in the early second century, then Hadrian (117-138), Antonius Pius (138-161), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Commodus (180-199), Septimus Severus (193-211), etc. culminating with the Great

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<sup>3</sup> We are reminded of this in the case of Priscilla and Aquila, Christians who had to leave Rome when Jews were expelled, as described in Acts 18: 2-3.

Persecution under Diocletian (284-305) which started c. 295 and peaked c. 304<sup>4</sup>. After Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 the persecution did not end immediately, but it was the beginning of an end of the Roman persecutions. Unfortunately, history repeated itself many times since, and it still does today in some parts of the world, but the way Christianity was understood before and after these tyrannies was not the same.

The first detailed record of any Christian martyrdom after the apostolic era is the famous Martyrdom of Polycarp (*Martyrium Polycarpi*), which started the whole genre of Martyrologies. Polycarp was a Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, ordained by Saint Apostle John<sup>5</sup>. Eusebius knew of this Martyrology and included it in his epic book “The History of the Church” which was first published c. 325 AD.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp is the first account of martyrdom that does not simply describe how the events developed but also sets a standard for all Christians in terms of how to approach martyrdom. It created not only a new genre in the Christian literature but also contextualised this new phenomenon in the everyday lives of Christians. The record describes how the early Church used yet another obstacle in its path to its own advantage. This was the second great Christian supersession.

From the author of Martyrdom of Polycarp and later from Eusebius and numerous martyrdoms he described in his “History of the Church” one can learn about the reasons for persecutions. Among different accusations, the most repeated one was that Christians refused to offer sacrifices to Roman gods and worship them, therefore making them atheists<sup>6</sup>. As such they risked the wrath of gods against Rome and would endanger the whole Empire. The persecution of Christians was portrayed as nothing more than keeping order in public life.<sup>7</sup> The culture of law and order was being preserved through bloodshed, in which the Christian race was portrayed as a threat to society, deserving only to be thrown to the lions. In order to justify their demonic schemes, the key assignment for the culprits of mass atrocities in all eras was to dehumanise their victims. This issue would reappear again in the

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<sup>4</sup> James Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, Cambridge, University Press, 1987, p. 386-391.

<sup>5</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers: Early Christian Writings*, Transl. by Maxwell Staniforth, London, Penguin, 1987, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson L. Leonard, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games”, *The Journal of Religion*, 82:1, 2002, p. 35.

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

modern cases explained further below and like Romans, other persecutors would begin by outlawing the targeted group.

Christianity was illegal in times of Polycarp, but local authorities in provinces were instructed from Rome not to go and hunt the Christians, only to prosecute them when they were at hand and charged properly<sup>8</sup>. Polycarp himself lived in Smyrna for nine decades and seemed to be well known to the residents. Surprisingly, it seems that he was not properly tried and was even executed on the spot, indicating that the local proconsul had a great deal of autonomy in governing his area. A similar example can be found in the trial of Jesus Christ before Pontius Pilate. There are other parallels between the proto-martyrdom of Christ and martyrdom of Polycarp, but the most significant aspect is the attitude of the local proconsul who predominantly aimed to ensure that his province stayed “peaceful and orderly”<sup>9</sup>.

Polycarp persevered in his faith when the Romans torched him, making sure he did not yield in pain or fear, and the Christian martyr suddenly became the one who suffered for the sake of keeping the righteous order, thus transforming the scene into one where the proconsul became a criminal executing an innocent man. The Church found a *modus operandi* to fight the social control with social control. First, it was established that the Christians were the true Israel, prepared to suffer and die for their faith while the Jewish priests declared their loyalty to the Roman Caesar, and now it was established that the Christians were keeping the order in the society upset by a criminal activity of the government.

This was a serious win for the Christians on the identity front and the first promise of a prospective Christendom culture. However, this struggle called for serious preparation and training. The Church certainly had the experience of incarnated Christ as an example, but it did not hesitate to reinforce the training with other means as well. They turned back to Jewish scriptures, especially the stories of the Maccabees and earlier martyrologies of Peter, Paul and others. They also drew from the contemporary patterns, such as Tertulian’s instructions echoing the terminology from the training of the gladiators and the Roman army.<sup>10</sup>

Christians won the political game in the arena by transforming the space designated for violence into shrines of composed testimonies (μαρτυρία). The Romans who could not understand such

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games”.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games”, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games”, p. 42.

“foolishness”<sup>11</sup> were left with a lose-lose situation as they could either set free the Christian accused of being atheist, thus admitting that they were wrong, or play the game in which they would become the criminals and the nonviolent and brave Christians would win the “crown of immortality”.<sup>12</sup> The Roman games in which many Christians were martyred were originally intended to imitate the battlefield and that is exactly the purpose they served to the Church as well, but the battle Christians fought was not for the entertainment of the masses but for their own salvation. They fought their spiritual warfare and transformed the profane reality of the circus into a real foretaste of the Eschaton<sup>13</sup>. Piously following Christ in martyrdom they walked up to Him, miraculously, just as Peter walked up to Him on water (Mt 14:29).

The Martyrdom of Polycarp was just the first of many that described the passions of thousands<sup>14</sup>, possibly hundreds of thousands of those who attested<sup>15</sup> to their faith through almost equally many ways to die. The only thing that always stayed the same throughout all martyrologies was the response of the Christian heroes. They never fought back, they never spilled blood, they were determined to follow Christ's footsteps from the Gethsemane Gardens, remembering His words, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52). Furthermore, they did not await the Messiah with the sword of steel to build them an empire on earth, but they knew that the sword He promised (Mt 10:34) was the one that cuts the bonds of spiritual slavery and sets one free for all eternity.

The martyrs fought what Eusebius calls “peaceful wars” in book five of the History of the Church, “for the very peace of the soul, and men who in such wars have fought manfully for truth rather than for country, for true religion rather than for their dear ones, that my account of God's commonwealth will inscribe on imperishable monuments; it is the unshakable determination of the champions of the true religion, their courage and endurance, their triumph over demons

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<sup>11</sup> G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games”, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Garry W. Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retribution*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2000, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> It would be fair to mention that some authors questioned the historicity of large scale Christian martyrdom in the Roman Empire (such as Candida R. Moss with “The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom”) but such claims must be rejected as plainly preposterous.

<sup>15</sup> The etymological root of the word *Martyr* comes from Greek *μάρτυς* meaning “witness”. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 5.

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

and victories over invisible opponents, and the crown which all this won for them at the last, that it will make famous for all time”<sup>16</sup>

It was the phenomenon of the Christian pacifist martyrs that made equal men and women, free men and slaves, Jews and gentiles... equal to each other in Christ and completely different to everything else in this world, truly *‘aywoc’*<sup>17</sup> (not of earth). They have imitated Christ so extremely that they achieved perfection in seconds, sometimes not even being baptized, not even knowing anything about Christianity<sup>18</sup>. The echoes of their heroic achievements formed the identity of a true discipleship for the modern days in which the world witnessed some of the worst atrocities in history.

### *Modern discipleship martyrology*

Violence was always present in the Christian world; during the first three centuries it was obvious through persecutions, however after the so called imperialisation of Christianity in the fourth century Rome, the world saw not only Christian soldiers but whole Christian armies, all far away from a non-violent mindset. Appearance of Islam and the subsequent crusades gave rise to the idea of a ‘holy war’. With the Reformation in Western Europe and consequent *social zealotism* more support followed for wars with a “worthy reason”.<sup>19</sup> The Church gave blessings to Emperors and armies to fight these holy wars and battles, yet it almost never canonized<sup>20</sup> any warriors apart from those who were glorified as martyrs. For the Orthodox Empire the holy war was lost in 1453 when Constantinople fell under the Ottomans. The time under Islam in the Balkans was a never-ending martyrology with countless examples of Christians, irrespective of ethnicity, age or sex, reaffirming the paradigm of Golgotha. Those that lived as slaves envied those who died for Christ and became liberated.

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<sup>16</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, London: Penguin, 1989, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> Greek word for ‘saint’. Literal translation would be “not of earth”.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Martyrology of the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste, <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2000/03/09/100727-martyr-acacius-of-the-holy-40-martyrs-of-sebaste>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Moo-Jin Jeong, Jong-Ok Seok, Won-Suk Han, Sang-Ho Seon, Jun-Ki Chung, “A „Righteous War”: Comparing Milton’s External Revolution And Bunyan’s Internal Struggle”, *ASTRA Salvensis*, 1/22, p. 217-228.

<sup>20</sup> Proclaimed a saint.



*“There is no faith more beautiful than the Christian...”*

One such example is the martyrdom of the Saint Deacon Avakum in the early XIX century.<sup>21</sup> Avakum was a young man from the region of north-western Bosnia where his father died in one of the local Serbian uprisings against the Ottomans. Avakum joined a monastery close to the village where his mother lived as a widow. When the uprising was extinguished in 1809 the brotherhood of the monastery was forced to move around in order to avoid the Turks who were burning churches and killing clergy and prominent Serbian leaders in retribution for the rebellion. His mother was part of this local exodus that ended in central Serbia where they were arrested in 1814 and transported to Belgrade. In December 1814, he was taken from the cell and paraded through the streets of Belgrade to the *Stambol gate*, a place just outside the city walls where other Christians were executed, mostly by impalement.

As he was walking he was carrying a large wooden pole, used by the Ottomans as an instrument of torture, degradation and death. His mother pleaded with him on the way to convert to Islam. She told him that God will forgive him because it is done out of necessity, and when he is released he can convert back to Christianity. His poetic answer was “Мајко моја, на млијеку ти хвала, а не хвала на науци такој. Брзо ћеш се обрадоват сину, док пред Божије изиђемо лице. Смрт избавља од свакијех биједа, цвијет прољетни тек за зимом иде...” (Eng. “Thank you mother for your milk but not for such advice, you will soon rejoice with your son when we face God. Death redeems from all sufferings, spring flowers can only come after winter...”) Finally, at the *Stambol gate* when the Turks saw the beauty and courage of this young man they asked him again to convert so that the consul could spare his life. Avakum’s answer was: “Нема љепше вјере од хришћанске. Срб је Христов радује се смрти” (Eng. “There is no faith more beautiful than the Christian. Serb belongs to Christ, rejoices death.”) As his executioner was impaling him, one of the Turks stabbed him in the heart out of compassion so that he would die instantly and not in suffering.

The narrative is obviously reiterating the Gospel account of the protomartyrdom of Christ. Deacon Avakum did not personally participate in the uprising hence he died as an innocent man. He carried the wood on which he would die. His mother followed him to the place where he would be impaled. He was urged to renounce what he preached in his life but he refused. He was happy to die for Christ. One

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<sup>21</sup> Justin Popovic, “Saint Deacon Avakum, Heiguman Paisios and other” in *Lives Of The Saints: Vol 12*, Cheliye Monastery, Valjevo, 1998, p. 478-94. [In Serbian]

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

of the soldiers pierced his body in order to die sooner. His last words were words of encouragement and reaffirmation of discipleship.

What is especially interesting is that this is not a piece of writing from the antiquity authored by a classical rhetorician. The account of the Martyrdom of deacon Avakum is described in Serbian epic poetry traditionally preserved and transmitted orally by an illiterate *guslar*.<sup>22</sup> Nineteenth century Balkans under the Turkish yoke had long forgotten their glorious days of prominent art, architecture and literature. However, they obviously did not forget the paradigm of the Golgotha. One should keep in mind that at the time of Avakum's martyrdom and its record, not even the Holy Bible was translated into the modern Serbian language, let alone ancient martyrologies. The record of this testimony was pure tradition of Discipleship intuitively implemented as the imitation of Christ that was brought to life by the inculturation of the Gospel received and interpreted through the liturgy.

Serbs and other Balkan Christians continued their fight for freedom and by the end of the XIX century they all established their national independent states. One hundred years after the martyrdom of Deacon Avakum another conflict escalated in the Balkans, this one will be remembered in the history as the Great War (1914-1918). The end of this bloodshed was at the same time the end of the Islamic Ottoman Empire as well as that of the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire. For Orthodox Serbs this was a significant change as for the first time since XIV century they lived in their independent country with ample religious freedom. The age of martyrdom seemed to be over.

*“Do your job, child.”*

A seventeen-year-old Orthodox Serb, Vukasin Mandrapa, would probably beg to differ, as he was one of the eyewitnesses of the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914. His high-school friend Gavrilo Princip, a couple of years older than Vukasin, fired *the shots that shook the world*. Vukasin admired Gavrilo and shared his zeal for national freedom but not his fiery character and revolutionary methods.<sup>23</sup> Vukasin was a quiet and a dispassionate young man, committed to Orthodoxy. He came from a rural and patriarchal

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<sup>22</sup> From the word ‘gusle’, a name of single string wooden instrument that these storytellers would use as soundtrack to their epic poems about heroes and significant events from the past, usually in decasyllable meter.

<sup>23</sup> Momir Vasiljevic, *Do your job, child*, UKSS Zavicaj, Sremska Mitrovica, 2017, p. 81.

[In Serbian]

Herzegovina, from the small village of Klepci. He spent most of his life after WWI in Sarajevo where he later inherited his uncle's store and built a noteworthy career as a merchant. That is where the Second World War caught up to him.

During WWII Sarajevo was included in the territory of the notorious Nazi puppet state, the Independent State of Croatia. Croatia was run by the *Ustasha* regime, remembered in history as one of the most bloodthirsty and genocidal systems, the only country recorded in history to operate concentration camps specialised for children. According to a recent well documented study<sup>24</sup>, since its establishment in 1941 and its end in 1945, the *Ustasha* regime killed 171 Serbian Orthodox priests, two bishops and two archbishops, completely destroyed 450 Orthodox churches and damaged another 800. Over a quarter of a million Orthodox Serbs were forcefully converted to Catholicism. In addition over 80% of Jewish population was wiped out and almost all synagogues were destroyed; while the Old Catholic Church was completely destroyed. It is flabbergasting to even consider that all this was done by people who considered themselves the disciples of Christ, as *the Ustasha* regime did.

When *Ustasha* took over the government of Sarajevo in June 1941 they immediately started with the executions of prominent Serbs and Jews. Vukasin managed to escape to his home village Klepci in Herzegovina where he was arrested in the summer of 1942 and sent to the largest Croatian death camp, Jasenovac. His exact destiny would remain a mystery forever, just like hundreds of thousands of others who died with him, if it was not for a unique testimony from his executioner, Josip Friganovic.

In January 1943, one of the inmates of Jasenovac, psychiatrist Nedo Zec, was called by the camp personnel to help distressed Friganovic. During the consultation Friganovic gave Zec the following confession:

A Franciscan Pero Brzica, Ante Zrinušić, Sipka and I waged a bet on who would slaughter more prisoners that night. The killing started and already after one hour I slaughtered much more than they did. It seemed to me that I was in the seventh heaven. I had never felt such bliss in my life. And already after a few hours I slaughtered 1100 people, while the others only managed to kill 300 to 400 each. And then, when I was experiencing the greatest ecstasy I noticed an elderly peasant standing peacefully and calmly watching me slaughter my

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<sup>24</sup> Jovan Mirkovic, *Suffering Of The Serbian Orthodox Church In The Independent State Of Croatia*, Belgrade, Svet Knjige, 2016, p. 9. [In Serbian]

victims and them dying in the greatest pain. That look of his shook me: in the midst of the greatest ecstasy I suddenly froze and for some time couldn't make a single move. And then I walked up to him and found out that he was some Vukasin [Mandrapa] from the village of Klepci near Capljina whose whole family had been killed, and who was sent to Jasenovac after having worked in the forests. He spoke this with incomprehensible peace that affected me more than the terrible cries around us. All at once I felt the wish to disrupt his peace with the most brutal torturing and, through his suffering, to restore my ecstasy and continue to enjoy the inflicting of pain.

I singled him out and sat him down on a log. I ordered him to cry out: 'Long live Poglavnik [Fuehrer] Pavelić!', or I would cut his ear off. Vukasin was silent. I ripped his ear off. He didn't say a word. I told him once again to cry out 'Long live Pavelić!' or I would tear off the other ear too. I tore off the other ear. 'Yell: "Long live Pavelić"', or I'll tear off your nose.' And when I ordered him for the fourth time to yell 'Long live Pavelić!' and threatened to take his heart out with a knife, he looked at me, that is, somehow through me and over me into uncertainty and slowly said: 'Do your job, child.' [РАДИ ТИ, ДИЈЕРЕ, СВОЈ ПОСОЛ.] After that, these words of his totally bewildered me. I froze, plucked out his eyes, tore out his heart, cut his throat from ear to ear and threw him into the pit. But then something broke within me and I could no longer kill that night ... Brzica won the bet because he had slaughtered 1,360 prisoners and I paid the bet without a word.<sup>25</sup>

Vukasin was 46 years old at the time of his martyrdom yet he bears the title 'staratz' (eng. Elder). It is accepted that his appearance after one year of hiding and six months in a death camp might be deceiving, and that he appeared older than he actually was; but he was not the only elderly Orthodox martyred. His murderer gave only three characteristics of his victim, his name (Vukasin), his appearance (elderly peasant) and his demeanor (incomprehensible peace), and it must be this last characteristic that established the collective memory of him as a

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<sup>25</sup> Milan Bulajic, *The Role of the Vatican in the Breakup of the Yugoslav State*, Belgrade, Ministry of Information of the Republic of Serbia, 1994, p. 156-57.

true disciple. He was an embodiment of the famous saying of Saint Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved.” He ‘became’ an *elder* not because of his ragged clothes but because he stayed loyal to the two millenniums old paradigm of proto-martyrdom.

One should note that it was not the hundreds of murdered Orthodox priests and bishops or the hundreds of destroyed Churches, nor the official policy of “the three thirds” (i.e., a Croatian version of the *Final solution* for almost 2,000,000 Serbs, which was to “kill one third, expel the other and convert (to Catholicism) the third”<sup>26</sup>) that personalised the suffering of an entire Ethnic population, but the martyrdom of one man. The man who embodied the martyr identity of the Orthodox disciple was not famous in any way, not a war hero, a poet or a philosopher or any such thing. The only feature that set him apart from the hellish setting he was in was his heavenly peace. He “stole” the proclaimed loyalty to God from the *Ustasha* and proved to be the true disciple, as well as stealing their sovereignty when he proved to be the instrument of the righteous order.

The statement of Dr. Zec that contained this confession was originally published in 1969<sup>27</sup> but it did not attract much attention. The Serbian Orthodox Church canonized Saint Vukasin on 16 May 2000<sup>28</sup>, almost a decade after the blood-spattered dissolution of “brotherhood and unity”<sup>29</sup>. It was precisely the context of the post-war social Yugoslavia that silenced not only Vukasin but also his slayer and hagiographer. Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic and a multi-faith socialist society in which it was not smart to dig up old wounds. The post-war generations of Serbs were estranged from their national and ecclesial history and tradition<sup>30</sup>. Their Yugoslavian and atheist identity was superimposed over their Serbian and Orthodox heritage.

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<sup>26</sup> Steven L. Jacobs, *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, Lexington Books, 2009, p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dusan Azanjac, Ivo Frol, Djordje Nikolic, (Eds.) *Otpor u zicama, secanja zatvorenika* (Eng. *Resistance in the vires, memories of the prisoners*), Belgrade, Vojnoizdavacki zavod, 1969, 61-65. [In Serbian]

<sup>28</sup> Decision of the Holy Hierarchical Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church No 8 and 9/min. 12, 17 and 111 of 16/3 May 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Yugoslavian policy on inter-ethnic relations.

<sup>30</sup> Djordjo Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, Sydney, Association of Serbian Victims of the Bosnian Civil War 1992-1996 Australia Inc, 2017, p. 15.

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

*“I did not think of defending myself...”*

The civil war that engulfed Yugoslavia in the early 1990s surprised most of its Serbian population. Djordjo Suvajlo<sup>31</sup> was no exception. He was a Serb who lived in a predominantly Muslim town of Tarcin, some 30 kilometers west from Sarajevo. On his older daughter’s fifth birthday, 2 June 1992, his Muslim neighbours took him, his father, and other male Serbs in the town and locked them up in an empty wheat silo under a charge that they were “endangering the public peace and order”.

The silo was across the road from his house. It was a place where he spent his childhood playing with his Muslim, Croat and Serbian friends. In 1992 it became one of the most notorious concentration camps in which he and hundreds of other civilians discovered God. The war unofficially ended with the treaty signed on 10 October 1995 and officially with the *Dayton Agreement* signed on 14 December 1995. Even though there was never any fighting in Tarcin during the whole war, he was released in the last consignment on 27 January 1996.<sup>32</sup>

Suvajlo speaks for his entire generation through his memoirs (“1335 days”) when he states: “Following the ideals of communism, we abandoned our churches and there was no interest to increase the number of churchgoers. (...) It seemed that we were reconciled with the situation imposed on us by our social system and its ungodly ways.”<sup>33</sup> But he was also irritated at the same time that the clergy of the Orthodox Church did not do much, if anything, to help them prepare for the breakup of Yugoslavia.<sup>34</sup> His account of events is not concentrated on spirituality; it is a reflection on the horrible days of war and an attempt to get some understanding of the context in which it could all happen. In that sense his grudge with the clergy can be seen more as a political discussion than a religious one.

Once he and his friends and family suddenly ended up incarcerated, tortured and sometimes murdered by their neighbours, they were similarly scared and confused. They were pondering on what

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Suvajlo, *1335 Days*. Memoirs of an inmate of the “Silo” concentration camp “in which Bosnian Muslims kept their Orthodox Christian prisoners during the Bosnian civil war 1992-1995.

<sup>32</sup> 27 January is the date of liberation of Auschwitz and also feast day of Saint Sava, the first hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church venerated as the ‘Serbian enlightener’ and a Traditional “father of the Serbian nation”.

<sup>33</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 14-15.

was going to happen to them, and perhaps more importantly- why? Soon they started to learn how to pray.<sup>35</sup> Many of them knew just a few words of the Lord's Prayer, remembering their grandmothers praying it at night. This was the beginning of their long conversations with God.

In different situations when Suvajlo and other inmates were in grave danger, they the enlighten Yugoslav youth with no spiritual grounding, would immediately fall back on prayer. For young people that grew up without any religion, this is an unusual condition. The physical separation from the rest of the world, combined with the suffering on the account of their religious identity, which they never developed, but was imposed on them by their Muslim masters, triggered certain yearning. They discovered within themselves a desire to be set apart from the world as the disciples of Christ.

A particularly beautiful account of the commitment to discipleship is a scene where Suvajlo is in a ditch awaiting almost imminent death and he prays: "Dear God, forgive me for only knowing the first half of the Lord's Prayer by heart. Mother, thank you for teaching me at least that half when I was a child while I listened to you praying in front of our icon of Saint Archangel Michael."<sup>36</sup> It is evident that the experience of suffering for Christ, whom they did not even know, at least in the beginning, did not beget resentment in them but rather humbled them. Djordjo's prayer starts with repentance and converts into gratitude, unknowingly instituting essential elements of the Eucharistic spirit.

Evidently it is the experience of a personal relationship with God who understands suffering, death, loss, abandonment, etc. that transforms a proud atheist or at least an agnostic into a humble disciple. Hence, when Suvajlo reflects on his personal development in the camp he is able to summarise it as follows:

My mother taught me to believe in God and to mention Him always. However, to feel His power, protection and help directly when enemies were ready to kill me... I do not know how to describe that feeling. I never imagined in what way, how and when... but I know that He is around us and inside of us and that He offers His grace invisibly and almost imperceptibly to all those who seek it. If we analyse our lives we will see that every one of us has received His help many times. Our main problem is that we do not recognize that help and are not able to see it in the right way.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 73-74.

<sup>36</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 167.

„CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AS A CATALYST FOR DISCIPLESHP IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A Case Study Of Modern Serbian Orthodox Martyrs and Confessors”, *Astra Salvensis*, X (2022), no. 20, p. 47-64.

The final realisation of the superiority of the Christian reaction to persecution is revealed to him during a winter march of prisoners on their way to dig the trenches for the Muslim army. They are being paraded through the streets of a Muslim town and a crowd is gathered. The angry mob is spiting at the prisoners, yelling abuses and getting ready to lynch them. At one point a stray dog appears and becomes agitated by the crowd. The dog decides to attack and runs straight to the middle of the column where Suvajlo is marching.

An immense feeling of pride surfaced in me (...) feeling of dignity my mother taught me. I did not think of defending myself... (...) I felt his fangs pierce through my overalls and drive into my leg muscle. I did not defend myself. I continued walking normally without stopping. (...) The strength of my step dragged the dog as well. Unaccustomed to that sort of reaction the dog let go of my leg and ran back defeated to the other side of the street. The audience was also defeated. They fell silent.<sup>38</sup>

The crowd was cheering for the dog and against the Christians in line with the dehumanisation of the captives. As in the Roman times, the government would present the Christians as a threat to the society in order to justify all kinds of maltreatment, then that maltreatment would be presented as the entertainment for the masses. One can notice this pattern from an incident when the prisoners are brought to the home of one of the guards to chop wood for his family. At one point the guard's little son who was peeping from the house, comes to his dad and says with amazement: “Dad, these *chetniks*<sup>39</sup>, they are just like us, aren't they?”<sup>40</sup> But the paradigm of the early Church martyrdoms proves to be a vital element for a Christian self-understanding once again.

This is why one of the greatest modern Serbian philosophers of religion, Zarko Vidovic, himself a Holocaust survivor, said “Our division on the Chetniks and the Partisans<sup>41</sup> are not important to our enemies. For them we are all simply “camp prisoners”, a nation of camp prisoners. (...) Saint Vukasin of Klepci is an icon of the prisoners and the consciousness of the Serbian history, our living faith, our Interpreter

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<sup>38</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 169-70.

<sup>39</sup> A term Bosnian Muslims use for Orthodox Serbs in a derogatory sense according to the name of the Yugoslav Royalist anti-fascist movement from WWII.

<sup>40</sup> Suvajlo, *1335 Days*, p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> A Yugoslav communist anti-fascist soldiers from WWII.



and Counselor in front of Christ. With him we can never forget that “This world is a tyrant to the tyrant, let alone to a truly noble soul!”<sup>42</sup> hence no political solution can lift us from this bottom if we are not lifted up by the peaceful faith of Saint Vukasin of Jasenovac.<sup>43</sup>

From the Martyrdom of Saint Deacon Avakum, through the passion-bearing of Saint Vukasin of Jasenovac to the witnessing of Djordjo Suvajlo and other Serbs in Bosnia, the same spirit of Discipleship is evident. Even with the demonisation of Serbs in the Western media and the unreal pressures on them to reject their Traditional identity, their experience only brought them closer to Christ, and even where there was no nursing of discipleship, the loyalty to Christ prevailed and flourished but only when it was pressured from the outside oppressors.

### *Concluding remarks*

It is not just suffering that is important for the Christian identity today. One can suffer and not gain anything from it but pain and despair. Even worse, it can change a faithful servant into a distrustful and/or revengeful individual separated from God. But when suffering is accepted with this transformative Christian peaceful response, that is where discipleship is born and a traditionalist becomes a spiritual devotee. A disciple is not just a student, someone who simply memorises the teachings. A true disciple is the one who follows. Disciples are not those who are informed about Golgotha but rather those who are willing to walk to Golgotha. Disciples are not all those who are wearing a cross on their bodies but rather those who are wearing their bodies on a cross.

In this sense it was the martyrdom of Christ and His impassionate reaction that reaffirmed the Apostles in their faith. It would be hard to follow your Teacher into martyrdom, as Apostles did, if you witnessed Him trying to fight and defend and eventually still dying in agony. If Saint Stephen begged his accusers for mercy or if Polycarp was trying to escape it would be hard to imagine Avakum so brave rejoicing that he was honoured to die for Christ and like Christ. Without the peaceful disposition of Christians in the Roman arenas, could we ever imagine or justify the demeanour of Elder Vukasin? Without the gift of peace from God, would Yugoslav atheist youth ever be transformed into the Serbian Orthodox confessors, and would they

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<sup>42</sup> A verse from the *Mountain Wreath*, 19<sup>th</sup> century poem by Petar II Petrovic Njegos.

<sup>43</sup> Zarko Vidovic, *History and faith*, Cetinje, Svetigora, 2008, p. 17-18. [In Serbian]

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have ever discovered that inner peace if it was not for the martyrdom from the outside?

Clearly there is no true discipleship without committed following of Christ until the doorstep of the Kingdom of Heaven. And as His path back into the embrace of the Father went over Golgotha, so will the paths of His true disciples always follow the same way. Martyrdom, suffering, passion bearing, witnessing or confessing the faith are not simply a passive enduring of pain without defence, but an active spiritual struggle to counterattack the system and turn the tables on the world, to transform the accusation into justification and shift the cultural worth into its own advantage. Discipleship is not learned from books, not even from the Bible. It can't be thought in schools or contained in theory. Discipleship is the covenant identity embodied in a living Tradition.