

INTRODUCTION: THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS AND THE UNITY OF BELIEVERS

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I had found a hidden spiritual treasure. It had been buried on the shelves of a German publisher, scarcely known for the past 10 years. The unearthed gem was the text of a [presentation](#) delivered by Kurt Cardinal Koch, entitled *Persecution of Christians and The Ecumenism of the Martyrs: A Biblical Reflection*.

Cardinal Koch's speech was not delivered at the Vatican, where this former Bishop of Basel has served for 15 years as president of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. As such, he is, next to the Pope, the Roman Catholic Church's most senior authority on relations between the various Christian communions and traditions. The presentation was made to an overwhelmingly evangelical Protestant gathering in 2015 at the Schönblick Conference Center in the small town of Schwäbisch-Gmund in southern Germany.

I became aware of the Schönblick address not long after returning from an encouraging meeting with Cardinal Koch in Rome. We spoke then about CSI's initiative to promote prayer for the suffering parts of the Body of Christ during weekly worship services. The Cardinal did not mention his Schönblick talk. But a colleague told me afterward he had heard the Cardinal speak very powerfully about the persecution of Christians at Schönblick years before.

I got on the phone straightaway and spoke with one of the conference organizers, Kuno Kallnbach. He informed me that they had indeed published a small [edition](#) of the Cardinal's speech in German and sent me a rare copy. Upon first read, I was struck by the pressing need for Christians of all traditions to consider deeply Cardinal Koch's message and its implications for Christians today.

Today, religious persecution is expanding and intensifying throughout the world. Much of it, arguably most of it, targets Christians. The martyrdom of Christians is increasing with no end in sight. The martyrs come from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. What they all have in common is belonging to the mystical Body of Christ on earth that “calls on the name of the Lord” for salvation. (Romans 10:13)

Today’s divisions in the Body of Christ are deeply rooted in history, theology, economics and politics. Barring a miracle, they will not be overcome soon. But by focusing on those who have been martyred because of their common faith in “God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...” as proclaimed in the Apostles’ Creed, we can be inspired to withstand the persecuting, dehumanizing “principalities, powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world and spiritual wickedness in high places” - to paraphrase the words of St. Paul (Ephesians 6:12).

Cardinal Koch begins by citing one of CSI’s biblical pillars: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (I Corinthians 12:26). It is a reminder of an obvious reality that we find all too easy to suppress, especially if we live in a rather comfortable bubble, far from the scene of violent persecution. We may be prosperous. We may enjoy extensive freedom and pleasure. We may not feel we have much in common with the suffering parts of the Body of Christ in faraway lands. But the fact is, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”

When CSI was founded nearly 50 years ago, its founder, Rev. Hans Stückelberger, recognized the reality highlighted by Cardinal Koch at Schönblick. Pastor Hans, as he is customarily called internationally, understood that standing in solidarity with the suffering parts of the Body of Christ would spiritually strengthen the whole Body. He also grasped that failure to express such solidarity would inevitably produce weakness and spiritual malaise in those parts that feel, for the time being, free, prosperous and powerful.

Recognizing the profound importance of Cardinal Koch's theological reflection, CSI is launching this multi-part series to stimulate deeper

conversation about the "ecumenism of the martyrs" among Christians of all traditions.

I would encourage Christians from all traditions to read this series not just as a theological exercise for the mind, but also as a call to action. Why?

“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand,” Jesus taught. This is basic common sense that is as applicable in the secular as in the spiritual realm. The less-than-pious Benjamin Franklin stressed it when reminding American statesmen upon the signing of the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we will hang separately.” Faithful fulfilment of our mission as parts of the Body of Christ depends on grasping and acting upon such truths, whether they come from reflection on the Bible or from the laws of human nature.

Cardinal Koch has made an appeal for solidarity in action with the suffering parts of the Body of Christ, whatever the nationality, whatever the denomination. This solidarity means resistance to those “principalities” and “powers” about which the Apostle Paul spoke. As we see violent persecution increasing dramatically in much of the world, and as troubling signs of anti-Christian legal and social discrimination appear in Europe and North America, it is hard to make a credible case against the essence of Cardinal Koch’s plea for solidarity. The “ecumenism of the martyrs” can in solidarity be expressed now, without further theological dialogue aimed at restoring full communion between the various Christian denominations and traditions.

Following Cardinal Koch's foundational reflection, this series will feature responses from Christian leaders across denominational lines and continents. Readers will encounter the theological insights of Archbishop Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who brings his characteristic depth to Cardinal Koch's thesis. They will also read the testimony of Professor Yusufu Turaki, a Nigerian theologian whose documentation of systematic Christian persecution in northern Nigeria provides sobering contemporary evidence of the very realities Cardinal Koch addresses. As this conversation unfolds, we will be

welcoming additional voices from the global Body of Christ who can deepen our understanding of what it means to practice the "ecumenism of the martyrs" in our troubled times.

I am grateful to have received permission from Schönblick and Cardinal Koch for CSI to publish an English translation and launch this important series. The deed is now done, thanks to a very able Australian translator, Brian Edwards. The intention is to invite Christian leaders of various traditions to respond for the purpose of stimulating constructive conversation about a great challenge facing Christian communities throughout the world. Great has been the temptation to shy away from practicing the "ecumenism of the martyrs" in pursuit of other interests. Through this series, we hope to encourage deeper engagement with this vital calling.