

The Evil Communion

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Sulpitius Severus (363-420), long famous for his *Life of St. Martin of Tours*, has recorded in his *Sacred History* an interesting and revealing episode in church history. In his second book, chapter 46, he writes that a certain Priscillian (4th century) was converted to the teachings of a Gnostic-Manichaean sect first introduced into Spain by Marcus, an Egyptian from Memphis. Severus tells us that Priscillian was

a man of noble birth, of great riches, bold, restless, eloquent, learned through much reading, very ready at debate and discussion — in fact, altogether a happy man, if he had not ruined an excellent intellect by wicked studies. Undoubtedly, there were to be seen in him many admirable qualities both of mind and body. He was able to spend much time in watchfulness, and to endure both hunger and thirst; he had little desire for amassing wealth, he was most economical in the use of it.

This man was the author of Priscillianism, a heresy which shook Spain and parts of Gaul till the middle of the fifth century. He was able at the start to convert two bishops in Southern Spain to his cause, Instantius and Salvianus. The movement then spread rapidly and attracted many of the clergy and laity — men and women, both wealthy and influential.

Hyginus, the bishop of Cordova, was the first to oppose the rising sect. He reported the matter to Ydacijs, bishop of Emerita, and took counsel with him. Their conference led to an organized movement against the new errors. Ydacijs seems to have been a rough and violent man. By intolerant severity he promoted rather than prevented the spread of the sect. Hyginus became dissatisfied and alarmed by Ydacijs' measures, and from an accuser became a protector of the Priscillianists. At length a synod was held at Saragossa (Caesar-Augusta) which excommunicated the four leaders of the sect, Instantius and Salvianus the bishops with Helpidius and Priscillian the laymen. Hyginus, bishop of Cordova, also incurred the wrath and reproach of the synod as protector of the excommunicated, although he had been the first to accuse them. All who shared or connived at the new errors of faith and practice were anathematized. The task of promulgating the decrees and executing the ecclesiastical sanctions was given to Ithacius, bishop of Sossuba, a lamentable fact, for he too was a man harsh and given over to violence.

The reaction of the opposition was to ordain Priscillian bishop of Arles (Avila). Persecutions began; accusations and counter accusations were hurled. At this point both parties appealed to the secular authorities and by means of influential people and bribes, used them against each other. In the beginning the opponents of Priscillian won over the emperor Gratianus (Gratian) and an edict was given excluding all heretics from the use of the churches and ordering them to be driven into exile. In time the Priscillianists won

over Macedonius, the master of the offices (*magister officiorum*). As one historian puts it, "The wealth of Priscillian and his followers was liberally employed. The 'silver spears' were now in the hands of the partisans on both sides." Through the powerful influence of Macedonius the Priscillianists were restored to their churches and sees. Ydacius and Ithacius were charged with causing divisions and disturbing the peace of the Church. Ithacius was even compelled to flee. The Priscillianists now had the upper hand and with friends at court powerful enough to ward off any moves of the opposition, all things seemed turned to their favor.

But an unlooked-for political upheaval changed everything. In Paris the unpopular Gratian was overthrown and assassinated and Clemens Maximus usurped the purple. His soldiers proclaimed him emperor in Britain and marched triumphantly into Gaul. This destroyed all the bright hopes of the Priscillianists. The fortunes of their adversaries revived. On the arrival of Maximus at Treves in 384, Ithacius brought a formal accusation with heavy charges against Priscillian and his followers. Maximus, a Spaniard by birth, reversed the vacillating policy of Gratian. Both parties were summoned to a synod at Bordeaux in 385 which had no results. In due course both parties appeared before Maximus at Treves. At Treves there was one in the midst of all this confusion whose prophetic insight saw the real significance of the issue at stake. This was Saint Martin of Tours, whose influence was then at its height.

This is how Sulpitius Severus records the event:

Thus, then, all whom the process embraced were brought before the king. The bishops Ydacius and Ithacius followed as accusers; and I would by no means blame their zeal in overthrowing heretics, if they had not contended for victory with greater keenness than was fitting. And my feeling indeed is that the accusers were as distasteful to me as the accused. I certainly hold that Ithacius had no worth or holiness about him. For he was a bold, loquacious, impudent, and extravagant man; excessively devoted to the pleasures of sensuality. He proceeded even to such a pitch of folly as to charge all those men, however holy, who either took delight in reading, or made it their object to vie with each other in the practice of fasting, with being friends or disciples of Priscillian. The miserable wretch even ventured publicly to bring forward a disgraceful charge of heresy against Martin, who was at that time a bishop, and a man clearly worthy of being compared to the Apostles. For Martin, being then settled at Treves, did not cease to importune Ithacius that he should give up his accusations or to implore Maximus that he should not shed the blood of the unhappy persons in question. He maintained that it was quite sufficient punishment that, having been declared heretics by a sentence of the bishops, they should have been expelled from the churches; and that it was, besides, a foul and unheard-of indignity, that a secular ruler should be judge in an ecclesiastical cause. (*Sacred History* 2.50)

And indeed, as long as Saint Martin was present, the trial of Priscillian was delayed; Maximus even consented to promise the holy one that no life should be sacrificed. But as soon as Saint Martin was obliged by the call of pressing matters to withdraw from Treves (the whole matter was being drawn out), the emperor was surrounded by the unyielding Ydadius and Ithacius, ably supported by two bishops of a like mind and character, Magnus and Rufus, who were powerful at court. All these unremittingly urged Maximus to take severe measures.

The verdict was not long in coming. Priscillian and his chief followers were condemned to death by the imperial consistory at Treves. Some, after confiscation of their goods, were banished to the Scilly Isles, others into Gaul. Priscillian is recorded as the first of those who suffered death (*gladio perempti*). With him died two presbyters, lately become disciples, Felicissimus and Armenius, and Latronianus a poet, and Euchrocia the rich and noble matron of Bordeaux. Instantius, deposed from his bishopric by the synod of Bordeaux, and Tiberianus, were banished to the desolate Scilly Isles. Asarinus and Aurelius, two deacons, were executed. Tertullus, Potamius, and Johannes, as meaner followers who turned king's evidence, were temporarily banished within Gaul. This was the first instance of capital punishment for heresy in the history of the Church. It should not pass unnoticed that it was at the instigation of Spanish bishops. Centuries later it would be repeated on a grand scale during the Inquisition.

The immediate consequences of the sentence were not reassuring to the persecuting party. At Treves a violent strife arose between the bishops present concerning Priscillian's execution. Theognitus, a bishop of independent mind, boldly led the non-contents, refusing church communion to Ithacius and the others guilty of the judicial bloodshed. In Spain the Priscillianist enthusiasm was for a while intensified. The number of followers grew. The bodies of those who had suffered at Treves were brought to Spain and honored as relics of martyrs. The opposition became terrified. Additional severities were proposed. Maximus resolved to send military tribunes to Spain with unlimited powers. They were to investigate charges of heresy, examine heretics, and take life and property from the guilty. They were men little likely to temper justice with mercy.

But let us hear Sulpitius Severus in his own words describe what followed.

I will now come to an event which he always concealed, owing to the character of the times, but which he could not conceal from us. In the matter referred to, there is this of a miraculous nature that an angel conversed, face to face, with him. The Emperor Maximus, while in other respects doubtless a good man, was led astray by the advices of some priests after Priscillian had been put to death. He, therefore, protected by his royal power Ithacius the bishop, who had been the accuser of Priscillian, and others of his confederates, whom it is not necessary to name. The emperor thus prevented every one from bringing it as a charge against Ithacius that, by his instrumentality, a man of any sort had been condemned to death. Now Martin, constrained to go to the court by many serious causes of people involved in suffering, incurred the whole force of the

storm which was there raging. The bishops who had assembled at Treves were retained in that city, and daily communicating with Ithacius, they had made common cause with him. When it was announced to them expecting no such information, that Martin was coming, completely losing courage, they began to mutter and tremble among themselves. And it so happened that already, under their influence, the emperor had determined to send some tribunes armed with absolute power into the two Spains, to search out heretics, and, when found, to deprive them of their life or goods. Now there was no doubt that that tempest would also make havoc of multitudes of the real saints, little distinction being made between the various classes of individuals. For in such circumstances a judgment was formed simply by appearances, so that one was deemed a heretic rather on his turning pale from fear, or wearing a particular garment, than by the faith which he professed. And the bishops were well aware that such proceedings would by no means please Martin; but, conscious of evil as they were, this was a subject of deep anxiety to them, lest when he came, he should keep from communion with them; knowing well as they did, that others would not be wanting who, with his example to guide them, would follow the bold course adopted by so great a man. They therefore form a plan with the emperor, to this effect, that, officials of the court being sent on to meet him, Martin should be forbidden to come any nearer to that city, unless he should declare that he would maintain peace with the bishops who were living there. But he skillfully frustrated their object, by declaring that he would come among them with the peace of Christ. And at last, having entered during the night, he went to the church, simply for the purpose of prayer. On the following day he betakes himself to the palace. Besides many other petitions which he had to present, and which it would be tedious to describe, the following were the principal: entreaties in behalf of the courtier Narses, and the president Leucadius, both of whom had belonged to the party of Gratian, and that, with more than ordinary zeal, upon which this is not the time to dilate, and who had thus incurred the anger of the conqueror; but his chief request was, that tribunes, with the power of life and death, should not be sent into the Spains. For Martin felt a pious solicitude not only to save from danger the true Christians in these regions, who were to be persecuted in connection with that expedition, but to protect even heretics themselves. But on the first and second day the wily emperor kept the holy man in suspense, whether that he might impress on him the importance of the affair, or because, being obnoxious to the bishops, he could not be reconciled to them, or because, as most people thought at the time the emperor opposed his wishes from avarice, having cast a longing eye on the property of the persons in question. For we are told that he was really a man distinguished by many excellent

actions, but that he was not successful in contending against avarice. This may, however, have been due to the necessities of the empire at the time, for the treasury of the state had been exhausted by former rulers; and, he, being almost constantly in the expectation of civil wars, or in a state of preparation for them, may easily be excused for having, by all sorts of expedients, sought resources for the defense of the empire.

In the meantime, those bishops with whom Martin would not hold communion went in terror to the king, complaining that they had been condemned beforehand; that it was all over with them as respected the *status* of every one of them if the authority of Martin was now to uphold the pertinacity of Theognitus, who alone had as yet condemned them by a sentence publicly pronounced; that the man ought not to have been received within the walls; that he was now not merely the defender of heretics, but their vindicator; and that nothing had really been accomplished by the death of Priscillian, if Martin were to act the part of his avenger. Finally, prostrating themselves with weeping and lamentation, they implored the emperor to put forth his power against this one man. And the emperor was not far from being compelled to assign to Martin, too, the doom of heretics. But after all, although he was disposed to look upon the bishops with too great favor, he was not ignorant that Martin excelled all other mortals in faith, sanctity, and excellence; he therefore tries another way of getting the better of the holy man. And first he sends for him privately, and addresses him in the kindest fashion, assuring him that the heretics were condemned in the regular course of public trials, rather than by the persecutions of the priests; and that there was no reason why he should think that communion with Ithacius and the rest of that party was a thing to be condemned. He added that Theognitus had created disunion, rather by personal hatred, than by the cause he supported; and that, in fact, he was the only person who, in the meantime, had separated himself from communion; while no innovation had been made by the rest. He remarked further that a synod, held a few days previously, had decreed that Ithacius was not chargeable with any fault. When Martin was but little impressed by these statements, the king then became inflamed with anger, and hurled him out of his presence; while, without delay, executioners are appointed for those in whose behalf Martin had made supplication.

When this became known to Martin, he rushed to the palace, though it was not night. He pledges himself that, if these people were spared, he would communicate; only let the tribunes, who had already been sent to the Spains for the destruction of the churches, be recalled. There is no delay: Maximus grants all his requests. On

the following day, the ordination of Felix as bishop was being arranged. He was a man undoubtedly of great sanctity, and truly worthy of being made a priest in happier times. Martin took part in the communion of that day, judging it better to yield for the moment, than to disregard the safety of those over whose heads a sword was hanging. Nevertheless, although the bishops strove to the uttermost to get him to confirm the fact of his communicating by signing his name, he could not be induced to do so. On the following day, hurrying away from that place, as he was on the way returning, he was filled with mourning and lamentation that he had even for an hour been mixed up with the evil communion, and, not far from a village named Andethanna, where remote woods stretch far and wide with profound solitude, he sat down while his companions went on a little before him. There he became involved in deep thought, alternately accusing and defending the cause of his grief and conduct. Suddenly, an angel stood by him and said, 'Justly, O Martin, do you feel compunction, but you could not otherwise get out of your difficulty. Renew your virtue; resume your courage, lest you not only now expose your fame, but your very salvation, to danger.' Therefore, from that time forward, he carefully guarded against being mixed up in communion with the party of Ithacius. But when it happened that he cured some of the possessed more slowly and with less grace than usual, he at once confessed to us with tears that he felt a diminution of his power on account of the evil of that communion in which he had taken part for a moment, through necessity and not with a cordial spirit. He lived sixteen years after this, but never again did he attend a synod, and kept carefully aloof from all assemblies of bishop (*Dialogues 3.11-12*).

From this incident we see how the God-bearing Martin of Tours refused to have communion with Ithacius and those with him for the sole reason that they had instigated bloodshed, even though the condemned were heretics. Rightly did he maintain "that it was quite sufficient punishment that, having been declared heretics by a sentence of bishops, they should have been expelled from the churches, and that it was, besides, a foul and unheard-of indignity, that a secular ruler should be judge in an ecclesiastical cause." Although bloodshed is a great crime, yet Ithacius and the bishops with him were not heretics that Saint Martin should refuse to have communion with them as Maximus the emperor had argued, "no innovation had been made" by them. True, one could argue that manslaughter or even killing as a soldier in war is an impediment to ordination, according to the canons; therefore if a clergyman after ordination should be guilty of the shedding of blood either by his own hand or by having instigated it, he should be deposed. Yet in this instance "a synod held a few days previously had decreed that Ithacius was not chargeable with any fault." But Saint Martin was "little impressed," as it is recorded, by any and every argument brought in defense of Ithacius and those with him guilty of bloodshed. If he finally relented and agreed to concelebrate with them, it was

solely to prevent the further bloodshed of hundreds if not thousands of others similarly accused.

Yet the angel informed him in a revelation that "justly" did he feel remorse for having concelebrated, even though "otherwise" he could not have gotten out of his difficulty, and rebuked him "lest you not only now expose your fame, but your very salvation, to danger." In verification of this warning "it happened that he cured some of the possessed more slowly and with less grace than usual" and felt a "diminution of his power on account of *the evil of that communion* in which he had taken part for a moment, *through necessity*, and not with a cordial spirit," How awesome indeed are the things one encounters in the Scripture and in the lives of the saints concerning the judgments of God. Yet who heeds!

The other day, leafing through an issue of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, we saw a panoramic color photograph of "world Orthodoxy" gathered together on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Moscow Patriarchate, which took place in May of 1978, in Moscow, and the above incident of the Priscillians in the fourth century came to mind. Here were the representatives of virtually all the official Orthodox churches with the Soviet patriarch and his bishops (there were a few Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Evangelicals, etc., just to make sure that all the "branches of the church" were represented), and in the midst of all these venerable hierarchs, pastors, and ministers, a non-clergyman (we would not call him a layman for that would presuppose that he was a member of the Church). Who might this esteemed gentleman be, so honored to be photographed with all these hierarchs? None other than the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs of the USSR Council of Ministers, Vladimir A. Kuroedov, the real head of the Soviet Church, an avowed atheist and enemy of the Church. And there was not found one hierarch of any rank and origin to step out of the group and refuse to be photographed with this sinister enemy of our Faith. The same thing was repeated at the official banquet and other gatherings. Mr. Kuroedov was always seated at the head table in a central place of honor. He even gave an address (which is beyond description) to the whole assembly. One should read the full text in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no. 8 (1978), page 32, to appreciate his erudition. The man should have been a comedian on television. And there was not found one person in that whole pious assembly to get up and leave.

Mayhaps today it would be too much to expect to find a God-bearer in the strength of Saint Martin of Tours among the bishops of "world Orthodoxy," yet not even a Theognitus was found to refuse to sit in the "seat of the pestilent" or to be found in the "counsel of the ungodly." But why speak of the atheist Kuroedov and not speak of the Soviet Patriarch Pimen and those with him. Since the days of the lamentable Metropolitan Sergei, (the later Soviet Patriarch Sergei), who in 1927 betrayed the Church and his fellow bishops and signed over the Church in Russia to the God-haters, have not the Soviet patriarchs and bishops of the Soviet Church the blood of the confessing bishops and new martyrs on their hands? Have not all these confessors and new martyrs been charged with disobedience and insubordination to their "canonical head," the Soviet patriarch and his holy synod? Have they not been persecuted, arrested, imprisoned,

tortured, exiled, and murdered because they refused to follow the example of the Soviet churchmen, remaining faithful rather to the confession of Patriarch Tikhon and the martyred bishops with him? Is not the recognition of and cooperation with the Soviet authority of Sergei and those of like mind with him the legal basis by which all who disagree are arrested and liquidated by one means or another?

Ithacius the bishop in Spain of the fourth century and those with him had the blood of the sectarian bishop Priscillian and a half dozen of his followers on their hands. How much more so have the Soviet Patriarchs Sergei, Alexei, and Pimen, and those with them, the blood of tens of thousands of Orthodox believers, hierarchs, priests, deacons, monastics, laity — who were specifically tortured and put to death because they censured and uncovered their betrayal of the Church? (The victims of the Soviet terror run into the millions as do the number of new martyrs also. Here we are speaking specifically of those clergy and laity who were arrested and liquidated precisely because they refused to accept the betrayal of Sergei; we are speaking of the bishops in his day: Peter, Cyril, Agathangelos, Joseph, etc., and those who later uncovered and protested against this betrayal, such as Boris Talantov, who exposed the lamentable Archbishop Nikodim of Leningrad of sorry memory, and the Soviet patriarchate, and who was for this reason arrested and liquidated while in prison.)

The blood of these countless innocents and confessors "cries out of the ground" unto the living God, and yet there is not found one bishop of "world Orthodoxy" to refuse communion with the Soviet bishops on this account. Not one imitator of Saint Martin of Tours, yet many of Judas. No one feels remorse. No one fears lest he expose his "very salvation to danger," to use the words of the angel to Saint Martin. No one fears a "diminution of grace on account of the *evil of that communion*," to use again a phrase from that account. Even if the Soviet Church had not espoused the heresy of Ecumenism, no conscientious Orthodox Christian should have communion with it precisely because of the blood of the righteous which it has denounced and betrayed. Until such a day as the Soviet Church ceases being a Soviet Church and becomes again the Church of Christ by denouncing its allegiance to the Soviet state, protesting the persecution of religion in the Soviet state and asking forgiveness for its two-fold sin, of betrayal of that which is God's to Caesar for the last fifty years, and of the heresy of Ecumenism — which is a sin against the unity and uniqueness of the Church — for the last twenty years, no Orthodox can recognize it as a canonical Orthodox Church. As for all those who have communion with it, they only partake in "the blood of all the righteous shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood" of all them that are slain even unto this very day for righteousness' sake.

They tell us that we are out of the mainstream of "world Orthodoxy." We thank God for this, for we would never wish to be found in the photograph of "world Orthodoxy" of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, with the enemies of our Saviour, partaking of that "evil communion."

HOLY TRANSFIGURATION MONASTERY

Editors' Note: Unfortunately, the bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate have not learned their lesson. They have not yet forgotten their KGB tactics of the past. The persecution of the traditional Orthodox Christians in Russia continues unabated, as it does in the lands of Byelorussia and Georgia, thanks to the activities of the "Orthodox" bishops and clergy there. The same is occurring on the Holy Mountain, Athos, against the Monastery of Esphigmenou (the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the "Ierá Epistasiá", and the Greek police work hand in hand there). We thank God for this persecution — because it exposes the true nature of Ecumenism's "tolerance" and "love."

Also, we note here that we emphatically condemn in the strongest terms the activities of one "old calendar" priest in the Republic of Georgia (under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Cyrilan of Fili), who has been accused repeatedly of countless acts of brutal violence against various sectarian groups in that country.

Acts of violence against others for their religious convictions are unacceptable, no matter who commits them.

St. Martin, pray to God that He may convert the hearts of the hierarchs who partake of the evil communion of apostasy and Ecumenism, and bring them back to the Faith of the Saints. Amen.