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“By your perseverance you will secure your lives” (Luke 21:19).

*Rev 15: 1-4: Luke 21:12-19*

Jesus’ prediction of coming persecution for believers comes near the end of Luke and may describe actual persecution as he was composing his Gospel. Did the growth of the early church provoke imperial suppression for challenging Roman cultural and economic interests? Nero found it an easy scapegoat in the 60s, when tradition says both Peter and Paul were martyred. The movement was essentially countercultural and may have collided with civil religion and the imperial cult and because it was attracting converts from among former slaves and even from the upper classes.

While Luke’s Acts of the Apostles bends over backwards to show that Christians were not subversives, the Book of Revelation clearly reflects this tension. The stage was set for persecutions while the church was still a minority, but by the time of Constantine, Christianity was given official status and other “pagan” religions were targeted as heterodox. A long history of anti-Semitism already infecting the New Testament flowed from this period.

The history of Christian persecution is checkered in that roles reversed depending on who was in the majority. We hear much today about “freedom of religion” and Christian persecution in American politics, blurred categories depending on how conflicts are defined. European faiths were integrated into colonial conquests for centuries, and this has complicated cultural and religious clashes in developing nations ever since.

Today's Gospel resonates with the experience of many peace activists who have protested nuclear weapons and US support for repressive Latin American militaries. Going to trial and often to prison has been part of radical Catholic protests for generations and is still today's news. Being able to witness in court has produced some eloquent pleas for sanity and the common good by nuclear activists. Public indifference has made this a lonely effort, but it is laying down a witness that will grow in relevance as nuclear proliferation and climate causes grow.

As Thomas Merton attested, most Christians are "guilty bystanders" in most radical issues, including the Beatitudes and the Corporal Works of Mercy. As the church year turns over and we focus once again on Advent, we are invited to persevere in a Gospel that is trying to transform us. Advent also poses for us the perennial question: "Just what we are waiting for?"

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