Fidelity in the Midst of Conflict

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How do people committed to the one God deal with the culture in which they live? This question posed an enormous challenge to the early Church -- and we too should evaluate very carefully the general tendencies of our society. No one can withdraw entirely from our world; indeed, we should strive to bring the values of the Gospel to bear upon it. However, it would be naive to ignore the lights and sounds that contradict the fabric of our faith. What principles guide us in this process?

Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea (185-245) was one of the early Church's great biblical scholars and theologians. When he noted that Moses received good advice from his non-Israelite father-in-law (Ex 18:16-23), he made the following point. "When we find a statement expressed with wisdom by the Gentiles, we must not spurn what the author says... But as the Apostle stated, 'Test everything; hold fast to what is good' (1 Thes 5:21)" (Homily on Ex XI:6). Thus, the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions and philosophies of life (see Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions #2). However, we cannot rely only on our good judgment and common sense to discern the true and the holy in divine creation from the bewildering array of options presented in a modern society. Each of us must seek to know the Church's teaching as given topics present themselves; the guidance of a wise Mother can save us a great deal of anguish and possible fatal errors.

From ancient times those espousing positions radically opposed to biblical revelation were often militant in fostering their cause. At times the very presence of a faithful Jew was irksome to those who had apostatized or assimilated into the foreign culture in which they lived. The Wisdom of Solomon, written in Alexandria, Egypt during the first century BCE, described such a persecution of the righteous. Making a mockery of the person's right to follow his conscience, those who had abandoned their faith hounded him to death. Even worse, they ridiculed his faith and put God to the test. "If the righteous man is God's son, he will help him and will deliver him from the hands of his adversaries" (Wis 2:18). Many of the faithful in every age have been subjected to such taunts.

Jesus knew the political situation of his day; Judea especially was in difficult straits because the high priestly authorities collaborated with the current Roman governor to maintain the Empire's control of the region. How did Jesus understand his own task? Certainly he did not intend to provoke a revolt against civil or sacred authorities, but his call for transformation of a world burdened by enslavement to sin had implications for both the political and religious orders. Unless he retreated from his forthright admonitions that these leaders examine their deeds in the light of God's truth, he knew that confrontation was inevitable. Few people in authority are willing to make profound changes in their lives!
The first three Gospels describe the careful effort that Jesus made to prepare his followers for the results of a non-violent witness to God's reign over history. Three times in the course of his ministry Jesus described his persecution, death and resurrection. However, his disciples were obtuse and unwilling to face these unpleasant realities. "They did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask him" (Mk 9:32).

In spite of Jesus' call to imitate his example (see Mk 8:34-37), the disciples did not transfer his pattern of leadership to their own level. When they thought that Jesus was not listening, "they discussed with one another who was the greatest" (Mk 9:34). So Jesus expressed verbally the principle whereby he lived: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). Later he would ask if they were committed to share in his cup of suffering (10:38), which had the purpose of combatting sin and reconciling humanity with God. "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the multitude" (10:45).

At all times Christians must beware of subtle compromises, such as those that led the high priests astray. This daily effort to test everything in the light of faith will enable us to be ready should persecution arise. Of course, an active faith and frequent prayer will seek the strength from God to persevere. Pray also for those who are persecuted!