

FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church

This refusal to participate in the civic machinery of jurisprudential violence was one of the most distinctive marks of the early Christian movement, and an object of scorn on the part of pagan observers. The witness of the earliest Christian writers of the post-apostolic age confirms this. St. Justin Martyr asserted that a Christian would rather die than take a life, even in the case of a legal sentence of death.⁴⁰ According to the *The Apostolic Tradition*, traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, no one intending to become a soldier could be received into the Church, while those who were already under arms at the time of their conversion were forbidden to carry out even a properly pronounced order of execution.⁴¹ Arnobius clearly stated that Christians were not allowed to impose the death penalty at all, even when it was perfectly just. Athenagoras stated that the killing even of those guilty of capital offenses must be repugnant to Christians, as they are obliged to view all killing of humans as a pollution of the soul.⁴² Minucius Felix, St. Cyprian, and Tertullian all took it for granted that, for Christians, the innocent may never slay the guilty. According to Lactantius, a Christian could neither kill a justly condemned criminal nor even arraign another person for a capital crime.⁴³ It is true that, after the conversion of the empire, the Church had to accept the reality of an established system of jurisprudence and correction that included capital punishment, a system that it could ameliorate only to a degree. Even so, the greatest

⁴⁰ Justin, *First Apology* 39. PG 6.388B.

⁴¹ *The Apostolic Tradition* 16.9. See *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.

⁴² Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 35. PG 6.968C.

⁴³ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.20. PL 6.705B.

of the Church Fathers consistently argued against the full application of the law in capital cases, in part because capital punishment constitutes a usurpation of God's role as just judge, and in part because it obviates the criminal's opportunity for repentance. And, as St. John Chrysostom asked in the course of praising the emperor for refraining from the "legal slaughter" of rioters: "If you slay God's image, how can you then revoke the deed?"⁴⁴ The prevailing view among the Fathers was essentially that the Sermon on the Mount's prohibitions of retaliation sets the standard for Christians in both the private and the public spheres, for on the cross Christ at once perfected the refusal of violence and exhausted the law's wrath. As the centuries wore on, admittedly, and as the Church accommodated itself to the cultures and rulers with which it allied itself, this prophetic hostility to capital punishment was frequently forgotten, and for long periods; but it remains the ideal of the New Testament and of the Church in its earliest dawn, and in our day it is possible to recover that ideal fully and state it anew without hesitation. Thus, while the Church fully recognizes that the state is obliged to imprison those who might cause harm to others, it calls for the abolition of the death penalty in all countries. The Church appeals also to the consciences of persons everywhere, and asks them to recognize that capital punishment is almost invariably a penalty reserved for those who lack the resources to afford the best legal defense or who belong to racial or religious minorities.

§49 For Orthodox Christians, the way of peace, of dialogue and diplomacy, of forgiveness and reconciliation is always

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Statues* 17.1. PG 49.173B.