

Another characteristic feature of Christ's teaching was the duty of self-sacrifice. Naturally, His first exposition of this duty, or rather of the necessity for it that would be forced upon them by their situation if they were to continue faithful, was exceedingly unpopular with the disciples. Their minds were filled with the political Messianic dreams of their fellow-countrymen, and they could not understand how there should be any great call for sacrifice. But they were soon undeceived, and the early Church, exposed to persecution from every quarter on account of the faith, responded heroically to the need. As the persecution became steadily fiercer, until it culminated in the martyrdom of large numbers of the faithful, so the spirit of the Church rapidly rose to the occasion. The first few examples of martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel no doubt spread consternation among the believers, as a similar experience in any part of the Church would do to-day. But presently we find a revulsion of feeling, and leading Christians, instead of shrinking from death as something to be dreaded and shunned, actually came to court the crown of martyrdom, though often obtained only after suffering almost incredible refinements of cruelty. They longed for it with an eagerness that would have been unspeakably heroic if it had not been morbid and exaggerated. Three centuries of heathen persecution, more or less acute, according to the spirit of the reigning emperor, restored the balance, and left the conviction deep and clear in the mind of the universal Church that no man need go out of his way to seek martyrdom in order that he might be faithful to the cause of Christ and witness a good confession before the world.

Curiously enough, the application of this same principle in a different direction, at a comparatively early period, was characterized by a similar exaggeration and has proved much harder to correct. The practical difficulty in the attainment of personal holiness, and the disappointment felt by earnest souls in every age as to their own progress, not unnaturally suggested the method of voluntary self-denial, self-imposed poverty and bodily discomfort, as one that was likely to secure better results. An erroneous philosophy widely current