This past year I have been made aware, from several sources, of an event that may have been a crucial turning point in the spiritual history of Switzerland.

One of my ongoing research questions has been, what is the source of God’s blessing on this nation? Why is it that in century after century after century, missionaries have brought revival and at times reformation to this little country?

A recent opportunity to speak to a Swiss minister’s group obliged me to do more reading on the martyrdom of the Theban Legion. Although some modern historians disparage this story as a “legend”, the events are well attested both in Europe and in Egypt, and there is no compelling reason to doubt that the martyrdom happened as related here.

About 290 A.D. one of the worst Roman emperors, Diocletian, appointed a Cesar named Maximian. Diocletian was trying to keep the Empire together by sharing power with the new strong man, who was in Diocletian’s words, "a barbarian".

The Roman Empire was starting to fall apart at this time, and policy was to recruit legions from one part of the Empire and then send them to put down rebellions in distant parts. The theory was that if they had no shared language and culture with the rebels, they wouldn’t be tempted to side with them.

The Theban legion was recruited in Upper Egypt in the region of the city of Thebes, now Luxor. They were all Coptic Christians, members of one of the oldest continuous expressions of the Body of Christ on earth. Maximian Cesar was facing a rebellion by the Gauls north of the Alps, across the St. Bernard pass, so he sent the Thebans to put it down.

When Maurice, the commander of the Theban legion, heard that the rebels were also Christians and that their crime against Rome was refusing to worship the Emperor as a god, he led his men in a flat refusal to attack them. Maximian ordered the Thebans to worship him, as he shared divinity status as a sort of co-Emperor, and then to obey his command to attack the Christians. When Maurice again refused, Maximian ordered the "decimation" of the Thebans, which meant that one man out of every ten was put to death. When this horrific intimidation didn’t work, he ordered a second decimation. When that had no effect, he commanded the execution of the rest of the 7,000 members of the Theban legion, his own soldiers, for refusing to worship him and to put to death their fellow Christians.
Groups of the Thebans had already been sent to several locations in Switzerland, but despite their being separated they remained united in their stand against this idolatry.

Many women traveled with the legion, and some survived. One of the nurses, Verena, decided that she had been spared so that God could use her to stay on in Switzerland as a missionary. She dedicated her life to ministering to the poor, specifically in teaching them the principles of hygiene.

A few decades later, Eucherius, Bishop of Lyon, wrote down the speech of Maurice as it had been handed down by church tradition. It is a model of clarity of thinking and expression on the difference between submission and obedience, a subject often misunderstood today.

Here is a part of Maurice’s declaration:

"Emperor, we are your soldiers, but we are above all servants of God. We owe you military obedience, but we owe Him innocence. We receive from you the wages of our labor, from Him we have received life. We cannot deny God our Creator and Lord, and your Creator also, whether you wish it or not.

If we are not forced to offend Him by such crimes, we will yet obey you as we have always done; otherwise we will obey Him rather than you. We offer you, to employ them against any enemy, our hands which we will not cover with innocent blood. These hands know how to battle against enemies and unbelievers, but they will not strike pious men and fellow citizens. For we have taken up arms for our fellow citizens, and not against them.

We have always fought for justice, respect, and the lives of the innocent; that was our recompense for the dangers we faced. We have fought in faithfulness; but how can we preserve this faithfulness toward you, if we refuse it toward our God? We have first of all sworn an oath to God, and secondly to the Emperor. Know that our second oath is meaningless, if we violate the first. You order us to put Christians to death. Search no further, here we are! We confess our faith: "We believe in God, Father and Creator of all things; we believe in His Son Jesus Christ, our God."

We have seen our comrades in arms slain by iron. Their blood has run over us. But we do not mourn our holy companions, we do not pity them. Rather we praise them, and we are full of joy, because they were found worthy to suffer for the Lord. Now the supreme need to live will not push us into rebellion against God. The despair which gives us such strength in the face of danger will not force us to take up arms against you, Emperor. Here we stand with our weapons, but we do not resist you. For we would choose to live rather than to kill, to perish innocent rather than to live guilty. If you make new decrees against us, if you give us new orders, if you bring new threats, fires, tortures, or swords, we are ready to bear all.
Christians we declare ourselves to be; we cannot persecute other Christians."

The memory of this martyrdom has been preserved down through the centuries, both in the Catholic Church in Switzerland and in the Coptic Church in Egypt. The site of it is known, and a small chapel was built there which still stands down beyond the other end of the lake from us. It is outside Agaune, presently St. Maurice, at a place now called Verolliez, where the mountains come down to a narrow defile. The Celts and then the Romans fortified this spot, to control the traffic going through. The Theban legion was encamped there.

Starting in the 4th century a bigger church was built in the town of Agaune over the bones of the martyrs, and in 515 King Sigismod of the Burgondes called monks from several monasteries together and charged them with maintaining the "Laus perennis", or perpetual praise to the Lord from that place. Every day since then, for 1490 years despite fires, floods, and invasions, praise has gone up to God from that Abbey. It is the oldest place of continuous worship in the West.

Tertullian said that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church". In Revelation 6.9-11 we get a glimpse of the importance in Heaven of the deaths of the martyrs.

My theory is that one of the principal sources of God’s blessing on Switzerland is the willing martyrdom of these 7,000 Egyptian Christians.

Blessed be their memory, and blessed be the Name of the Lord.