

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

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## Persecution in Early Church: Did You Know?

Persecution in the Roman Empire was not, as is widely supposed, a constant experience for Christians. Rather, it was sporadic, spaced sometimes by long periods of relative tranquility. The first long peace lasted from 211 to 250 (briefly interrupted in 235), and the second from 258 to 303.

Diocletian, the emperor who launched the "Great Persecution," was a somewhat reluctant persecutor, the main thrust coming from his junior colleague Galerius.

Persecution was not always Empire-wide; more often, particularly in the first two centuries, it was localized.

Inflamed rumors, perhaps based on the early Christians' observance of the Eucharist and love feasts, accused believers of cannibalism and incest.

Many Christians lapsed (i.e., compromised their faith by complying with imperial directives or cooperating with government authorities) under the threat of persecution. The numbers of those who fell away produced a crisis for the church in the 250s. Eventually the question of whether to readmit the lapsed produced several schisms.

The church allowed flight in order to escape persecution and warned against rushing into a voluntary martyrdom.

The high regard for the martyrs as the heroes of the church and the privileges assigned to them led to the cult of the saints.

One of the leading charges against Christians in the Empire was that they were "atheists," that is, they did not worship the pagan deities and so did not participate in the social and civic activities that involved homage to them.

The catacombs around Rome were burial places and only infrequently places of hiding during persecution. Their locations were known to the authorities, with whom they were registered.

Persecution often grew out of animosity by the populace rather than from deliberate government policy.

The "Edict of Milan" in 313, so the story usually goes, was an edict issued at Milan by the emperor Constantine that established Christianity as the imperial religion. Actually, this was not an edict but an agreement between Constantine and his imperial counterpart, Licinius, that resulted in rescripts to provincial governors. Though Constantine and Licinius had met in Milan, the "Edict" issued not from Milan but from Nicomedia, near Constantinople. In the agreement, Christianity was not established as the state religion but was recognized as a legally permissible religion among others in the Empire. There had been earlier grants of toleration, as by Gallienus in 261 and Galerius in 311.

The total number of martyrs was not nearly so great as often imagined. Imperial decrees often were directed against church property, the Scriptures, or only the leaders of the church.

Martyrs were thought to go directly to the presence of God without having to wait in an intermediate state

for the final judgment.

Perhaps the most severe persecution, the "Great Persecution," was also the last, beginning in 303 and continuing off and on in places until 324.

It is estimated that more people have been martyred for Christ in the past 50 years than in the church's first 300 years.

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## From the Editor: Tomb of the Unknown Christians

KEVIN A. MILLER

Last year I visited Arlington National Cemetery, a peaceful expanse (despite the tour buses) on a slope overlooking Washington, D.C. Its central monument is the huge marble sepulchre dedicated to soldiers whose names elude the government and military historians. No doubt most were young, far from home, and filled with a perplexing mix of fear and bravery when they died. A United States marine keeps constant vigil; at prescribed moments he or she crisply traces steps in front of the Tomb and blows a mournful taps.

Though a few Christians martyred under the Roman Empire are well known—Ignatius, Justin, Blandina, Origen—many are unknown. *The Book of Saints* (Morehouse, 1989) lists some of them without comment:

“—d. c. 304: Thirty soldiers martyred under Diocletian

“—d. c. 303: Many martyrs who suffered under Diocletian for refusing to give up the holy books

“—d. 303: Twenty-three martyrs who suffered on the Salarian Way under Diocletian.”

Yet no sepulchre rises at the ruins of the Roman amphitheater in Carthage. No one keeps vigil in Lyons. Taps is not sounded throughout the subterranean web of Roman catacombs.

Despite this, the many faceless Christians who died for their faith in the first few centuries do have a lasting and fitting memorial: a church that continues 1700 later.

Who today worships Mithras? Who follows Mani? Who burns incense to Isis, Osiris, Minerva, and the countless other deities in the Roman pantheon?

Yet the church of Jesus Christ continues unabated, in no small part because its early members were willing to die for him. Among the many reasons that Christianity survived and flourished in the Roman Empire, certainly one of the most compelling, in the words of William H.C. Frend, is that it “never lost its martyr spirit.”

You and I would not and could not hold faith in Christ today, if many of the early Christians had not marched into the arena or toiled in the mines, unbent and uncompromised.

Each time you and I meet a Christian, we are viewing a monument to the unknown early Christian martyrs.

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## Persecution in the Early Church: Did You Know?

**Beginning as a despised, illicit religious sect, Christianity endured 300 years of hostility to emerge as the dominant force in the Roman Empire.**

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Early Christians expected suffering. Christ had died on the cross, so there was no higher honor than to imitate that death through accepting martyrdom (witness by one's blood). The Jewish legacy portrayed, in writings such as the Fourth Book of the Maccabees, the glorious nature of death rather than renunciation of Israel; even without this, Christianity would inevitably have held the martyr's death in high esteem. As the writer of 1 Peter expressed it, "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (4:16).

### Why Were Christians Persecuted?

How was it that the church underwent such sacrifices? The Roman religion was not intolerant; Rome had accepted into its pantheon deities from the Italian tribes and from Asia Minor. In the provinces, the great territorial gods—such as Saturn in North Africa and Jehovah among the Jews—were accepted as "legal religion" on the grounds that their rites, even if barbarous, were sanctified by ancient tradition. Countless local gods and goddesses, worshiped by the ordinary inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, were often provided with a classical equivalent name and worshiped as "Roman" deities.

Despite this toleration, by the early second century the Roman governor of Bithynia (on the Black Sea) had no hesitation in sending to immediate execution those who had been denounced as being Christians. The name alone was a sufficient death warrant.

Reasons for the persecution emerge from the record of Christianity's first three centuries.

### Fratricidal Strife

Persecution did not begin with the Roman authorities. The New Testament writings tell of fratricidal strife between Jews and Christians, the latter challenging the Jews by claiming to be "the New Israel." In the early chapters of Acts, Stephen (7:57) and James, the brother of John the disciple (12:2), became victims of the Jerusalem mob and of King Herod Agrippa, respectively. Indeed, the writer of Luke-Acts appears to go out of his way to reassure the Roman authorities of the loyalty and general value of the Christians and the hostility of the Jews toward them.

The persecutors and their motives changed in A.D. 64. On July 19 that year a great fire engulfed much of Rome; only four of the fourteen quarters of the city escaped damage. Suspicion immediately fell on Emperor Nero: was this a madcap way of clearing part of the city to make room for new, magnificent streets and buildings in his honor? Nero, however, managed to deflect blame first, apparently, on the Jews, who had a reputation for large-scale arson but also had friends at court; and then onto the Christians. Many Christians (perhaps including Peter) were seized, tortured, and done to death in the arena.

Tacitus, writing in c. 115, included an account of the incident in his *Annales* (XV, 44). Except for the manner of the Christians' deaths, which he thought excessively cruel, he showed no sympathy for the Christians. Recording that "Christus, from whom the name [Christians] had its origin" was executed by

"one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate," Tacitus described the Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" and guilty of "hatred of the human race," an accusation he also made against the Jews. Theirs was not a "religion" but a "deadly superstition," and hence worthy of repression. Though there was no immediate sequel to Nero's persecution, the fire forfeited any chance Christians might have had of being recognized as "legal religion" (*religio licita*) separate from Judaism.

## Imperial Policies

Another 30 years pass before we hear of further action against the Christians, and then the evidence is not watertight.

Emperors were extremely suspicious of anything that seemed like "superstition" (for example, carrying a memento given by a Druid priest cost one Roman officer his life!). In 95–96, the emperor Domitian acted drastically against some members of the Roman nobility accused of "atheism" and "lapsing into Jewish customs." It is not sure that Christianity was meant. However, Domitilla, the emperor's kinswoman (*neptis*) who was exiled to the island of Pantelleria [near Sicily], was believed to have been a Christian. The accusation of "atheism"—denial of the existence and power of the gods—might point in that direction.

The veil is lifted, however, about 15 years later. In c. 112, Pliny was sent by the emperor Trajan (98–117) to Bithynia to restore the province from ravages caused by maladministration and corruption. He toured the province and when he reached the far east end, near Amastris, he encountered Christians. Pliny, though a lawyer by profession, had never been at a trial of Christians. The procedure he used was the same as for the vast majority of criminal cases in the province: *cognitio extra ordinem*, an arbitrary system of trial before a magistrate for offenses that fell outside the range of "statutory crimes" such as treason, forgery, or adultery.

As already mentioned, Pliny condemned to immediate execution those who confessed to being Christians, "for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished." Christianity itself was punishable, but the defiant, martyr-attitude of the accused left Pliny in no doubt that his action was right.

Pliny's difficulties arose when individuals agreed that they had been Christians once but were so no longer, and his letter to the emperor indicated his preference for lenience toward them. Trajan responded in an ambiguous but fair-minded way. Christians were "not to be sought out" (i.e., treated like common criminals). If they recanted and "worshipped our gods," they were to be freed, but those who persisted must be punished. Anonymous denunciations, however, were to be rejected as being "a bad example and unworthy of our times."

Twelve years later (in 124–125), Christians gained a further concession. Anti-Christian riots had broken out in the province of Asia (western Asia Minor) in 122–123, and the governor had written to Emperor Hadrian for advice. In response, Hadrian's rescript (imperial order) allowed cases against Christians to be brought to trial, but ordered that the Christians had to be proven guilty of illegal acts before they could be condemned. Once again, "slandering attacks" against Christians were forbidden. The rescript helped protect Christians, for now the emphasis was less on their name than on specific misdeeds. Christians might be unpopular, and their cult technically illegal, but it would take a bold man to file an accusation that, if in any way flawed, could rebound with serious consequences. An accuser also had to await the arrival of the one senior official (the proconsul) able to try a capital case in the large province of Asia. No wonder Justin Martyr attached the text of Hadrian's rescript to the end of his *First Apology*, written c. 155.

## Precairous Toleration

Between 125 and 160, Christians enjoyed a precarious toleration. Few martyrdoms are recorded in this era

of prosperity that marked the climax of the Greco-Roman achievement.

With the accession of Marcus Aurelius as emperor in 161, however, the situation changed. First, the Christians were becoming exceedingly unpopular; they were blamed for causing natural disasters by refusing to worship the deities that protected communities. Christians were also accused of immorality, unnatural vice, and black magic, all calculated to bring the rest of the population into peril.

An urban mob demanded the arrest of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, during what the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea termed "great persecutions that disturbed the province of Asia" (perhaps in February 156, but more likely 166–69). Other Christians had been seized, tried, and executed before Polycarp was arrested. One, a Phrygian, had rushed toward martyrdom—only to recant at the sight of the beasts in the amphitheater.

Polycarp was brought before the proconsul, who begged him to have respect for his great age (he was probably nearly 100), saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar" and denounce "the atheists." But Polycarp, seeing "the lawless heathen" in the amphitheater, "waved his hands at them, and looked up to heaven with a groan and said, 'Away with the atheists.'" The proconsul persisted, "Swear, and I will release you. Curse Christ." And Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He was condemned to death and burned alive.

The story shows the efforts made by an average, reasonable administrator in the second century to persuade a Christian leader not to sacrifice his life, and the latter's complete commitment to Christianity, even in the face of death. Between the two outlooks there was little room for compromise.

Later in Marcus's reign, in c. 175, we hear of "new decrees," probably emanating from the proconsul of Asia, making it easier for enemies to denounce Christians and seize their property. In one terrible pogrom at Lyon in Gaul [modern France] in 177, forty-eight Christians were done to death in the amphitheater.

## Rising Tension

A new dynasty, the Severan Dynasty, seized power in 193, at a crucial moment in the church's relations with the Empire. Though it remained illegal, the church was now much stronger than in the previous century. Christians were consolidated around urban communities governed by bishops, who were in frequent contact by letter with one another. The church had its own liturgy, its own sacred writings separate from those of the Jews, and established rules of faith on which orthodox doctrines could be built. It also had begun to acquire property (the **Areae**, or cemeteries; and in Rome, the earliest catacombs date to c. 200). Most important, the church had recovered its missionary urge, which after St. Paul and his disciples seems to have diminished through much of the second century. The result was great tension between Christians and pagans in provinces where the church was strong.

The dynasty's individual emperors—Septimius Severus (193–211), Caracalla (211–217), Elagabalus (218–222), and Alexander Severus (222–235)—do not seem to have been personally ill-disposed toward Christians. In Alexander Severus's reign, the first building identifiable as a house-church was erected in the frontier town of Dura-Europos on the River Euphrates. The emperors' individual dispositions, however, were nullified by the wave of anti-Christian feeling in Carthage, Alexandria, Rome, and Corinth from about 202 to 210. The recorded victims of persecution were mainly converts—such as Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage (martyred March 7, 203), or the disciples of Origen in Alexandria. The bishops and clergy seem not to have been affected.

The end of the Severan Dynasty in 235 brought another brief period of persecution under its supplanter, Maximinus Thrax (235–238), aimed, according to Eusebius, against the "leaders of the Church."

This was followed, however, by 12 years of calm in which the church expanded, extended its catacombs in

Rome, and through its great teacher Origen (186–254), established for the first time an intellectual superiority over its pagan contemporaries. Origen, however, perceived the danger of the situation. There might not have been many martyrs to date, but persecution, if it came now, would be on a worldwide scale. He was right.

## **Empire-Wide Persecution**

Under the emperor Decius (249–251) the church experienced what, in retrospect, was its most severe test. Decius had come to power at a moment of grave military threat from the Goths, and economic and social decline in the cities. He blamed his predecessor, Philip, for military incompetence and the Christians, whom he believed Philip had favored, for the breakdown of morale in the Empire. His remedy was an explicit return to former Republican virtues (Roman *mores*) and the association of all inhabitants of the Empire with the emperor's yearly sacrifice to the gods of Rome on the Capitol. Decius combined this move, evidently, with an order (probably in December 249) to seize leading Christians. By January 20, 250, Pope Fabian had been tried before the emperor himself and sentenced to be executed.

The authorities went to great lengths to ensure compliance. In major cities, such as Carthage, commissions saw that individuals did perform sacrifice and punished those who refused. In Egypt, at least, there were commissioners in the country areas, and 44 of the certificates (*libelli*) have survived. They follow a set pattern. One reads, "To those appointed to see the sacrifices: From Aurelia Charis of the Egyptian village of Theadelphia. I have always continued to sacrifice and show reverence to the gods, and now, in your presence, I have poured a libation and sacrificed and eaten some of the sacrificial meat. I request you to certify this for me below." The date and official signatures follow, occupying several lines of papyrus. Charis retained one certificate for herself, and the other was deposited in the official archives, so one can imagine the bureaucratic nightmare the order caused.

Contemporaries, both pagan and Christian, and Christian historians of the next century indicate that Decius's measures were initially very successful. "All covered with fear," as one contemporary writer said of the Christians in Alexandria. Many fled; few wished to defy the emperor openly. Alexandria and Carthage saw massive apostasies. In Smyrna, the bishop himself performed sacrifice. Those who defied the authorities, like the presbyter Pionius of Smyrna, were often regarded as simpletons or fanatics eager to throw away their lives. The edict caused deep divisions among Christians, moreover, that brought merriment to pagan authorities.

Decius's main aim had been to secure universal support by a sacrifice to the gods to "restore Roman liberty." Once that had been achieved, by the early months of 251, the persecution was over. Decius died in June 251 on a campaign against the Goths, and Bishop Cyprian, who had fled, returned to Carthage to aid demoralized and disorganized congregations.

The church recovered its adherents rapidly but faced problems: what to do about the multitudes who had lapsed, and how to treat the Novatianist schism in Rome and North Africa, which had repercussions throughout much of the church. The Novatianists, according to Eusebius, called themselves "the pure." They would not allow those who had given in during the persecution to return to the church. Their movement foreshadowed more permanent division in the Christian church between those who put its integrity above all other values, and those who regarded universality (the *Katholike*) as all important.

## **"Sacrilegious Instigators"**

The new emperor, Valerian (253–60), at first tolerated the Christians but in the summer of 257 suddenly altered his attitude. The emperor's policy was not to destroy the Christian church but to bring it into conformity with public rites (aimed at safeguarding the empire in time of peril). In July-August he sent orders to deport Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria. Other bishops were sent to the mines. In addition, Christian places of worship and cemeteries were closed, and anyone

entering did so at risk of execution.

For nearly a year there was an uneasy calm. The Christians, however, were not cowed as they were a few years before. We learn of numbers of visitors to Curubis, where Cyprian was living; of forbidden Christian assemblies in a suburb of Alexandria; and of proselytizing by Dionysius where he had been exiled.

The emperor's patience broke. Around July 258, Valerian ordered that bishops, priests, and deacons be executed, that church property be confiscated, that socially superior (*honorati*) laity lose their privileges and imperial civil servants (*Caesariani*) be reduced to slavery (a status from which many had emerged).

In some parts of the Empire this persecution of 258–259 was the bloodiest the church endured. On August 6 Pope Sixtus II was discovered conducting a service in the Catacomb of Praetextatus and was martyred, as were all seven of his deacons. Next month, Cyprian was brought from his place of exile to face the ailing governor, Galerius Maximus. Once again Cyprian refused to perform sacrifice. In words that summed up the authorities' case against the Christians, the proconsul said, "You have lived a sacrilegious life, and you have gathered around yourself many vicious men in a conspiracy. You have set yourself up as an enemy of the Roman gods and of their sacred rites. And the pious and most religious emperors Valerian and Gallienus Augusti, and Valerian, the most noble Caesar, have been unable to bring you back to the observance of their own sacred rituals. Therefore, having been apprehended as the instigator and ringleader of a criminal conspiracy ... you will be executed." Conspiracy, illegal association, enmity toward the gods of Rome—these charges formed the basis for the persecutions during the first three centuries.

### **Lull Before the Storm**

Valerian's death brought more than 40 years of peace (260–303). Christian could still be arrested, however. For example, a Christian soldier, Marinus, lost his life when a jealous fellow soldier found that Marinus was to be promoted to the rank of centurion and denounced him as a Christian. Yet bishoprics multiplied, and church building seems to have gone on unhindered. In the imperial capital at Nicomedia (on the opposite side of the Bosphorus to Constantinople), the Christian church stood in full view of the imperial palace. More important, the church now became a movement of the countryside as well as of the towns. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius quoted Dionysius of Alexandria, who hailed Gallienus as an emperor under whom "the monarchy, as it were, put aside its old age and cleansed itself from its former wickedness and now blossoms forth in fuller bloom.... "

### **Final, "Great Persecution"**

In 303, however, came 10 years of persecution, the "Great Persecution" as it became known. How and why, after 43 years of peace, did this happen?

First, while the church appeared to be accepted, opposition to it was never far below the surface. Since 270 the pagans, inspired by the Neo-Platonist philosopher, Porphyry, had begun to mount a serious intellectual assault on Christianity. "The evangelists," Porphyry wrote in 15 books *Against the Christians* (c. 280–290) "were the inventors, not the historians, of those things they record about Jesus." This propaganda war between Christian and pagan champions intensified in the 290s.

Second, in 284 Diocletian seized power by a coup d'état and survived to become one of the greatest conservative reformers of all time. In March 286 he appointed a comrade-in-arms, Maximian, as co-emperor (Augustus) in the West; and on March 1, 293, the two Augusti appointed two other military men, Constantius and Galerius, as their assistants, or Caesars. The emperors' ideal was to return to the traditional values of Rome. They imposed a uniform system of administration, currency and, in 301, prices throughout the Empire. Uniformity and discipline were the watchwords of the age, yet Christian remained a standing challenge to the unifying and conservative ideals of the emperors.

Persecutions might not have occurred, however, but for the fortunes of war. In 296 Caesar Galerius, who was strongly anti-Christian, won a decisive victory over the Persians. With his victory his influence over Diocletian increased. Diocletian's family contained some who were pro-Christian, and he was unwilling to act against the Christians. But his hand was forced, partly by Galerius's steady pressure and partly by anti-Christian propaganda from some provincial governors. Between 298 and 302 the civil service and army were gradually purged of Christians. Late in 302 the emperors visited the shrine of Apollo at Didyma and the oracle complained of the baneful influence of the Christians ("the just on earth") in its pronouncements. The die was now cast. On February 23, 303, the Feast of Terminalia, repression would start.

Churches were destroyed, Christian services banned, and the Scriptures seized and burned. Christians in high places lost civil rights, and "those in households" (perhaps meaning, "private citizens") were deprived of their liberty. One concession Diocletian secured: no bloodshed.

A second edict imposed an obligation on all clergy to sacrifice, but the prisons became too full, and in the autumn of 303 this was modified and most of those imprisoned for refusing were released.

So far the persecution had not been as severe as under Valerian. Scriptures were seized, but among Christians there was often consternation and grudging compliance. Only a minority of determined souls held out. Years later, the "day of handing over" was remembered as a day of disaster by the North African Christians.

In 304, with Diocletian ill in Rome, Galerius seized his chance and imposed a universal obligation to sacrifice on pain of death. Up to then only the clergy had been involved directly; now the pressure was on every Christian. The number of martyrs increased, as did the defiance of the Christians. One inscription from a North African church lists 34 men and women who "suffered under the laws of the divine emperors Diocletian and Maximian." In Phrygia a whole community was wiped out, and Egypt saw eight years of ruthless repression, which among the Coptic Christians earned the reign of Diocletian the title "The era of the martyrs. "

### **A Grudging Concession**

This phase ended on May 1, 305, when Diocletian and his western colleague, Maximian, formally abdicated, to be succeeded by Galerius and Constantius respectively. In the West, Constantius took no further action, and on his death, his son Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his troops. In the next five years Constantine gradually increased his authority, and though an adherent of Apollo, followed his father's policy of toleration toward Christians.

In the East, however, Galerius renewed persecution, accompanied by anti-Christian propaganda and a great effort to reorganize paganism along Christian hierarchical structures.

It was too late. Steam gradually ran out of the enforcement of the edicts, and no martyrs are recorded in this phase after 310. In April 311, Galerius, realizing that he was dying, decided that enough was enough and revoked the edicts of persecution. In the spirit of Diocletian's reform, he wrote, "We wished previously, always acting for the good of the commonwealth, to correct all things according to the ancient laws and public discipline of the Romans." However, too many Christians had failed to conform, and rather than they should not worship any god, "they might henceforth exist again. Their meeting houses were to be restored," and their prayers "for our good estate" were asked. This last request was in vain, for Galerius died six days later. Galerius' concession of failure was grudging but decisive. The Empire could not be preserved by the "immortal gods" with the Christian God possessing a veto over their powers.

In the spring of 312, Constantine entered on a final bid for supremacy in the West. Campaigning against his rival, Maxentius, through north and central Italy, he reached within five miles of Rome on October 27.

That night he had a vision or dream that convinced him that his own destiny lay with Christianity. Next day he defeated Maxentius's superior forces and entered Rome in triumph. In February 313 Constantine met Licinius (who had succeeded to Galerius' European dominions), and in a document that has become known as the Edict of Milan formally ended the persecution. All individuals were to be free to follow their own consciences. In fact, the Edict proved to be the deathknell of the immortal gods. Eleven years later (in 324), Constantine defeated Licinius and proclaimed his adherence to Christianity and his aim that Christianity should become the religion of the Empire now united under his sole rule. The church had triumphed.

## **Why the Christians Triumphed**

Why had the Christians won?

First, they had become too strong to be defeated. In some provinces, such as Bithynia and Cyrenaica [today, northern Egypt and Libya], they may already have formed a majority, and they were well organized.

Further, Christians attracted people, as a Neo-Platonist philosopher explained c. 300, by their religion's "simplicity," its direct moral teaching and promise uncomplicated by its rivals' mythology.

More than that, Christianity had never lost its martyr spirit. As one contemporary (Lactantius) explained, "There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried out against us, that the people of God may be increased." People rejected the old gods because of the cruelties perpetrated in their names. People inquired what was so good that it seemed preferable to life itself, "so that neither loss of goods, nor of the light, nor bodily pain or tortures deter them." In Egypt in 311–312, Eusebius of Caesarea was an eyewitness of the final horrors of Maximinus's persecution. He writes that "we ourselves beheld, when we were at these places, many [Copts] all at once in a single day, some of whom suffered beheading, others punishment by fire, so that the murderous axe was dulled, and worn out, was broken in pieces, and the executioners grew utterly weary.... It was then that we observed a most marvelous eagerness and a truly divine power and zeal in those who placed their faith in the Christ of God. Thus, as soon as sentence was given against the first, some from one quarter and others from another would leap up to the tribunal before the judge and confess themselves Christians.... "

Popular opinion had been changing in favor of Christianity in the previous 30 years. Against such spirit the pagan authorities were powerless. They might sometimes win intellectual combats, proving Plato was a cleverer man than St. Paul, but those who regarded death as liberation had the last word.

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## When Christianity Triumphed

The achievement brought new difficulties.

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The Christians' triumph over the pagan Empire brought its own problems.

Constantine's imperial patronage did, of course, assure Christianity's victory. And the Emperor summoned the first general councils of the church, at in 314 and Nicea in 325.

The imperial presence, however, had its less happy side. The persecution under Diocletian and his colleagues had caused schism in the North African church. In 312 the North African majority rejected Caecilian as bishop of Carthage, on the grounds that he had shown insensitivity toward imprisoned confessors, and that he allowed himself to be Consecrated by a bishop who (wrongly, as it turned out) had handed over the Scriptures to the authorities. Unfortunately for the objectors, Emperor Constantine supported Caecilian, and his lead was followed by the rest of Christendom. The Emperor's intervention in the quarrel thus caused a deep and permanent schism. In addition, North Africa lost its role as a powerhouse of western Christianity until St. Augustine's time almost a century later.

Further, too soon the victorious church itself turned persecutor—against the remnants of paganism and dissenters in its own ranks. By the end of the fourth century, for example, when Catholic Christianity had become the established religion of the Empire, Augustine invoked state aid against the Donatists. The way was opened for the persecution of religious minorities that has marred the church's history to our own day. Even so, the survival of the church in the first three centuries was a historic achievement.

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## From the Archives: Perpetua & Polycarp: Two Heroic Martyrs

### Perpetua

*In A.D. 202, Emperor Septimius Severus disallowed conversions to Christianity. In the wake of that act, severe persecution broke out against Christians, particularly in North Africa. Living in Carthage at the time was Perpetua, a young noblewoman and new Christian who was preparing for baptism. Though Perpetua was only about 22 years old, and was still nursing her infant son, she (with four other catechumens) was arrested and thrown into prison.*

While we were still under arrest, my father, out of love for me, was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. "Father," I said, "do you see this vase here, for example, or water pot or whatever?"

"Yes, I do," said he.

And I told him: "Could it be called by any other name than what it is?"

And he said: "No."

"Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian. "

At this my father was so angered by the word "Christian" that he moved toward me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child into their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

### Perpetua's vision

Then my brother said to me: "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed."

Faithfully I promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience.... Then I made my request, and this was the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up it at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled, and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Satorius [Perpetua's instructor in the Christian faith] was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase, and he looked back and said to me: "Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you."

"He will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Christ Jesus."

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a gray-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; he was tall, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: "I am glad you have come, my child."

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it in my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said, "Amen!" At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

A few days later there was a rumor that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me.

"Daughter," he said, "have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers; think of your mother and your aunt; think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me.... I tried to comfort him, saying, "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly hurried off for a hearing [before Hilarianus the governor].... All the others when questioned admitted their guilt. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: "Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!"

Hilarianus the governor ... said to me, "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."

"I will not," I retorted.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarianus.

And I said: "Yes, I am."

When my father persisted in trying to dissuade me, Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for Father, just as if I myself had been beaten. Then Hilarianus passed sentence on all of us: We were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits ...

## **Into the amphitheater**

***[An observer picks up the story and describes the events of March 7, 203.]***

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully, as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze....

They were then led up to the gates, and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

"We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm; she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian [dragon?]. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus began to warn the onlooking mob. Then, when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their motions and gestures: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you" was what they were saying.

At this time the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this, that they had obtained a share of the Lord's sufferings....

For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua, and she fell on her back. Then sitting up, she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair; for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be in mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas [Perpetua's Christian slave] had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her her hand, and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life....

Perpetua then called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through."

... Immediately as the contest was coming to a close, a leopard was let loose, and [as Saturus predicted,] after one bite Saturus was ... drenched in blood.... Shortly afterward, he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord, and kissing one another

they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua.

Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly you are called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!

***[It is not known what happened to Perpetua's husband and son.]***

## **Polycarp**

***Polycarp was born about A.D. 70, and he knew eyewitnesses of Jesus, possibly including the apostle John. Before 110 Polycarp was named bishop of Smyrna, and throughout his life he stood for orthodoxy. At a pagan festival c. 156 (though possibly later), Polycarp was arrested at the demands of an angry mob. This account was written by Christians in Smyrna shortly there after and is the earliest extant account of a Christian martyr outside of the New Testament.***

III.... All the crowd, astonished at the noble conduct of the God-beloved and God-fearing race of Christians, cried out, "Away with the atheists; let search be made for Polycarp."

V. But the most admirable Polycarp, when first he heard of this, was not dismayed but wished to remain in the city. The majority, however, prevailed on him to withdraw. And he withdrew to a small estate not far from the city. There he passed the time with a few companions, wholly occupied night and day in prayer for all men and for the churches throughout the world; as, indeed, was his habit. And while at prayer he fell into a trance three days before his arrest and saw his pillow set on fire. And he turned and said to his companions, "I must needs be burned alive."

[By torturing one of Polycarp's servants, the authorities discover his whereabouts. ] VII. So, on the day of the preparation, mounted police ... found him in a cottage, lying in an upper room. He could have gone away to another farm, but he would not, saying "The will of God be done." So, hearing their arrival, he came down and talked with them, while all that were present marveled at his age and constancy, and that there was so much ado about the arrest of such an old man. Then he ordered that something should be served for them to eat and drink, at that late hour, as much as they wanted. And he besought them that they should grant him an hour that he might pray freely. They gave him leave, and he stood and prayed, being so filled with the grace of God that for two hours he could not hold his peace, while they that heard were amazed, and the men repented that they had come after so venerable an old man.

IX. Now, as he was entering the stadium, there came to Polycarp a voice from heaven, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." And no one saw the speaker, but the voice was heard by those of our people who were there. Thereupon he was led forth, and great was the uproar of them that heard that Polycarp had been seized. Accordingly, he was led before the proconsul, who asked him if he were the man himself. And when he confessed, the proconsul tried to persuade him, saying, "Have respect to shine age," and so forth, according to their customary form: "Swear by the genius of Caesar," "Repent," "Say 'Away with the atheists!'" Then Polycarp looked with a severe countenance on the mob of lawless heathen in the stadium, and he waved his hand at them, and looking up to heaven he groaned and said, "Away with the atheists." But the proconsul urged him and said, "Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ." And Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

XI. Then said the proconsul, "I have wild beasts; if thou repent not, I will throw thee to them." But he said, "Send for them. For repentance from better to worse is not a change permitted to us; but to change from cruelty to righteousness is a noble thing." Then said the proconsul again, "If thou dost despise the wild beasts, I will make thee to be consumed by fire, if thou repent not." And Polycarp answered, "Thou threatenest the fire that burns for an hour and in a little while is quenched; for thou knowest not of the fire of the judgement to come, and the fire of the eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Bring what thou wilt."

XII. As he spake these words and many more, he was filled with courage and joy; and his countenance was full of grace, so that not only did it fall not in dismay at what was being said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was astonished and sent his herald to proclaim thrice in the midst of the stadium, "Polycarp hath confessed himself to be a Christian." When this was proclaimed by the herald the whole multitude of Gentiles and Jews who dwelt in Smyrna cried out with ungovernable rage and in a loud voice, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, that teacheth many not to sacrifice nor worship." They kept shouting this, asking Philip, the Asiarch, to loose a lion at Polycarp. But he said that it was not lawful for him, since he had finished the sports. Then they decided to shout with one accord that he should be burned alive. For the matter of his vision of the pillow must needs be fulfilled, when he saw it burning while he was at prayer, and turned and said prophetically to his companions, "I must needs be burned alive."

XIII. And now things happened with such speed, in less time than it takes to tell; for the mob straightway brought together timber and faggots from the workshops and baths, the Jews giving themselves zealously to the work, as they were like to do.... They were about to nail him to the stake, when he said, "Let me be as I am. He that granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pyre unmoved, without being secured with nails."

XVI. So at length the lawless ones, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, bade an executioner approach him to drive in a dagger. And when he had done this there came out [a dove and] abundance of blood so that it quenched the fire, and all the multitude marveled at the great difference between the unbelievers and the elect.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

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## The Piety of the Persecutors

In the Roman mind, there were valid religious reasons to halt the spread of Christianity.

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Persecutors seldom get good press. Whether the reporting is done by the journalist or the historian, it is always easier to side with the victims. The courage and fortitude of martyrs holds greater appeal than the haughty rationalizations of their judges and executors. Thus, the persecutors are seen as cruel and capricious tyrants, sybarites, inattentive to the needs of their subjects and indifferent to the ways of God.

In the writing of Christian history, the emperors most closely identified with the persecution of Christians—Domitian, Decius, and Diocletian—have long been the object of obloquy and abuse. One early Christian writer, Lactantius, even wrote a book entitled *On the Death of the Persecutors*. Its purpose was to describe in lurid detail the torturous end of the “enemies of God.”

### Humane Roman Officials

Yet the writing of history is more than the celebration of the deeds of noble and virtuous men and women; it is also the challenge to understand what offends and disturbs our moral sensibilities.

The earliest document on Christianity written by a Roman official bears no marks of cruel indifference; its author, Pliny (governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor), is humane, cautious, prudent, fair, and pious.

Pliny had been sent (c. 111) by the emperor Trajan to tour the cities of Bithynia and to oversee the social and economic affairs of the region. At one of these cities, located on the southern shore of the Black Sea, the local citizens lodged a complaint against Christians living in the region. What prompted the petition is not known, but it may have had to do with the refusal of Christians to participate in the public cult.

When Pliny looked into the matter, he discovered that the “sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: [the Christians] had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath.... After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.”

In his investigation, Pliny is not being cruel; he is simply conscientiously fulfilling his duty to maintain public order.

### Halting a Degenerate Cult

To what, then, does Pliny object?

In his letter Pliny calls Christianity a “degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.” The term he uses for a degenerate cult is *superstitio*. (This same word is used by two contemporaries, the historians Tacitus and Suetonius, to designate Christianity. Tacitus terms Christianity a “deadly superstition,” and Suetonius calls Christians a “class of persons given to a new and mischievous superstition.”)

The Latin word *superstitio* has somewhat different overtones than our English superstition; in its most common sense it designates practices and beliefs associated with foreign peoples—for example, the Germanic tribes in northern Europe or the Egyptians. Jews, too, were thought to be tainted with superstition: they worshiped a single supreme deity, refrained from work on the Sabbath, refused to eat pork (a meat Romans loved), and circumcised their male children.

To say that a group was “superstitious” meant that its rites and customs set the people apart from the rest of society. The superstitious did not conform their lives to the traditions of most citizens. They were “other,” just as the saffron-robed Hare Krishna monks are to most Americans. Their otherness was, however, not simply social; it was also religious. What set them apart were not only national customs and familial traditions but also religious rituals and beliefs. In saying that Christians were “superstitious,” the Romans were making a religious judgment about their way of life.

### The Romans’ Public Piety

To understand why the Romans persecuted Christians and sought to exclude them from society, we have to look at the way Romans viewed religion.

In most history books and courses on ancient civilization, little is said about Roman religion. What are celebrated and admired are Roman law, politics, road building, architecture, and administration. When religion is discussed, it is portrayed as cold and unfeeling, the perfunctory performance of lifeless ritual. Although the poems of Virgil are filled with the names of Roman gods and goddesses, and public monuments depict religious scenes, only a few specialists give much attention to Roman religion.

Traditional Roman religion emphasized the *utilitas* (usefulness) of religious belief for the well-being of the commonwealth, the *res publica*. Hence, it has been easy, especially for a civilization nurtured on the “personal” religion of Christianity, to assume that the Romans did not actually believe in the gods, but rather deemed belief in the gods merely advantageous to the life of society and to the state.

The term used most frequently to designate the religious attitudes of people such as Pliny and Tacitus was *piety* (*pietas* in Latin, *eusebeia* in Greek). When the Capitol—the temple of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva in Rome—was rebuilt after the civil wars of 68–69, Tacitus described the public ceremony of dedication as an act of piety. Its rebuilding was at once a religious rite and a civic festival. It was religious in that it was an act of piety toward the gods, and civic in that it was a public occasion involving the populace. The dedication ceremony was presided over by religious as well as civic officials. In American society, it would be more like a Memorial Day celebration than a religious service of a church or synagogue. In short, piety designated loyalty and obedience to the customs and traditions of Rome, as well as reverence for the gods and respect for the rituals by which the gods were honored.

In the cities of the Roman Empire, religion was inextricably intertwined with social and political life. Piety toward the gods was thought to insure the well-being of the city, to promote a spirit of kinship and mutual responsibility, to bind together the citizenry. “In all probability,” wrote Cicero, “disappearance of piety toward the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.” In the most profound sense, then, impiety toward the gods disrupted society, and when piety disappears, said Cicero, “life soon becomes a welter of disorder and confusion.”

By the standards of the individual and personal religion familiar to most Westerners, it is difficult for us to appreciate the social and public character of Roman religion. But “separation of the concept of piety into a familiar and a cultic half is clearly a product of modern sensibilities; in antiquity piety formed a unity.” For the Romans, religion sustained the life of the state. The new Christian superstition undermined it.

### Impious Christians

In this view of religion, tradition and custom are the final arbiters. For the Romans, the ultimate legitimation of religious beliefs did not rest on philosophical arguments about the nature of the gods but on rites that had been passed from generation to generation. Religion was also tied to place and to people. Because Christianity had no homeland and did not constitute a people or nation, and was not the bearer of an ancient tradition, its way of life could make no claim on religious truth. Hence, Christians were considered impious.

When the Romans called Christianity a superstition they meant that it promoted impiety. Superstitious practices did not contribute to the public good. In Tacitus's phrase, Christians were hostile to humankind. By saying this, he did not mean simply that he did not like Christians and found them a nuisance (though that was certainly true), but that they were an affront to his social and religious world. There were, then, "spiritual" reasons for the persecution of Christians.

For 200 years Roman writers charged the Christians with impiety and superstition. When Porphyry wrote a book against the Christians in the mid third century, he used language reminiscent of Pliny and Tacitus. "How can people not be in every way impious and atheistic who have apostatized from the customs of our ancestors through which every nation and city is sustained? ... What else are they than fighters against God?"

During the final persecution of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century, the emperor Maximinus Daia (310–313) restated this traditional Roman belief. The Christians, he wrote to a city in Asia Minor, should be "driven from your city . . . so that it may be purged of all contamination and impiety, and in pursuit of its set purpose may with due reverence give itself to the regular worship of the immortal gods."

### **Superstition's New Meaning**

By the beginning of the fourth century Christianity was a large and influential social and religious force within Roman society, no longer a tiny, unknown foreign sect. Yet from the perspective of Roman officials Christians remained a people apart. They contributed little to the public life of society, and by their devotion to their own deity, Jesus of Nazareth, they undermined the religious foundations of the cities in which they lived.

With the advent of a Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, in the next decade, and the gradual transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian Empire, the impiety of the Christians became the new "piety" of the Roman world. When Christianity became the religion of society, the term once applied to the Christians, "superstition," took on a new meaning: Pliny and Tacitus and the emperors who had persecuted the Christians were said to be captive to deadly superstition.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

## Rome's Religious Ferment

The first-century Empire swirled with an exotic mix of religions.

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Just as Jesus and the apostles were victims of the overarching and exclusive religious system that they threatened, so those who followed them suffered for similar reasons. (In fact, it may be true that all persecutions are conducted from the background of a comprehensive world view, such as pantheism or Marxism, that people are found to be transgressing.)

The first century was a time of religious and ethical ferment. Some of the older religious beliefs that had fallen into disuse enjoyed a revival, and newer ones, like the worship of Isis and Mithra (mystery religions), came into vogue.

Charitable foundations, guilds, and endowments for the benefit of hospitals and schools came into being, and the harsher elements of slave ownership were mitigated by reforms. Some of this ethical reform may have come from the cultural influence of Judaism, even as its political influence was being crushed.

This strengthening of the religious impulse in the first century, of course, had nothing to do with the worship of the one true God. Religious sensibility was dominated by fear of the unknown, and the gods had to be propitiated with occult rites and ceremonies. A demonology developed and people relied on dreams and omens. Chaldean astrology made a comeback.

## The Unifying Imperial Cult

Superimposed upon this variety of religious expression was the imperial cult, which provided a surface uniformity over the diversity of the Empire and was intended to cement political authority. In the context of an official freedom of worship, the requirement that incense be offered to the emperor presented no problem to the multitude of pagan religions. But it was disastrous for the Christians.

Given the dominance of the imperial cult, it was inevitable that Christians should come into conflict with the state. Central to the very existence of the church was the conviction that Christ was Lord of all. This relativized all other loyalties, including political ones. Even though the Christians might insist they were aloof from politics, they held to a source of law higher than the emperor, and therefore perennially endangered a system that was absolutist. As one historian expressed it " ... the rise of the 'slaves of Christ' meant the fall of the rule of the Caesars."

Sometimes religious zeal motivated the pagans, and they thought they were serving their gods when participating in the persecutions. One of the most famous of the early Christians, Tertullian, put it this way: "If the Tiber floods the city, or the Nile refuses to rise, or the sky withholds its rains, if there is an earthquake, famine, or pestilence, at once the cry is raised: 'Christians to the lions!'"

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

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## Persecution in the Early Church: A Gallery of the Persecuting Emperors

From A.D. 30 to A.D. 311, a period in which 54 emperors ruled the Empire, only about a dozen took the trouble to harass Christians. Furthermore, not until Decius (249–251) did any deliberately attempt an Empire-wide persecution. Until then, persecution came mainly at the instigation of local rulers, albeit with Rome's approval. Nonetheless, a few emperors did have direct and, for Christians, unpleasant dealings with this faith. Here are the most significant of those rulers.

### **Claudius (41–54)**

**Perhaps the first to persecute Christians—inadvertently**

Sickly, ill-mannered, and reclusive, Claudius devoted his early days to the quiet study of Etruscan and Carthaginian history, among other subjects. Understandably, he was an embarrassment to the activist imperial family. But the murder of his nephew, the emperor Gaius, in 41 propelled him to the throne nonetheless. During his reign, he wisely avoided potentially costly foreign wars, extended Roman citizenship at home, and showed tolerance toward a variety of religions.

However, "since the Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigations of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome...." So writes the Roman historian Suetonius about events in Rome around 52. "Chrestus" may have been a thorn in the side of Roman politicians anxious to be rid of him and his cohorts. Or "Chrestus" may be the way uninformed bureaucrats pronounced the name about which Jews argued: Christus. Such arguments between Jews and Christians were not unknown (e.g., in Ephesus; Acts 19). Claudius likely and inadvertently was the first emperor, then, to persecute Christians (who were perceived as a Jewish sect)—for, it seems, disturbing the peace.

### **Nero (54–68)**

**Savage madman in whose reign Peter and Paul were martyred**

Nero, a man with light blue eyes, thick neck, protruding stomach, and spindly legs, was a crazed and cruel emperor, a pleasure-driven man who ruled the world by whim and fear. It just goes to show the difference an upbringing makes.

His mother, the plotting Agrippina, managed to convince her husband, Claudius, to adopt her son Nero and put him, ahead of Claudius' own son, first in line for the throne. Maternal concern not satisfied, she then murdered Claudius, and Nero ruled the world at age 17.

The young Nero, having been tutored by the servile philosopher and pedophile Seneca, was actually repulsed by the death penalty. But he resourcefully turned this weakness into strength: he eventually had his mother stabbed to death for treason and his wife Octavia beheaded for adultery. (He then had Octavia's head displayed for his mistress, Poppaea, whom years later he kicked to death when she was pregnant.) The Senate made thank offerings to the gods for this restoration of public morality.

Unfortunately, that is but the tip of the bloody and treacherous iceberg of Nero's reign. Yet such activities overshadow the few constructive things he attempted, albeit without success: the abolition of indirect taxes (to help farmers), the building of a Corinthian canal, and the resettlement of people who had lost

their homes in the Great Fire of Rome in 64.

Nero tried to pin the blame for that fire on the city's small Christian community (regarded as a distinct, dissident group of Jews), and so, appropriately, he burned many of them alive. Peter and Paul were said to have been martyred as a result. But the rumors persisted that Nero had sung his own poem "The Sack of Troy" (he did not "fiddle") while enjoying the bright spectacle he had ignited. That business about singing was not unreasonable, for Nero had for years made a fool of himself by publicly playing the lyre and singing before, literally, command performances.

Political turmoil finally forced the troubled emperor to commit suicide. His last words were, "What a showman the world is losing in me!"

### **Domitian (81–96)**

#### **Does Revelation depict him as a hideous beast?**

The historian Pliny called Domitian the beast from hell who sat in its den, licking blood. In the Book of Revelation, John of the Apocalypse may have referred to Domitian when he described a beast from the abyss who blasphemes heaven and drinks the blood of the saints.

Domitian repelled invasions from Dacia (modern-day Rumania)—something later emperors would have increasing difficulty doing. He also was a master builder and adroit administrator, one of the best who ever governed the Empire. Suetonius, who hated Domitian, had to admit that "he took such care to exercise restraint over the city officials and provincial governors that at no time were these more honest or just."

But there was something wrong with Domitian. He enjoyed catching flies and stabbing them with a pen. He liked to watch gladiatorial fights between women and dwarfs. And during his reign he was so suspicious of plots against his life, the number of imperial spies and informers proliferated, as did the number of casualties among suspect Roman officials.

Domitian was the first emperor to have himself officially titled in Rome as "God the Lord." He insisted that other people hail his greatness with acclamations like "Lord of the earth," "Invincible," "Glory," "Holy," and "Thou Alone."

When he ordered people to give him divine honors, Jews, and no doubt Christians, balked. The resulting persecution of Jews is well-documented; that of Christians is not. However, the beast that the author of Revelation describes, as well as the events in the book, are perhaps best interpreted as hidden allusions to the rule of Domitian. In addition, Flavius Clemens, consul in 95, and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, were executed and exiled, respectively, by Domitian's orders; many historians suspect this was because they were Christians.

But what goes around, comes around. An ex-slave of Clemens, Stephanus, was mobilized by some of Domitian's enemies and murdered him.

### **Trajan (98–117)**

#### **Skilled ruler who established policies for treating Christians**

So well did Trajan rule that senators and emperors of the later Empire wished that new emperors should be "more fortunate than Augustus, better than Trajan."

Trajan began his rule intent on conquests that would excel those of his hero Julius Caesar. Although he did not succeed, his conquest of Dacia turned out to be the last major conquest of ancient Rome.

Between military campaigns, Trajan found time to be an effective, albeit conservative, civilian administrator, protecting the privileges of the senate. He is also known for the impressive public works he undertook, especially his Aqua Trajana, the last of the aqueducts to serve Rome; Trajan's Baths, which included soaring concrete arches, apses, and vaults; and the complex and magnificent Forum of Trajan. A series of letters with Bithynian governor Pliny display Trajan's concern for the welfare of the provinces. Unfortunately for Christians, this concern was combined with suspicious preoccupation with state security

and a tendency to interfere in internal affairs of ostensibly self-governing cities. In one letter he tells Pliny how to deal with Christians "They are not to be hunted out. [Although] any who are accused and convicted should be punished, with the proviso that if a man says he is not a Christian and makes it obvious by his actual conduct—namely, by worshiping our gods—then, however suspect he may have been with regard to the past, he should gain pardon from his repentance. "

Even though relatively temperate, the great Trajan became the first emperor known to persecute Christians as fully distinct from the Jews. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was perhaps the best known to have suffered death during his reign.

### **Marcus Aurelius (161–180)**

#### **Great Stoic philosopher whose reign fueled anti-Christian hostilities**

Marcus Aurelius actively pursued military campaigns nearly his entire reign. From 161 to 167, Rome battled the invading Parthians in Syria. To repel Germanic tribes who were marauding Italy and then retreating across the Danube, Marcus personally conducted a punitive expedition from 167–173. On an expedition to extend Rome's northern borders, he suddenly died in 180 at his military headquarters. This is not, of course, the Marcus Aurelius we've come to know and love. That Marcus ruminated eloquently in his philosophical *Meditations*. Having converted to Stoicism early in life, these personal reflections display lofty and bracing austerity: we must show patient long-suffering; our existence on this earth is fleeting and transitory. Yet, there is also this humane strain in Marcus: all men and women share the divine spark, so they are brothers and sisters. "Men exist for each other," he wrote. "Then either improve them, or put up with them."

As for himself, he tried to improve them. It was during his reign that the *Institutes* of Gaius, an elementary handbook about which our modern knowledge of classical Roman law is based, was written. Also, numerous measures were taken to soften the harshness of the law against the weak and helpless. Except those Christians. Officially, Marcus took the position of his predecessor Trajan, also followed by Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. But his philosophical mentors convinced him that Christianity was a dangerous revolutionary force, preaching gross immoralities.

So under Marcus, anti-Christian literature flourished for the first time, most notably Celsus's *The True Doctrine*. More regrettably, Marcus allowed anti-Christian informers to proceed more easily than in the past, with the result that fierce persecutions broke out in various regions. In Lyons in 177, the local bishop was martyred, bringing Irenaeus to the office. In addition, Justin, the first Christian philosopher, was martyred during Marcus's reign.

During the reign of the magnanimous, philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius, then, Christian blood flowed more profusely than ever before.

### **Septimius Severus (193–211)**

#### **Consummate soldier in whose reign Perpetua was killed**

Severus was a soldier, first and last. He militarily dispensed with Pescennius Niger, rival emperor in the east, in 195, and then with Clodius Albinus in 197, rival emperor in the West. In 208 he set out for Britain to shore up its defenses, and on that trip succumbed to illness in 211. At death, he is said to have summoned his two sons, Caracalla and Geta, and said, "Keep on good terms with each other, be generous to the soldiers, and take no heed of anyone else."

That generosity to soldiers was one of Severus's trademarks. During his reign he raised their pay 67 percent and ennobled the military so that it became a promising path for many different careers. In addition, the deity most popular with soldiers, the sun-god Mithras, began to edge out the competition in the Roman pantheon.

During the first part of his reign, Severus was not unfriendly toward Christians. Some members of his household, in fact, professed the faith, and he entrusted the rearing of his son, Caracalla, to a Christian nurse.

However, in 202 Severus issued an edict that forbade further conversions to Judaism and Christianity. A persecution followed, especially in North Africa and Egypt. The North African theologian Tertullian penned

his famous apologetic works during this period, but to no avail. Among others, the dramatic martyrdom of Perpetua and her servant Felicitas occurred under Severus. Clement of Alexandria also perished, as did the father of Origen. (Tradition holds that Origen, in his youthful ardor, wished to share his father's fate, but his resourceful mother prevented his leaving the house by hiding his clothes.) But the persecution ended at Severus's death, and except for a brief bout under Maximinus (235–238), Christians were free from persecution for some 50 years.

### **Decius (249–251)**

#### **Leader of the first Empire-wide persecution**

For decades, Roman emperors had become increasingly concerned with the ragged edges of the Empire and the invading barbarian tribes that harassed them. Decius, from a village near the Danube, at the northern frontier of the Empire, recognized the military dimensions of the problem but perceived some spiritual ones as well.

He was concerned that traditional polytheism was weakening, and thought a resurrection of devotion to the deified Roman rulers of the past would help restore Roman strength. Naturally, monotheistic Christians stood in the way.

Although they still constituted a small minority, their efficient and self-contained organization, with no need of the state, irritated him. Consequently, Decius became the first emperor to initiate an Empire-wide persecution of Christians, apparently one with intensity. After executing Pope Fabian he is said to have remarked, "I would far rather receive news of a rival to the throne than of another bishop of Rome." Although he did not actually order Christians to give up their faith, he did expect them to perform one pagan religious observance. When undertaken, Christians would receive a Certificate of Sacrifice (*libellus*) from the local Sacrificial Commission and so be cleared of suspicion of undermining the religious unity of the Empire.

As expected, many Christians succumbed to this pressure; others paid bribes to receive the certificate. But many refused to compromise and died as a result. Origen was arrested and tortured during this time. Though released, he died within a few years.

Decius, a not-incompetent general, died in Scythia Minor (in modern-day Bulgaria and Rumania) while engaging in battle, the other tactic he thought necessary to shore up the troubled Empire.

### **Valerian (253–260)**

#### **He blamed Christians for the Empire's woes**

Valerian seems to have been honest and well intentioned, but he inherited an empire nearly out of control. Plague and civil strife raged within the provinces. At the eastern borders, Germanic tribesmen invaded with greater efficiency and more numbers. Meanwhile, attacks from the north were underway. Valerian, recognizing that one emperor could not simultaneously defend north and east, extended in 256–257 the principle of collegiate rule to his son and colleague Gallienus, who was already fully occupied to the north.

To divert attention from the troubles that beset the Empire, Valerian blamed the Christians. In August 257 he intensified Decius's policies by ordering clergy to sacrifice to the gods of the state (although, with usual Roman pragmatism, they were not prohibited from worshiping Jesus Christ in private.) A year later clergy became liable to capital punishment. Pope Sixtus II and St. Lawrence were subsequently burned to death in Rome, and Cyprian was executed at Carthage. In addition, the property of Christian laity, especially that of senators and equites (a class immediately below senators) was confiscated, and Christian tenants of imperial estates were condemned to the mines.

In 259, the Persians, under Shapur I, launched a second series of attacks in Mesopotamia. (In the first, 254–256, they had captured and plundered 37 cities.) Valerian took an army into Mesopotamia to drive Shapur back from the besieged city of Edessa. However, in May 260, Valerian was taken prisoner. In Michael Grant's words, "The capture of a Roman emperor by a foreign foe was an unparalleled catastrophe, the nadir of Roman disgrace."

Fortunately, soon after Valerian's capture, in an attempt to win the favor of eastern Christians against the

Persians, Gallienus lifted the edicts against Christians.

### **Diocletian (284–305)**

#### **Gifted organizer who led the Great Persecution to extinguish Christianity**

Diocletian was the most remarkable imperial organizer since Augustus, and that talent, unfortunately, was not lost on Christians.

He is most famous for his reconstruction of the Empire into a Tetrarchy. The Empire was divided between four men, two Augusti and, under them, two Caesars. However, the multiplying of ruling authorities did not ease the transition of rulers, as Diocletian had hoped, but only made for more strife.

Diocletian also presided over a complete reconstruction of the Empire's military system, which included the garnering of enormous taxes to pay for its half-million soldiers, a huge increase from the previous century. He tried to insure that tax burdens were equitably distributed, but for all its fairness, the new system tended to freeze people in their professions and social positions, and led, on paper, to a thoroughgoing totalitarian state (in practice, however, there was no way to fully implement the new rules).

Diocletian's gift for mass organization, unfortunately, extended to things religious and patriotic. In 303, encouraged by his Caesar Galerius, and attempting to rouse patriotic feeling, Diocletian returned to hounding Christians, even though his wife, Prisca, belonged to the faith.

It was the first time in almost 50 years that an emperor had taken the trouble. Yet, as never before, the motive of this Great Persecution was the total extinction of Christianity. It was, it seems, the final struggle between the old and new orders, and therefore the fiercest.

The first of Diocletian's edicts prohibited all Christian worship and commanded that churches and Christian books be destroyed. Two further edicts, required in the eastern provinces, ordered clergy to be arrested unless they sacrificed to pagan deities. By 304 this edict was extended to all Christians and was particularly vicious in Africa, under Diocletian co-Augustus Maximian.

After a serious illness in 304, Diocletian took the unprecedented step of abdicating the throne. Although called back for a brief period, he retired to farming in Salonae in Dalmatia (in modern-day Yugoslavia).

The persecutions continued under Galerius, now promoted to Augustus. But falling seriously ill in 311, Galerius and his fellow emperors issued an edict canceling the persecution of Christians. The following year, Constantine emerged triumphant in the West after the battle at the Milvian Bridge. In 313 he and Licinius, soon to control the Eastern Empire, issued the Edict of Milan, which decreed full legal toleration of Christianity.

For all intents and purposes, no Roman emperor harassed Christians again.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

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## Controversial Constantine

**The famous emperor ended the persecution of Christians. But was he a true believer, or merely a superstitious political opportunist?**

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Constantine has earned a place in history for many reasons—not least because he brought to an end the persecutions of Christians by the pagan Roman Empire. A concordat agreed to with his fellow emperor, Licinius, at Milan in 313 granted “both to Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each person has desired.... Every one of those who have a common wish to follow the religion of the Christians may from this moment freely and unconditionally proceed to observe the same without any annoyance or disquiet.” In retrospect, the agreement forms one of the major watersheds in the history of Christianity, bidding farewell to the age of the martyrs and presaging the era of the Christian Empire.

What sort of man was he, this Constantine “the Great,” the first emperor of Rome to come out unambiguously on the side of the Christian church? How significant were the so-called Edict of Milan and the other actions he took as patron of the church? How truly Christian was he himself?

### Early Days

Constantine was born on February 27, probably in 272, in the military town of Naissus—modern Nis in eastern Yugoslavia. His father, Constantius, was an army officer; his mother, Helena, was a woman of lowly origins whom Constantius later (probably by 290) found it prudent to divorce as his political aspirations took shape. Not much is known for certain about their religious attitudes. Helena became a Christian—and one of outstanding piety only after her famous son’s conversion. Constantius enforced without enthusiasm only the first of the anti-Christian measures of the Great Persecution in Britain and Gaul (France)—the sector of the Empire he took charge of in 293 as a junior emperor (Caesar). One of his children by his second wife was named Anastasia, from the Greek word for “resurrection,” which implies pro-Christian sympathies going beyond mere tolerance. Eusebius later portrayed him as a worshiper of the one true God, but not in unmistakably Christian terms. The evidence suggests that Constantine could have acquired from his father a predisposition to take a serious look at Christianity when the opportunity offered.

As the son of a Caesar and hence potentially an emperor himself, Constantine spent a dozen years (from about 293 to 305) in the East in the court of Diocletian, the senior emperor (Augustus), and Galerius, his deputy (Caesar). Constantine could be regarded both as an imperial apprentice and as a hostage (ensuring the good conduct of his father). He passed the time partly in Diocletian’s palace at Nicomedia (modern Izmit, Turkey, not far from the eastern shore of the Bosphorus) and partly in the field on military campaigns. Constantine’s religious development in these formative years is largely hidden from us, but he could hardly have been unaware of the Christians in an area of the Empire where they were thickest. The ranks of Diocletian’s officials and perhaps even his close family included some Christians, and the church building in Nicomedia was easily visible from the palace windows.

### Taking over

The Great Persecution initiated from Nicomedia in 303–304 must have been highly distasteful to Constantine. In circumstances that scholars debate (did he flee at the first opportunity and take steps to prevent pursuit?), Constantine left Nicomedia soon after Galerius succeeded Diocletian (as Augustus) on

May 1, 305, and made his way to Britain to his father—now also a senior emperor (Augustus). On Constantine's father's death at York on July 25, 306, his troops saluted Constantine as Augustus in his place. This was scarcely a regular (though not uncommon) route to the imperial throne, and Constantine would have to vindicate his right to rule on the battlefield.

To cut a tangled story short, on October 28, 312, he defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, a dozen miles up the Tiber from Rome, and thereby became sole master of the Western Empire. Twelve years later, he finally routed the forces of Licinius and became "Ruler of the Entire Globe"—or at least of the whole Empire.

### **Favoring the Christians**

From the winter of 312–313 onward—that is, from soon after his triumphant entry into Rome as controller of the West—Constantine's actions reveal increasing favor toward the Christian church. During those months he sent three letters to Carthage (near modern Tunis), the capital of Roman North Africa. The first ordered the Roman governor to restore to "the catholic church of the Christians in any city" all the property it had formerly owned, irrespective of its present owner. The second letter informed the bishop of Carthage that funds would soon reach him for distribution to "certain specific ministers of the lawful and most holy catholic religion," and also assured him of protection against elements disruptive to the catholic church. The third letter, again to the governor, exempted clergy from the burdens of inherited responsibilities as local councillors. The reason given is highly significant: "The setting at nought of divine worship ... has brought great dangers upon public affairs, and its lawful restoration and preservation have bestowed the greatest good fortune on the Roman name and singular prosperity on all the affairs of mankind (for it is the divine providence which bestows these blessings)." The clergy, "when they render supreme service to the Deity, ... confer incalculable benefit on the affairs of the state."

### **Religious Convictions**

Sentiments like these resonate throughout Constantine's letters and edicts. They reveal a deeply religious man who believed that the well-being of the Empire was dependent on God, and that God would prosper the fortunes of the Empire so long as he was truly worshiped by its inhabitants. This true worship (so Constantine held, with ever-sharpening clarity) was the worship offered by the Christian church, and the true God was the God of the Christians.

How Constantine came by these controlling religious convictions has long been disputed. Two Christian writers, Lactantius and Eusebius, had direct contact with Constantine in later years. They write that on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had a dream (Lactantius) or a vision (Eusebius) that convinced him to enter the fray, trusting in the Christians' God, and to display a distinctively Christian emblem. The veracity of these accounts is, in the last resort, beyond corroboration. Nevertheless, they speak, in however embellished a form, of a decisive shift in religious allegiance—a conversion—and this is acknowledged today by eminent Roman historians, like Ramsay MacMullen and Timothy Barnes, who have no ecclesiastical axe to grind. As Norman H. Bayne wrote, Constantine's action in confronting Maxentius "is more explicable if Constantine was convinced that the Christian God had assured him victory."

It must be stressed, though, that the genuineness of Constantine's pro-Christian stance does not depend on the historicity of the dream and the vision. It is writ unmistakably large in his words and deeds from shortly after the decisive victory. This consideration, for those who carry no prejudice against divine communications through dreams and visions, may properly count in favor of their authenticity in Constantine's case.

### **Superficial Faith?**

Constantine probably never gained a good grounding in Christian doctrine, however. As late as 324 he

could regard the momentous divide opening up between the heretic Arius and his opponents as “a small and very insignificant question.” Only gradually and never frequently does he speak of “Christ” and “our Savior” rather than simply of “God” or, in more impersonal terms, “the divine power,” “providence,” “the supreme Deity,” etc.

Constantine was baptized only after the onset of his final illness, not many days before his death on Pentecost, May 22, 337. But if only then do we see him as a penitent (and delayed baptism was the norm at the time), the explanation lies largely in a circumstance too often forgotten or minimized by critics who depict him as a hypocrite, an impostor, or even a monster. It is simply this: Constantine was the emperor of Rome, the civil and military (and religious) head of the Empire. Our sources give us little access to the private Constantine. His letters and edicts are all official utterances. It is perhaps more remarkable that they make his religious convictions so clear than that they speak so little of Jesus Christ in terms of personal devotion.

### **Intermingled Paganism**

Constantine’s religion is from first to last that of an autocratic ruler of an empire secured by military might—and still overwhelmingly pagan. If pagan elements did not disappear from his coinage immediately after his conversion, that should scarcely surprise us. Constantine’s legislative and executive actions can be fairly understood only when judged not anachronistically, against some ideal portrait of the Christian monarch (there were, after all, no precedents, no available role models, to guide a Roman emperor who was also a Christian), but historically, in a brutal age that took harsh retributive punishments for granted. And so his wife and eldest son had to die for offenses of treason. Not in vain did this Constantine bear the sword.

Yet in many details a Christian inspiration can be glimpsed in his legal enactments—for example, on the treatment of prisoners and slaves, on the status-less underclass of Roman society, on the exposure of surplus children, on celibacy and marriage and extra-marital infidelity.

But it is important not to make Constantine out to be more consistently Christian than he was. His conversion was not accompanied by a sharp break with his former paganism. Rather, a transition is discernible from the worship of the divine Sun to the service of the one true Christian God. When, in 321, he made the first day of the week a holiday, he described it as the day of the sun (but so do Christians today!). Christian regard for the Lord’s Day, however, alone motivated this ruling.

### **Consequences**

Few individuals have set as many precedents as Constantine. He launched the church on its way to becoming the official, established religion of the Roman Empire—a journey it completed half a century later under Theodosius the Great. And by founding Constantinople as a “New Rome,” a Christian Rome, he laid the foundations for the noble Christian civilization of the Byzantine or East Roman Empire that would survive for a millennium after the Empire in the West had disintegrated. By his patronage Constantine aligned the former church of the martyrs—persecuted, powerless, and pacifist—with the military might and earthly glory of the state. Christianity would never be the same again.

Soon the wars of the Empire became holy wars; church leaders looked for civil sanctions to back up their ecclesiastical judgments (the Council of Nicaea deposed Arius; Constantine exiled him); rulers began to convene synods of church leaders and to influence or intimidate their proceedings; the church hierarchies learned how to invoke state coercion against heretics and schismatics, and they came to control increasing property and wealth. Persecution soon resumed of Christians by Christians, of pagans by Christians, of Jews and Moslems by Christians.

Yet if blame must be apportioned, much belongs not to Constantine but to those church leaders who not

only, it seems, failed to teach him any better, but even, like Eusebius above all, constructed an extravagant theology of the Christian emperor that made him almost the earthly embodiment of divine power.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

## Constantine's Famous Emblem

The chi-rho symbol he adopted is now displayed in churches throughout the world.

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***In October 312, Constantine and his forces marched toward Rome. Arrayed against them were the armies of Maxentius—four times greater. At stake was control of Rome and sole rule of the Western Empire.***

***According to Christian historian Eusebius, the troubled Constantine sought help in prayer to his father's god. Constantine then had a vision of a cross of light emblazoned against the sun and saw the words In hoc signo vinces: "In this sign you will win." Constantine ordered the monogram of Christ to be painted on his soldiers' shields. When he later engaged Maxentius, Constantine won a decisive victory. What was this emblem? Where did it originate? Historian David F. Wright offers this brief history.***

The military standard or ensign carried by the Roman legions was normally a metal pole surmounted by a figure of an eagle and often bearing other decorative features. The name **labarum** (a word of disputed origin—perhaps Celtic) may already have designated such a standard, but it became the distinctive name of the form Constantine gave it—the eagle displaced by a sign based on the chi-rho monogram, i.e., the first two letters (**C, R**) of "Christ" in Greek.

Later this symbol itself came to be known as the **labarum**, even when blazoned not on a standard but on shields or helmets. The emblem was thought of as incorporating a cross. Antecedents for the chi-rho monogram have sometime been suggested. What matters, however, is that Constantine incontrovertibly adopted it as a token of his Christian allegiance.

Accounts of Constantine's later military campaigns show him using the **labarum** as a kind of talisman against his enemies. This is one illustration of what modern Christians might describe as the superstitious character of his Christianity.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Persecution in the Early Church: A Christian History Timeline

*Many dates are approximate*

### Persecution in the Early Church

**35** Stephen martyred; Paul converted

**42** Apostle James beheaded by Herod Agrippa I

**49** Jews expelled from Rome (for disturbances with Christians?)

**64** Nero launches persecution

**65** Peter and Paul executed

**80s** Domitian develops emperor worship

**95** Domitian executes or exiles several family members on charges of "atheism"

**107** Simeon, cousin of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, killed for political (anti-Semitic) reasons

**110** Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, martyred in Rome

**112** Pliny inquires of Trajan how to treat Christians

**155 (166?)** Polycarp martyred

**155, 160** Justin writes *First* and *Second Apology*

**165** Justin martyred

**177** Pogrom in Lyons and Vienne: 48 killed

**178** Celsus's *True Discourse* against Christians

**180** 12 from Scilli (N. Africa) killed

**197** Tertullian writes his Apology

**202** Emperor Septimius Severus forbids conversions to Christianity (Judaism)

**203** Origen's father and Perpetua and Felicitas martyred, among others

**211–213** North African hostilities

**235–36** Emperor Maximin Thrax persecutes church leaders, including Hippolytus

**248** Origen writes *Against Celsus*; persecutions in Alexandria

**250** Emperor Decius orders universal sacrifice; church leaders arrested; Origen jailed and tortured; Pope Fabian martyred, as are bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem; Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, flee

**251** Decius dies; Cyprian returns to Carthage and deals with lapsed Christians; Novationist schism

**252–53** Emperor Callus revives persecutions of Decius

**254** Origen, weakened from torture, dies

**257–60** Emperor Valerian hounds clergy; Cyprian, Pope Sixtus II, and others martyred

**261** Emperor Gallienus issues rescript ordering toleration

**270s** Emperor Aurelian establishes state cult of the Unconquerable Sun (birthday, Dec. 25) and threatens persecution

**275** Porphyry writes *Against the Christians*

**298–302** Christians in army forced to resign

**303** Great Persecution begins February 23. Four edicts call for church buildings to be destroyed, sacred writings burned, Christians to lose civil rights, clergy to be imprisoned and forced to sacrifice, and (in 304) all people to sacrifice on pain of death

**305** Diocletian and Maximian abdicate; hiatus in persecution

**306** Constantine named Augustus by troops; in the East, Maximinus II renews persecution (through 310); Council of Elvira, in Spain, passes severe penalties for apostates

**311** On death bed, Galerius issues edict of toleration; Maximinus II continues persecution in Egypt; Donatist schism begins

**312** Constantine defeats Maxentius to take control of Western Empire

**313** Constantine and Licinius meet at Milan; resulting "Edict" of Milan grants toleration of Christianity

**324** Constantine defeats Licinius to become sole Roman emperor

### **Significant Social, Religious, and Political Events**

**18** Caiaphas becomes high priest

**26** Pontius Pilate appointed prefect of Judea

- 30** Crucifixion of Jesus
- 39** Herod Antipas dies
- 43** Rome invades Britain; London founded
- 46–58** Paul's missionary journeys
- 48** Jerusalem Council
- 64** Great fire in Rome
- 66** Jewish War begins
- 70** Jerusalem taken by Romans
- 74** Masada captured
- 79** Mt. Vesuvius erupts, destroying Pompeii
- 95?** John exiled to Patmos; Book of Revelation written
- 101–102, 105–6** The Dacian Wars; Empire reaches greatest extent
- 132** Second Jewish War led by bar Kokhba (through 135)
- 140–160** Heretic Marcion and Gnostic teacher Valentinus active
- 164** Fifteen-year plague breaks out
- 172** Montanism, an apocalyptic movement later condemned, begins in church
- 195** Theological writer Tertullian converts to Montanism
- 212** Roman citizenship extended to every freeborn person
- 216** Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, a non-Christian sect, born of
- 230** First Persian War (further wars in 243–44, 254)
- 232** First known house-churches built
- 248** Goths attack Rome
- 259** Shapur I of Persia captures Valerian in battle
- 268** Goths sack Athens, Corinth, and Sparta

**270** Saint Antony, monastic pioneer, seeks solitude in Egyptian desert

**285** Roman Empire divided into western and eastern empires

**293–303** Emperor Diocletian creates administrative Tetrarchy; reforms army, currency, and taxation; establishes price controls

**311** Eusebius writes *Ecclesiastical History*

**314** Constantine summons Council of Arles to deal with Donatist schism; Lactantius writes *On the Death of the Persecutors*

**318** Arian controversy begins

**325** Constantine summons First Council of Nicea to deal with Arian question

**328** Athanasius, defender of orthodoxy, elected bishop of Alexandria

**330** Constantinople dedicated as Empire's new seat

**337** Constantine baptized shortly before death

### **Key Roman Emperors**

**31 B.C.–A.D. 14** Augustus

**14–37** Tiberius

**41–54** Claudius

**54–68** Nero

**69–79** Vespasian

**81–96** Domitian

**98–117** Trajan

**117–38** Hadrian

**138–61** Antoninus Pius

**161–80** Marcus Aurelius

**180–92** Commodus

**193–211** Septimius Severus

**211–17** Caracalla

**222–35** Severus Alexander

**235–38** Maximin Thrax

**249–51** Decius

**253–60** Valerian

**284–311** Tetrarchy

***Augusti***

Diocletian (284–305)

Maximian (286–305, 307–308)

***Caesars***

Constantius I (Aug. 305–306)

Galerius (Aug. 305–311]

**284–305** Diocletian

**286–305, 307–308** Maximian

**305–306** Constantius I

**305–311** Galerius

**306–312** Maxentius

**306–337** Constantine I "the Great"

**308–324** Licinius

**310–313** Maximinus II Daia

Primary sources for timeline are ***The Rise of Christianity***, by W. H. C. Frend (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); ***The Triumph of the Meek*** by Michael Walsh (London: Roxby, 1986); ***A History of Christianity***, edited by Ray C. Petry (Englewood Cliffs,

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs

Christians held a theology of martyrdom that gave them courage to endure.

William G. Bixler

The early church's theology of martyrdom was born not in synods or councils, but in sunlit, blood-drenched coliseums and catacombs, dark and still as death. The word *martyr* means "witness" and is used as such throughout the New Testament. However, as the Roman Empire became increasingly hostile toward Christianity, the distinctions between witnessing and suffering became blurred and finally nonexistent.

In the second century, then, *martyr* became a technical term for a person who had died for Christ, while *confessor* was defined as one who proclaimed Christ's lordship at trial but did not suffer the death penalty. A passage from Eusebius describes the survivors of the persecution in Lyons (in 177 in what is today France): "They were also so zealous in their imitation of Christ ... that, though they had attained honor, and had borne witness, not once or twice, but many times—having been brought back to prison from the wild beasts, covered with burns and scars and wounds—yet they did not proclaim themselves martyrs, nor did they suffer us to address them by this name. If any one of us, in letter or conversation, spoke of them as martyrs, they rebuked him sharply.... And they reminded us of the martyrs who had already departed, and said, 'They are already martyrs whom Christ has deemed worthy to be taken up in their confession, having sealed their testimony by their departure; but we are lowly and humble confessors.' "

### Roots of the Martyr Ideal

The ideal of martyrdom did not originate with the Christian church; it was inspired by the passive resistance of pious Jews during the Maccabean revolt (173—164 B.C.). Antiochus IV, the tyrannical Seleucid king, ignited the revolution by a variety of barbarous acts, including banning Palestinian Jews from religious practices such as circumcision. Stories abounded of steadfast Jews, such as Eleazar the scribe (2 Macc. 6), who chose torture and death rather than violate the Law by eating pork. Two hundred years later, the Jewish War of A.D. 70 saw thousands become martyrs for their faith rather than capitulate to Roman paganism. This noble tradition helped shape the church's emerging theology of martyrdom.

### Why Not Armed Resistance?

The Maccabean period also, however, gave stories of avenging rebels such as Judas Maccabeus. What prompted Christians to emulate the passive resisters such as Eleazar, rather than armed revolutionaries like Judas Maccabeus?

To answer this question one need look no further than to Jesus himself. The church understood martyrdom as an imitation of Christ. The Lord was the exemplar of nonviolence at his own trial and execution, declaring that his servants would not fight because his kingdom was not of this world.

Jesus' words burned themselves deeply into the collective psyche of the Ante-Nicene church: "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also (Luke 6:29); do not resist an evil person (Matt. 5:39); blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Matt. 5:10); if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also (John 15:20)."

Paul and the other New Testament authors sustained and developed the theme that followers of Christ were to suffer, not fight, for their Lord. A believer's weapons were not composed of iron or bronze but were made of sterner stuff (Eph. 6:13ff.).

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died a Christlike death, praying earnestly for his tormentors. Eusebius, the church historian, called Stephen "the perfect martyr"; thus he became a prototype for all martyrs to follow.

### **The Ultimate Contest**

The martyr's nonviolent response to trial and torture was never equated with passivity or resignation. For the early church, the act of martyrdom was a spiritual battle of epic proportion against the powers of hell itself. Justin, for example, wrote an apologetic to Emperor Antoninus Pius charging that his punishment of Christians without examination was "by the instigation of demons. "

Despite their moral opposition to gladiatorial and athletic contests, Christians freely appropriated the language of the games to describe their spiritual bouts with evil. Eusebius wrote effusively of "the discipline and much-tried fortitude of the athletes of religion, the trophies won from demons, the victories placed upon all their heads."

This imagery was used, with some irony, to depict women and children doing battle against spiritual wickedness. Prior to her death, Perpetua recorded in her prison diary that she had a vision in which she defeated an Egyptian wrestler (a common participant in the games) before Christ, the heavenly umpire. Conquering this symbol of the Evil One, she was awarded apples, the prize in Apollo's games at Carthage. Another martyr, Blandina, was described as "she the small, the weak, the despised, who had put on Christ the great and invincible Champion, and who in many rounds vanquished the adversary and through conflict was crowned with the crown of incorruptibility. "

These vivid athletic metaphors echo the thoughts of another martyr who died years before Blandina and Perpetua, during the Neronian persecution: "Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever" (1 Cor. 9:24—25).

### **The Ultimate Companion**

For early Christians, such a battle was not waged alone. The church, as G. W. Lampe notes, understood the believer's suffering and death as a concrete and literal realization of death and burial with Christ, enacted figuratively in every convert's baptism (Rom. 6:3). Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom at Rome, wrote the church there to take no action to prevent his death, for he wished to "attain to Christ" and to be an "imitator of the passion of Christ, my God."

The New Testament afforded to the early church numerous explications of this theme: To persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus himself (Acts 9:5); Christ's disciples would suffer as he did (John 15:20); believers are to be crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20); Christians are to "rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:13).

Martyrs not only represented Christ, but also found Christ actually present with them, in a mystical way, during their torment. At the death of Blandina (in Lyons in 177), it was said "they saw ... him who was crucified on their behalf in the person of their sister." And this was written about Sanctus, who suffered at nearby Vienne: "But his poor body was a witness to what he had undergone—one whole wound and bruise contracted, having lost the outward form of a man—in which body Christ suffered and accomplished mighty wonders, bringing the adversary to nought."

The church understood the source of the martyr's strength and testimony to be the Holy Spirit. Only by his inspiration could such powerful proclamation be given before hostile authorities. The martyrs relied on Jesus' promise: "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mk. 13:11).

Those who confessed their faith in the face of persecution were seen as receiving a word of revelation and proclamation much like the Old Testament prophets. Vettius, spokesman for the martyrs of Lyons, was described as having "in himself the Paraclete, that is, the Spirit of Zechariah," (who was identified in Luke 1:67 as a Spirit-possessed prophet).

The Spirit fell on slave and free, baptized and unbaptized, granting dreams and visions as he saw fit. For example, Polycarp (the bishop of Smyrna martyred c. 155) saw his pillow on fire, understanding the vision as a prophecy regarding the kind of death he would die. Basileides, an Alexandrian soldier, was granted a vision of the martyred Potamiaena, who informed him that he would soon have the privilege of dying for Christ. In both instances the prophetic visions were fulfilled.

### The Ultimate Crown

The negative side to the assurance of inspiration during trial and torture was the danger of apostasy under the same conditions. The Shepard of Hermas declared that a servant who denies the Lord is evil. Cyprian went further, reminding the lapsed that apostasy is equivalent to blasphemy of the Holy Spirit: "For that it is a very great crime, they themselves know who have committed it; since our Lord and Judge has said, 'Whoever shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven, but whosoever shall deny me, him will I deny.' And again he has said, 'All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men and blasphemies, but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit shall not have forgiveness, but is guilty of eternal sin.' "

Because they stood against apostasy, and because they possessed gifts of prophecy and visions, martyrs and confessors were held in high regard in the church. Their spiritual authority, in fact, rivaled that of bishops. The Spirit, R. L. Fox notes, enabled them to "bind and loose," pronounce on heresy and orthodoxy, and forgive sins. In one instance, Saturus of Carthage saw a vision in which he and Perpetua, both martyrs-to-be, were called upon to mediate a dispute between a bishop and his elders.

The early church also believed in martyrs as master intercessors. The First Epistle of John alludes to the power of intercession: "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life" (1 John 5:16). Numerous stories were circulated of almost legendary feats of prayer performed by martyrs during their lifetimes. Thus it was not difficult for Christians at that time to imagine these same prayer warriors interceding at the heavenly court after death. This belief is illustrated by an inscription, one of many similar, in the Roman catacombs: ***Paul ed(t) Petre pro victore***—"Paul and Peter pray for Victor."

It was said the rewards of a virgin were 60 times greater than an ordinary Christian's, but a martyr's were 100 times greater. While Christ's death remained central to the early church's understanding of salvation, it was believed that a martyr's death effaced all sins committed after baptism. Melito of Sardis claimed, "There are two things which give remission of sins: baptism and suffering for the sake of Christ." Tertullian echoed this, writing to martyrs: "Your blood is the key to Paradise."

The belief in the virtue of martyrdom generated the phenomenon of "volunteering," whereby numbers of Christians actively sought persecution and death. In one account, a Roman governor was interrupted in his courtroom by a Christian named Euplus who shouted, "I am a Christian. I want to die." His request was granted. The early church did not advocate voluntary martyrdoms and, in fact, Origen and Clement specifically warned against them. Jesus himself in Matthew's gospel advised fleeing when persecution was imminent. Thus, those who volunteered to die were a small minority.

## **From Love to Veneration**

The sentiment of the early church toward its martyrs moved from love to reverence to veneration. The author of the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp wrote: "For him as Son of God we adore; the martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we reverence as they deserve on account of their unsurpassable loyalty to their King and Teacher."

Martyrs were honored by having their "heavenly birthdays" (i.e., the anniversaries of their deaths) celebrated annually. The celebration service was held at the grave of the deceased with prayer, oblations, Communion, and a reading of the martyr's history of suffering and death. This practice was quite contrary to Christianity's Jewish roots, for Judaism, following the Mosaic law, held that a grave was unclean. Thus a third-century Syrian Christian advised fellow believers to meet in their cemeteries without fear of impurity.

It is not certain exactly when the honor paid to the martyred dead was transferred to their physical remains, but the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, written in the second century, includes a statement that the church of Smyrna counted the bones of the saint "more valuable than precious stones and finer than gold." Believers in Antioch held the remains of Ignatius in high esteem, while Cyprian's blood and clothing became objects of veneration.

The emphasis on procuring martyrs' relics produced many abuses but did not dampen the church's desire to honor its faithful dead. The importance of relics grew to such proportion that the Seventh Ecumenical Council (in Nicea in 787) decreed that relics must be placed in the altar of a new church before it could be consecrated.

Any abuses surrounding the honoring of the martyrs should not blind us to the spiritual debt the whole church owes to these brave souls. By their faithfulness to Christ in spite of torture and death, these men, women, and children proclaimed to the world that Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord. In the words of the Book of Revelation, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11)."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

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## The Gallery: Martyrs and Confessors

### Ignatius of Antioch

(d. c. 107–117)

Escorted to his death by ten Roman soldiers

"I am the wheat of God and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God." So wrote Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (in Syria) as he was being taken to Rome under close military guard.

It is unsure why Ignatius had been arrested, but his journey was more like a triumphal procession than a journey to death. At nearly every stop, he met leaders of the local church, and he wrote letters to a series of churches and one to Bishop Polycarp in Smyrna. Yet there is no indication that anyone else was ever in danger of arrest.

We know almost nothing about Ignatius's life except his journey to Rome and his death. In his letters we see a man with a passion for Christ, for martyrdom, and for the right faith. He warns against a heresy with Docetic elements (the belief that God's Son only appeared to be human). Ignatius was so concerned for sound doctrine that he wrote that anyone who said Christ only seemed to suffer could not really be a martyr. Further, Ignatius taught that the bishop is the proper safeguard for sound teaching and, in fact, there can be no church without the bishop.

Ignatius's letters give us rare insight into the mind of a martyr. He wanted to die and considered his death an imitation of the passion of Christ and an atoning sacrifice. One reason for his letter to Rome was to be sure they did nothing to secure his release.

Ignatius was martyred in Rome during the reign of Emperor Trajan, and tradition holds that he died in the Colosseum.

### Justin

(and six friends, d. c. 165)

"You can kill us," he wrote the emperor, "but not hurt us."

Justin was born in Samaria around A.D. 130. As an adult, he searched for truth in pagan philosophy but was not satisfied, and around A.D. 130 he converted to Christianity. Justin taught for a while at Ephesus and later moved to Rome, where he gathered disciples into a philosophic "school."

Justin's *First Apology*, addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, was published in 155. Apologies were explanations of the faith, designed to show that Christianity was not a threat to the state and should be treated as a legal religion. Today, the *First Apology* also is important for what it tells us about second-century baptismal and eucharistic practices.

Soon after 155, Justin published his *Dialogue with Trypho*, an argument with a Jew about the true interpretation of Scripture. The *Dialogue with Trypho* teaches three main points: The Old Covenant is passing away to make place for the New; the Logos is the God of the Old Testament; the Gentiles are the new Israel.

Justin's **Second Apology** was written soon after Marcus Aurelius became emperor in 161. In these writings Justin tried to show that the Christian faith alone was truly rational. He taught that the Logos (Word) became incarnate to teach humanity truth and to redeem people from the power of the demons.

Justin and some of his disciples were denounced as Christians sometime in 165 and taken before the prefect of Rome. The prefect asked them if they were Christians, and if they would sacrifice to the gods. Justin replied, "No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false."

When the prefect threatened them with death, Justin said, "If we are punished for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hope to be saved.... "

They were taken out and beheaded.

### **Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne (d. 177) Victims of a bloody pogrom**

Lyons was the Roman capital of Gaul and one of the most important cities in the Empire. The persecution there (and in nearby Vienne) in 177 was local, inspired perhaps by a celebration in honor of the goddess Roma, the genius of Rome.

To gain evidence against the Christians, citizens of Lyons (modern Lyon, France) tortured several of the Christians' slaves. The slaves quickly said their owners were guilty of incest and cannibalism, two common charges against the Christians. These accusations inflamed the prejudices of the mob, who demanded action. In all, 48 Christians died either in prison or in the arena.

Blandina, a Christian slave girl, is typical of the incredible suffering endured by this church. As a letter from the church says, "Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn until evening were worn out and exhausted, and themselves confessed defeat from lack of aught else to do to her; they marveled that the breath still remained in a body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds, and they testified that a single form of torture was sufficient to render life extinct, let alone such and so many."

Blandina stood firm in her faith, however, and when she was returned to the prison, she encouraged the other prisoners to stand firm in their faith.

Blandina's ordeal was far from over, however. Later she was tied to a cross in the arena and wild beasts were let loose on her. The letter says that others who were being tortured in the arena gained strength by looking at Blandina and hearing her prayers, for they saw in her the image of the Christ who had suffered for them all. Since none of the beasts would touch her, Blandina was cut down and put back in prison.

Later, Blandina was brought back into the arena, scourged, put on a red-hot iron grill, and finally gored and tossed by a bull before she died.

Like their counterparts in Asia and North Africa, the martyrs at Lyons saw their suffering as part of the battle against the Antichrist and a sign of the end of the age and the final victory of Christ. They believed their faithfulness was a key part of Christ's victory.

Irenaeus says that soon after this persecution the church began a mission to the rural population of the area. So the faith of the martyrs not only saw the church through a time of terrible suffering, it also helped lay the foundation for mission in the next decade.

### **The Martyrs of Scilli (d. 180)**

**"I do not recognize the empire of this world," their leader declared.**

Seven men and five women were brought before the Roman proconsul Saturninus in Carthage, North Africa, on July 17, 180. The charge: They were Christians.

J. E. Stevenson includes the "Acts" of their martyrdom in his *New Eusebius*:

"The proconsul Saturninus read out the sentence from his notebook: 'Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the rest have confessed that they live in accordance with the religious rites of the Christians, and, when an opportunity was given them of returning to the usage of the Romans, persevered in their obstinacy, it is our pleasure that they should suffer by the sword.'

"Speratus said: 'Thanks be to God.'

"Nartzalus said: 'Today we are martyrs in heaven: thanks be to God!' "

They were beheaded.

The account of these martyrs from Scilli, a village near Carthage, is the earliest document demonstrating the existence of Christianity in North Africa. It shows what was at stake between Rome and the church: two opposing ways of life. When these African Christians refused to return to "the usage of the Romans," the Roman authorities recognized there was a profound danger to the Empire.

The story of these seven men and five women is also important for the development of the canon of Scripture. When the Christians were arrested, they were carrying "the sacred books, and the letters of Paul, a just man." "The sacred books" may mean the Hebrew Scriptures, thus making this an early indication that Paul's letters were treated as Scripture. Or "the books" may refer to the Gospels, which would likewise give insight into the history of the New Testament's formation.

### **Crispina of Numidia**

**(d. 304)**

#### **St. Augustine praised her**

When Emperor Diocletian decreed that all Christians should sacrifice to the Roman gods, many hastened to do exactly that. Crispina did not.

Crispina was a wealthy woman, married, with several children, so she had many "good" reasons to sacrifice. The proconsul begged her to conform to the imperial edict. She replied, according to *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, "I do observe the edict: that of my Lord Jesus Christ. "

The proconsul reasoned with her, even threatened her with death. Finally, he said, "We cannot put up with this impious Crispina any longer." She was tortured and finally killed by the sword.

Once again we find a North African martyr. Crispina became such a prominent martyr that Augustine called attention to both her birthday and her feast day in his sermons. In a sermon delivered (over one hundred years later) on her birthday, he said, "Is there anyone in Africa, my brethren, who knoweth her not? For she was most illustrious, noble in birth, abounding in wealth." In another sermon in his *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, Augustine says of Crispina, "She rejoiced when she was being seized; when she was being carried before the judge; when she was being put into the prison; when she was being brought forth bound; when she was being condemned."

### **The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste**

**(d. 320)**

#### **Soldiers left naked on a frozen lake**

Never was Rome in more danger from the church than when Christians refused military service. When the Empire was threatened on three borders at once, the pacifism of the church threatened the Roman way of life. Roman officials saw clearly that a vast organization with many conscientious objectors, and opposed to Roman ideals, could not be tolerated in a time of war. Thus, Christians were purged from the army in the early fourth century.

In 320, near the end of the Great Persecution, the emperor Licinius ordered all Christians to renounce their faith on pain of death. Forty soldiers of the Twelfth Legion, stationed at Sebaste in Armenia, refused. They were stripped naked, forced out onto a frozen lake, and left to die from exposure. Fires were built on the bank, however, and warm baths were prepared for anyone who would recant.

Only one gave in. Yet when he did, another soldier, moved by the example of the suffering Christians, declared himself a Christian and took the apostate's place.

Within 24 hours, most of the 40 were dead. The others were then put to death.

**Paphnutius**  
**(tortured c. 306–313)**  
**Maimed in the Great Persecution**

Emperor Constantine entered the Council of Nicaea in 325 in all the splendor of the imperial state. Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, says the emperor was as "resplendent as one of God's angels in heaven." In spite of the show of power and wealth, Constantine was also conscious of the pain suffered by the church during the Great Persecution.

The monk/bishop Paphnutius had been tortured in the persecutions of Maximinus Daia. His left knee had been shattered and his right eye ripped out. In that crippled condition he had been sent to work in the mines, probably in Palestine. It may be one of the minor miracles of the persecutions that Paphnutius survived at all.

When Paphnutius and Constantine met at the Council of Nicaea, Constantine, as a sign of respect for the suffering of the old man, kissed his empty eye socket.

Paphnutius was a disciple of St. Antony and a solitary monk when he was called to be a bishop in Upper Egypt. At the Council of Nicaea he argued against the proposal that married clergy should separate from their wives. Because of his fame as an ascetic and confessor (one who suffered in the persecution but was not killed) his words carried the day. A historian, Socrates, says in amazement that one who had never known a woman but could argue with such compassion for married clergy, moved the council in a way no one else could. Paphnutius also supported Athanasius and the understanding of Christ as true God that would emerge as orthodox. His was a powerful voice in a period when the orthodox position was actually the minority one. The long persecutions were over. Constantine's kissing the empty eye socket of Paphnutius signaled that a new day had begun for the church.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Cowards Among the Christians

Decius became emperor in 249, at a time of crisis. Externally, the Empire was threatened by invasions on the northern frontiers. Internally, the citizens lacked cohesion and moral fiber.

Decius decided to strengthen and unite the Empire on the basis of religion. He ordered that all citizens take part in a general sacrifice, pouring out a libation to the Roman gods and eating part of the sacrificial meat. This order was aimed particularly at prominent Christian leaders. Decius operated on the theory that if you cut off the head, the body will die of itself.

Citizens who refused to sacrifice were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Great bishops such as Fabian of Rome, Babylas of Antioch, and Alexander of Jerusalem were killed or died in prison. Others, like Cyprian of Carthage, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Gregory the Wonderworker, were banished or went into hiding.

Eusebius describes the torture of Origen, the great theologian, in his *Ecclesiastical History*: "The dreadful cruelties he endured for the word of Christ, chains and bodily torments, agony in iron and the darkness of his cell; how for days on end his legs were pulled four paces apart in the torturer's stocks—the courage with which he bore the threats of fire and every torture devised by his enemies.... " Origen survived and was freed but died as a result of his torture.

## Fallout for the Faithful

While the government targeted Christian leaders, mobs in Alexandria and other cities attacked the rank and file. Eusebius preserves a letter from Dionysius of Alexandria describing the attacks of a mob: "Next they took a female convert named Quinta to the idol's temple and tried to make her worship. When she turned her back in disgust, they tied her feet and dragged her right through the city over the rough paved road, bumping her on the great stones and beating her as they went, till they arrived at the same place, where they stoned her to death. Then they ran in a body to the houses of the Christians, charged in by groups on those they knew as neighbors, raided, plundered, and looted."

The church practically collapsed. Thousands of Christians either offered sacrifices or obtained a certificate (*libellus*) saying that they had sacrificed.

In 251 Decius died in battle, ending the persecution (which still ranks as one of the bloodiest in the history of the church). But then the church found itself facing a tempestuous internal struggle. What was the church to do with all these apostates who, when the crisis was over, wanted to rejoin the church? On what basis could they be readmitted? The struggle for an answer reflects a deeper tension about the nature of the church.

## Is the Church a Pure Bride?

Behind the struggle lies the question of post-baptismal sin. In *Against Marcion*, Tertullian listed what seems to have been a common understanding of the benefits of baptism: remission of sins, deliverance from death, rebirth to new life, and endowment with the Holy Spirit. In his work *On Penance*, Tertullian said that because baptism is so important, there can be no second repentance after baptism. Particularly could there be no forgiveness of what would later be called mortal sins—adultery, murder, apostasy. Since the lapsed had apostatized, the answer was clear: they could not be received back.

Tertullian's strict position was based on an understanding of the church as the pure body and bride of Christ. The church stood separate, against the Empire.

### **Is the Church a Field with Tares?**

Another view of the church led to a different understanding of penance and of how to treat the lapsed. Hermas, in *The Shepherd* (c. 150), had said there could be one repentance after baptism. Hermas even suggested that apostasy might be forgiven once. Callistus, the bishop of Rome from 217 to 222, apparently was willing to offer penance and forgiveness for adultery and murder (at least Hippolytus and Tertullian accused him of that).

But forgiveness was not easy. Penance was public and lasted a long time. No clergy who sinned were admitted again to their office. Origen, writing *Against Celsus*, describes the penitential system: "They admit [those who have sinned] some time later as though they had risen from the dead, provided that they show a real conversion, though their period of probation is longer than that required of those who are joining the community for the first time. But they do not select those who have fallen after their conversion to Christianity for any office or administration in the church of God."

This more open approach to penitence saw the church as a body of sinners; tares grow along with the wheat.

### **A Bitter Focus**

Yet these questions of purity and penance remained moot; for over 200 years, very few Christians committed adultery or murder, and only a few more apostatized.

But with the great persecutions under Decius (and 50 years later under the Tetrarchy), one could no longer talk about exceptions. The majority of Christians sacrificed (*sacrificati*) or obtained certificates to that effect (*libellatici*). The questions of penance and the nature of the church now became a bitter focus of the church's life.

In Carthage, for example, there were at least 18 martyrs and 17 confessors. Bishop Cyprian had gone into hiding at the beginning of the persecution. From his exile he had tried to hold the church together. At the same time, the confessors were exerting what they considered to be their ancient right to forgive sins and were readmitting the lapsed without penitence.

Cyprian returned to Carthage in 251 to handle the crisis. A council at Carthage in June of that year decided that all should be admitted to penance, though not to the church. Those who had obtained a certificate (without having actually sacrificed) were to be readmitted after a penance varying in length in proportion to the amount of pressure they had endured. Those who had performed sacrifice were to be readmitted only at the point of death. Lapsed clergy could be readmitted to the church in the face of death, but they were removed permanently from office. The confessors had no power to readmit persons to the church; that power lay only with the bishop. The decision of the council was a great victory for Cyprian and for the long-standing tradition of penance and forgiveness for even post-baptismal sin. The view of the church as a mixed body had prevailed.

But such a stance did not win without conflict. With the martyrdom of Fabian (Fabianus), Rome had been left without a bishop. In 251 Cornelius was elected bishop of Rome and immediately offered penance to the lapsed. Novatian, one of the leading clergy in Rome, set himself up as head of a rival church and ordered that no forgiveness for the lapsed was possible. The conflict between Novatian and Cornelius was again a conflict between two views of the church. Novatian saw the church as a small group of the spiritually elite, in conflict with the world. Cornelius saw the church as a mixed people, one that had room

for the elite but also for ordinary Christians. Ultimately, the traditional view prevailed, although the followers of Novatian remained a powerful force in the Roman church for years.

## Responses in Five Regions

A similar crisis came later in the great persecution under the Tetrarchy (the reign of four rulers initiated by emperor Diocletian in 293). The church's response varied widely, according to evidence from five regions of the Roman world.

**Asia Minor:** Here the church was more tolerant. The Synod of Ancyra (modern day Ankara, Turkey) said that lapsed clergy who came back to the church and suffered for the faith were allowed to keep their office but not to celebrate the sacrament. The laity could be readmitted after a period of three to five years of penance. Wounds in Asia Minor healed fairly quickly.

**Rome:** Struggle continued between the followers of Novatian and the followers of the bishops. Bishop Miltiades won, but the Novatianists elected Victor as a rival pope, and tension remained for another hundred years.

**Egypt:** Epiphanius's *Heresies* tells the story of the struggle in an Egyptian prison between Bishop Peter of Alexandria and Meletius. Peter wanted a policy of leniency, for fear that the church might lose the lapsed completely. Meletius wanted severe punishment for any who lapsed, for fear that the church might lose its integrity.

Peter sent a letter to the churches saying that those who lapsed under severe pressure could be restored after forty days of fasting and penance. All who confessed were to be restored to fellowship within three years.

Yet Meletius and his followers argued that none could be restored until after the end of the persecution, and in no case could lapsed clergy resume their office. By the time of Peter's martyrdom in 311, the Egyptian church had split.

**North Africa:** The most serious split over the status of the lapsed clergy came in Africa. There, the real issue was not so much the securing of certificates but the surrender of Scriptures. Donatist, for whom the Donatist opposition was named, took the crime of handing over the Scriptures (*traditio*) so seriously, he said that simply being in communion with one of the guilty was enough to make one equally guilty of *traditio* and thus an apostate. Donatus said that all sacraments given or received by a *traditor* were invalid. On this basis, the Donatists argued that the consecration of Bishop Caecilian of Carthage was invalid, because one of the consecrating bishops allegedly had been a *traditor*. The Donatists considered themselves the true church of the saints, making no compromise. This time there was no Cyprian at the head of the church, and the religious question, combined with political and economic ones, split the church.

The Donatist struggle forced the Latin church to more fully develop its theology of the unity of the church and to hold the sacraments as valid *ex opere operato*, that is, regardless of the moral character of the person administering them.

## Two Visions of the Church

The struggle over whether to allow penance for apostates during the persecutions was, at the same time, a struggle over two visions of the nature of the church. One saw the church as an elite body of the sanctified; the other saw the church as a mixed body of both the sanctified and those on the way.

The view of the church as a mixed body had the weight of pastoral care and forgiving love on its side, and it prevailed. But the call for sanctification continues to raise many of the same issues for the church in our day.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 27: Persecution in the Early Church

## **From the Archives: Cyprian's Letter to Banished Christians**

Encouragement for believers sentenced to the Roman mines.

*While imprisoned, and soon to be beheaded, Cyprian sent a letter to comfort nine Christian friends who had been exiled to the mines at nearby Sigua.*

Cyprian to ... the brethren in the mines, martyrs of God the Father Almighty, and of Jesus Christ our Lord, and of God our preserver, everlasting greeting ... As golden and silver vessels, you have been committed to the mine that is the home of gold and silver, except that now the nature of the mines is changed, and the places which previously had been accustomed to yield gold and silver have begun to receive them.

Moreover, they have put fetters on our feet and have bound your blessed limbs and the temples of God with disgraceful chains.... To men who are dedicated to God and attesting their faith with religious courage, such things are ornaments, not chains; nor do they bind the feet of the Christians for infamy but glorify them for a crown....

Let cruelty, either ignorant or malignant, hold you here in its bonds and chains as long as it will, from this earth and from these sufferings you shall speedily come to the kingdom of heaven. The body is not cherished in the mines with couch and cushions, but it is cherished with the refreshment and solace of Christ.... Your limbs unbathed, are foul and disfigured with filth and dirt: but within they are spiritually cleansed.... There the bread is scarce; but man liveth not by bread alone, but by the word of God. Shivering, you want clothing; but he who puts on Christ is both abundantly clothed and adorned....

This temporal and brief suffering, how shall it be exchanged for the reward of a bright and eternal honor, when, according to the word of the blessed apostle, "The Lord shall change the body of our humiliation, that it may be fashioned like to the body of His brightness!"

... Farewell in the Lord, and always and everywhere remember me.

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## Persecuted Christians Today

"Martyrdom is a regular, ongoing feature of church life in the 25 percent of global Christianity that we call the 'underground church,'" claims David Barrett of the World Evangelization Research Center. "In one part of the globe, over 10,000 Christians have been killed every year since 1950, due to clashes with anti-Christian mobs, infuriated relatives, state-organized death squads, and so on."

Such staggering statements remind us that Christian martyrdom is not confined to the early centuries of Christianity and the Middle Ages. In fact, Barrett's statistics show martyrdoms increasing, from 35,000 in 1900 to an estimated 260,000 this year. Asked to explain the dreadful upsurge, Barrett says: "All the long-term underlying factors which produce martyrdoms seem to be gradually increasing in our day." Such factors include widespread social, economic, and political unrest.

### From the USSR to Uganda

"The church in the USSR has suffered more severe and sustained persecution than that of any nation in recent history," claims Patrick Johnstone, compiler of *Operation World*. The USSR's anti-Christian activities have gone through peaks and valleys since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, but at one time 88 percent of Russian Orthodox churches were closed and 400 leaders of unregistered Baptist churches were in prison. About 10,000 Christians were sent to Siberian gulags or exiled. In a peculiarly cruel kind of persecution, some 1,000 Christians were prisoners in psychiatric wards. Barrett estimates that of the 60 million killed and 66 million imprisoned between 1917 and 1953, half were Christians.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76), religious activity was forced underground, most Bibles were destroyed, believers' homes were looted, and many Christians were imprisoned or executed. In 1983 the government arrested hundreds of church leaders and cracked down on illegal house-church meetings.

Beyond the Soviet Union and China, Christians have laid down their lives for their faith in some 180 countries. In Uganda, under Idi Amin, some 400,000 Christians died, disappeared, or fled the country between 1971 and 1976. The most notable martyr was Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum, apparently shot by Amin himself.

In Vietnam, congregations were disbanded and buildings destroyed. Hundreds of pastors were sent to re-education camps. Other Christians died of starvation and disease because their fields were confiscated and their harvests stolen.

Today, persecution seems most severe in Nepal, where conversions are outlawed, and in Peru, where Christians are caught in a brutal Maoist-inspired guerrilla uprising.

The ever-present possibility of persecution for many Christians calls for response. Daniel Kyanda, who escaped execution under Idi Amin, now represents Christian Solidarity International in Nairobi, Kenya. He goes about Africa giving seminars on preparation for persecution. Why? "When I see more and more Africans being converted, I just conclude that each one is a candidate for persecution," he says.

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## Persecution in the Early Church: Recommended Resources

Recommendations provided by Kenneth R. Calvert, Th.M. candidate in patristics at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

### General Histories

W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1984). A well-documented and easy-to-read coverage of early Christianity.

Adolf von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., trans. by J. Moffatt (London: Williams & Norgate, Ltd., 1908). In classic German style Harnack provides an excellent introduction to the early church.

Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. 1, Beginnings to 1500* (Harper and Row, 1975). Written by a scholar of faith, this church history is well composed and researched. The coverage of martyrdoms and persecutions is good.

### Secondary Literature

Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Indiana University Press, 1986). A more recent work focusing on issues relative to pagan and Christian relations. Excellent background material to the persecutions.

W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Baker, 1981). The most complete and documented modern accounting of the persecutions in the first three hundred years of Christian history. It is readable and accurate.

E. G. Hardy, *Christianity and the Roman Government, 3rd ed.* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1925). This book focuses less on religious tensions and more on legal issues and Roman administration.

W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (Putnam's, 1893). A broad coverage of New Testament times and the early church.

H. B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1980). An edited version of an earlier work by the same author. It is short, and easy to read, yet well documented.

### Popular Works

Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Penguin, 1983). Though regarded as outdated, this popular work makes for good reading.

John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Baker, 1978). A popular text, not known for objective historical work, that details some of the gruesomeness that came with persecution.

### Specific Persecutions

Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Lu sebiu* (Harvard University Press, 1981). The book offers a good look at the Diocletian persecution with the subsequent triumph of Christianity in the rise of Constantine.

N. H. Baynes, ed., "The Imperial Crisis and Recovery," Vol. XII in *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge University Press, 1939). Chapter 6 treats the Decian persecution, and chapter 19 the Diocletian.

Patrick Healy, *The Valerian Persecution* (Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905). A good review of crucial events leading to the persecution, and the results for the Empire and the church.

### Primary Sources

*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vols. 1—10 (Eerdmans, 1981). This classic set, covering the first three hundred years of Christian writings, includes martyrdoms, apologies, and letters of exhortation. Despite the old translations, still the best collection.

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (Penguin, 1981). This first history of Christianity, written in the fourth century, is a compilation of Christian texts, with running interpretation.

J. B. Lightfoot, ed. and trans., *Apostolic Fathers* (Baker, 1984). Including the earliest post-biblical writings, this text gives a good idea of Christian thinking in the early years of the persecutions. Good translations.

Herbert Musurillo, ed., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979). The Greek and Latin texts, alongside English translations, of all the recorded martyrdoms of the Christian period.

J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius, Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to AD. 337* (SPCK, 1977). A good collection of edited texts, both Christian and Roman. The text is in the style of Eusebius, though without the Eusebian interpretation of Christian history.

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## The Faith Behind the Famous: Charles Dickens

Some of his novels mercilessly lampoon Christians. Yet the great Victorian author also wrote a reverent account of Jesus' life.

Stephen Rost, a writer from Mesquite, Texas, is the editor of eight volumes in the Christian Classics Series (Nelson, 1988–9).

Charles Dickens has been called “perhaps the greatest of English novelists.” Some may consider such a tribute an exaggeration, but no one can deny his genius and tremendous contribution to literature.

Throughout his life, Dickens was a champion of the poor and oppressed, as well as a critic of aristocratic and High-Church elitism. Popular works such as *David Copperfield*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Pickwick Papers* reveal his contempt for the corruption and folly in Victorian England's business, law, religion, and education. “In *Our Mutual Friend*,” writes Neil Philip, citing one example, “[Dickens] depicts a [religious] leacher ‘drawling on to My Dearerr Childerrener ... about the beautiful coming to the Sepulchre; and repeating the word Sepulchre (commonly used among infants) five hundred times, and never once hinting what it meant.’”

### Taste of Poverty

Dickens's life follows a classic rags-to-riches story. He was born at Landport, in Portsea, on February 7, 1812. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the navy—a job that enabled the family to live at a comfortable, but not overly indulgent, middle-class level.

Unfortunately, careless money management and difficult times contributed to John Dickens's financial decline in the 1820s. Household items had to be sold, and Charles was given the unsavory task of taking treasured family books to the local pawn shop. At the tender age of 12, Charles was sent to work in a dingy blacking house. This dashed all hope of his getting a proper education. To make matters worse, his father ended up in debtors' prison.

Work in the blacking house lasted from 8 A.M to 8 P.M., with one hour for dinner and 30 minutes for tea. He made the best of his situation, and in time it became apparent to the foreman that Charles was different. He not only carried himself in a manner unlike the other boys', he also outworked them.

Upon his father's release from prison, Charles went back to school. He developed shorthand and landed a job as a parliamentary reporter—first for *The True Sun*, then the *Morning Chronicle*. And he contributed articles to the *Monthly Magazine* and *Evening Chronicle*.

### Disenchantment with Religion

The influence of religion was ever present in Dickens's life, even though he didn't engage in religious activity to any noticeable degree. Biographer Edgar Johnson writes that Dickens's parents “were Church of England, though not at all devout, or interested in matters of doctrine.... They did not even attend church very regularly.” Young Charles was also subjected to the boring messages of Baptist minister William Giles. With these experiences to reflect upon, Dickens developed a dislike for the church. G. K. Chesterton wrote that “the tone of Dickens towards religion, though like that of most of his contemporaries, philosophically disturbed and rather historically ignorant, had an element that was very characteristic of himself. He had all the prejudices of his time. He had, for instance, that dislike of defined

dogmas, which really means a preference for unexamined dogmas.”

This attitude did not come by accident; it was neatly cultivated by a life of unpleasant experiences with formal religion. Dickens’s contempt should not be construed, however, as a hostility toward God or Jesus Christ. He merely observed that the church, for all its dogma and ceremony, failed to realize, at least in practice, the need for social action.

In 1834, for example, Sir Andrew Agnew attempted to pass a bill prohibiting recreation and work on Sunday. This infuriated Dickens, for it reflected the fanatical side of religion he had grown to hate. The wealthy enjoyed leisure throughout the week because their money enabled them to hire others to do their work, but the poor worker had to labor six days, leaving only Sunday for recreation and other needed activities. Now the religious zealots wanted to take that brief source of pleasure from those who needed it most.

Dickens attacked the bill with a pamphlet titled ***Sunday Under Three Heads: As it is; As Sabbath Bills would make it; As it might be made.*** The bill was never enacted, but the issue did entrench his disdain for rabid religiosity.

Dickens became involved with a system that attracted many fellow intellectuals: Unitarianism. It enabled him to live without the dogmatic creeds of historic Christianity, yet affirm the existence of God and the humanity and divine mission of Jesus Christ. And Unitarianism promoted social awareness. Writer Robert Browning remarked that “Mr. Dickens is an enlightened Unitarian.” After 1847, however, he did attend the Anglican church near his home. And he prayed each morning and night.

### **Settling Down to Success**

The year 1836 was pivotal for Dickens. He married Catherine Hogarth on April 2 and began a family that eventually expanded to ten children. Also, his writing career was launched in earnest. Chapman and Hall hired him to write the brief text for a series of sporting plates by illustrator Robert Seymour. Dickens initiated an alternate plan that gave birth to the ***Pickwick Papers***. At the same time, ***Oliver Twist*** was coming out in the periodical ***Bentley’s Miscellany***. Dickens was now an established writer with a growing reputation. His popularity crossed the Atlantic, and soon he was on his way to America, where he was received with enthusiasm.

Dickens conveyed his social concerns to a vast number of people via his novels. He made it a point to expose injustice. A case in point is the anti-Catholic riots of that era. By no means was Dickens sympathetic toward Catholicism, but he hated bigotry. In 1841 he wrote ***Barnaby Rudge***, which exposed the foolishness of the anti-Catholic period and those who encouraged it.

### **“God Bless Us, Every One”**

Even though Dickens hated established religion, he maintained a sensitivity toward the social principles of Christianity, principles he made quite clear in one of his most popular and endearing novels, ***A Christmas Carol***.

Written when Dickens was 31, this tale of ghosts and greed so thrilled him that he literally wept and laughed over it. The protagonist, Scrooge, is an oppressing, greedy, lover of money—a cold, wretched shell of a man who has lost all sense of kindness. Of all the characters in the Dickens gallery, the old miser is the most memorable representation of that which Dickens hated in individuals and society.

The moral and spiritual values sprinkled throughout the story are priceless. For example, Scrooge equates happiness with wealth; ironically, he is the most unhappy character. Scrooge remarks that those who are unable to care for themselves would do society a favor by dying, thereby helping decrease the surplus

population. Later, however, Scrooge is taken by the second Spirit to visit the home of his impoverished employee Bob Cratchit. Scrooge develops a personal interest in Tiny Tim, the lovable boy who suffers from a potentially fatal ailment. Scrooge inquires about Tim's health, and the Spirit states that the boy will die unless the old miser changes his ways. But who cares, for "If he be like to die," says the Spirit, "he had better do it, and decrease the population." Scrooge hangs his head in shame.

Eventually, Scrooge sees the folly of his way and exclaims, "I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse." A religious conversion? The "salvation" of Scrooge comes not from an encounter with Christ, but an encounter with self. He displays the Dickensian view that salvation is achieved by loving your neighbor, giving a cup of water to those in need. The New Testament teaches that such acts are the result of spiritual conversion; for Dickens, they were the means.

### **A Secret Work Revealed**

In 1849, Dickens wrote an important manuscript that would not be printed until 1934. This work was so personal to him that he requested it not be made public for 85 years. The work was a retelling of the Gospel narratives, titled *The Life of Our Lord*. Marie Dickens, Charles Dickens's daughter-in-law, offered this fitting description of Dickens's secret work:

"This book, the last work of Charles Dickens to be published, has an individual interest and purpose that separate it completely from everything else that Dickens wrote. Quite apart from its Divine Subject, the manuscript is peculiarly personal to the novelist, and is not so much a revelation of his mind as a tribute to his heart and humanity, and also, his deep devotion to Our Lord."

Dickens wrote *The Life of Our Lord* so that his children would become familiar with Jesus Christ, and he often read the story to them. When his children left home, he gave each a New Testament (though not an entire Bible). To one, he wrote, "I put a New Testament among your books, for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child; because it is the best book that ever was or will be known in the world...." *The Life of Our Lord* most clearly expresses Dickens's religious disposition. He respected Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, who practiced what Dickens so desperately wanted to find in humanity. Jesus loved all people. He rubbed shoulders with social castaways, rebuked wealthy elitists, and severely condemned hypocrisy. If ever a man could gain Dickens's utmost respect and favor, Christ could, and did.

While certain statements about Christ appear orthodox, the overall picture that Dickens paints cannot be considered orthodox when measured by Scripture or the historic creeds of Christianity. Dickens portrays Jesus as a good man who is loved by God like a son. He writes of the Resurrection, yet glosses over the Virgin Birth and Communion, and he states that one becomes acceptable for heaven by doing good.

One thing is certain, however: Dickens respected the Bible and Christ and sought to instill in his children the same reverence. Near the end of his life he wrote to a reader: "I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of Our Saviour; because I feel it; and because I re-wrote that history for my children—every one of whom knew it from having it repeated to them—long before they could read, and almost as soon as they could speak. But I have never made proclamation of this from the house tops."

### **Unfinished Business**

In 1858, Dickens separated from his wife. Some speculate that a chief cause of the marriage's breakup was his tendency to put himself and his writing first. Dickens then devoted himself increasingly to traveling and public readings of his works. He also developed a relationship with a young actress.

Dickens pushed himself to the limit for so long that his health began to break down. Eventually, he was

forced to cease most of his public speaking and resign himself to writing. In 1869 he began work on ***The Mystery of Edwin Drood***, which was interrupted by his untimely death from a seizure on June 9, 1870. He was 58. He was buried in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

In his last will and testament, written on May 12, 1869, Dickens wrote, "I commit my soul to the mercy of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and I exhort my dear children humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there."

Dickens despised, and in his books eloquently portrayed, the gross injustices and shoddy lifestyle of many who laid claim to the teachings of Christianity. Yet a fair examination of his life and work shows that he was not a hater of Christ or of Christianity. His friend John Forster concluded that Dickens's will demonstrates his "unswerving faith in Christianity itself, apart from sects and schisms."

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## Events in the Life of Charles Dickens

Stephen Rost, a writer from Mesquite, Texas, is the editor of eight volumes in the Christian Classics Series (Nelson, 1988–9).

**1812:** Birth at Landport, Portsea, on February 7, 1812.

**1824:** Father, John Dickens, imprisoned for debt.

**1836:** Writes *Sunday Under Three Heads*. Begins *Pickwick Papers*. Marries Catherine Hogarth on April 2.

**1837:** First child, Charles Culliford Boz Dickens, born.

**1838:** *Oliver Twist* published in three volumes.

**1842:** First visit to the United States.

**1843:** *A Christmas Carol* published; it immediately sells 6,000 copies.

**1849:** Writes *The Life of Our Lord* for his children; publication delayed at his request until 1934.

**1850:** *David Copperfield* published. Dickens starts his own magazine, *Household Words*.

**1852:** Tenth and final child, Edward Dickens, born.

**1853:** First public reading of *A Christmas Carol*.

**1858:** Separated from his wife.

**1859:** *A Tale of Two Cities* published.

**1861:** *Great Expectations* published.

**1869:** Begins work on his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

**1870:** Dies from a seizure June 9, leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* unfinished. Buried in Poets' Comer, Westminster Abbey.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## How Dickens Viewed Jesus Christ

Selected quotations from *The Life of Our Lord*.

—Selected by Stephen Rost

My dear children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the history of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about Him.

And when people seek ill of the Poor and Miserable, think how Jesus Christ went among them and taught them, and thought them worthy of his care.

And because he did such Good, and taught people how to love God and how to hope to go to Heaven after death, he was called Our Savior.

Remember!—It is christianity to do good always—even to those who do evil to us. It is christianity to love our neighbor as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to shew that we love him by humbly trying to do right in everything.

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