

## ROMAN PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANITY

(64 - 323 A.D.)

“Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”<sup>1</sup>

—Matthew 5:11-12

During the first three centuries after Christ’s death, the mightiest Empire on earth, Rome, repeatedly assailed Christianity in an attempt to destroy it. This was primarily the result of two factors. First, Christians, as a whole, were unwaveringly opposed to the pagan religions of the Romans. Christians refused to worship or offer sacrifices to the Roman gods or to the Roman emperors.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians considered such sacrifices to be apostasy, for which no forgiveness was possible! However, to the Romans, such worship was evidence of a person’s loyalty to the Empire. Sacrificing to the Emperor or to the traditional Roman gods showed a person’s patriotism, like we do when we salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. The Christians’ refusal to honor the gods aroused Roman suspicions. These suspicions were heightened by the Christians’ refusal of military service on religious grounds, and their opposition to many Roman customs and traditions—such as the Roman “games” (gladiator fights) and the Roman theater, which most Christians found immoral and revolting.

But the second factor was by far the more important: the Christians were **successful!** Rome tolerated many varieties of religious belief within its borders, including Judaism, so long as they did not undermine Roman rule. But Christianity spread so rapidly throughout the Empire that the Romans began to perceive it as a very real threat to everything Roman. Quintus Septimius Tertullian (“Tertullian”)<sup>3</sup> described this rapid spread of Christianity:

In whom have all the nations believed but in Christ who is already come? In whom have they believed—the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and those who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia; those who live in Pontus, Asia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, in Africa beyond Cyrene; those born here and those who came here from Rome; also the Jews in Jerusalem and other national groups, as now the various tribes of the Gaetulians and of the wide regions of the Moors, and the Spaniards to their remotest boundaries; the different nations of Gaul; the haunts of the Britons, inaccessible to the Romans; the lands of the Sarmatians, Dacians, Germans, Scythians; and many remote nations,

provinces, and islands, which are unknown to us and which we cannot enumerate? We are but of yesterday, yet we have filled all that is yours: cities and islands, forts and towns, assemblies and even military camps, tribes, councils, the Palace, the Senate, the Forum. We left you only the temples.<sup>4</sup>

The relatively modern concept of the separation of church and state was completely unknown to the Romans. They regarded opposition to the state religion as opposition to the state—which was **treason!** As we shall see, many Christians were executed for the “treasonous” conduct of being a Christian. Many more suffered arrest, imprisonment, floggings, torture, forced labor in the mines, and loss of property and status. Some even sought martyrdom, although most Christians disapproved of such needless deaths.

When a person was accused and convicted of being a Christian, Roman law awarded the Christian’s property to his or her accuser. Obviously, this law encouraged accusations—some of them false—and often made life difficult for Christians within the Empire. However, in many locations during the first and second centuries A.D., Christians were relatively safe, either because the local authorities did not perceive Christians as a threat or because the authorities could be bribed to look the other way. But as Christianity grew and spread, it became increasingly hard to ignore, and the persecutions became more widespread. While the first five Roman persecutions were generally localized to one or more specific cities or regions within the Empire, the last five were much more pervasive.

Because the Christians were looked upon with suspicion, as enemies of the state, rumors and misunderstandings about them abounded. For example, they were accused of being atheists because they would not worship the Roman gods. Christians were also accused of incest, cannibalism, promiscuity, infant sacrifice, and hatred of the human race.<sup>5</sup> Families were often divided when one member converted to Christianity, so Christians were accused of breaking up homes. Justin Martyr,<sup>6</sup> in his *Second Apology*, tells of a Christian named Ptolemaeus who was imprisoned, tortured, and eventually executed because he converted the wife of a Roman nobleman to Christianity.

We must not make the mistake of believing that only the Roman government disliked the Christians; persecutions often resulted from actions of pagan mobs, rather than orders of local authorities. Indeed, in 197 A.D., Tertullian noted “the general hatred felt for us.”<sup>7</sup> In about 200 A.D., a pagan lawyer named Marcus Minucius Felix wrote the following unflattering description of Christians:

They form a rabble of profane conspiracy. Their alliance consists in meetings at night with solemn rituals and inhuman revelries. They

replace holy rites with inextinguishable crimes. They despise temples as if they were tombs. They look down on our priests although they are pitiable themselves. They despise titles of honor and the purple robe of high government office though hardly able themselves to cover their nakedness. Just like a rank growth of weeds, the abominable haunts where this impious confederacy meet are multiplying all over the world, due to the daily increase of immorality. Root and branch, it should at all costs be exterminated and accursed. They recognize each other by secret signs and symbols. They love one another before being acquainted, so to speak. Everywhere they practice a kind of religious cult of lust, calling one another “brother” and “sister” indiscriminately. Thus, under the cover of these hallowed names, ordinary fornication becomes incest. They consecrate and worship the head of a donkey, the meanest of all animals. They even reverence the genitals of their president and priest, adoring in this the creative power of their father. This suspicion may be false, but at any rate it fits the character of their secret nocturnal rites. To venerate an executed criminal and the gallows, the wooden cross on which he was executed, is to erect altars which benefit lost and depraved wretches. The blood of the infant—oh, how abominable—they lap up greedily, they distribute its limbs with passionate eagerness. Their feasting is notorious. Even Cornelius Fronto, the teacher of Emperor Marcus Aurelius testifies to this. . . . After a surfeit of feasting, when the blood is heated and drinking has inflamed impure passions, a dog which has been tied to the lampstand upsets and extinguishes the tale-telling light. Darkness covers their shamelessness, and lustful embraces are indiscriminately exchanged. All single acts correspond to the will of all. . . . Otherwise why do they have no altars, no temples, no images? Why do they not speak in public? Why do they never meet in the open? Is it not simply because what they worship and conceal is criminal and shameful? <sup>8</sup>

Many Christian writers—such as Justin Martyr, Quadratus, <sup>9</sup> Tertullian, and Athenagoras—tried to respond to these false accusations. Here is an example, from the *Dialogue with Trypho*, by Justin Martyr:

We ourselves were well conversant with war, murder, and everything evil, but all of us throughout the whole wide earth have traded in our weapons of war. We have exchanged our swords for ploughshares, our spears for farm tools. Now we cultivate the fear of God, justice, kindness to men, faith, and the expectation of the future given to us by

the Father himself through the Crucified One. . . . We do not give up our confession though we be executed by the sword, though we be crucified, thrown to wild beasts, put in chains, and exposed to fire and every other kind of torture. Everyone knows this. On the contrary, the more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever-increasing numbers become believers and God-fearing men through the name of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Traditionally, the Church recognizes ten official persecutions by the Roman Empire, with the approximate dates of each:

- First Official Roman Persecution: 64 A.D.
- Second Official Roman Persecution: 81-96 A.D.
- Third Official Roman Persecution: 108 A.D.
- Fourth Official Roman Persecution: 177-180 A.D.
- Fifth Official Roman Persecution: 202-211 A.D.
- Sixth Official Roman Persecution: 235-238 A.D.
- Seventh Official Roman Persecution: 249-251 A.D.
- Eighth Official Roman Persecution: 257-260 A.D.
- Ninth Official Roman Persecution: 274-275 A.D.
- Tenth Official Roman Persecution: 303-311 A.D.

Persecutions often occurred during the years between the “official” persecutions. But local authorities, or mobs, rather than the Emperor, were usually responsible for such intermittent molestations.

**The First Official Roman Persecution** (about 64 A.D.). Nero<sup>11</sup> ordered this first persecution, which the Roman historian Tacitus,<sup>12</sup> described in his book, Annals:

No humane endeavors, no princely generosity, no efforts to placate the gods were able to dispel the scandalous suspicion that the burning of the city [Rome] was the result of an order. To silence this rumor, Nero pushed the Christians forward as the culprits and punished them with ingenious cruelty, as they were generally hated for their infamous deeds.

The one from whom this name originated, Christ, had been executed during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator, Pontius Pilate. For a time this pernicious superstition was suppressed, but it broke out again, not only in Judea where this evil thing began, but even in the city itself where everything atrocious and shameful from all quarters flows together and finds adherents. To begin with, those who openly confessed were arrested, and then a vast multitude was convicted

on the basis of their disclosures, not so much on the charge of arson as for their hatred of the human race. Their execution was made into a game: they were covered with the skins of wild animals and torn to pieces by dogs. They were hung on crosses. They were burned, wrapped in flammable material and set on fire as darkness fell, to illuminate the night. Nero had opened his gardens for this spectacle and put on circus games. He himself mingled with the crowd dressed as a charioteer or stood up high on a chariot. Although these people were guilty and deserved the severest penalty, all this gave rise to compassion for them, for it was felt that they were being victimized, not for the public good, but to satiate the cruelty of one man.<sup>13</sup>

This first persecution is unique because Christians were initially punished as suspected criminals—i.e., arsonists—rather than based solely on their religion. In later persecutions, merely being a Christian would suffice to bring down the wrath of Rome. Historians are unsure whether Christianity was formally outlawed by the Roman government as early as 64 A.D., since no such law is mentioned by the Christian writers of the 1st and 2nd centuries. Nevertheless, subsequent events show that some type of illegality must have attached to Christianity at about this time.

Peter and Paul are both believed to have been victims of the hostility toward Christians which was generated by this persecution, both dying in Rome somewhat later, in about 68 A.D. Early Christian writers tell us that Peter was crucified upside down, while Paul was beheaded. Paul was no doubt spared crucifixion because such punishment was not inflicted on Roman citizens.

**The Second Official Roman Persecution (about 81-96 A.D.).** The 2nd persecution occurred during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian,<sup>14</sup> who promoted the worship of himself as emperor-god, as well as worship of the Roman gods. Many Christians were forced into exile, including John the apostle (son of Zebedee and brother of James)—by this time a very old man. John was exiled to the island of Patmos (off the coast of Asia Minor), where he had his famous vision, as recorded in the Book of Revelation.<sup>15</sup> According to Tertullian, the persecution was relatively short-lived because Domitian changed his mind and suppressed it. However, only after Domitian's death in 96 A.D. were all of the exiles allowed to return to their homes. John returned to Ephesus at about this time.

The Roman historian, Dio Cassius, writing in about 225 A.D., tells us that Domitian had exiled his wife (Flavia Domitilla), and executed his cousin (Flavius Clemens) and the consul (Acilius Glabrio), for “atheism,” because they had “slipped into Jewish customs.” If this is a reference to Christianity, then it probably means that

Christianity was still viewed at that time as a sect of Judaism, and may have been punished as an illegal Jewish association.

**The Third Official Roman Persecution (108 A.D.).** The 3rd Roman persecution occurred in about 108 A.D. during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan.<sup>16</sup> Simeon, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, perished during this persecution. A Christian named Justin (not Justin Martyr) also died at this time. He has left us several letters which he wrote during his journey to Rome to die in the arena. Here is a sample:

I give injunctions to all men that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if you do not hinder it. I beseech you, be not an unseasonable kindness to me. Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. . . . Let there come upon me fire and cross, struggles with wild beasts, cutting and tearing asunder, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, and cruel tortures of the devil, if so I may attain to Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

**Ignatius.** Ignatius, the bishop of Syrian Antioch, died in about 108 A.D., in the arena in Rome. Along his journey to Rome, his guards allowed him to meet with Christian congregations and give them encouragement. Ignatius was an aggressive Christian leader who courted martyrdom. He proclaimed that if the wild beasts in the arena were not hungry he would urge them on.

**Persecutions Between 108 A.D. and 177 A.D..** Persecutions occurred intermittently during the following 70 years, under the Emperors Trajan, Hadrian, Antonius Pius, and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>18</sup> However, because Christians were generally left alone during this time, it was a period of relative calm. We have a letter describing these persecutions, written in about 112 A.D. by Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (better known as Pliny the Younger), Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, to the Emperor Trajan:

It is my custom, Sire, to report to you everything about which I am in doubt, for who could better guide my uncertainty or instruct my ignorance?

I have never been present at trials of Christians; therefore I do not know what or how much to punish or to investigate. I am also very unsure whether age should make any difference, or whether those who are of tender age should be treated just the same as the more robust; whether those who repent should be pardoned, or whether one who has

once been a Christian shall gain nothing by having ceased to be one; finally, whether the name [of Christian] as such should be punished even if there is no crime, or whether only the crimes attributed to this name should be punished.

Meanwhile I have followed this procedure with those who were denounced to me as Christians: I asked them whether they were Christians. If they confessed, I repeated the question a second and third time and, moreover, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted I had them led away to their death, for I had no doubt that, whatever it was that they confessed, their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved to be punished.

There were several others, Roman citizens, who showed the same madness, and I noted them to be sent to the city. As often happens during legal investigations, the crime became more widespread and there were some particular incidents. An anonymous accusation was presented denouncing a large number of persons by name. I felt that I should acquit those who denied that they were or had been Christians if they followed my example and called upon the gods; if they offered before your image incense and wine, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose with the statues of the gods; and if they reviled Christ besides. It is said that those who really are Christians cannot be compelled to do any of these things in any circumstances. Others, whose names had been given by an informer, first said they were Christians but then soon denied it, saying in fact they had been but had ceased to be, some saying three years ago, others longer, and some as long as twenty years ago. All of these worshiped your image and the statues of the gods and cursed Christ.

They continued to maintain that the sum of their guilt or error lay in this, that it was their custom to meet on a fixed day before daylight and, alternating with one another, to sing a hymn to Christ as to a god. They also bound themselves mutually by an oath, not in order to commit any crime, but to promise not to commit any theft, robbery, or adultery; not to break their word; and not to deny entrusted goods when claimed. After doing this, it was their custom to part from one another and then to meet again to share an ordinary and harmless meal. But even this they said they had ceased to do since my edict in which, in compliance with your injunction, I had forbidden closed societies.

I thought it all the more necessary, then, to find out finally what was true by putting to torture two girls who were called serving girls. But I found nothing but a depraved and enormous superstition.

Consequently I adjourned the investigation and now turn to you for advice.

The matter seems to me worthy of consultation especially because of the large number of those imperiled. For many of all ages, of every rank, and of both sexes are already in danger, and many more will come into danger. The contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities but even to the villages and to the country districts. Yet I still feel it is possible to check it and set it right. Of this much I am sure, that people are beginning once more to frequent the beautiful temples which have been almost deserted, so that the long-neglected sacred rites are being restored and so that fodder for the animals to be sacrificed, for which there was until now scarcely any demand, is being bought and sold again. From this it is evident that a very great number of people can be brought back to better ways if they are given the opportunity to repent.<sup>19</sup>

We also have the Emperor Trajan's reply:

Pliny Secundus, you have followed the correct procedure in examining those who were accused before you as Christians, for in general no hard and fast rule can be laid down. They should not be sought out. Those brought before you and proved guilty should be punished provided that anyone who denies that he is a Christian and actually proves this by worshiping our gods is pardoned on repentance, no matter how suspect his past may have been. Anonymous accusations, however, should not be admitted in any criminal case, for this would give a very bad precedent and would not be worthy of our age.<sup>20</sup>

Eusebius<sup>21</sup> tells us of the deaths of three Christians in Pergamum in Asia Minor, in about 165 A.D.: Carpus, his mother, Agathonica, and their friend, Papyrus. Carpus and Papyrus were brought before the proconsul and ordered to sacrifice to the gods. Carpus refused, so he was beaten and tortured until he lost consciousness. Then the proconsul turned to Papyrus, who also refused. So he too was beaten and tortured. The proconsul ordered that both be burned alive. Papyrus and Carpus were nailed to stakes and burned to death. As they were dying, Carpus' mother, Agathonica, rushed forward and confessed that she too was a Christian. So she was nailed to a stake and burned alive, crying out as she died, "Lord, Lord, Lord, help me, for I flee unto Thee."



**Polycarp.** In about 155 A.D. (one historian places it as late as 168 A.D.), another Christian bishop died in the arena: Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. In his youth Polycarp had known the apostle John. Now, as an old man, about 86 years old, Polycarp bravely faced his own death.

At this time, a mob in Smyrna demanded that the government enforce the law against Christianity. The authorities complied by torturing and then executing eleven Christians in the city's amphitheater. That prompted the mob to call for the execution of Bishop Polycarp, who was arrested and brought before the proconsul. He offered Polycarp a chance to recant and save himself by saying, "Away with the atheists," referring to Christians. But Polycarp pointed to the mob of spectators as he uttered the words, "Away with the atheists." The proconsul gave him another chance, urging him to "Curse Christ." Polycarp replied: "I have served Him 86 years and He has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme the King who saved me?" The proconsul tried again, telling Polycarp to "swear by the genius of Caesar." Polycarp replied: "I am a Christian." The proconsul now turned to threats—first, the threat of being thrown to wild beasts, to which Polycarp replied, "Bring them in." Threatened with torture and death by fire, Polycarp responded that such fire was not to be compared with the fires of Hell. And he added, "Why do you wait? Bring on whatever you will." As the authorities were about to nail him to the stake, as was customary, Polycarp said, "Let me be. He who gives me the strength to endure the fire will also give me the strength to remain at the stake unflinching, without the security of your nails." The fire was lit and Polycarp was executed.

**Justin Martyr.** Justinus Flavius of Neapolis (in Samaria), better known as Justin Martyr, was born about 100 A.D. He moved to Rome and opened a school of Christian philosophy there during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius. Justin wrote two Apologies in defense of Christianity against pagan accusations. In 166 A.D., a rival teacher prodded the authorities to enforce the law, and Justin Martyr and five of his followers—Chariton, Charito (a woman), Euelpistus (a slave), Hierax, and Liberian—were arrested. The account of their trial, apparently drawn from official court minutes, tells us that the City Prefect, Junius Rusticus, addressed each in turn, asking if he were a Christian, and each answered that he was. Another Christian, Paeon, who was not one of the accused, was moved to confess that he too was a Christian. The City Prefect then addressed their leader, Justin, asking if he supposed that he would ascend into Heaven and be rewarded if he were to die. Justin replied, "I do not suppose it; I know it. I am certain of it." The Prefect once again demanded that they offer sacrifices to the gods, threatening that they would be "mercilessly punished" if they refused. But Justin replied: "It is our wish to be martyred for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and so be saved." And the others agreed. So all 7 were scourged and beheaded.

**The Fourth Official Roman Persecution (177-180 A.D.).** During most of the reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Christianity continued to enjoy unspoken toleration. However, the deaths of Polycarp and Justin Martyr illustrate that public opinion among pagans was turning against the Christians. Many people believed recent misfortunes in war and weather were the result of the gods' displeasure with the Roman tolerance of the "atheistic" Christians. So in 177 A.D., Aurelius directed that Christianity and other sects be punished. Administrative procedures for bringing accusations against Christians were apparently eased, encouraging informers to denounce them.

The persecutions were especially severe in southern France—in the cities of Lyons and Vienne—where the Governor ordered that investigations be launched to find the Christians. According to a letter written by the surviving Christians, pagan slaves were pressured or tortured to lie against their Christian masters, and the slaves' false accusations of cannibalism and sexual immorality inflamed the public against all of the Christians.

Christians in both cities were stoned by mobs if they were caught in public. Many Christians were arrested and imprisoned. Pothinus, the 90-year-old bishop of Lyons, was arrested and brought before the Governor, who asked him, "Who is the god of the Christians?" Pothinus replied, "If you were worthy you would know." For this response, he was viciously beaten and jailed. He died in jail two days later. Pothinus' assistant, Attalus, was roasted to death on a chair of red-hot iron. Blandina, a slave-girl, is said to have been repeatedly tortured, while she kept repeating, "I am a Christian, and nothing evil happens among us." She was eventually bound in a fishing net and tossed into the arena where she was gored to death by a bull. Another Christian named Sanctus endured torture with red-hot metal plates, but to every question he would only say, "I am a Christian." After this, he was fed to the wild beasts in the arena. In all, 47 Christians who refused to renounce their faith were killed—most by torture or wild beasts in the arena, although those who were Roman citizens were beheaded. Their bodies were publicly displayed for a week and then burned. For all of this, the property of the Church itself was apparently not disturbed. Within 2 years after the storm had passed, the remaining Christians were able to elect a new bishop: Irenaeus, of whom we shall soon hear more.

The *Acts of Martyrs* tells us of the martyrdom of six Christians in Carthage in July, 180 A.D. The story is drawn from the official court minutes of their trial. The six who died were Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia. The Proconsul Saturninus repeatedly urged them to win leniency for themselves by offering sacrifices for the Emperor, but Speratus and the others refused. The proconsul offered to give them time to reconsider, but Speratus responded, "In such a

just cause there is nothing to consider.” And each agreed. So the proconsul ordered that they be “executed with the sword” (i.e., beheaded).

**The Fifth Official Roman Persecution (202-211 A.D.).** The Roman Emperor Septimius Severus<sup>22</sup> was a cruel tyrant who had obtained the purple by marching with his army on Rome, bribing the Praetorian Guard to accept his rule, and then executing those Roman Senators who opposed him. But his cruelty was not at the outset directed toward Christians. Severus entrusted the raising of his son, Caracalla, to a Christian nurse, and was tolerant of Christians during the first half of his reign.

Then in 202 A.D., Severus issued an edict forbidding conversions to Judaism or Christianity, on pain of death, prompting a persecution which was especially severe in North Africa and Egypt. In Carthage, many died. One such martyr was a young mother named Vibia Perpetua, who was arrested along with her slave, Felicitas, and her Christian teacher, the presbyter Saturus. While imprisoned, Perpetua repeatedly refused her father’s pleas to renounce her faith. She was gored by a bull in the arena, and then finished off by the sword of a gladiator. Felicitas and Saturus also died in the arena in Carthage.

As we will see when we discuss the life of Origen, below, this persecution was also severe in Alexandria, where many Christians were killed or forced to flee.

**Irenaeus.** Irenaeus was born about 130 A.D., probably in Smyrna, in Asia Minor. He was presumably born into a Christian family, for he received instruction in Christian teachings while still a boy. In his youth, Irenaeus met Polycarp, who, Irenaeus tells us, had been instructed by one or more of the apostles and had talked with many who had seen Christ. Irenaeus spent most of his adult life in the city of Lyons, in Gaul (France). He survived the terrible persecutions in Lyons in 177 A.D., and by 180 A.D. he was made bishop of the Church there. In about 185 A.D., Irenaeus wrote his powerful books, *Against Heresies*, which attacked—with devastating success—what he saw as the growing influence of gnosticism<sup>23</sup> within the Church. Thanks in part to his efforts, gnostic interpretations of the Bible were eventually rejected and disappeared from orthodox Christianity. Irenaeus also wrote an apologetic work, *The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*. He was beheaded in 202 A.D.

**The Sixth Official Roman Persecution (235-238 A.D.).** For more than 20 years persecutions against Christians nearly ceased. That changed during the brief reign of the Emperor Maximinus Thrax.<sup>24</sup> Maximinus was a Roman general from peasant stock; he had no significant education, but he was a good soldier. He revived the persecutions, but after only 3 years as Emperor, Maximinus was murdered by his own troops, and the persecutions ended.

In Rome, Bishop Pontian was arrested and deported to an unhealthy area of the island of Sardinia, where he died. A Christian writer named Hippolytus suffered the same fate.

**The Seventh Official Roman Persecution (249-251 A.D.).** The brief persecution under Maximinus did little to slow the rapid growth of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire during the early 3rd century, A.D. Yet Christians were still mainly clustered in the cities; the countryside remained pagan. This combination of weakness and concentration left the Christians in a highly vulnerable position. As Roman enemies multiplied and Roman defeats mounted—defeats by the Sassanids in the East, the Franks in Germany, the Goths in the Balkans—the Christians were a convenient scapegoat and an easy target for the troubled Empire. In addition, the cult of Emperor-worship was growing stronger than ever. These factors would lead to the most severe persecution of Christians to date. It was also the first persecution that can truly be said to have been Empire-wide.

The Emperor Decius<sup>25</sup> was a man of wealth and culture who believed deeply in the Roman traditions and the Roman religions. He quickly took steps to suppress Christianity and placate the Roman gods. In an atmosphere of pagan religious fervor, concern over military defeats, and fear of barbarian invasion, Decius' measures won wide support among the pagan population.

The initial phase of the persecution—from about December 249 A.D. until about February 250 A.D.—was directed against Christian leaders. Fabian, the Bishop of Rome, was arrested and executed during this time. (Decius commented that he would rather face a rival emperor than another bishop in Rome.) Babyllas, bishop of Antioch, and Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem, were also executed. Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, and Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, escaped death by going into hiding.

Then in June 250 A.D., Decius issued an imperial edict requiring all citizens of the Empire, of whatever faith, to make sacrifices to the Roman gods. Refusal was punishable by death. Those who obeyed the edict and made the required sacrifices were issued certificates evidencing their compliance. Some Christians managed to buy the certificates without making the required sacrifices, and many simply complied with the edict. In Carthage, Rome, and Alexandria, the leaderless congregations readily submitted to the new law. In Smyrna, even the Christian Bishop, Euctemon, participated in this “apostasy” by sacrificing to the Roman gods. But not all complied. Hundreds of Christians were beheaded, burned at the stake, or tossed into the arena with wild animals for their refusal to obey the edict.

The persecutions began to subside before the end of the year 250 A.D. In 251 A.D., Decius was killed fighting the Goths in southeast Europe. Decius' death further reduced the intensity of the persecutions. While some persecutions continued

under his successor, Gallus,<sup>26</sup> they were not as widespread or as severe. However, one victim was Cornelius, Fabian's successor as Bishop of Rome. Cornelius was deported to Centumcellae and imprisoned there, where he died in July, 252 A.D.

**Origen.** Origenes Adamantius was born in about 185 A.D., in or near Alexandria, Egypt, one of 7 children born to his Christian parents. In 202 A.D., during the 5th official persecution, Origen's father, Leonides, was arrested and condemned to death as a Christian. Much of the family's property was confiscated by the authorities. Origen, who was only 17, wished to join his father in prison and martyrdom, but his mother stopped him by hiding all of his clothes. Origen sent his father letters encouraging him to remain steadfast in the faith, and then took over as head of the family when his father was beheaded.

Alexandria at this time was a center of Christian learning, thanks in large part to the Christian Catechetical School,<sup>27</sup> which had been founded in 180 A.D. by Pantaenus, and was promoted to prominence by the famous Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria. Clement became head of the School when Pantaenus left for missionary work in India. However, the persecutions of 202 A.D. either killed or drove into exile most of the leading Christians of Alexandria, including Clement, who fled to Palestine. So at the remarkable age of 18, Origen became head of the Catechetical School.

Origen adopted a life of asceticism—fasting often, sleeping little, and abusing his body with cold and hardship. Origen slept on the ground, often went barefoot, and had a wardrobe consisting of only a single garment. He even made himself a eunuch, possibly adopting a literal interpretation of Matthew 19:12,<sup>28</sup> or perhaps merely to avoid scandalous accusations based on the fact that his students included females. During the next 50 years, he wrote more than 6,000 books and pamphlets in defense of Christianity. These included commentaries on the Scriptures and his most famous work, *Contra Celsum* (Against Celsum), a defense of Christianity, in 248 A.D. His fame spread throughout the Empire, attracting both Christian and pagan students. He travelled to Rome, Arabia, Greece, and Palestine, and was ordained as a priest in Palestine in about 229 A.D. However, Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, refused to recognize Origen's ordination, and convened a meeting of the Alexandrian clergy to order his banishment. So Origen moved to Caesarea, in Palestine, and opened a school there.

Unfortunately, Origen's fame eventually attracted the attention of the Roman authorities in Caesarea. In 250 A.D., during the 7th Roman persecution, and at the age of 65, he was arrested, placed in chains, and tortured on the rack. He remained in prison in the nearby city of Tyre for many months. When Decius died, Origen was saved from execution and released from prison. But his health had suffered from the

torture and imprisonment, and he never regained his strength. He died 3 years later, at about the age of 69.

Origen's affection for Greek philosophy, and his desire to marry Christianity to it, led the Church to later disavow many of his views, such as his belief in universal salvation (even for demons). But he was still the most famous and influential Christian of his time. And the Church is indebted to him for his zeal, as well as his efforts to use Reason and intellect in defense of the Christian faith—even if his efforts sometimes went beyond orthodoxy.

**The Eighth Official Roman Persecution (257-260 A.D.).** At first, the Emperor Valerian<sup>29</sup> seemed friendly toward Christians. But repeated military defeats changed his temper. The Empire was attacked in Armenia and along the Black Sea; in Asia Minor, Greece, and the Balkans; and even in northern Italy itself. Almost everywhere Rome's enemies were winning battles, killing her citizens, and looting the Empire's accumulated wealth. In an effort to regain the gods' favor, Valerian reinstigated the persecution of Christians throughout most of the Empire in 257 A.D., and with new fury. Valerian ordered Christian bishops to do homage to the Roman gods or be exiled, and he forbade attendance at Christian meetings or assemblies, as well as visits to Christian cemeteries, on pain of death. (The prohibition against visiting cemeteries was prompted by the fact that Christians had formed themselves into burial associations, which—unlike religious groups—had legal standing and could legally assemble.) Dionysius (bishop of Alexandria) and Cyprian (bishop of Carthage) refused to perform the required acts of worship and were exiled, but to relatively pleasant locations. In Numidia, the bishops were not so fortunate—they were exiled to the mines of Sigus.<sup>30</sup>

In 258 A.D., Valerian issued a new edict, and the persecutions became even more severe—primarily targeted at the Church's leaders. Bishops, priests, and deacons were summarily executed. Christian men of wealth lost all of their property and, if they still refused to recant, they lost their lives. Wealthy Christian women were banished. Christians in the imperial service were reduced to slavery.

Pope Sixtus II, the bishop of Rome, resisted the edicts and was put to death, along with all seven of his deacons. One of those deacons, a man named Lawrence, was roasted to death on a gridiron. Cyprian was returned to Carthage from exile and beheaded. In Spain, a bishop was burned at the stake. In Africa, many Christians were slain. However, the persecutions quickly ended when Valerian was captured in battle by the Persians in 260 A.D. His son, the Emperor Gallienus, restored the Church's property the following year.

**The Ninth Official Roman Persecution (274-275 A.D.).** The Emperor Domitianus Aurelianus (known to us as Aurelian) reigned only five years.<sup>31</sup> Yet in that time he

managed to defeat virtually all of Rome's enemies and regain most of the territory lost under previous emperors. Aurelian also sought to promote religious unity through a monotheistic worship of the sun-god, and of the Emperor as his representative on earth. This of course led to a resumption of the persecutions of Christians. In 275 A.D., Aurelian was murdered by his own soldiers.

**Denis.** St. Denis was sent by Pope Fabian to the city of Lutetia in the province of Gaul in about 249-250 A.D., shortly before Fabian's execution. Lutetia became what is now Paris, France. Denis built churches and converted many to Christianity. He was in fact so successful that the pagan priests turned to the Roman authorities for help in suppressing the Christian movement. So in about 275 A.D., Denis and two companions, Rusticus and Eleutherius, were arrested and condemned. When they refused to renounce their faith even under torture, they were beheaded.

### **The Tenth Official Roman Persecution (303-311 A.D.).**

In 284 A.D., Diocletian became Emperor, after the assassination of the Emperor Probus and a 2-year period of near-anarchy. Diocletian would rule until his resignation in 305 A.D. When he assumed power, the Empire's economy was in chaos, Britain had rebelled, and the Persians were invading in the east. Diocletian created an absolute dictatorship and imposed strict government supervision of the economy. His generals regained Britain and decisively defeated Persia, adding Mesopotamia to the Empire in the process. Most important for Christians, Diocletian required worship of himself as the earthly embodiment of the god Jupiter (Greek, Zeus). And he made war against Christians, whom he knew would never accept his new religion.

In 303 A.D., Diocletian issued edicts which began the final and most terrible of the Roman persecutions—known as the Great Persecution. These edicts ordered the destruction of Christian church buildings, the burning of sacred books, the exclusion of Christians from public office, the confiscation of Church property, and the execution of Christians caught in Christian assemblies. Diocletian also ordered that Christians who refused to worship the Roman gods were to be subjected to extensive tortures, and he ordered the local authorities to search out the Christians so that they might be purged.

At first these edicts were enforced primarily against Church leaders. In Egypt, many of the Christian bishops—including Peter of Alexandria and Meletius of Lycopolis (in Upper Egypt)—were imprisoned. Then in 304 A.D., enforcement was extended to all Christians, and the measures were enforced aggressively and ruthlessly. Christians who refused to worship the Roman gods were subjected to torture, exile to the mines, and even death.

A Christian who tore down the edicts in Nicomedia was caught and roasted alive. Eusebius describes horrible tortures inflicted upon the Christians to induce them to recant their faith, including: eyes gouged out; sharp reeds stuck under the fingernails; and brutal beatings and whippings, followed by salt or vinegar being poured into the wounds. One of the Christian leaders in Africa, Lucius Caelius Lactantius (known simply as Lactantius), tells us of a Christian in Bithynia who recanted after two years of interrogations and tortures. Of course, many Christians—including many Christian leaders—were led by fear or torture to submit to the edicts.

Eusebius also tells of executions by beheading, crucifixion, and the pouring of molten lead down the victim's throat. Death was generally authorized only as a last resort, but many died from the brutal tortures. In Rome, Church property was confiscated and many Christians were slain. In Asia Minor, Roman soldiers surrounded a Christian town and burned it, along with all of its inhabitants. In Antioch, a presbyter named Lucian perished. In Thagara, Africa, in December, 304 A.D., a Roman matron named Crispina had her head shaved and was then beheaded for her refusal to renounce her Christian faith and offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. The Proconsul who conducted her trial, Anulinus, is said to have commented: "All Africa had sacrificed, so should not she?"

In all, at least 1,500 Christians were martyred. This final persecution was Empire-wide, except for Gaul (France) and Britain, where Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, deliberately neglected the imperial edicts. The persecution was especially severe in the eastern part of the Empire, where there were many more Christians.

In 305 A.D., Diocletian abdicated for health reasons. Constantius became ruler in the Western portion of the Empire and ended the persecutions there. Constantius died in 306 A.D., and his son Constantine eventually took over his father's place as ruler in the West. Constantine claimed to have converted to Christianity, although some doubt his sincerity. What is not in doubt is that Constantine granted full religious toleration to Christians in the West in 313 A.D., in the Edict of Milan.

Meanwhile, in the East, the persecutions continued periodically—especially in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine—under Diocletian's successor, Galerius.<sup>32</sup> But on his death bed, Galerius granted religious toleration to Christianity. This ended the Great Persecution in the east, after 8 years.

### **Religious Toleration Comes to the East.**

Galerius' successor, Maximin,<sup>33</sup> soon ended the policy of toleration in the East. Many Christian leaders in the East lost their lives during this time. In November, 311 A.D., Peter, bishop of Alexandria, was executed. Two months later, in January, 312 A.D., a presbyter and teacher named Lucian was killed in Nicomedia.



Maximin's death in 313 A.D. ended the persecutions for a time, but they briefly flared up again under his successor, Licinius, in about 321 A.D. Licinius outlawed councils of bishops and Christian assemblies within walled cities; he also dismissed Christians from imperial service and prohibited men and women worshipping together. These edicts prompted sporadic persecutions in the East, which ended only when Constantine defeated Licinius and united the Empire once again in 323 or 324 A.D. Under Constantine, Christianity officially became a tolerated religion. Later emperors would make it the official state religion.

**Epilogue.** The Roman persecution of Christianity probably had the opposite of its intended effect. Most of the persecutions were too limited in scope and duration to really slow the rapid spread of the new religion. Although many Christians were intimidated and frightened, they quickly returned to the Church when the persecutions subsided. Meanwhile, those Christians who remained faithful despite torture and execution advanced the cause of Christ out of all proportion to their numbers. As Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is seed."<sup>34</sup> Their fortitude proved not only the sincerity of their faith, but also its power. They serve as both an example for us to emulate and a confirmation of the truth of our faith. We owe them much.

- Sources:
- (1) *A History of Christianity, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500* (Revised Edition), by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
  - (2) *The Early Christians*, Selected and Edited by Eberhard Arnold (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970, 1972, 1979).
  - (3) *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and its Impact on Western Civilization*, by Roland H. Bainton (1964).
  - (4) *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944).
  - (5) *The Early Church*, by W.H.C. Frend (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1965, 1982).
  - (6) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know, Volume 2*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1996).
  - (7) *Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia* software (Microsoft, Redmond, Washington).
  - (8) Diocèse of Tunis web site: <http://www.diocesetunisie.com/> (see footnote 28).

## Endnotes for “Roman Persecution of Christianity”:

<sup>1</sup> All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Caligula in 37 A.D., emperors were often deified and worshiped as gods during their lifetimes. (Caligula was the Roman emperor from 37 to 41 A.D.) Caligula’s predecessors—Julius Caesar, Augustus (Octavian), and Tiberias—were honored as gods after their deaths, but were not worshipped as such during their lifetimes. (Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C. Augustus ruled Rome from 42 B.C. to 14 A.D. Tiberias was the Roman emperor from 14 to 37 A.D.)

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian was a Christian writer who lived from about 160 A.D. until about 230 A.D.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *Against the Jews* VII; *Apology* 37, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, pp. 217-218.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, these assertions were based on ignorance, fear, and misunderstanding. For example, the charge of incest was apparently derived from the Christian custom of calling each other “brother” and “sister.” The belief that Christians practiced cannibalism undoubtedly arose from the Eucharist (communion), in which Christians consume the “body” and “blood” of Christ. The accusation of infant sacrifice may have had a similar origin, considering the prominence of the baby Jesus in Christianity. Christians were regarded as haters of mankind because they refused to participate in many aspects of Roman culture, including its religion, its army, and its forms of entertainment. Finally, many Romans believed Christians to be promiscuous because some of their meetings, especially when they met to receive the Eucharist, were closed to non-Christians.

<sup>6</sup> Justin Martyr was a Christian writer who died in 166 A.D.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* (iv, 1), as quoted in *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant, p. 647.

<sup>8</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4; 9.1-6; 10.2, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, pp. 88-90.

<sup>9</sup> Quadratus’ *Apology*, written during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), is the earliest known Christian Apology. An “Apology” is merely a defense of, or an argument in favor of, Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 110.3, 4, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, pp. 97-98.

<sup>11</sup> Nero was the Roman emperor from 54 to 68 A.D.

<sup>12</sup> Tacitus lived from about 55 A.D. to about 120 A.D.

<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* XV.44, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, pp. 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Domitian was the Roman emperor from 81 to 96 A.D.

<sup>15</sup> See Revelation 1:9-11:

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

<sup>16</sup> Trajan was the Roman emperor from 98 to 117 A.D.

<sup>17</sup> *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant, p. 611, quoting from *Apostolic Fathers*, Lake, K., ed., Loeb Library, 2V, I, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Hadrian was the Roman emperor from 117 to 138 A.D. His successor, Antonius Pius, reigned from 138 to 161 A.D. He was followed by Marcus Aurelius, whose rule began in 161 and ended in 180 A.D.

<sup>19</sup> Correspondence of the Emperor Trajan with Pliny, *Letters* X.96-97, A.D. 112, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, pp. 63-65.

<sup>20</sup> Correspondence of the Emperor Trajan with Pliny, *Letters* X.96-97, A.D. 112, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, by Eberhard Arnold, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> Eusebius was a 4th-century church historian, who lived from about 260 to 340 A.D.

<sup>22</sup> Septimius Severus was the Roman emperor from 193 to 211 A.D.

<sup>23</sup> Gnostics believed that the way to God was through "Gnosis," which means knowledge. Gnostics believed that flesh is evil, and that salvation is the freeing of spirit from the flesh. Christians influenced by Gnosticism generally believed that Yahweh—the God of the Old Testament—was evil; that He had created this world and made it evil; and that Jesus provided the "Gnosis" through which to overcome this evil world and reach God. Because Gnosticism taught that this world and everything in it were evil, including the flesh, Christian Gnostics had trouble accepting that Jesus had truly been a man, and thus minimized or rejected the belief that He had died or been truly resurrected. Some even taught that Jesus was pure spirit and that His earthly body was merely an illusion.

<sup>24</sup> Maximinus Thrax was the Roman Emperor from 235 to 238 A.D.

<sup>25</sup> Decius was the Roman emperor from 249 to 251 A.D.

<sup>26</sup> Gallus was the Roman emperor from 251 to 253 A.D.

<sup>27</sup> A catechetical school teaches Christian children and new converts about the faith. However, the school in Alexandria soon became far more than that.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 19:12 (Jesus speaking):

“For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

<sup>29</sup> Valerian was the Roman emperor from 253 to 260 A.D.

<sup>30</sup> Numidia was a Roman province in north Africa, roughly where Algeria now is. The web site of the Diocèse of Tunis locates the mines of Sigus southeast of the city of Constantine, Algeria. See <http://www.diocesetunisie.com/inglese/paging/santi%20e%20martiri.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Aurelian was the Roman emperor from 270 to 275 A.D.

<sup>32</sup> Galerius was the Roman emperor in the east from 305 to 311 A.D.

<sup>33</sup> Maximin was the Roman emperor in the east from 311 to 313 A.D.

<sup>34</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* (i, 13), as quoted in *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant, p. 652.