

## THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

The Third Century – Part III

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### I. PERSECUTION

There were two major persecutions in the Greco-Roman Empire in the third century. We'll talk about them briefly.

1. The first was a persecution under the **Emperor Septimius Severus** early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Severus, after putting an end to a series of civil wars in the Roman Empire felt that the promotion of religious harmony might also bring about a kind of civic harmony as well. Remember, there were still a proliferation of religious groups, sects, and religions within the conquered peoples of the Empire. He decided the best way to promote religious harmony was through a policy of religious syncretism, that is, a kind of synthesis and melding of all religions. He proposed to do this by bringing all religions together under the worship of one **chief god—*Sol invictus*—the Unconquered Sun**. All religions were to be acknowledged so long as The Unconquered Sun would be recognized as reigning over all. Two groups refused to yield: the Jews and the Christians. So Severus outlawed *the conversion* to either of these, on penalty of death. This was a step up from Trajan's ruling, a century before. And is reflected in the writings of the Koran against conversions to Christianity from Islam, several centuries later. **Irenaeus of Lyons** suffered martyrdom under this persecution. However, it is generally thought that persecution was limited and of relatively short duration, and for some 40 years the church grew. It was during this time that Christians began to take refuge and worship in the **Catacombs of Rome**.

Two well known martyrs of this period were women named **Perpetua and Felicitas** who died in the year 203. We know about them because Perpetua wrote the story of her arrest and imprisonment in first person in a diary we still possess included in an early collection of accounts called the Acts of the Martyrs. A postscript to her story describing her martyrdom was added by others. This is the earliest known writing by a Christian woman. It was so well written and beloved that two centuries later Augustine had to warn his readers not to put the story on a level with scripture. This is their story:

Perpetua was a noblewoman living in Carthage (Tunis, Tunisia) about 22 years of age, well educated and well married who had converted to the Christian faith along with one of her brothers and had become a catechumen, that is, had began the study of the Christian faith under an instructor. Her father, mother, aunt and one of her brothers remained pagans. She was nursing a child at the time of her arrest. Felicitas was her servant girl who was eight months pregnant. Perpetua's father plead with her to renounce Christianity, but she refused. This was one of the things that most enraged authorities. **She was defying her father's authority—who was unable to control her, much to the Procurator's fury: she was defying her father as well as that of the state and all the traditional pieties and loyalties. This is what deeply worried the Emperor**. As well as the populace at large which would break into spontaneous riots against Christians. (Frend, page 291, 294). **She, Felicitas and three men** were

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condemned to be thrown to the beasts in the arena. Secundulus, an elder in a church from Proconsular Africa (now Libya) and one of the original five, arrived in prison with his four children and died there before he could be sent to the games. **Incidentally, at this time, most bishops or pastors, like elders were married and had families. Tertullian himself was married** (Frend, page 412). A fourth man, Saturnus, who was in fact Perpetua's catechist, that is, the man who was instructing her in the Christian faith later joined the others in prison. **Perpetua began to have visions of a dead brother who was suffering. Her prayers released him.**

**Question: Knowing the influence of this piece of writing, what later Catholic doctrine might this vision have inspired?** (Purgatory)

Perpetua had another significant vision which repeated the first. In this second vision Perpetua saw a ladder leading to heaven. At the bottom of the ladder was a serpent attacking the Christians trying to climb the ladder to heaven. From this vision Perpetua claimed that she would have to fight Satan rather than just the beasts of the arena. Furthermore, she learned that she would not be defeated in her quest and consequently, she was defiantly confident.

Pudens, their jailer, came to respect these prisoners, and he permitted other Christians to visit them. Perpetua's father was also admitted and made a further fruitless attempt to dissuade her from martyrdom. Imagine this father who was considered by his compatriots as unable to control his daughter! A deep personal humiliation for him, as well as a personal tragedy.

But back to our story. The remaining five prisoners yearned for martyrdom. Felicitas, Perpetua's slave, who was eight months pregnant, was apprehensive that she would not be permitted to suffer martyrdom with the others, since the law forbade the execution of pregnant women, but two days before the games she gave birth to a daughter who was adopted by a Christian woman. On the day of the games, the three men and two women remaining were led into the amphitheater. At the demand of the crowd they were first whipped. Then a boar, a bear, and a leopard were set on the men, and a wild cow on the women. Perpetua was gored and tossed by a maddened heifer but still found the strength to encourage her brother and other catechumens watching from the arena: "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another and do not be weakened by what we have gone through." (Frend, 291). When all five were wounded, bleeding and dying they gave each other the kiss of peace and were then put to the sword. The pagans in the arena were astonished by their courage. It was this that inspired Tertullian, their exact contemporary who'd only been a Christian for 3-6 years and who may well have finished the tract himself to write that the **"blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."**

The bodies of the five were interred at Carthage. A large Basilica (Roman Church) was later built in their honor in Carthage **over the site of their tombs**, and recently, an inscription on the site bearing their names was found.

**Question: What further Medieval practice do you see here beginning to develop?** (Relics of the martyrs were revered and churches began to be built on sites where they were buried, or,

if that were not possible, they would bring the bones or pieces of clothing or objects associated with them to the churches themselves. )

2. In mid-century under the **Emperor Decius, around 249 A.D.**, a second more cruel persecution broke out. Incursions of Goths across the Danube and into the empire were more and more frequent and daring. Decius, a victorious against the Goths, turned against and defeated his commander in chief and became emperor in his stead. How to stop these Gothic invasions and wars? How to unite the empire? History began to repeat itself. He decided that there had to be a religious reason for the woes besieging the Empire, and he found it in the neglect of the pagan gods. The gods were angry. Rome had abandoned its gods, so the gods had abandoned them. If Rome was to recover its imperial glory therefore, the worship of the gods must be universally restored. The very survival of Rome itself was at stake. To neglect worship was high treason. Children were disobeying their fathers by converting. Rome's traditions were being flaunted. The gods were angry. So Decius imposed pagan worship on everyone. He took and killed the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The bishops of Carthage and Alexandria went into hiding. But he outlined a rather different policy for the ordinary bishops, elders, and church members: when Christians refused to recant, **rather than killing them** and making them **martyrs** to widespread admiration, he made it his policy to weaken and embarrass the Church by forcing Christians **under torture, to recant**. His policy was systematic and widely applied in the Empire.

The result was a major embarrassment to the Church. People were lining up to give the token sacrifice to the emperor. Crowds of pagans would gather round to mock them as they did so. (Frend, The Rise of Christianity, page 321-2). What had happened? *“Throughout the empire the church had been accepting a large number of nominal converts as well as committed individuals. Behind its monolithic exterior all was far from well. Origen writes of congregations full of chattering women who were more concerned with household affairs than worship. The gap between educated and uneducated, cleric and laity was widening. Origen describes how 'some bishops, by no means examples of high-mindedness or knowledge of the truth were despising the mites and waifs of the church who praised God and Christ, as though they were sinning.'... It is clear that the more important churches had become in the nature of administrative machines whose clergy felt themselves superior to their laity. Moreover, some were combining their clerical office with lucrative secular work, which included acting as bailiffs on imperial and private estates or as trustee for family pension funds...[And so] there were thousands who thought nothing of performing sacrifice in the temple and presenting themselves for Eucharist the next Sunday..When confronted with the choice of empire or Christian church in 250, the great majority of Christians played safe and sacrificed.”* (Frend, page 322).”

There were some notable exceptions. It was during this persecution that the scholar **Origen** suffered torture in Caesarea in Palestine, and later died from the effects. But, whereas *before this persecution*, those who kept the faith died and passed on as martyrs—since Decius' policy was to make a spectacle of Christians who denied their faith through torture, under his persecution, most did NOT die. The result was that to the public humiliation of the Church many denied Christ and were released; whereas others, tortured, were brought to the point of

death without denying Christ—and then so as not to create martyrs by their deaths, released. These latter re-joined the rest of the Living Church with the glorious name of **Confessors**. They were much admired. This was the upside. However, there was a downside too. What if you didn't make it through torture confessing the name of Jesus? What then? And what if you wanted to rejoin the church later when the persecution had died down? Should you come back with the same status as those who've resisted? What, for example, if you were a leader?

This question as we shall see, was to have a profound effect on the unity of the Church in later years. Particularly when it involved bishops. Fortunately, this persecution was brief, only about 3 years duration, and ended with the **death of Decius in 251**. But the consequences of the questions we've just raised, lived on. Notably, what to do with so many bishops and believers who hadn't achieved the high standards of some during this persecution? And of the names attached to this controversy, two in particular stand out: one was **Cyprian, the other Novatian**. We'll talk today about Cyprian.

## II. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

Cyprian was a disciple of Tertullian calling him 'The Master', and like him, was a skilled rhetorician and debater. Like Tertullian, he converted at about the age of 40. Because of his great learning, shortly after his conversion he was elected bishop of Carthage in North Africa (about 249); and shortly after that, the Decian persecution began. Cyprian felt the best thing he could do was to flee the persecution along with many of his church leaders, go into hiding, and watch over his flock from a distance through correspondence. **He was, incidentally, one of the best Christian writers of the age.** So, during the year **250-251**, he went into hiding. When he returned at the end of the persecution, he took back his post as bishop of Carthage, a post of influence for the entire North African region. His policy generally speaking was to accept back into membership those who had recanted so long as they had not sacrificed to the gods in which case they could only be absolved on their deathbeds—actually there was a whole range of possible categories, including **some who had simply purchased forged documents without really sacrificing to the gods**. They were given two years penance.

However, some, **especially those who had lived through the persecution in Carthage, were not so sure someone like Cyprian should be deciding which of the lapsed should be restored**. Even Rome, after all, had lost its bishop in the persecution. What were Cyprian and his colleagues doing deciding who should, and who should not be readmitted to the church? By what authority? Should not decisions about who should return to the Church fold be put into the hands of **the Confessors**? Those who had been tortured and yet held firm to their faith in Christ? Before Cyprian and his staff had returned to the bishopric, **these Confessors were already restoring people to the church with very little if any repentance: simply confession of their sins**. Cyprian disagreed. The authority of the church, he declared, was invested in him and the other bishops and deacons; they should be the ones to decide who would be allowed back in. Moreover, people who had lapsed should not be let off the hook so easily. So Cyprian called a Synod of bishops in north Africa in **256, called the Council of Carthage**, to address this question and re-establish authority. It was to elaborate a set of rules about who should be readmitted and who shouldn't, **what kind of penance** should be

prescribed, and what to do with these individuals who'd taken it upon themselves to restore the lapsed that the synod was called. Cyprian's concern was that the church remain united and not divided. Because, he wrote, the church is the body of Christ and will share in the victory of its Head. And, **only properly recognized and ordained bishops and elders were the Church.** **“Outside the church” he insisted, “there is no salvation.”** This didn't mean you couldn't disagree with the Church hierarchy—even he disagreed with Rome on occasion, but he believed that the unity of the church was of supreme importance, and that the actions of the Confessors who were taking it upon themselves to decide who should come into the Church and who shouldn't, threatened that unity. He wanted a synod of the church to decide who should be restored, and not a group of dissident Confessors. (Gonzales, pages 89-90). The problem of authority and who constituted the true church was one which was to remain an important one in the decades to come, in particular in north Africa. We'll see something about that when we talk about St. Augustine and his controversy with the Donatists.

But two salient questions remain with us which the Church has struggled down through the ages:

1. What constitutes a true church? Who should belong?
2. If someone lapses, in order to obtain re-admittance to the Church and communion should some kind of penance be required? If so, what?

**QUESTION: So what do you think? If people deny Christ in a context where others are dying for the faith or being tortured, should some kind of penance be required? Or should they be simply allowed to take communion like anyone else?**

Here is what the Carthaginian ecclesiastical hierarchy decided. Cyprian and his fellow bishops developed a vocabulary to describe various types of offenses along with an appropriate penance.

#### **Sacrificati**

Those who had actually offered a sacrifice to the idols. Christians that made sacrifices, especially to Roman gods, were only offered absolution on their deathbeds.

#### **Thurificati**

Those who had burnt incense on the altar before the statues of the gods. From Latin *thurificare* - "burn incense"

#### **Libellatici**

Those who had drawn up a fake attestation, or had, by bribing the authorities, caused such certificates to be drawn up for them, representing them as having offered sacrifice, without, however, having actually done so. A two year sanction was imposed as penance. From Latin *libellus* - "little book; letter; certificate"

#### **Acta facientes**

Those that made false statements or other acts to save their lives. From Latin - "those doing the acts"

#### **Traditores**

Those who gave up sacred scriptures, artifacts and/or revealed names of fellow Christians. From Latin *tradere* - "hand over; deliver; betray"

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The penitential system of the middle ages that Luther and the Reformers rejected over a thousand years later, was a direct outgrowth of this practice and these definitions. The system grew exponentially in time.

**Incidentally, Cyprian was tainted for the remaining years of his ministry by the accusations of Confessors, as having fled during the Decian persecution. And so, it was with some relief that when a new persecution was enacted by Valerian in 258, he stayed put and was arrested and killed in his own villa, dying as a martyr.**

But we're not done with Cyprian yet. He is an important theologian for the emerging Roman Catholic Church. Let's look at a few of his writings and see why.

**QUESTION: As you read these, what can you glean that may reflect upon the evolution of the doctrine of the Church?**

### III. WRITINGS OF CYPRIAN

*“If Christ Jesus our Lord and God is himself the high priest of God the Father and first offered himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and commanded this to be done in remembrance of himself, then assuredly the priest acts truly in Christ's room, when he imitates what Christ did, and he offers then a true and complete sacrifice to God the Father if he so begin to offer as he sees Christ himself has offered.” (Documents of the Church, pages 76-7).*

*“If any one consider and examine this, there is no need of lengthy treatment and argument. It can easily be proved to the mind of faith by a brief statement of the truth. The Lord says to Peter, 'I say unto thee that thou art Peter, etc.' And again after his resurrection he says to him, 'Feed my sheep.' He builds his church upon him one man; and to him he gives his sheep to be fed; and though he gives to all the Apostles an equal power and says, 'As my Father sent me, etc.', yet he has appointed the one chair and ordained by his authority the source and system of unity beginning from one man. Certainly the other Apostles were what Peter was, but primacy is given to Peter that it may be shewn that the Church is one and the chair one. And all are pastors, but one flock is indicated which is fed by all the Apostles with unanimous consent. That he might manifest the unity.” (Documents, page 72).*

*“The spouse of Christ cannot be made an adulteress; she is undefiled and chaste. She knows but one home, and guards with virtuous chastity the sanctity of one chamber. She it is who perseveres us for God, who enrolls into the Kingdom the sons she has borne. Whoso stands aloof from the Church and is joined to an adulteress is cut off from the promises given to the Church; and he that leaves the Church of Christ attains not to Christ's rewards. He is an alien, an outcast, an enemy. He cannot have God for his father who has not the Church for his mother. If any one was able to escape outside of Noah's ark, then he also escapes who is outside the doors of the Church.” (Documents, page 73).*

*“This sacrament of unity, this bond of peace inseparable and indivisible, is indicated when in the Gospel the robe of the Lord Jesus Christ was not divided at all or rent but they cast lots for*

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*the raiment of Christ, who should put on Christ for clothing, and so the raiment was received whole and the robe was taken unspoilt and undivided. Divine scripture speaks, and says, 'But as for the robe, since it was seamless from the part above, woven throughout, they said among themselves: 'Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be.' ... He that rends and divides the Church of Christ cannot possess the clothing of Christ...." (Documents, page 73).*