



# Persecution and Martyrdom in The Early Church

## *History, Motives and Theology*

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The article is an inquiry on the persecution and martyrdom experienced by the Church in the nascent years of her existence. There are three points under which the said phenomenon is investigated. The first part concerns with looking at the said experience of the Church under the lens of history. In the second, persecution is viewed from the perspective of the Romans themselves who have initiated and carried out the oppressive measures to suppress the religion of Christians. In this section the politico-religious culture of the Romans is discussed, taking as its sources the Roman writers themselves, in order to understand the way they acted toward Christians. The third and the last part, discusses the same phenomenon, taking this time the perspective of the subjects of persecution themselves, that is, the Christians. How they were able to turn this negative experience into positive, drawing from it the testimony of the love and providence of God to those willing to imitate him until the end, is shown in this chapter. The different acts and passions of the martyrs and the treatises on martyrdom composed by Christians from this period are analyzed to discover the meaning that they imputed in their suffering.

**Keywords:** *persecution, martyrdom, early Church, Romans, pax deorum, contest for Christ, imitation of Christ, participation in the passion of Christ*

### Introduction

This paper discusses the persecution and martyrdom in the early Church. The discussion consists of three parts. The first concerns with the history of persecution, the aim of which is to provide a general overview of the persecution and the suffered martyrdom of the Christians in this early period of the history of the Church. Other issues arising from the narrative are also

explored. The second section discusses the persecution from the perspective of the Romans. In particular, it aims to reveal the underlying motives that prompted the Romans to carry out oppressive policy against the Christians. The last section gives an account of the reaction of the Christians toward the persecution they were experiencing from the perspective of faith. It answers the question how the Christian community and/or the would be martyrs perceived their suffering and their impending death. Specifically, it seeks to present a coherent theology of persecution and martyrdom, drawing from the different *actae* and *passiones* of the martyrs, and treatises on martyrdom composed by leading ecclesiastical writers of that period.

### **The three stages of persecution in the early Church**

Scholars of ecclesiastical history are prevalently in agreement in identifying three distinct phases of persecution in the early Church. The first phase encompasses from the time of the apostles until the year 64, just before the great fire in Rome. The second commences with the persecution of Nero that followed the great fire, which decimated large section of the city, and terminates in the year 249. However, this established clear-cut division between the first and the second phases is challenged by Jakob Engberg, particularly on the issue of the first confrontation between Christianity and the Roman authorities, which he contends to have started not under the reign of Nero (54-69), but rather under the rule of emperor Claudius (41-54).<sup>1</sup> His objection is carefully considered and provided with a definitive answer below. The third phase covers the general persecution launched by Decius in 250, to the persecution orchestrated by Valerian, which lasted for two years, and ends with the persecution under the rule of the tetrarchs, which ended in 311 with the declaration of the edict that gave Christians religious freedom.

This article focuses more on the last two phases of persecution mentioned, without, of course, suggesting that the sufferings undergone by the apostles and the first Christians were of less interest as compared to that of the persecution suffered by the later generations of Christians. The reason for this preference is methodological. I would like to limit my discussion to the persecution initiated by the Romans. A short comment though on the first phase is in place, for the purpose of showing the historical continuity of persecution from the time of the apostles to the generations of Christians of the second, third and the beginning of the fourth centuries.

#### *1. From the time of the apostles up to the year 64 before the great fire at Rome*

As I have insinuated above, up until the year 64, there was no known persecution of Christians coming from the Romans—either a persecution instigated

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Jakob Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto: Opposition to Christianity in the Roman Empire c.50-250 AD*, Frankfurt, 2007, 81-106.

by the local Roman population, or an existent oppressive measures decreed by the imperial government that directly targeted Christians. The persecution of Christians during this period was prompted and instigated by the Jews who viewed Christianity, the new sect, as a threat to the religion of Israel. Two instances of persecution would be sufficient to mention as a demonstration of this. The first post-Jesus' passion event to be recorded in the bible that describes Jewish hostility toward Christians was the stoning of Stephen, the deacon (Ac 6:8-8:3). Paul himself, then an ardent persecutor of the followers of the crucified Savior, assisted the stoning. The second instance involves Paul, at that time he was already a convert to Christianity and numbered among the apostles, suffering the same hostility that he previously extended to converts as a Pharisee, from the hands of his former coreligionists. Specifically at Iconium, while Paul was preaching to the people, the Jews stirred and turned the crowd against him. In effect he was stoned and then hauled out of town by the people (Ac 14:1-6).<sup>2</sup>

At this particular period of history, the general attitude of the Roman imperial government vis-à-vis the religious quarrel between the Jews and the Christians was one of "impartiality or indifference."<sup>3</sup> Such norm was demonstrated for instance in what had occurred at Corinth when the Jews led Paul before the tribunal of Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, to stand trial. The Roman official simply dismissed the people away, telling them that he had no interest in their religious squabbles (Ac 18:12-16). However, such unconcerned stance was not always the case. Inasmuch as the official mandate of the provincial governors required that they put foremost at the center of their concern the preservation of peace and order of the territory under their charge, when it involved potential disruption of civil life, the Roman official expectedly would take the side of the violent persecutors so as not to agitate them further, just as what happened in the case of the condemnation of Jesus to death by Pilate.

## *2. From the great fire of Rome under Nero's reign until the year 250*

The consensus among the majority of historians identifies Nero as the first Roman emperor who had ordered the persecution of Christians. For our purpose, the exact character of the comportment of Nero towards Christians, whether or not he gave a blanket order to oppress Christianity, ought to be determined. But, before expounding on this, a clarification about the objection raised by J. Engberg, as indicated above, needs to be articulated. The said author argues that the traditional view, nominating Nero as the first Roman emperor to persecute Christianity, relies much on the testimony of Tertullian who, in his *Apology* wrote:

<sup>2</sup> For other biblical accounts of persecution of early Christians, see also, Ac 12:1-19; 13:44-50; 14:2,4-6,19-20; 17:5-9; 18:12-16; 21:27ff; 1 Th 2:14-16.

<sup>3</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom & Orthodoxy*, New York, 2006, 107.

Consult your histories, you will there find that Nero was the first who assailed with the imperial sword against the Christian sect (5).

To discredit this affirmation J. Engberg offers the following reasons. First, this document, he explains, is apologetic in nature, with the aim of demonstrating to his readers that only bad emperors persecuted Christians. Second, it also addressed indirectly the current emperor represented by the imperial magistrates of Africa in order to discourage him from embarking on another persecution, that he might not be numbered among the cruel emperors, of which Nero was the epitome, mentioned in the work. Accordingly, the opus did not aim to provide an exact historical account of the beginnings of persecution since its apologetic purpose dictates that it should include only those data that support and prove the very thesis that the writer proposed for his readers to believe. Ascribing to Nero, the mad and egoistic emperor, who won the ire of the Roman people and prompted the senate to pronounce on him *damnatio memoriae*,<sup>4</sup> the beginning of persecution would just render more credence and add persuasive force to its intended propaganda.

Instead, J. Engberg suggests that the Roman hostility against the Christians should be traced back to the reign of Nero's predecessor, Claudius.<sup>5</sup> He finds support for this in Suetonius who provided us with a testimony about the imperial edict that ordered the expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome because of the social disturbances that they were causing in the city. There is no doubt that this was an anti-Jewish edict. However, it affected the Christians as well, since the Romans did not have yet at that time a precise understanding of the difference between the two religions, or if they had already a slight idea of their respective peculiarities, at best, they viewed Christianity as a sect of, but not independently separate from, Judaism. The text of Suetonius reads:

He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.<sup>6</sup>

The cited text yields two interpretations. First, it provides a reading that the trouble in the city was caused by the instigation of a certain Chrestus. The word Chrestus, being a common name among Asiatic immigrants,<sup>7</sup> is interpreted as a local troublemaker. He was an individual who claimed to be the saviour of the Israelite people, a practice not uncommon among the Jews who had high messianic expectation, and instilled in people the idea of liberation from the sovereignty of their conquerors, that is, the Romans. However, this interpretation stands on shaky ground on account of the following counter propositions. In the first place, the practice of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Marcel le Glay *et al.*, *A History of Rome*, Massachusetts, 2006, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 235-237.

<sup>5</sup> J. Engberg, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Suetonius, *De Vita XII Caesarum: Divus Claudius*, 25,4: "Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit." My own translation.

<sup>7</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Cambridge, 1<sup>st</sup> published in 1965, corrected edition 2008, 161.

declaring oneself as the promised messiah was common among Palestinian Jews, but it was not attested to among the Jews in the *diaspora*. Another, obvious weakness of this opinion that may be pointed out is that, “if Suetonius or his source really were referring to a local unknown troublemaker,... it is odd that he would refer to him merely by the name Chrestus and not find it necessary to explain to his contemporary readers who this Chrestus was.”<sup>8</sup> It was then customary to record the identity and other relevant details not only of the plaintiff, but more especially of the person being accused of the crime.

The second interpretation of the text, which is to my judgment the more plausible explanation, understands the name Chrestus as referring to Jesus himself being proclaimed by the Jewish-Christian proselytes as messiah, which the other Jews did not receive well, thereby provoking their violent opposition. Regarding this we find a parallel story in the missionary activity of Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (Ac 17,1-9) where the Jews, consumed by resentment, because many among their countrymen were being converted to Christianity by the proclamation of Paul, enlisted a gang of troublemakers and started a riot in the city on the pretext that the Christian preachers themselves were the ones responsible for causing disorder in the city.

Suetonius did not tell us when this edict was issued. However, the date can be ascertained relying on relevant historical data from other ancient sources. Among the victims of this eviction were the Christian couple Aquila and Priscilla, whom the apostle Paul met at Corinth (Ac 18:2). As has mentioned above, Paul’s stay in the said city, which lasted for one and a half year, brought him into conflict with the local Jews who did not like his missionary activity and resulted with him being led by the people to the proconsul Gallio for trial (Ac 18:12-16). Since Gallio’s term of office is dated to 51/52, it can be wisely assumed that Paul arrived in Corinth around the year 50.<sup>9</sup> It can be conjectured from this that the edict was issued not later than 49, since, when the apostle arrived in Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla were already reputed figures in the local Christian community, which indicates that they had been with them for some time already.

However, the ancient historian Dio Cassius also made mention of an edict issued by the same emperor in the year 41. He described in this account how the emperor dealt with the problem of the social disturbances caused by the Jews:

As for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, he did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> J. Engberg, 101.

<sup>9</sup> J. Engberg, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Dio Cassius, *Historiarum Romanorum*, LX,6 cited in *ibid.*, 93.

Some scholars speculate that this edict recorded in the testimony of Dio Cassius is identical with the edict attested to by Suetonius, and propose the year 41, as provided for by the former, as its promulgation. However, as J. Engberg has shown convincingly, the contents of the two edicts were completely different. The one recorded by Suetonius spoke of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, whereas that of Dio Cassius only prohibited them to hold meetings and mentioned nothing about their expulsion.<sup>11</sup> It can be maintained then that there were two anti-Jewish edicts issued under the reign of emperor Claudius, one in the year 41 and the second in around the year 49. The second edict which expelled all the orthodox Jews from Rome because of the disturbance provoked by the confrontation between the Jews and the Jewish converts to Christianity was a development of the first decree. Since the disturbance caused by their religious differences was not solved with the prohibition to gather, Claudius resorted to the strategy of rooting them out altogether from the city for the sake of maintaining peace.<sup>12</sup>

The testimonies from these two ancient authors inform us that Claudius was prompted to issue the edict with a sole purpose in mind, that is, the preservation of peace and order in the city. Had they caused no further civil disturbances, the emperor would not have issued the edict and likely have left them on their own to sort out their religious differences. Also, it is observed that neither the two authors mentioned any systematic use of violence in the application of the edict. Such might possibly be the reason why Tertullian and all the other scholars, who rely on his testimony, do not consider Claudius as a persecutor of Christians. Moreover, given that both were anti-Jewish edicts only suggest that they did not have the Christians as the main target. The two imperial orders only included Christians *qua* they were also regarded of Jewish origins. W.H.C. Frend, in fact, referring to the edict of AD 49 makes an observation that “there is nothing in this incident to suggest that the authorities in Rome were turning against the Christians as such.”<sup>13</sup>

Let us now go back to the consideration of the case of Nero. Under Nero's reign, in the year 64, a great conflagration<sup>14</sup>, which lasted for six days and seven nights,

<sup>11</sup> J. Engberg, 94.

<sup>12</sup> This view is summarized in this quotation from J. Engberg (95): “...Claudius issued two different edicts against the Jews in Rome during the years 41 to 49. In the year 41, Claudius was worried about the number of Jews and the potential for civil unrest, and because of this chose to forbid public gatherings and to encourage the Jews to keep the peace. The second edict, from the year 49, had the intention, according to Suetonius, of putting a stop to (continual) unrest amongst the Jews of Rome by expelling them.; W.H.C. Frend is also in agreement with this view that there are two separate edicts the first one “enforcing regulations against unlicensed *collegia*, in the second proceeding to a more general measure of expulsion following riots.”, 160.

<sup>13</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny the Elder (26-79), an author who lived that period, makes mention about the fire in passing in his *Natural History*, XVII, 1 recalling that in his childhood he remembers of the great trees on a Roman estate which were famous for their longevity that lasted down to Emperor's Nero's conflagration: “I have already made mention of the remarkable longevity of trees, I would here add, that they were in existence down to the period when the Emperor Nero set fire to the City, one hundred and eighty years after the time of Crassus; being still green and with all the freshness of youth

broke out in the city of Rome. It was believed that the emperor himself, who wanted to reconstruct the city and give it a new look, orchestrated the destructive fire.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, the intent of Nero was not unknown to the people. When the people started to suspect him, the cunning emperor knew that he needed an escape goat upon whom he could impute the crime in order to divert away from himself the ire of the suspecting populace, who were then demanding that the perpetrator of the fire be punished. Thus he blamed the crime to the Christians and started their persecution in order to satisfy the enraged population.<sup>16</sup>

Tacitus, writing some fifty years after the incident, provided a vivid description of how Nero made a spectacle of the brutal persecution of Christians:

Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.<sup>17</sup>

The same author did not believe that the Christians were responsible for the fire, although he held the sentiment that the Christians, being superstitious and haters of humanity, deserved to be denied existence. He resented only the fact that the persecution of Christians had been carried out for the wrong purpose for as it dawned on him:

It was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

Basing from Tertullian's evaluation of the infamous fire of 64, there has been a penetrating scholarly conversation among students of ancient history on the issue of whether or not Nero had declared Christianity illegal.<sup>19</sup> The point of contention being the right interpretation of the expression *institutum Neronianum*. The text in which it is found is quoted below:

*Et tamen permansit erasis omnibus hoc solum institutum Neronianum iustum denique ut dissimile sui auctoris.*<sup>20</sup>

upon them, had not that prince thought fit to hasten the death of the very trees even." While Suetonius (69-140) in his *Life of Nero*, 38 emphatically puts the blame of the fire that burned for six days and seven nights and brought down to ashes 10 of the fourteen quarters of Rome.

<sup>15</sup> Suetonius, *The Life of Nero*, 38,2: "For under cover of displeasure at the ugliness of the old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, he set fire to the city so openly that several ex-consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught them on their estates with tow and fire-brands, while some granaries near the Golden House, whose room he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone."

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* XV,44: "Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace."

<sup>17</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* XV,44.

<sup>18</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XV,44.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, I,7,14.

<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, I,7,9.

There are those who see in this an imperial edict proscribing Christianity, which, accordingly, became the legal basis for the persecution of Christians in the generations that followed.<sup>21</sup> However, its reading as a general edict is untenable for the following reasons. First, Nero's persecution was confined only in the city of Rome. There were no other documented incidents of Christians being subjected to the same brutal treatment outside the imperial capital that would substantiate the proposed thesis. Secondly, semantic analysis discloses that the word *institutum* is not a legal term. In antiquity it was not typical to employ such word in framing laws. In fact, the *Vocabulario della Lingua Latina* provides several senses for the word *institutum* (such as plan, design, way of doing, teaching, principle, etc.) except the meaning relating to any promulgated law or a decree. Thirdly, if one would maintain the reading of *Neronianum* as a qualifier modifying *institutum* and accord it the meaning of 'a legal decree promulgated by Nero', one will have difficulty taking account of the appositive adjective *iustum* in the following clause, as it would yield a sense that such was a just decree, which Tertullian clearly would not have taught.

The better way of reading the above quoted text, in particular the expression under scrutiny, is to dissociate *institutum* from *Neronianum*, with the latter understood as having the function of an adverb the import of which is to localize all the referred occurrences 'under Nero's reign'. It is for this reason that I am resolved to accepting the rendering of this important quotation found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers series as an accurate translation, which goes:

Now although every other institution which existed under Nero has been destroyed, yet this of ours firmly remained, righteous, it would seem, as being unlike the author of its persecution.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, the phrase *institutum Neronianum* then, as expressed in the work of Tertullian, consists of no general law, whose applicability extended throughout the empire, and validity, binding for the succeeding generations unless revoked and officially changed by an equal imperial authority.

Similarly, the letter sent by Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus and Bithynia, to Trajan in 112, consulting the emperor how he should go about with those Christians accused and brought before his tribunal, implied an absence of imperial edict that proscribed Christianity. The letter reads:

It is my invariable rule, Sir, to refer to you in all matters where I feel doubtful; for who is more capable of removing my scruples, or informing

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<sup>21</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 165.

<sup>22</sup> ANF III, 115.



my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, therefore, any difference is usually made with respect to ages, or no distinction is to be observed between the young and the adult; whether repentance entitles them to a pardon, or, if a man has been once a Christian, it avails nothing to desist from his error; whether the very profession of Christianity, unattended with any criminal act, or only the crimes themselves inherent in the profession are punishable; on all these points I am in great doubt.<sup>23</sup>

The doubt expressed by Pliny in his letter specifies that he knew of no existing general law against Christians. Had there been a policy that outlined the treatment of Christians, Pliny would not have had the need to consult the emperor. He would have simply consulted the existing law, and then proceeded competently, following the prescribed legal measures without the need of consulting the emperor.<sup>24</sup> Such was, furthermore, confirmed in Trajan's response to the said governor. In the rescript, the emperor did not refer to any known imperial edict, which would be unlikely if there was one that existed, but, instead, acknowledged that there was no fixed norm that governed the prosecution of Christians, while at the same time commended and approved of the course of action already being pursued by the governor:

You have adopted the right course, my dearest Secundus, in investigating the charges against the Christians who were brought before you. It is not possible to lay down any general rule for all such cases. Do not go out of your way to look for them. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that where the party denies he is a Christian, and shall make it evident that he is not, by invoking our gods, let him (notwithstanding any former suspicion)

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<sup>23</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, IX, 4, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Those who argue in favor of the existence of an imperial edict also find support in the same letter of Pliny. They base their argument from the fact that prior to asking the counsel of the emperor, the governor had already executed a number of Christians (X,4,9,7). Such action, they contend, points to the fact that there was an existing law to which he based his order. These scholars, represented by Keresztes (*Imperial Rome and the Christians*, 1989, vol.1, 107-109), distinguish three categories of those accused discernible, accordingly, in the letter, namely, those Christians who confessed and persisted being Christians, those who were wrongly accused of being Christians and proved their non allegiance to Christianity by offering sacrifice, and those who admitted to being Christians once but have repented and proved it by offering sacrifice (Cf. J. Engberg, 177). Accordingly, the doubt expressed by Pliny concerns only the third group, that is, those who repented, or in the eyes of the Christians the apostates, because he would want them to be spared from the capital punishment. But, as is evident in the text, Pliny's doubt is not only limited to the repentant, but it concerns the whole undertaking. He was in doubt whether the young Christians should be treated in the same manner as the adult, whether Christians should be punished by merely being such even if he committed no crime, or whether only those offences associated with name should be punished. The execution of a number of Christians which he ordered prior to his writing the letter could be explained by the prerogative of the governor to take any measure necessary to preserving the general condition of peace in the province and does not indicate the existence of an edict against Christians.

be pardoned upon his repentance. Anonymous informations ought not to be received in any sort of prosecution. It is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and is quite foreign to the spirit of our age.<sup>25</sup>

One important point that needs to be stressed in this response of Trajan is that it confirms that one could be judged and condemned by merely being a Christian. It was the earliest existing imperial document that defined the name Christian as a crime, punishable by death. With this in mind, Christian apologists occupied themselves refuting this unjustified equation between the name and the penalty of death, arguing, on the contrary, that only the wrong deeds and not the mere ascription of the name merit penalty.<sup>26</sup> Prudent emperor as he was, Trajan did not encourage that Christians should be tracked down, for this would lead only to further chaos. The Christians, he counseled the governor, should be tried only if there were *delatores* or plaintiffs. It means that no anonymous denunciation should be entertained. This was not a measure formulated to favor the welfare of Christians, as it was a precaution to safeguard the rights of the citizens who run the risk of being maliciously accused. Apparently, the emperor was cognizant of the fact that some individuals were taking advantage of the issue of Christianity to promote their own selfish motives. Hence, some parameters needed to be dispensed to countercheck the malicious intent of others. Pliny was also aware of this so that he employed the test-sacrifice to ascertain that the denounced persons were indeed Christians, knowing that the true ones would never offer sacrifice to the gods and curse the name of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

It could hardly be presumed that the rescript of Trajan became likewise normative in the empire's dealing with Christianity in the years that followed. The document that records the martyrdom of Polycarp (155/160) discloses that the measures specified by Trajan were not observed. In particular, the elderly bishop of Smyrna was sought out and tried without a plaintiff.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the martyrs of Lyons (177) were hunted down to be thrown to the beasts, to make a spectacle out of them for the people to watch. The reason why Trajan's rescript, despite it being included in the volume of the published letters of Pliny, did not become a norm, one could only conjecture. There is always the possibility that not all imperial officials had an access to it, and therefore had no knowledge about its provisions. Or, assuming that these officials did know of the rescript, they did not think that they were bound to follow its stipulated guidelines.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, IX, 4, 98.

<sup>26</sup> See for example: Justin, *I Apology*, 4; Athenagoras, *A plea regarding Christians*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, IX, 4, 97.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> J. Engberg, p.253.

There is yet another opinion that argues in favor of Marcus Aurelius as the first who ordered the general persecution of Christians. But, this, too, could hardly be sustained. The account of the martyrs of Lyons is often used to give credence to this view.<sup>30</sup> However, the said document provides no explicit testimony that could point to the emperor himself prompting the persecution. What was plainly obvious in the text was that it was the local population who, on their own initiative, instigated that the followers of Jesus should be persecuted. The provincial official only became increasingly involved in it. As any zealous civil official, who wanted that peace and order be preserved in his territory of jurisdiction, by any means necessary, the governor opted to pacify the becoming turbulent population by adhering to the popular clamor that Christians be sought out and condemned to death.

In addition to this, towards the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius in 180, twelve Christians from Scillii, a town in Numidia, in the province of North Africa, were tried and executed at Carthage before the proconsul Saturninus. This document also reveals that the martyrs were brought into trial not on account of a general persecution, but because the local people denounced them for allegedly having committed some acts contrary to the law. This assertion can be deduced from the words of Speratus, the spokesperson of the martyrs:

I did not rob anyone and I pay my dues because I acknowledge my Lord, the king of kings, the emperor of all nations.<sup>31</sup>

Speratus here, just like the apologists, was trying to convince the proconsul that Christians were no transgressors of the law, contrary to what their accusers supposed them to be. Rather they were conscientious in fulfilling their civic duties because their Christian belief required them to respect the civil authorities except when it prescribed functions that run into conflict with the essentials of their faith in the one true God whom they worshipped above all things.

Still another proof text that can be employed to refute the view of a general and active persecution under the reign of Marcus Aurelius is recorded in the *True Discourses* of Celsus<sup>32</sup>, whose date of composition is traced back to the time in power of the said emperor. The pagan writer made use of the martyrdom narratives in order to demonstrate the powerlessness of the God of the Christians. The fact that the Christian God, he argued, could not rescue and protect his followers from the violent oppression and persecution just proves the powerlessness, if not the falsity, of this

<sup>30</sup> Cf. M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, London, 1988, 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Acta Martyrum Scilitanorum*, 6. My own translation.

<sup>32</sup> The work of Celsus came to us through Origen, who lifted the long sections of the text into his work *Contra Celsum* in order to argue against it point by point.

deity that the Christians worship. What is of our interest here is that while Celsus acknowledged that in his lifetime Christians were being persecuted, he made no mention that such was carried out under the order of the emperor. On the contrary, he expressed hope for that day when the emperor would recognize how dangerous Christianity was and would order that Christians be exterminated.<sup>33</sup>

Under the reign of the Severi, small-scale persecution took place and, as in previous years, it was carried out under the jurisdiction of the provincial authorities. The most celebrated account of martyrdom from this period was that of Perpetua and Felicity (202/203), who, together with their companion martyrs, were thrown into the arena to battle the beasts as part of the celebration of the birthday of emperor Gaeta.<sup>34</sup> That other Christians could visit and attend to the needs of their brothers and sisters in prison awaiting for trial and judgment without being apprehended by the authorities is but an indication of the absence of a general proscription of Christians. Such scenario was possible because here the policy enforced that governed the arrest of Christians was the one corresponding to the provision outlined by Trajan, that is, no trial without an accuser, someone willing to be personally present in the trial to provide testimony against the person he was accusing and also willing to take the risk of being punished once proven that his accusation bears no merit.<sup>35</sup>

Until this juncture of the history of the Church it is still premature to speak of a general persecution initiated by the supreme imperial authority. So far the textual evidences that we have reviewed reveal that the persecution of Christians was often instigated by the local population and that the attitude of “the imperial rule was characterized more by the emperor reacting, adapting to local and regional conditions, developments and queries in an *ad hoc* fashion rather in asserting a centrally initiated uniform policy throughout the empire.”<sup>36</sup> There was no edict yet that prescribed any uniform policy to be followed throughout the empire as regards the treatment of Christianity. However, while some provincial governors did not encourage the active seeking out of Christians others were personally involved in vigorously hunting down Christians. Such differences in the approach of governors in dealing with the Christian problem can be explained by the autonomy enjoyed by the provincial officials to intercede at their own discretion, as they saw fit and necessary, to resolve encountered social problems in the province of their jurisdiction. Nevertheless, although the provincial governor was enjoying autonomy in administrative affairs, it did not prevent them from seeking imperial advice on matters when they found themselves in doubt, just as Pliny did to Trajan.<sup>37</sup> At this time, the imperial authority’s

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. Engberg, 287.

<sup>34</sup> *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, 16,3.

<sup>35</sup> This is provided for in the rescript of Hadrian to Minucius Fundanus.

<sup>36</sup> J. Engberg, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *I Apology*, 68.

policy was reactive, rather than proactive. It does not mean though that it regarded the issue of Christianity lightly. The fact that the respective emperors committed themselves to respond to the queries of their governors concerning the treatment of Christians just showed their interest in the matter.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. *From the reign of Decius until 312*

From 250 onwards the persecution of Christians did no longer originate from the people, as it has become part of the imperial policy. Decius ordered the first systematic persecution of Christians. When he ascended to the throne in 249, he promoted the policy of reviving the traditional values, which made the Rome of old glorious. Fundamental to his administrative program was upholding the religion of the state, which involved the sacrifice to the gods, which were believed to be the protectors of the empire. In January of 250, he issued a universal order compelling all citizens to sacrifice. "The requirement was for all free inhabitants of the empire, men, women and children, to sacrifice to the gods of the empire, pour libation, and taste sacrificial meat."<sup>39</sup> The coercion of all people to practice the state religion was made possible by virtue of the *constitutio antoniana* issued by Caracalla in 212 that automatically made all people inhabiting the empire Roman citizens. As Roman citizens they could be required to offer sacrifice to the gods and pray for the well being of the emperor, whose genius the Christians believed to be a demon.<sup>40</sup> "Under the edict of Decius a particular day was appointed, whether for the whole empire or separately in each province, by which everyone had to sacrifice and obtain a certificate that he had done so".<sup>41</sup>

The course of action applied to the lay members of the Church differed from the one applied to the presbyters, particularly the bishops. While it only intended to punish the laity, sanctioning their torture to coerce them to recant and pour libation in honor of the genius of the emperor, there was a standing order to execute the bishops. Decius' strategy was to leave the Christian community leaderless and hoped that it would scatter and eventually desist to exist without a bishop to oversee the affairs of the Church. Among the high profile clergymen who fell victim in this persecution was Pope Fabian, the bishop of Rome, who was martyred on January 20, 250.

On the other hand, Cyprian, having thought thoroughly that it would expose others to the danger of persecution if he would stay in his episcopal see, and that it would do more harm to the Church if she would be deprived of the leadership of a

<sup>38</sup> J. Engberg, 53.

<sup>39</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 407.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Osborn, *The emergence of Christian theology*, Cambridge, 1993, 13.

<sup>41</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 60.

bishop to administer her affairs, was forced to leave Carthage and retired into a safe hiding place to avoid being caught. For doing so he had to defend himself from the charge of cowardice and abandonment of his flock launched by his enemies. In his letter to the Roman clergy, he explained himself that it was not his own safety that was foremost in his mind when he withdrew to a safe place, but rather the preservation of the public peace enjoyed by the brethren. Since the crowd were violently seeking for him, he thought that it would be prudent to go away so as not to provoke further the tumult which had began, while at the same time he gave the Roman clergy assurances that he was faithfully exercising his pastoral functions *in abstentia*.<sup>42</sup>

The Decian persecution lasted for more than a year. It ended with the demise of Decius, who was defeated and killed in the marshes of Abrittus in the Dobrudja in June 251 against the gothic king Kniva.<sup>43</sup> Although the persecution was short-lived, it shook the Church, which prior to it was enjoying a relatively peaceful and prosperous years. Cyprian of Carthage mentioned three classifications of Christians that resulted from the persecution of Decius. There were the *lapsi*, those who sacrificed to the gods or procured false certificates which attested that they had done so, then there were the brave confessors of the faith, a few of whom were martyred, and lastly there were the *stantes*, those who were not arrested and called upon to make a public profession of faith, but would have been most willing, had they been apprehended, to suffer the punishment than to betray the one true God.<sup>44</sup> The bishop of Carthage called those who belong to this last group as potential confessors.

As indicated above, Cyprian himself retired to a safe place to avoid being caught, and so the three distinctions presented and the positive evaluation of the third group might be his own way of accommodating and justifying his own action. But of course, the saint went into hiding, as he opined, in order not to disturb the peace of the brethren and avoid unnecessary lose of lives knowing that if he be caught by the imperial police others would most likely volunteer themselves to follow their bishop in death, a scenario which he did not want to happen. Indeed this was what took place in September 14, 258, under the persecution of Valerian, when, after having discerned that it was the will of God that this time he was to die a martyr, Cyprian willingly subjected himself to the imperial authority to be condemned as a witness to the Christian faith. The Christians who were among the audience upon hearing the condemnation of their bishop volunteered themselves to be beheaded with him.<sup>45</sup>

After a short respite for the Christians, another persecution was conducted in 257 by Valerian, who, just like Decius, wanted to make as the foundation of his

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<sup>42</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle*, X,1.

<sup>43</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 412.

<sup>44</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *On the lapsed*, 2-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Acta Cypriani*, 4,1.

administration the ancient virtues of the old Rome, for, with such values observed, he hoped that it would result in the revival of the old glory of Roman empire. Christianity again was seen as incompatible to the values upheld by the state and an enemy to the gods of the religion of Rome,<sup>46</sup> thus it needed to be eradicated. The policy of repression of Christianity conducted by Valerian followed a two-phase scheme. The edict was directed first to the clergy ordering them to be sought and punished severely. Similarly the intention was to leave the Church without a leader who would administer to the community. The imperial officials were expecting that without a shepherd, the flock would disperse and abandon their faith. In addition to Cyprian, the other bishops who suffered martyrdom in this persecution were Bishop Theogenes of Hippo—it was Augustine who informed us about his execution on January 26, 259—and bishops Agapius and Secundus who were both executed on April 30 of the same year.<sup>47</sup>

The second edict, which, accordingly, was harsher than the first, and extended the persecution to the laity, was issued in the summer of 258. Cyprian gave a description of the repressive measures contained in this second edict:

[B]ishops and presbyters and deacons should immediately be punished; but that senators, and men of importance, and Roman knights, should lose their dignity, and moreover be deprived of their property; and if, when their means were taken away, they should persist in being Christians, then they should also lose their heads; but that matrons should be deprived of their property, and sent into banishment. Moreover, people of Caesar's household, whoever of them had either confessed before, or should now confess, should have their property confiscated, and should be sent in chains by assignment to Caesar's estates.<sup>48</sup>

Combined with the demand to acknowledge the saving deities of Rome, Valerian was also prompted by the motive of confiscating the material wealth of the Church<sup>49</sup> and the property of the Christians. The imperial treasury was drained and it needed money to provide for the needs of the citizens and more importantly to finance the war that it was fighting. The Church, having flourished materially in the previous years, and the Christians, who among their ranks already included some of the nobility, could just be the answer to alleviate the difficult economic situation the empire was facing. The imperial officials then were instructed to actively enforce the edict, seeking out Christians and claiming their property for the state. Fortunately for the Church, in the campaign against the Persians, Valerian was defeated and captured

<sup>46</sup> This view is for example expressed in the judgment of Galerius Maximus, the proconsul of Africa, which condemned Cyprian to death: "You have long lived sacrilegiously... and set yourself up as an enemy of the Roman gods and of their religious rites," *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 427.

<sup>48</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle*, LXXX.I, 1.

<sup>49</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 422.

in 260. His son and successor, Gallienus, did not pursue the hostile policy of his father against Christianity, instead he favored the Church, allowing them to freely gather for worship, and returned its property.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the so-called the 'Great Persecution', which lasted from the year 303 to 311, took place under the rule of the tetrarchs. The tetrarchs were deeply religious leaders. They did not wish to establish their rule merely by military might, but went on to entrust their administration to the gods and protectors of the Roman Empire. Thus Diocletian (284-305) adopted as his heavenly father Jupiter, the supreme deity of the cosmic order, while Maximian (285-305), on his part, adopted Hercules as heavenly father and protector, with the former taking the cognomen *Jovius* and the latter *Herculius* to indicate their relationship with the heavenly deities. The two Caesars, namely, Galerius (293-311) became the adopted grandson of Jupiter, and Constantius, of Hercules.<sup>51</sup> It was their belief that the ancestral virtues of Rome were in conformity with the will of their paternal deities, and that pleasing them with ritual sacrifices would move the deities to grant favors to the empire. Hence, the tetrarchs ordered that Christianity, perceived as damaging to the state religion, should be repressed.

There were, at least, four edicts issued under the reign of the tetrarchs to suppress Christianity. The first edict, believed to have been issued on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 303, decreed that all churches must be destroyed, the Scriptures and liturgical books surrendered to be burnt, liturgical plates and other ecclesiastical properties confiscated, and gatherings of Christians for the purpose of worship prohibited. A couple of months after, the second edict, which ordered the arrest of the clergy, was issued. It yielded many arrests, causing prison cells to crowd with Christians. Thus, in November, still of the same year, during the celebration of the *vicennalia* of Diocletian, the government granted amnesty to incarcerated Christians on the condition that they performed sacrifice to the gods. While some Christians freely accepted the amnesty, others were literally coerced by employing torture to make them offer sacrifice, since only in this way that they could empty the prison cells of Christians. The fourth edict was issued in January or February of 304 and its decree commanded all inhabitants of the empire to sacrifice to the gods on the pain of death.<sup>52</sup>

Scholars take notice of the decisions of the different ecclesiastical councils that dealt with the aftermath of the persecution concerning what consisted apostasy and from these make deductions as regards the diverse applications of the four edicts

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<sup>50</sup> Gallienus rescript to the bishops in Egypt cited in Frend, p.429.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, London, 2004, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 35-38.



throughout the empire. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, for example, observes that “in the East, the characteristic form of apostasy is always conceived as *sacrificatio* or *turificatio*; [and that] there seems to be no evidence at all that *traditio* was regarded as religious offence.”<sup>53</sup> He arrives at this conclusion after noting that neither Peter of Alexandria mentioned the sin of *traditio* in his canons nor the Church council that met at Ancyra in 314, which dealt with providing proper disciplinary measures to those who had lapsed in the recently experienced persecution. Moreover, the *passio* of Philip, bishop of Thracian Heraclea, recounts that the bishop himself agreed to turn over to the authorities Church plates, but he refused to turn over the Scriptures. On the other hand, in the tradition of the West the turning over of vessels used in the Church was considered a form of *traditio*. This is evident in the canons of the council of Arles (314) which specified three forms of *traditio*, namely, the handing over of the holy Scriptures to be burnt, the surrender of the Lord’s vessels (*vasa dominica*), and the giving away of the names of the members of the Christian community. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that this same ecclesiastical council that has anathematized every form of *traditio* gave no account about the sin of *turificatio*.

This virtual absence of any reference to *turificatio* in the canons of the council of bishops that convened at Arles after the persecution prompted some scholars to propose a view that in the West the fourth edict was not enforced at all. However, such assertion would neglect the data in the other parts of the Western empire. It is rather more accurate to say that the experience of persecution in one province might have been different from another, given that the execution of the edict was not as systematic as the one carried out by Decius.<sup>54</sup> There was no assigned particular day for example when all inhabitants should be asked to offer sacrifice. Neither there were certificates issued that would ascertain that such and such person has already fulfilled his religious duty.<sup>55</sup> The enforcement of the edict depended much on how vigorous the particular emperor was in enforcing the imperial policy concerning Christianity. Constantius, for example, who ruled at Trier and its neighboring regions was not as ardent as his co-emperors in the imperial college in persecuting Christians given the fact that his former wife, Elena, the mother of the future emperor Constantine the Great, was a Christian.

That there is a virtual absence in the canons of council of Arles (314) reference to the *dies turificationis* may be explained by conjecturing that perhaps it was just not part of their experience. But, certainly in Africa the fourth edict was enforced. It can be supported by the account of martyrdom of many lay Christians during this period,

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>55</sup> This can be drawn from the fact that no ecclesiastics or a Church council made reference about the sin of *libellatici*, which was a hot issue during the persecution of Decius.

example of which were the thirty-four martyrs recorded at Haidra,<sup>56</sup> who chose to be put to death rather than deny the Christian God. The persecution in this part of the empire did not only target the leadership of the Church—the object of the second edict,—but also lay members were forced to offer sacrifice under the pain of death, as prescribed by the fourth edict. Another important testimony to this fact is Saint Crispina, who was executed at Theveste in Africa in the year 304 before the tribunal of the proconsul Annulinus. She was a lay matron and was condemned to death for refusing to sacrifice.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the proconsul in his attempt to persuade her to return to the Roman custom said that all Africa had already sacrificed.<sup>58</sup> The proconsul might have been exaggerating by claiming that the entire province had already lapsed, but such exaggeration nonetheless shows that the demand of sacrifice, which the fourth edict prescribed, was enforced in Africa.

The policy of persecution in the Western part of the empire mellowed down in 305 with the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian, but it continued in the East and with renewed enthusiasm under Maximin (305-313). In the summer of 306 Maximin issued an edict “calling on everyone regardless of age and sex to sacrifice at the temples under the supervision of the magistrates.”<sup>59</sup> Among his victims was Pamphilus, the leading Christian scholar in Palestine, the pupil and defender of Origen, executed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 310.

The persecution officially came to an end with the edict drafted by Galerius on his deathbed and issued under the names of Galerius, Constantine, Licinius and Maximin, which granted Christianity the right to exist as long as they conformed their lives with the laws of the State. The summary of the edict reads:

[C]onsidering our most gentle clemency and our immemorial custom by which we are wont to grant indulgence to all men, we have thought it right in their case too to extend the speediest indulgence to the effect that they may once more be free to live as Christians and may reform their churches always provided that they do nothing contrary to the public order... Wherefore in accordance with this our indulgence they will be bound to entreat their god for our well-being and for that of the State and for their own so that on every side the State may be preserved unharmed and that they themselves may live in their own security.<sup>60</sup>

At this time, the emperors have realized that their policy concerning Christians did not at all meet its desired effect. It did not result the abandonment of Christianity and the return of Christians to the old Roman custom. On the contrary,

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<sup>56</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 503.

<sup>57</sup> *The act of martyrdom of St. Crispina*, 1,3.

<sup>58</sup> *The act of martyrdom of St. Crispina*, 1,7.

<sup>59</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 507.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 510.

it even increased their number as more and more were converted seeing the verity of the faith in Jesus, demonstrated by the fearlessness of the martyrs to face death if only to remain faithful to Christ. Hence, the imperial government then changed their strategy in dealing with the phenomenon of Christianity from cruel oppression to tolerance, provided that Christians would do nothing contrary to the public order, while at the same time asking them to pray to their God for the welfare of the emperors and for the preservation of the state.

### **Motives of Persecution**

In mapping out the history of persecution, I have alluded to some motives why Christians were subjected to such torment. In this section I would like to make a more precise presentation of the reasons that prompted the hostility of the Romans toward Christianity. However, before proceeding, it is necessary to be clear about the distinction between popular hostility carried out by the local population against the Christians and the official persecution. With official persecution, I mean the persecution conducted either by the provincial government, or the central government itself with the emperor issuing a decree. Generally, from the time after Nero until the year 249 it was the local populace that initiated the persecution that the Church suffered. Such can be described as taking place in the ascending manner, the general public being responsible for instigating it and the provincial government, as it reacted to the situation, became gradually involved in the affair. On the other hand, the persecution from 250 onwards until the declaration of the edict of toleration in the year 311 was a product of the imperial policy designed and commanded by the emperors themselves. Bearing this distinction in mind, we can now proceed identifying the motives underlining the persecution of Christians following as always the historical divisions made above.

#### *1. Motives of persecution from the reign of Nero to 250*

Among the popular charges against Christians were their alleged immoral practices. Athenagoras enumerates at least two of these immoral acts that Christians have been charged of practicing, namely, incest<sup>61</sup> and cannibalism<sup>62</sup>. The charge of incestuous relationship might be explained by the fact that it was not unknown to the pagans that Christians addressed themselves as brothers and sisters—the pagans confused this spiritual relationship with blood relations—and in addition to that Christians often held exclusive gatherings among themselves. The only analogue the ill-informed mind of the Romans could think of to the secret meetings of Christians was the secret rites of the *Bacchanalia*, the religious rites practiced by the followers of

<sup>61</sup> Athenagoras, *A plea regarding Christians*, 32-34.

<sup>62</sup> Athenagoras, *A plea regarding Christians*, 35.

the Greek god Dionysius, which involved sexual intercourse, as they knew very well. The charge of cannibalism was connected with the charge of infanticide. The Romans conceived of this idea from the celebration of the partaking of the Eucharist, which came to their knowledge in an obscure way. They thought that the bread, which the Christians believed as the real body of Christ, were flesh taken from an infant killed and sacrificed to the Christian God. Obviously, these charges were product of ignorance about Christianity and its rites, which explains why beside refuting these false accusations, the apologists also strived to educate their pagan readers about their religion by explaining the Christian faith and illuminating them of the liturgical rites celebrated.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, the prospect of economic gain likewise has encouraged the locals to turn Christians over to the government. The Roman law stipulated that the accuser would receive a portion of the property of convicted Christians. Furthermore, as the number of Christians increased, the pagan temples consequently were no longer frequented. This affected the income of those people whose source of livelihood directly depended on pagan ritual sacrifice: butchers, sellers of meat for sacrifice, animal growers, priests and other workers of the temple. Arnobius of Sicca, writing in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, mentioned in *Adversus Nationes* that the priests of the pagan religion invented the alleged immoral and other criminal acts ascribed to Christians, as they were enraged because the abandonment of the pagan sacrifice by the people reduced their revenues.<sup>64</sup> It would not be unlikely for these people to join, if not initiate, the cause of those who would want the Christians tried, in order to force them to return to the old religion, as this would mean the revival of the pagan ritual sacrifice, and consequently the resurgence of business and resumption of jobs.

In addition to this, some people accused Christians to the governor for the simple reason of wanting to get back on a particular Christian, whom one despised. We recall here Crescens, the accuser of Justin and his students. The martyr himself wrote that he expected Crescens to give him away to the authorities because he had been keeping a grudge against him, as Justin often defeated him in public debate. On top of it all, he was offended grievously by the comment made by the Christian philosopher that the pagan was unworthy of the name philosopher.<sup>65</sup> Eusebius confirmed that indeed it was Crescens who gave away Justin and his students.<sup>66</sup>

On the part of the provincial governors, there are two reasons for their involvement in the persecution of Christians during this period that can be

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<sup>63</sup> Justin Martyr, for example in his *I Apology*, 62-67 explains Christian worship.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Notre Dame, 1983, vol.2, 384.

<sup>65</sup> Justin Martyr, *II Apology*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV,17.

mentioned. First, political motive might have provoked some officials to repress Christianity. Regarding this, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix has this comment:

Christians might also be suspect, as *mali homines*, in the eyes of some governors, because they worshipped a man who had admittedly been crucified by a governor of Judea, as political criminal, who thought himself as 'king of the Jews'. Their loyalty to the state, whatever they might say, could well appear doubtful, if only because they refused even to swear to an oath by the emperor's genius.<sup>67</sup>

This suspicion is further aggravated by the fact that Christians gather in secret for their liturgical celebration, which to the ancient mind, habituated to the public sphere, might just be an indication of anti-social behavior. Indeed, one accusation brought against Christian, as we have learned from Tacitus, was that Christians were haters of humanity and thus deserved extreme and exemplary punishments.<sup>68</sup> Getting rid of Christians who, they believed, threatened the ordered civil life, might just be necessary if the province was to be kept free from further agitation of people and other forms of civil disturbances. Disturbances that they blamed to Christians, which in reality was caused by the local people who were so eager to see the followers of Christ punished.

The correspondence between Pliny the younger and the emperor Trajan confirmed that the normal charge against Christians was simply 'being a Christian'. The governor of Pontus and Bithynia related in his letter of 112 that when he executed some Christians the only question that he had asked them was that whether they admit to being Christians.<sup>69</sup> In fact, in all the acts of martyrdom, the interrogation of the imperial official only revolved around the question whether the martyr admits to being a Christian. Precisely for this reason, Christian apologists—we have in mind Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Origen and Tertullian—dedicated themselves to demonstrating that it is not the name, but rather the acts committed that consisted a crime. They appealed that Christians should be tried not on account of the name, but by examining closely their mode of life, which they argued, the authorities would discover to be religiously disposed toward peace and the performance of their social duties, as the Christian God likewise prescribed the preservation of the civil order. Suffice it to say, during this period, the charge of merely being a Christian merited a severe punishment, which led to the death of some.

It must be specified that the motives outlined above—imagined atrocities committed by Christians, economic reason, personal hatred—which the people employed to bring Christians to trial did not necessarily produce the sentence of

<sup>67</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 122.

<sup>68</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, IX, 97.

capital punishment from the provincial governors. (The distinction made between the popular hostility and the official persecution is helpful to recall here.) For the provincial officials the one accusation that merited conviction and punishment was the charge of atheism, or simply put, the charge of being Christians. The strongest argument to this favor is the fact that in every *acta* or *passio* of martyrdom the Christians were convicted and put to death for admitting that they were Christians and for refusing to sacrifice to the gods of Rome. Christians were considered as ungodly, or the enemy of the gods of the state, the deities that protected and granted favors to the city. These gods, duly given worship, intimated benevolent care to the empire, but when offended, brought to the empire disaster and suffering. In other words, for the provincial governors the issue of Christianity was a case of religion and not of politics, the perspective that the Christians apologists adopted in their writings.

The provincial governors did not take seriously the charge of immorality because they knew of it as unfounded. Pliny punished the Christians not because they were believed to have been practicing debaucheries—in fact he discovered that these alleged immoralities were untrue<sup>70</sup>—, but because of their superstition which he qualified as contagious.<sup>71</sup> About seventy years after, Saturninus, the governor of Africa, did not pay much interest in the declaration of the martyrs from Scillii of having committed no acts contrary to the law, instead he proceeded with the condemnation because they persevered in their ungodliness,<sup>72</sup> that is, they refused to honor the gods of the empire represented in the genius of the emperor.

As the number of Christians increased, with pagan families having among their members Christian converts, the secret character of Christians was no longer an issue. Their rites were not anymore unknown to the general population. The new situation allowed the pagans to learn much about Christians and their rites. Consequently they were known of not engaging in any immoral activities. It explains why the charge of immorality slowly disappeared in the third century. Likewise, the political factor for persecuting Christians eventually showed no basis, for it became clear that Christians had no political agenda, as the Christians themselves declared that they were faithful in fulfilling their social duties as long as it did not compromise their faith.<sup>73</sup> Tertullian insisted on this in his appeal to Scapula, the proconsul of Carthage in 217:

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, IX,4,97.

<sup>71</sup> Pliny the Younger, IX,4,97; see also, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,33.

<sup>72</sup> *Acta Martyrum Scilitanorum*, 2-3.

<sup>73</sup> We find this point for example in the defense of Polycarp to the proconsul: "...for we have been taught to render honor, as is befitting, to rulers and authorities appointed by God so far as it does not harm us." *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 10,2.

A Christian is an enemy to none, least of all the Emperor of Rome, whom he knows to be appointed by his God, and so he cannot be love and honor; and whose well being moreover, he must needs desire, with that of the empire over which he reigns so long as the world shall stand – for so long as that shall Rome continue. To the emperor, therefore, we render reverential homage as is lawful for us and good for him. (2,1)

## *2. Motives of persecution from 251 to 311*

In the third phase of the persecution, the motive was principally religious in character. The persecuting emperors ordered the extermination of Christians because they were seen as enemies of the gods. The persecution of Christians instigated by the emperors from 251 onwards was founded on the imperial program of reviving the ancient cultural values of the empire. Central to this imperial policy was the cultivation of religion, which consisted in the outward sacrifice to the gods for the purpose of courting divine favors. The Christians were persecuted because they refused to participate in the religious ritual and often ridiculed the gods of the empire. The Romans feared that such act of irreverence would provoke the ire of the deities and they were convinced that when the gods vent their wrath, it would not just be directed upon the Christians alone, but upon the whole humanity. That the persecuting emperors embarked in the repression of Christianity was because they would not want the whole empire to suffer the wrath of the gods for the irreverence of the few ungodly people, namely, the Christians.

The central issue therefore in the persecution of Christianity was the charge of ungodliness.<sup>74</sup> To have a more balanced view of the subject, it is deemed necessary to discuss the intimate connection between religion and the society in the ancient world. The Roman people were deeply religious. Their religion was, in the mind of the Romans, what made them different from other people. Cicero intimated that it was their religiosity that distinguished the Romans from other nations, the same characteristic that made the Romans superior from the rest. He proudly declared:

If, moreover, we care to make a comparison between our own characteristics and those of foreign nations, while the latter will be found equal, or even superior to us in other respects, in religion, that is, in the worship of the gods, we shall be found to far excel them.<sup>75</sup>

More particularly, the religiosity of the Romans was “a matter of performing cults acts rather than belief, or ethics.”<sup>76</sup> In roman religion the spiritual inner

<sup>74</sup> This is also true in the persecution before 250. As I have already argued, even if the accusations brought against the Christians were diverse, and more often it was not necessarily religious in nature, still in the end that which led their condemnation was their refusal to acknowledge the protector gods of the empire.

<sup>75</sup> Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II,3.

<sup>76</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 134.

disposition of the believer played a lesser role in comparison to the collective public cult.<sup>77</sup> It is unlike the modern view of religion that gives more stress on the intimate spiritual bond between the believers and the deity being worshipped, and the outward performance of prescribed ethical duties, which are believed to proceed from the teachings, or the commandments revealed by the Supreme Being. On the contrary, the relationship between the Romans and the deities they honored was viewed as a contract. This contract consisted in the religious duty of the citizens to perform public religious rites in honor of the gods and in return the gods would be bound to show their benevolent care for them. However, failure to render the gods worship would make them angry and subsequently not only withdraw their divine protection over the empire, but also positively punish the people, which might take in the form of defeats in war, plagues, or sufferings brought about by natural disasters.

Religion was part of Roman life and greatness. According to their belief system, they were able to overcome their enemies and conquered other great empires because the gods of their ancestors protected them and gave them victory. The persecuting emperors attributed the setbacks in war and other catastrophes suffered in the past due to the neglect of the religious duty to worship the protector gods. They also firmly believed that in order to win back the protection of the gods they ought to give them their due worship.

Interestingly, the Roman religion had a place for the gods of conquered nations. Rome's policy towards the religion of the conquered territories was that of assimilation in the Roman religious system. The gods of the conquered territories were either considered lesser gods, subject to the gods of the Romans or identified with the Roman gods.<sup>78</sup> Under this scheme, the God of Christians could be tolerated as long as he is placed inferior to the gods of the empire. The Christians can be tolerated to practice their religion on the condition that they would not neglect their duty to offer incense and libations to the gods that made the Roman Empire great.<sup>79</sup> The Romans gave no importance about the inner conviction, or personal beliefs of an individual, or a group of individuals as long as they participated in the public religious rituals. This is the insight that we learn from the query raised by Tertullian as to why the philosophers who, just as the Christians, openly attacked the superstition of the

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<sup>77</sup> J. Engberg, 69.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>79</sup> In the beginning, however, the Romans did not consider Jesus, the crucified savior of the Christians, as worthy of divinity. This belief warranted Tacitus' (*Annals*, XV,44) derision of Christianity calling it 'a highly decadent and contagious superstition' because it gave worship to a mere man, a criminal at that, who died the most scandalous form of punishment a man could get. On a more popular plane a mid-second century graffito was discovered in 1587 in the Palace of the Caesars on the Palatine Hill which depicts a boy on his knees in front of a crucified figure with a donkey's head which only expressed how the ancient Romans ridiculed the belief of Christians on the crucified savior (Cf. Paul Gavrilyuk, *The suffering of the impassible God*, Oxford, 2004, 75).



pagan religion, and yet were not similarly persecuted.<sup>80</sup> Well, the obvious answer was that even if the philosophers attacked the absurdity of the pagan religion in their writings, still they were willing to perform incense and libation before the statues of the gods of the Romans, which the Christians would not do.

The pluralist religious system of the Romans was well noted in the letter of Dionysius of Alexandria, informing us that the imperial government did not prevent the Christians to worship the Christian God as they were also expected to pay homage to the gods of the empire. The prefect Aemelianus pointed this out emphatically as he interrogated the saintly bishop:

But who hinders you from worshipping this god too, if indeed he is a god, along with those who are gods by nature? For you have been commanded to worship the gods, and those gods whom all know as such.<sup>81</sup>

It was not the contents of Christian belief, the articles of faith as we call it now, which made the Christians target of the persecution, but rather their unwillingness to participate in the religious rites of the Romans. The same conclusion is arrived at by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix in this succinct description:

It was not so much the positive beliefs and practices of the Christians which aroused the pagan hostility, but above all the negative element in their religion: their total refusal to worship any god but their own. The monotheistic exclusiveness of Christians was believed to alienate the goodwill of the gods, to endanger what the Romans called the *pax deorum* (the right harmonious relationship between gods and men), and to be responsible for the disasters which overtook the community.<sup>82</sup>

The adamant refusal of Christians to acknowledge the existence of the gods of the empire and to take part in pagan religious rites, and also their unyielding conviction that even others ought not to do so<sup>83</sup> – indeed, some Christians went to the extreme of going to the temples to destroy the statues of the pagan gods – were the reasons why they were targeted by the persecution. The name of Christian became the central, if not the sole point, of every interrogation because the imperial officials, no doubt, knew that a true Christian, just as Pliny observed, would not participate in the public performance of religious sacrifice. They would not do so because they believed that these gods, which the Roman people worshipped, did not exist, or if they existed, were in fact malevolent spirits. The name Christian then was equivalent to blaspheming everything that is sacred to the Romans.

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<sup>80</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 46,4.

<sup>81</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria, *Epistles and Fragments of Epistles*, X,5.

<sup>82</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 133-134.

<sup>83</sup> For example Polycarp was accused by the crowd as “the father of Christians, the destroyer of [the] gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice and not to worship.” *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 12.

Considering, therefore, the cultural background of the Roman world, one would not find difficulty understanding why Christianity was described as the ‘most mischievous superstition’ (*superstitio exitiabilis*)<sup>84</sup> by Tacitus, or ‘a highly decadent and contagious superstition’ (*superstitio parva et immodica*)<sup>85</sup> by Pliny, or ‘the worst crimes’ (*nequissimae crimines*)<sup>86</sup> by Galerius Maximus, the proconsul of Africa who sentenced Cyprian of Carthage to the sword. Accordingly, this ‘mischievous’, ‘decadent and contagious’ superstition was expressed primarily in the excessive devotion to the Christian God, which, as a result, led to the neglect of the other gods, especially the supreme gods of the Romans. Such neglect in turn, the Romans feared, would lead to the disruption of the harmonious relationship between the gods and the people, the *pax deorum*, translated in the horrifying scenario where the powerful gods punish the helpless people. It was the most ‘heinous crimes’ because it invited disasters to occur. Thus, it is understandably clear why, in every unfortunate event that happened, the Romans would put the blame to Christians and demand that they be punished for causing it. As Tertullian put it:

[The pagans] suppose that Christians are the cause of every public disaster, every misfortune that happens to the people. If the Tiber overflows or the Nile doesn’t, if there is drought or an earthquake, a famine or a pestilence, at once the cries goes up: The ‘Christians to the lions!’<sup>87</sup>

The Romans look at the persecution as necessary to preserve the very existence of the empire. Christians being a threat to the empire, understood not in a political sense, that is, as plotting military action to destabilize and take over the imperial government, but in a more profound and religious sense, given that for the Romans the glory and success of the empire depended on the benevolence of the gods, which by their actuations were disturbed and disrespected. Put simply, the choice confronted the persecuting emperors and the provincial governors who comprehended perfectly the implication of this religious problem to the very existence and welfare of the empire, was between, on the one hand, the preservation of the empire, guaranteed by safeguarding the harmonious relationship between the state and its protector gods through the enforcement of a general sacrifice and the extermination of any institution that threatened to disturb such relationship, and, on the other hand, the tolerance of Christianity which compromised the *pax deorum*, as they respected not the gods and even impeded others from performing religious rites in honor of them. Expectedly, between these two options, the Roman officials opted for that which would lead to the preservation of the state.

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<sup>84</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XV,44.

<sup>85</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistle*, X,96.

<sup>86</sup> *Acta Cypriani*, 3,5

<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 40,1-2.

## Theology of persecution and martyrdom

In the first section, I have discussed the reality of the persecution that took place in the nascent years of the Christian Church, and in the second, I have endeavored to uncover how did the Romans perceive the persecution in terms of the motives that had pressed them to zealously pursue Christians. In this section, I engage myself on examining how the Christians themselves received the persecution that they were experiencing or had experienced. At the outset it must be said that Christians found meaning in their suffering, otherwise they would not have willingly and courageously endured it. The particular meaning—I label it the theology of persecution and martyrdom—that the early Christians gave to their suffering is the concern of this present chapter. Three general views of the early Christians on martyrdom namely, martyrdom as a contest for Christ, martyrdom as imitation of the passion of Christ, and martyrdom as participation in the life of Christ, are explored below.

### *1. Martyrdom as a contest for Christ*

Cyprian of Carthage proposed to understand the persecution as a positive reality that God had allowed to happen in order to test his followers who have grown lax in their faith, due to the long years of peace, with the aim of inspiring people to be steadfast once again in their commitment to follow Jesus. This particular way of seeing the experience persecution, he put, in the treatise he composed concerning those who had lapsed, in these words:

The Lord has desired his family to be proved; and because a long peace had corrupted the discipline that had been divinely delivered to us, the heavenly rebuke has aroused our faith, which was giving away, and I had almost said slumbering; and although we deserved more for our sins, yet the most merciful Lord has so moderated all things, that all which has happened has rather seemed a trial than a persecution.<sup>88</sup>

Reechoed in his thought is the familiar story of Job in the Old Testament. Just like in the narrative of Job, God had allowed the devil to tempt and torment Christians to prove their faith. The martyrs viewed their acts not in political terms, battling a cruel political government that was prejudiced against them, but in the light of the eschatological battle between them, the disciples of God, and the devil. The persecutors were seen as evil instruments employed by the malicious devil to make the faithful suffer with the sole aim of inducing as many apostates as they could. The theme of the devil influencing pagans to persecute Christians is well developed in the works of the Christian apologists. St. Justin Martyr, for instance, categorically stated:

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<sup>88</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, 5.

The evil demons who hate us, and who keep such men as these subjects to themselves, and serving them in the capacity of judges, incite them, as rulers actuated by evil spirits, to put us to death.<sup>89</sup>

Since the persecution is seen as a religious phenomenon, the devil causing it to befall on Christians to snatch away those who were weak, it has become, in the mind of Christians, an arena wherein Christians struggle against the devil to win Christ. The idea of martyrdom then is perceived as a contest for Christ.<sup>90</sup> One had to fight the adversary in order to be worthy to partake of the divine life, the crown of immortality. Perpetua initially thought that she would be given to wild beasts, but in a vision it was made known to her that she would fight the Egyptian, which represented the devil, in a game supervised by a *lanista*, the trainer of gladiators. Perpetua, defeating his evil enemy, received from the *lanista* himself the prize of green branch upon which were apples of gold.<sup>91</sup> In the story of the martyrs of Lyon, when Blandina was not touched by the beasts which were released to devour her, the narrator of the event informed us that she was taken back again to prison “to be preserved for another ordeal; and thus for her victory in further contests she would make irreversible the condemnation of the crooked serpent... for she shall put on Christ, that might and invincible athlete, and had overcome the adversary in many contests, and through her conflict had won the crown of immortality.”<sup>92</sup>

Two analogies were used by the early Christians to describe the experience of combat between the martyrs and the devil. In the first, the martyrs were compared to athletes. This, no doubt, takes its root from the apostle Paul himself who, in his description of the Christian life, employed the image of an athlete running a race, or giving a good fight to win the precious prize (1 Co 9:24-25; 2 Tim 2:4-5). Before the appointed day of the game, athletes are known to prepare themselves diligently by subjecting themselves to difficult training condition. Likewise, the torments and the punishing condition that martyrs were subjected to in prison at the hands of their captors were welcomed willingly because they served a constructive purpose of preparing and making one stronger, always under the guidance of the divine trainer, so that they would be able to overcome the malevolent adversary in battle.

Exhorting the confessors to martyrdom, Tertullian addressed them in the following manner:

In like manner, O blessed ones, count whatever is hard in this lot of yours as a discipline of your powers of mind and body. You are about to pass through a noble struggle, in which the living God acts the part of superintendent,

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<sup>89</sup> Justin Martyr, *II Apology*, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Helen Rhee, *The Early Christian Literature*, London, 2005, 92.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, 10,1-15.

<sup>92</sup> *The martyrs of Lyons*, 1,42.

in which the Holy Ghost is your trainer, in which the prize is an eternal crown of angelic essence, citizenship in the heavens, glory everlasting. Therefore your Master, Jesus Christ, who has anointed you with His Spirit, and led you forth to the arena, has seen it good, before the day of conflict, to take you from a condition more pleasant in itself, and has imposed on you a harder treatment, that your strength might be the greater. For the athletes, too, are set apart to a more stringent discipline, that they may have their physical powers built up. They are kept from luxury, from daintier meats, from more pleasant drinks; they are pressed, racked, worn out; the harder their labours in the preparatory training, the stronger is the hope of victory.<sup>93</sup>

Secondly, martyrs were also said to be soldiers of Christ. They were depicted as combatants of God fighting the hostilities brought upon them by the army of the devil. This is present in the teaching of Cyprian, the martyred bishop of Carthage, who described the persecution as a war waged by the devil against the Christians, and that by means of it the faithful, emerging victorious over their tormentors, would attain to the most beautiful prize of being in the presence of God:

We will glory in the name of the Lord our God. They themselves are bound, and they have fallen; but we have risen up, and stand upright. And even more strongly the Holy Spirit, teaching and showing that the army of the devil is not to be feared, and that, if the foe should declare war against us, our hope consists rather in that war itself; and that by that conflict the righteous attain to the reward of the divine abode and eternal salvation.<sup>94</sup>

Also Tertullian filled his letter, addressed to the blessed confessors, who were being kept in prison awaiting for their impending trial and death for the faith, with the descriptions culled from the experience that soldiers undergo while training for battle:

Grant now, O blessed, that even to Christians the prison is unpleasant; yet we were called to the warfare of the living God in our very response to the sacramental words. Well, no soldier comes out to the campaign laden with luxuries, nor does he go to action from his comfortable chamber, but from the light and narrow tent, where every kind of hardness, roughness and unpleasantness must be put up with. Even in peace soldiers inure themselves to war by toils and inconveniences— marching in arms, running over the plain, working at the ditch, making the *testudo*, engaging in many arduous labours. The sweat of the brow is on everything, that bodies and minds may not shrink at having to pass from shade to sunshine, from sunshine to icy cold, from the robe of peace to the coat of mail, from silence to clamour, from quiet to tumult.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Tertullian, *To the martyrs*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Tertullian, *To the martyrs*, 3.

Martyrdom was welcomed by the early Christians as an occasion for them to fight the devil and to demonstrate the purity of their faith in God. The devil used persecution as an instrument to make apostates of Christians. But the more the devil tried to snatch Christians away from God, the more Christians were inspired, like a soldier trying to win a battle against a formidable enemy, or an athlete competing for a precious prize, to strive, with the help from God, to be steadfast in their faith. For the very experience of persecution, endured with a constant faith in the power of God, would procure for Christians the crown of salvation.

## 2. *Martyrdom as imitation of the passion of Christ*

Corollary to the Christian understanding of persecution as a contest is the fundamental belief in the evangelical teaching that says that the lot of the disciples of Christ is to suffer and die like their master.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, what the martyrs seek in their death is the closest possible imitation of Jesus, the Savior, who suffered and was crucified on the cross out of love for humanity. Again the bishop of Carthage encouraged his readers to face martyrdom bravely, using the same argument of imitation of Christ theme, in this particular statement:

Since He, when He came, not only exhorted us with words, but with deeds also, but after all wrong and contumelies, suffered also, and was crucified, that He might teach us to suffer and to die by his example, that there might be no excuse for a man not to suffer for Him, since He suffered for us.<sup>97</sup>

The martyr then is a disciple who follows the lamb wherever he goes, even to death. He is expected to emulate the example of his master, notwithstanding the offering of life for the sake of the master because the master himself had sacrificed his own for him.

The concept of martyrdom as imitation is evident in the way the accounts of martyrdom were presented. There was a conscious effort, on the part of the recorder, to assimilate the sufferings of the martyrs to the passion of Jesus. The authors deliberately made parallelism between the suffering of the saint and the events in the passion of Christ to make the readers realize the semblance between the two noble sacrifices. In the martyrdom of Polycarp, for example, the author, indicated on purpose at the introduction that the elderly bishop was martyred “just as the Lord.”<sup>98</sup> Not only that he was betrayed and entered the city riding on an ass, just as Jesus did, but even his judge was also named Herod. Eusebius of Caesarea also specified that Simeon, the second bishop of Jerusalem “was, [during the reign of Trajan], tortured in many ways for a great many days because he was clearly a Christian, and

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Mk.13:9-13, Mt.24:9-13, Lk.21:12-19, Jn.15:20

<sup>97</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 1,2.

he astonished to the highest degree both the judge himself and those with him, and won for himself an end similar to the passion of the Lord.”<sup>99</sup> Also, the passion of the young maidens from Africa, Maxima and Donatilla, was certainly modeled after the passion of Jesus. An associate betrayed them, and in their interrogation the language used by the proconsul reechoed the dialogue of the high priest at Jesus’ trial while the response given by the virgin martyrs was similar to that of Jesus. Furthermore, they were also forced to drink gall and vinegar.<sup>100</sup>

The early Church made a distinction between confessors and martyrs. Although the confessors suffered physical tortures upholding the Christian faith, they could not claim for themselves the title martyr unless their suffering is sealed with death. It was death alone, a life given up to give witness to faith in Christ that rendered a Christian a perfected martyr. However, Christians did not seek their own death. “The goal of martyrdom is neither masochistic enjoyment of suffering as such, nor the aspiration that by death one will enter into a condition of ceaseless suffering with Christ.”<sup>101</sup> Although, they were aware that they were just pilgrims passing this earthly world and that their true citizenship being in heaven, such consciousness did not give them the license to finish off their lives as an easy escape and immediate means to be reunited with God. They lived on earth worthily as true believers of the one true God who created the world good in order to announce to the nations how benevolent and caring the Christian God is by forming this world habitable and convenient for all mankind to live in. Justin Martyr wrote specifically about this topic in his *Second Apology*, providing an explanation to the pagans, who objected that if Christians were willing to die for Christ why they just not killed themselves:

We have been taught that God did not make the world aimlessly, but for the sake of the human race; and we have before stated that He takes pleasure in those who imitate His properties, and is displeased with those that embrace what is worthless either in word or deed. If, then, we all kill ourselves we shall become the cause, as far as in us lies, why no one should be born, or instructed in the divine doctrines, or even why the human race should not exist; and we shall, if we so act, be ourselves acting in opposition to the will of God.<sup>102</sup>

Martyrdom was not an option for death, but rather a deep religious conviction to follow Christ, even to the point of death. They did not hate the world inasmuch as it was created by the good God to serve men as they prepare themselves for their eventual return to the heavenly abode where they will be united with their loving God and creator. However, if the earthly authority would coerce them to deny their

<sup>99</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III,32.

<sup>100</sup> *Passio of Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, 1-3.

<sup>101</sup> P. Gavriluk, 69.

<sup>102</sup> Justin Martyr, *II Apology*, 4,1.

faith, then they would be willing to give up their lives than to deny the good Lord who, out of his unconditional love for humankind, humbled himself and allowed himself to be crucified that humanity may be saved from their just damnation. St. Justin Martyr continued with his reasoning:

But when we are examined, we make no denial, because we are not conscious of any evil, but count it impious not to speak the truth in all things, which also we know is pleasing to God, and because we are also now very desirous to deliver you from an unjust prejudice.<sup>103</sup>

While Christians should earnestly desire martyrdom when occasion presented it, because such would enroll them among the angels in heaven and the martyrs who had gone before them, they are not, however, to provoke it. It is a reward, and not a personal prerogative, that must be accepted from no one else but God alone. All martyrdoms took place according to God's will,<sup>104</sup> the author of the martyrdom of Polycarp claimed. This same conviction is most evident in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. The saintly Roman matron recognized that it was the will of God that her newborn baby did not desire anymore for her breast and neither did she suffer any inflammation (6,8). She was miraculously spared from these earthly concerns in order to prepare herself for his imminent battle with the devil. Similarly, as the appointed time of their final contest with the devil drew near, the martyrs elect feared that Felicity would miss the great honor to give testimony to her faith in Jesus with them, being at that time eight months pregnant, since Roman law forbade the execution of an expectant mother. Saddened by this, her fellow martyrs prayed to God and as soon as their supplication was ended, Felicity started to feel pain and gave birth (15,3-5). Soon enough Felicity joined her fellow martyrs in the arena facing fearlessly the evil tormentor.

Martyrdom takes place because God wills and permits it to happen to his elect. Such is the reason why in the mainstream Church voluntary martyrdom was not condoned. The *acta* of martyrdom of Polycarp did not encourage those who willingly come forward to be put to death because, accordingly, it was contrary to the precepts of the gospel. A particular example was this certain Quintus who, out of his own initiative, presented himself before the governor. Overcame by the torture he was inflicted with, he eventually renounced his faith.<sup>105</sup> He was not able to withstand suffering for the simple reason that it was his own and not the will of God that he chose to undergo it. No one could patiently endure any form of tortures and sufferings without God's help. St. Cyprian, in one of his letters, strongly counseled his presbyters not to "stir up any tumult for the brethren, or voluntarily offer himself to

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<sup>103</sup> Justin Martyr, *II Apology*, 4,2.

<sup>104</sup> *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 2,1.

<sup>105</sup> *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 4.



the Gentiles.”<sup>106</sup> Also, Peter Alexandria was against voluntary martyrdom although he made exemption for those who previously lapsed to make amends for their betrayal of Christ.<sup>107</sup>

Another aspect of the notion of martyrdom as imitation of Christ is the view that it is a sacrifice in behalf of the Church. The theme of Christ who offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to God in exchange for our redemption inspired much the authors of *actae* and *passiones* of martyrs. There is not a doubt that the authors of the *actae* and *passiones* would like the readers to view the death of the saints, or their own death, in case they would find themselves in such situation in the future, as an expiatory sacrifice.<sup>108</sup> The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp is rich with this theme. The death of Polycarp is said to seal all the persecution in Asia, for thereafter the persecution of Christians ceased in that part of the empire. It was also emphasized his triumph over the devil, the adversary of Christ’s faithful disciples, inasmuch as by losing his life he was crowned with immortality (19,2). Finally, the author related that Polycarp himself viewed his death as an act of praise to God, as he emphatically expressed this in the prayer he put in the mouth of the martyr bishop before he was burned:

I bless thee, because thou has deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for resurrection to eternal life of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom I may be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice. (14,2)

These three aspects of the sacrifice motif present in the account of Polycarp—the death of the martyr, which brought salvation not only to himself but also to others, the defeat of the devil, and the death of the martyr as a form of praise to God<sup>109</sup>—are similarly discernible in the account of the martyrs of Lyons. Similarly, the sacrifice of the holy martyrs of Lyon was understood as an efficacious instrument for combating demon (2,6). It also gained heavenly favors for others since through their intercession the dead were brought to life (1,45), while “those who denied the faith for the most part were... quickened again in the womb and learned to confess Christ” (1,46). Finally, the martyrs offered their victory over the devil as a sacrifice to God (1,36).

<sup>106</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle*, LXXXI.1.4

<sup>107</sup> He preached in his eighth canon that Christians who had been delivered up to the authorities and lapsed overcame by torments, and retook the battle against the devil by confessing themselves to be followers of Christ before the tyrant judge would gain the promised heavenly reward. (Cf. *Canonical Epistles*, 8).

<sup>108</sup> H. Rhee, 95.

<sup>109</sup> The three aspects of the martyr’s sacrifice is articulated in the study on the acts of the martyrs by Helen Rhee. See, *ibid*, 97.

Furthermore, because of the close relationship between Christ and the martyrs and the latter's valiant imitation of the passion of Christ, early Christians believed that martyrs had been given the privilege to function as an effective mediator between God and the Church. Christians supposed that the martyrs have been granted the grace of being able to intercede for others. In her vision, Perpetua saw Dinocrates, her unbaptized dead brother, in a miserable state (7,4-5). Since she felt that she had been rendered worthy to intercede for his sake, being a martyr elect, she prayed earnestly day and night to God. Soon she obtained her petition, shown to her in another vision with her brother already looking happy and relieved of suffering (8,1-2).

Not only the martyrs, that is, those who were sealed with death for the sake of Christ, were thought of as able to efficiently intercede before God for others, but also the same privilege was believed to have been accorded to the confessors, those who stood firm in the days of persecution, although did not receive the grace of martyrdom. This gave problem to the ecclesiastical hierarchy because some confessors arrogated for themselves not just the privilege of interceding for others, but the power itself to directly forgive sins. Those who had lapsed, as they wanted an easy and immediate way of obtaining pardon for their denial of Jesus, were drawn to the confessors, who in turn proudly declared these *lapsi* forgiven on account of the merit that the confessors had received. This problem St. Cyprian had to contend with in his own community. In his treatise *On the Lapsed*, he dedicated a great deal of the opus correcting this error, asserting that it is God alone who can forgive sins, while at the same time affirmed the merit received by the martyrs and confessors. The mediatory role of the martyrs and the confessors, the bishop of Carthage taught, is subjected to the divine approval. Forgiveness comes only from God, He who people hurt in their sinfulness. Thus he cautioned those who had lapsed not to let themselves be deceived by those who offered them easy way to reconciliation with the Church, but rather should seek God's mercy through sincere repentance and good works.<sup>110</sup>

In summary, Christians believed that the experience of martyrdom was a gift from God, according them the occasion to share in the life of Christ to imitate his unselfish love, even to the point of death. The martyrdom of Christians also took the form of expiatory sacrifice in behalf of the Church and also granted the martyrs and confessors alike the special privilege to intercede before God in behalf of the community.

### 3. *Martyrdom as participation in the life of Christ*

Pagans were puzzled as to how Christians were able to endure severe tortures and other forms of afflictions inflicted on them by their persecutors. In trying to

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<sup>110</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *On the lapsed*, 17-19.

explain their bewilderment they invented fancy stories such as Christians were engaged in magic and sorcery. According to their fictitious tale, before their execution Christians pronounced some magical formula, or applied some strange potion on their body that made them feel no pain. The pagans failed to see in the bravery shown by Christians in the face of death the person for whom they willingly and patiently accept suffering and death, the same person from whom they drew their admirable strength. Christians were able to endure such suffering because Christ preserved and suffered with them. They firmly believed that, as the gospel has promised, “divine help shall not be wanting to God’s servants in persecution.”<sup>111</sup>

For instance, St. Crispina, when threatened by the Proconsul Annulinus to have her beheaded if she would not sacrifice, answered the Roman official:

My God who is and who abides forever ordered me to be born; it was He who gave me salvation through the saving waters of baptism. He is at my side helping me, strengthening His handmaid in all things so that I will not commit sacrilege.<sup>112</sup>

With the same conviction on God’s abiding and sustaining presence, Polycarp bravely refused to be nailed as he was about to be burned alive, saying to his persecutors:

Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain in the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from the nails.<sup>113</sup>

Some even went to the point of asserting that it was the savior himself who suffered in the martyr’s body. This point is stressed in the exchange between Felicitas and the jail guard who scoffed at her for she was crying aloud in pain delivering her baby:

‘You who are in such suffering now, what will you do when you are thrown into the beasts’... And she replied, ‘Now it is I that suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I am also about to suffer for him’ (15,5-6).

Implicit in every account of Christian martyrdom is the idea of participation. In this regard, the martyr’s suffering and death is viewed not merely as imitation, as discussed above, but also as a participation in the passion of Christ. More importantly, such participation is characterized not as a one-way kind of participation but a reciprocal one. It is not only the martyr who participated in the suffering of Christ, but Christ also participated in the suffering of the martyr. Christ strengthened

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<sup>111</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 10.

<sup>112</sup> *The act of martyrdom of St. Crispina*, 3,3.

<sup>113</sup> *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, 13,4.

the martyrs with his grace, understood as the Lord himself present in the martyr undertaking their suffering as his own.<sup>114</sup>

There is a necessary link between the concept of the martyr's imitation of and participation in the passion of Christ. P. Gavrilyuk articulates this in the following:

The theology of martyrdom very quickly linked the idea of imitation to that of participation in the passion of Christ. The difference between imitation and participation is substantial: while it is natural to imitate a past example, it is impossible to participate in a process that is not in some way continuing in the present. If communion in Christ's suffering is open to those who follow him, then Christ's suffering itself must be in some sense an enduring reality, extending beyond the boundaries of his earthly ministry.<sup>115</sup>

For participation to take place, the passion of Christ needs to be a present enduring reality. But where do we find the passion of Jesus celebrated and made present again among us if not in the sacrifice of the Eucharist? The bloody passion of Jesus offered once and for all in history is perpetuated in the Church through the memorial of the Eucharist thereby making the participation in it by the martyrs possible. Methodius of Olympus, martyred in 311, taught the view of the Church as continually nourished by the gifts of Jesus who makes himself present through the memorial of the passion, rendering her capable of giving birth to new believers through the sacrament of baptism. He enunciated this conviction in his work, *The Banquet*, in the following comment:

[T]he Church increasing daily in greatness and beauty and multitude, by the union and communion of the Word, who now still comes to us and falls into a trance by the memorial of his passion; for otherwise the Church could not conceive believers, and give them new birth by the laver of regeneration, unless Christ, emptying Himself for their sake, that He might contained by them, as I said, through the recapitulation of his passion, should die again, coming down from heaven, and being joined to His wife, the Church, should provide for a certain power being taken from his side, so that all who are built up in Him should grow up, those who are born again by the laver, receiving of his bones and of his flesh, that is, of his Holiness and of His glory.<sup>116</sup>

In this text of Methodius of Olympus, the memorial of the passion of the Lord, wherein the Church enters in communion with the Lord, is identified as the reason by which the Church exercises his power over the world, which enables her to give birth to sons of God by adoption and then provides for the growth of its

<sup>114</sup> P. Gavrilyuk, 72.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. The concept of imitation linked to the concept of participation is given stressed by Justin Martyr in his *II Apology*, 13. However, here the two concepts are related to the Logos as such and not explicitly to the passion undertaken by the Logos who became man.

<sup>116</sup> Methodius of Olympus, *The Banquet*, 3,8,70-72, cited in J. Quasten, 132-133.

members. Such grace recreated in the Church through the continuous celebration of the passion of Christ is all the more extended to those who, having been renewed by the laver of regeneration, accepted the invitation of the same Lord to give witness to Him amidst persecution.

Cyprian of Carthage validated the significant role of the Christian community under divine initiative to help sustain and strengthen those who have been elected for the baptism of the blood in the following words:

Let us only who, by the Lord's permission, have given the first baptism to believers, also prepare each one for the second; urging and teaching that this is a baptism greater in grace, more lofty in power, more precious in honor—a baptism wherein angels baptize—a baptism in which God and His Christ exult—a baptism after which no one sins any more—a baptism which completes the increase of our faith—a baptism which, as we withdraw from the world, immediately associates us with God.<sup>117</sup>

Early Christians were cognizant of the fact that true martyrdom took place always within the Church. The God who called the martyrs to the share in his passion sustained them with spiritual gifts through the ministry of the mother Church. As we have learned in the above discussion, the community continued to give assistance not just materially, but also spiritually to the confessors who were being kept in prison. Part of the spiritual ministry of the community is to preserve the confessors in their faith.

Again, Tertullian encouraged the confessors who were in prison to grieve not the Holy Spirit, and added categorically that if it were not because of the Holy Spirit, the blessed ones would not have been there in the first place.<sup>118</sup> Martyrdom is an initiative or a gift coming from above. Hence, the grace of Jesus' passion abiding in the community through the ministry of the Church, particularly in the celebration of the memorial of his passion in the Eucharist, did not only provide an occasion for the faithful to take part in it, but more importantly it actively inspired and moved them all the more to take upon themselves the cross of suffering under the violent persecution of the gentiles.

The conceived relationship between the imitation of and the participation in the passion of Christ echoes the theological distinction and correlation in the soteriological function of Christ's life both as *exemplum* and *sacramentum* specified in the theology of the later Fathers, particularly St. Augustine and Leo the Great.<sup>119</sup> Christ's life did not only provide the Christians an example to follow on how to

<sup>117</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Lewis Ayres, 'The Context of the Augustine's *De Trinitate* XIII: Toward Relocating Books VIII-XV', in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (eds.), Dublin, 1988, 106.

live their life as God's servant, but more importantly it renewed them from within, empowering them such that they were able to live a life conformable to the will of their Creator. Moreover, martyrdom as imitation of Jesus' passion was made possible because the Savior himself willed and invited the martyrs to participate in it. And martyrdom as participation is understood in response to God's invitation to imitate his example of sacrifice on the cross.

Both the acts of participation and imitation have as their fundament the grace of invitation from God. The noble athletes and soldiers of Christ were able to imitate and participate in the passion of the Savior because, in the first place, they were invited and empowered to be crowned with the gift of martyrdom by Him who was crucified. While the two concepts have been distinguished, in reality these two dimensions of martyrdom could not be isolated one from the other. For martyrdom as imitation is the external manifestation of the mystery of participation in the passion of Christ. And participation in the passion of Christ is the spiritual reality that sustained the martyr who was invited to imitate the death of Christ.

Finally, martyrdom was not just mere participation in the passion of Jesus on earth as it also brings the participation in God's glorious life in heaven. Christians perceived martyrdom having as its ultimate goal the participation in the divine life of God, who out of his benevolent will, first elected the martyrs and then sustained them with his grace under suffering, that his dominion and provident care may be proclaimed to the world. Ontologically, God's grace which sustained and strengthened Christians was more than sufficient to let them courageously and calmly bear suffering and death for the faith, but the thought of the crown of immortality promised to those who would remain faithful until the end added further vigor to the martyr's motivation. They were well aware that what they were presently suffering in the world could not be compared to the happiness that they would later on gain in heaven.

Regarding this point, Tertullian wrote to Scapula, the proconsul of Carthage, telling him that Christians would not shrink in the face of punishment and torture that he would cast upon them because their suffering have as its ultimate goal the promised divine reward, which is, the most desired union with God himself:

We are not in any greater perturbation or alarm about the persecutions we suffer from the ignorance of men; for we have attached ourselves to this sect, fully accepting the terms of its covenant, so that, as men whose very lives are not their own, we engage in this conflicts, our desire being to obtain God's promised rewards (1).

On the other hand, if Christians were fearless in facing death because of the promised reward in sight, they dreaded the punishment that would result from the denial of the name of Christ. The same Latin father declared:

“Our dread lest the woes with which He (God) threatens an unchristian life should overtake us”.<sup>120</sup>

Christians did not fear the rage of the civil authority, but shrunk in the thought of meriting the anger of God. Many Christians willingly and bravely accepted the punishment of death for their faith in Christ because of the promise of eternal life that they consciously knew they would as reward for their fidelity. They believed that the participation in the passion and death of Christ would grant them participation in the heavenly and blessed life of the Triune God.

## Conclusion

Three phases of persecution in the early Church have been identified. The persecution in the first phase that commenced from the day of Pentecost until the year 64 just before the great conflagration in Rome, which we did not deal much in this work for methodological reason, resulted from the hostility of the Jews against the Christians. The second phase is dated from the great fire of Rome under the reign of Nero until the year 249. With the exception of the persecution of Nero, the repression of Christianity during this period was qualified as sporadic, limited in the provincial level, and instigated by the local population. The local population prompted by varied motivations—unfounded immoral charges, economic, political and for some religious reason—seized Christians and brought them before the governor for trial and judgment. The governors reacted to this situation accordingly, and, in certain instances, when they encountered doubt as to its verdict, sought the advice of the emperor. Of the charges thrown against the Christians, the only accusation which the governor found to merit capital punishment was the charge of superstition, or as some authors would label it, atheism or ungodliness. In the last phase of persecution, the order came from the central imperial government, with the emperor himself issuing edicts for a general repression of the Christian religion. The persecuting emperors wanted to revive the ancient values that once made the empire great and at the fundament of this was the religion of the Romans. In their religious consciousness, the gods protected the Romans and they would continue to do so as long as they were properly given due worship. The incompatibility of Christian belief with the cultural-religious program of the emperors led to the general persecution of Christians.

Even in this difficult situation, the Christians still found a meaning in the persecution that they were experiencing. They looked at it as a test coming from God. The devil was allowed to do his malicious acts against them so that faith might be aroused and they might grow stronger in their belief. Persecution became an occasion which gave Christians, although it must not be sought out, opportunity to attain the

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<sup>120</sup> Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 1.

eternal union with God in heaven, promised to those who would remain steadfast in faith under violence in the hands of the gentiles. Furthermore, martyrdom was perceived as imitation of the passion of Christ. The death of the martyr, inasmuch as an imitation of the passion of the Lord, took the form of a sacrifice acceptable to God, by reason of which merited for the elect the privilege to share in the mediatory role of Christ. Moreover, the theme of martyrdom as imitation of Christ is intimately linked with the notion of participation. This kind of participation is reciprocal. It was not only the martyr that participated in the suffering and death of Jesus, but more significantly Jesus participated in the suffering and death of the martyr. This explains why the martyrs were fearless confronting their tormentors. The martyrs were first chosen and then empowered by Jesus himself. Some taught that Jesus himself took upon himself the suffering of the martyr. The martyrs were unafraid because the abiding presence of Jesus sustained them in their suffering. They also knew that the suffering they were undergoing was nothing compared to the blessedness that they would gain in the heavenly abode.

The Christians of that period viewed persecution and martyrdom as a demonstration of God's eternal dominion and uninterrupted provident care, it being a gift granted to the faithful to stir them to long for the divine fellowship more intensely. The elect was sustained by the grace of perseverance facing their persecutors, and was ultimately crowned with the prize of eternal salvation, which consisted in enjoying the divine presence that they so longed to behold. ■



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