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St. Benedict blesses one of his pupils, St. Maurus, before the monk leaves on a mission to teach in France. In the background is an event from St. Maurus' life when he saved a drowning boy named Placidus by walking on the water.

CHAPTER 2

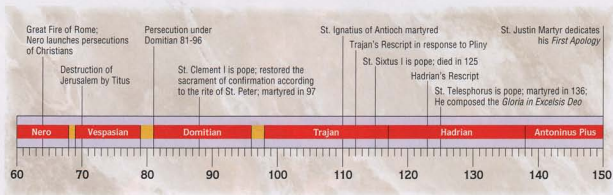
Persecution Of "The Way" And Heresies

In the earliest years, the Christians referred to the Faith as "the Way" (cf. Acts 9:2 and 19:9). Living the Way required a life of integrity according to the commandments and counsels of the Gospels and a strong commitment to become a disciple of Christ. Although living the Way is always difficult and requires much sacrifice, the early Christians especially suffered in the pursuit of its ideals.

Many thousands of early Christians lost their lives during three hundred years of persecutions in the Roman Empire. There are numerous accounts of martyrs from this period, many of whom were priests and bishops of the early Church. Scores of lay men and women from all walks of life comprised the majority of the martyrs. When reading the accounts of the martyrs, it is hard not to be shaken by the brutality with which they were killed. It is important, however, to understand the reasons behind their persecution and to focus upon the courage shown by so many otherwise ordinary men and women. These martyrs lived with their families, had normal occupations in life, and were simply devoted to Christ. Despite the tremendous pressure put on them by the emperors to renounce their Faith, the early Christians remained faithful to the teachings of Jesus.



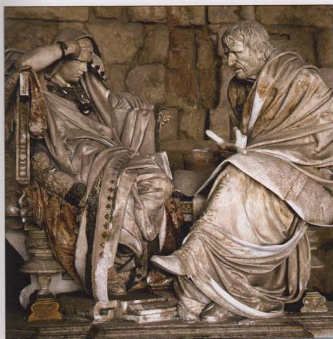
Last Prayers of the Christian Martyrs by Jean-Léon Gérôme



PART I

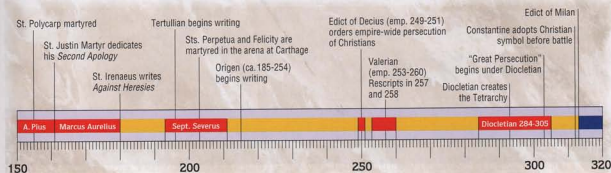
The First Roman Persecutions

The earliest Christians had suffered persecution at the hands of the Jews, but the Roman Empire for a time did not trouble itself with what appeared to be merely a small group of schismatic Jews. As the early Church grew and distanced itself from the Jewish tradition, the Roman Empire began to view these early Christians as enemies of the empire who, through their disregard for some imperial institutions and traditions, were seen as a breeding ground for corruption and discord within the empire. Soon, periodic imperial persecutions, many of which were incredibly brutal, became a normal part of the life of an early Christian.

THE FIRST PERSECUTION
UNDER EMPEROR NERO (AD 64)

Emperor Nero with his noble advisor, Seneca.

The Emperor Nero (AD 37-68, emperor AD 54-68) was a figure of immense cruelty, psychological sickness, and paranoia. Even the Roman historical tradition portrays him as a tyrant. The stepson of Emperor Claudius and the nephew of Emperor Caligula (infamous for his depravity and psychosis), Nero was the last of the Augustinian line. His rule began in AD 54 at the age of seventeen, and for a time, things ran smoothly. The noble Stoic Seneca was an advisor to Nero and had been his tutor when Nero was young. By the year AD 59, however, Nero's evil character had clearly emerged. He murdered his mother, and then renounced and slandered his own wife, Octavia, before having her beheaded. In AD 65, Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide.



Early on the night of July 19, AD 64, fire broke out near the Circus Maximus and engulfed the city of Rome for nine straight days. The fire raged throughout the city, and consumed the lives and the property of members of every Roman class.

Immediately, the rumor began to circulate that Nero had started the fire. The reason behind this rumor was Nero's announced intention to seize private property in the center of Rome in order to build an expansive new palace, later called the Domus Aurea (House of Gold). The rumor told of Nero taking delight in watching Rome burn while he read his own poetry. The famous saying, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned," originates from this rumor.

Nero provided emergency shelter to victims, and quickly sought to remove suspicion from himself by falsely accusing the Christians of starting the fire. He tortured several Christians, elicited from them forced confessions, and then ordered large numbers of other Christians to be arrested. The Roman historian Tacitus writes that when it became clear to everyone that Nero's accusations against the Christians were wildly implausible, he charged them with "hating the human race" (Annals, XV, 44).

Although Nero's first persecution of Christians was limited to the city of Rome proper, its egregious brutality remains unquestioned. St. Clement of Rome, the third pope, relates that Christians were first taken across the Tiber to an arena on Vatican hill called Nero's Circus, where St. Peter's Basilica now stands. They were then sewn into animal skins and distributed throughout the gardens. Next Nero released hungry mastiff dogs into the gardens, which hunted down and ate the trapped Christians. Other Christians were martyred in an assortment of awful ways in the Circus Maximus. Finally, in perhaps the greatest example of the emperor's cruelty, Nero coated hundreds of live Christians with pitch and resin and then set them on fire to provide light for him as he passed through his gardens and along the city streets at night.

Nero was the first to declare Christianity unlawful, and sought to punish all believers with death under his principle *Christiani non sint* (Let the Christians be exterminated).



Death by wild beasts in the Amphitheater is shown in this mosaic from a villa near Leptis Magna, North Africa. The crowd would roar "*Salvum lotum*" (well washed) at the blood-bath.



The fire raged throughout the city, and consumed the lives and the property of members of every Roman class.

PERSECUTION UNDER EMPEROR DOMITIAN, "LORD AND GOD"

Domitian (AD 51-96) served as emperor beginning in AD 81. An effective and hard-working ruler, Domitian took particular interest in directing military campaigns and securing the patronage of the army. He had good cause to curry the favor of the army, for his relationship with the Roman Senate was less than ideal. He is reported to have opened his letters to the Senate with the words, "Our lord god orders that this be done." He also habitually referred to himself in the third person as *Dominus et Deus* ("Lord and God"). As the years passed, Domitian became pathologically suspicious of conspirators and once quipped, "No one believes in a conspiracy against an emperor until it has succeeded."

Domitian was particularly intent on stopping the spread of Christianity from the lower classes to the aristocracy, which included members of his own family. When the Emperor murdered his cousin, an office-holding Christian, he set in motion a conspiracy against him (his wife Domitia possibly being one of the conspirators) that culminated in his assassination.

Despite the fact that growing numbers of patricians began to convert to Christianity, all believers remained subject to heavy impositions placed upon them by the empire. Domitian levied a special tax only on Christians and Jews to pay for a new temple dedicated to Jupiter, and Pope St. Clement I speaks of "misfortunes and catastrophes" in the Roman community because of persecution.

PART II

“The Five Good Emperors”

(AD 96-180)

The five emperors that followed Domitian have been called “The Five Good Emperors” because of their skill in leading the Empire. They are Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. These emperors generally enjoyed the support of the army, senate, and the people, and were certainly much more stable than either Caligula or Nero. They worked to secure the existing borders of the Roman Empire and even expanded them.

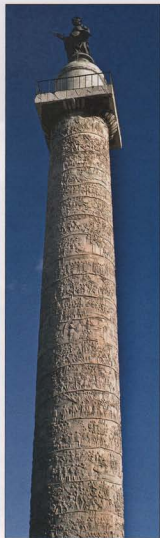
While these five emperors were good for the Empire’s interests, they were not necessarily supportive of Christianity. Although the first four of these emperors were more moderate than Nero, they by no means halted the persecution of Christians.

TRAJAN’S RESCRIPT (AD 112)

Trajan (ca. AD 53-117) began to rule in AD 98. His nearly twenty year reign is considered to be one of the most excellent in the empire’s history. With respect to Christianity, Trajan took what he deemed to be an enlightened and balanced approach. A letter from one of his governors, Pliny the Younger (ca. AD 61-ca. 112), asked for Trajan’s advice concerning the persecution and punishment of Christians. According to both Nero and Domitian, Christians were to be summarily executed, and Pliny had executed Christians out of a sense of responsibility. Pliny made it clear to Trajan that Christians by this time existed across all strata of society, and lived in rural as well as urban areas. Pliny posed four questions to Trajan: whether anonymous denunciations of Christians were to be pursued; whether the age of Christians should be taken into consideration in determining their punishment; whether Christians who denied their faith publicly should be allowed to live; and whether the profession of Christianity itself, apart from the crimes associated with the practice of the Faith, was sufficient to warrant execution.

Trajan’s response to Pliny offered a nuanced, though definite, policy for handling Christianity. Trajan decreed that if Christians renounced their faith and offered sacrifice to the Roman gods, they would be allowed to live in spite of their past Christian life. Furthermore, Trajan declared that anonymous denunciations were not to be pursued. Nevertheless, anyone denounced openly who admitted his status as a Christian was to suffer death. Trajan’s decision thus confirmed that the profession of Christianity was itself a crime, but clarified under what conditions it could be prosecuted.

Trajan’s Column is made from a series of 18 colossal Luna marble drums, each weighing about 40 tons, and is exactly 100 Roman feet (30 meters) high. The frieze winds around the shaft 23 times and contains over 2,500 figures. Inside the column, a spiral staircase of 185 stairs provides access to a viewing platform at the top. Originally, a gilded bronze statue of Trajan crowned the top of the column. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V replaced it with a statue of St. Peter.



Trajan's Rescript still left Christians with an awful choice: death or apostasy. While Trajan did seek to remedy the gross abuses of the legal system that were often used in the persecution of Christians, in the end, he upheld the principle first attributed to Nero: *Christiani non sint*.

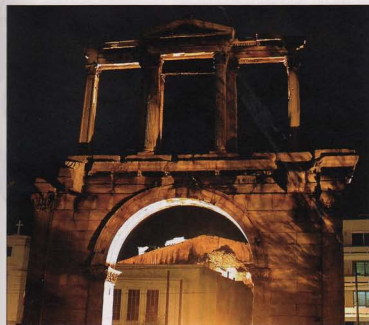
ST. IGNATIUS, BISHOP OF ANTIOCH

St. Ignatius (ca. AD 50-ca. 107) was likely the third Bishop of Antioch, after Sts. Peter and Evodius, and he is thought to have listened at the feet of St. John the Evangelist. Because of his close association with Sts. Peter and John, St. Ignatius is an Apostolic Father, i.e., one of those saintly figures who had direct contact with the Apostles, and consequently his writings are considered especially authoritative. In fact, St. Ignatius' letters are considered the most important documents which link the Twelve Apostles with the early Church.

Little is known of St. Ignatius' life up to his arrest during the reign of Trajan for being a renowned Christian bishop. Under a guard of ten soldiers, he traveled to Rome to meet a martyr's death. Along the way he was happily received by the Christian communities of the day, and it was during this time that St. Ignatius carried on a correspondence with the various churches of Asia Minor and the bishop of Smyrna, St. Polycarp.

In these letters, known as the Seven Epistles, St. Ignatius makes clear his ardent desire for martyrdom, going so far as to ask the Christians not to intervene with the pagan officials to save his life. Instead, he wrote, "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found Christ's pure bread" (Epistle to the Romans, IV.1).

St. Ignatius denounced all heresy and schism, and he singled out the episcopacy in the Church as a bulwark against false belief and as a means of unity with Christ. Without bishops, St. Ignatius asserted, neither Matrimony nor celebration of the Eucharist were possible. Indeed, St. Ignatius counseled the early Christians to remain "aloof" from the heretics who "confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again" (Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, VII). The Eucharist, St. Ignatius wrote, is "the bread that is the flesh of Jesus Christ, this flesh which has suffered for our sins." St. Ignatius elaborated on the Incarnation, Passion, death, and Resurrection of Christ.



St. Ignatius was also the first person to use the term "Catholic Church," which he again linked to the episcopacy. Finally, St. Ignatius supported the primacy of the papacy, and advocated deference to the Bishop of Rome.

Upon his arrival in Rome, St. Ignatius was martyred in the Coliseum. St. Ignatius was led out in front of a great crowd and was fed to lions. His feast day is celebrated on October 17.

The Hadrian Arch in Athens was built by Hadrian in AD 131 as part of a wall separating the old and new cities. On the side facing the Acropolis is the inscription, "This is Athens the former city of Theseus." The side facing the new city reads, "This is the city of Hadrian and not of Theseus."

HADRIAN'S RESCRIPT (AD 123/124)

The Emperor Hadrian succeeded Trajan in AD 117 and served until his death in AD 138.

In religion, Hadrian promoted the cult of the gods and designed a special temple built for Venus and Roma in the Roman Forum. Hadrian banned circumcision among the Jews, and planned to turn Jerusalem into a Roman colony called Aelia Capitolina. The Jews responded by revolting under their leader Bar Kokhba in AD 132. After this revolt was suppressed in AD 135, the Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem.



In AD 123/124 Hadrian answered the request of Serenus Gracianus, Proconsul of the Province of Asia, who wanted the emperor's advice on how to handle the often violent crowds intent on murdering Christians and inquired whether they should be prosecuted for simply being Christian.

In his official response, or rescript, Hadrian emphasized the primacy of the rule of law over mob action. Furthermore, he ordered that Christians could only be prosecuted for actual violations of the common law, not just for professing Christian belief. If an accuser made false accusations, then the accuser himself was to be punished.

Accordingly, under Hadrian, Christians enjoyed a relative amount of toleration, although there was no official codification of such toleration.

ST. POLYCARP, BISHOP OF SMYRNA

St. Polycarp (ca. AD 69-ca.155) suffered martyrdom during the long and peaceful reign of Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 86-161, emperor AD 138-161). St. Polycarp spent much of his life defending orthodox Catholic belief against various heresies. He is an important link to the Apostles and a great number of Christian writers who lived toward the end of the second century. Along with St. Ignatius and Pope St. Clement I, St. Polycarp is one of the most important Apostolic Fathers. He was a friend and correspondent of St. Ignatius. Only one of St. Ignatius' letters to St. Polycarp has survived.

After traveling to Rome to discuss the date of Easter with Pope St. Anacletus, St. Polycarp returned to Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey). Shortly thereafter he was arrested during a pagan festival and charged with being a Christian. The letter "Martyrium Polycarpi" (The Martyrdom of Polycarp) was written by someone of the church in Smyrna to the church in Philomelium, and relates the details of St. Polycarp's martyrdom.

The governor wished to save St. Polycarp, and asked him to curse Christ in public so that his life could be spared. St. Polycarp refused to renounce Christ and was sentenced to be burned alive. The executioners, impressed by St. Polycarp's courage, honored his request to be tied to the stake, rather than fastened with spikes. Once the fire began, St. Polycarp remained unharmed from the flames. Finally, an executioner killed St. Polycarp with a sword. The Church celebrates his feast day on February 23.



THE COLISEUM



The Coliseum's "Door of Death" and the skeleton of cages and cells which were located under the stadium floor.

The Coliseum of Rome remains both a tribute to the brilliant engineering of the ancient Romans and a witness of their gruesome entertainments and disregard for human life. The construction began around AD 72 under Emperor Vespasian and was completed by the Emperor Domitian. The Coliseum was originally known as the Flavian Amphitheater.

In its heyday, the building boasted a number of technological wonders. It featured a cooling system made from a large canopy suspended by ropes over the audience that provided shade and created a breeze. Underneath the stadium floor, there were cells to house wild beasts, condemned criminals, and trained gladiators. These "entertainers" could enter the arena through dozens of elevators or trap doors.

Although the standard forms of entertainment were executions, fights between various animals, between

men and animals, and, of course, the famous gladiatorial combats fascinated the Romans. During the emperor Titus' hundred-day festival celebrating the Coliseum's inauguration, contests pitted bears, buffalo, elephants, rhinoceri, lions and other wild animals against each other and against armed or unarmed men.

It is possible that some Christians were condemned *ad bestias* in the Coliseum, but it is more likely that they were killed in the circus Flaminius, the Gaium, the Circus of Hadrian, the Amphitheatrum Castrense, or the Stadium of Domitian.

Gladiatorial combats were finally outlawed in 404, largely due to the influence of Christianity, and the Coliseum quickly became a site of pilgrimage. Indeed, it remains standing today, preserved as a testament to those great sacrifices made by Christians during the dark days of persecution.

EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS, THE PHILOSOPHER-KING

Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180) was a favorite adopted son of Emperor Hadrian. Upon the death of Emperor Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius ascended the throne in AD 161. Marcus Aurelius was an ardent Stoic, and philosophy was the central focus of his life. When he died, Marcus Aurelius' book *Meditations* was found on his person. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* is a thoughtful and moving work that reflects the profound discipline of a Stoic's life. He exemplified Stoicism's ideal of living free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submitting without complaint to unavoidable fate.

Marcus Aurelius adhered to Trajan's Rescript, outlawing Christianity and persecuting the Christians. He reinstituted the practice of anonymous denunciations, and did not hesitate to kill Christians when it served the empire's interests. Many of the persecutions undertaken during Marcus Aurelius' reign, however, originated not directly from the emperor, but from angry provincial mobs and the governors who were meant to hold them in check. Allowing mobs to kill Christians was an effective way of diffusing their anger, which otherwise might turn against the empire itself. Marcus Aurelius' attitude towards any new religion was generally disdainful. If the new sect excited the people, the emperor was willing to respond with strong punishments.



Emperor Marcus Aurelius

ST. JUSTIN MARTYR

St. Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100 - ca. 165) was one of the most famous martyrs to die under the persecution of Marcus Aurelius. Born of pagan parents in Shechem in Samaria in Palestine, Justin studied philosophy from his early youth, and converted to Christianity in his thirtieth year. Tradition has it that Justin was walking along the sea one day and met a mysterious old man whom he had never seen before. The old man began talking to Justin and convinced him that true knowledge of God could not come only from philosophy, but must be supplemented by reading the revealed word of the prophets. After his conversion, Justin continued studying philosophy and became an excellent apologist for the Faith.

Justin worked tirelessly during the Roman persecutions to defend the Church against those pagans who falsely accused her. Justin respected philosophy, but saw that its truths were mere shadows compared to Christ's teachings.

In his *First Apology*, which he addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his two adopted sons, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, Justin provides important descriptions of the rituals for the celebration of Baptism and the Eucharist. The *Second Apology* was addressed to the Roman Senate just after Marcus Aurelius became emperor in AD 161. Shortly thereafter Justin and six others were denounced as Christians. When they refused to sacrifice to the gods, they were beheaded.

St. Justin Martyr's feast day is celebrated on June 1.

PART III

Later Persecutions and the Edict of Milan



Emperor Septimius Severus

The reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (emperor AD193-211) was characterized by warfare in Britain and Mesopotamia. By this time the military played an ever-increasing role in the selection of the emperor and the elimination of his enemies. Severus issued a decree in AD 202 declaring that circumcision and Baptism were to be forbidden. This threatened not only Christians, but Jews as well. Another round of persecutions followed, which were concentrated mainly in Syria and Africa.

ST. IRENAEUS, BISHOP OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus (ca. AD 130 - ca. 200) was a disciple of St. Polycarp, and is believed to have come from Smyrna. Although a native of Asia Minor, St. Irenaeus served as Bishop of Lyons, and is regarded as the preeminent figure of the early Church in Gaul. Irenaeus devoted much of his energy to combating heresies, especially Gnosticism. In his defense of orthodoxy, St. Irenaeus emphasized

key elements of the Church: the episcopacy, Sacred Scripture, and Tradition. He spoke explicitly of the importance of recourse to the Church's tradition, even though Christianity was still very much in its infancy. He argued, "If the revelation of God through creation gives life to all who live upon the earth, much more does the manifestation of the Father through the Word give life to those who see God" (St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV.20.7).

St. Irenaeus' writings are of special interest given the way they systematically describe the origin and history of each heresy before contrasting its false claims with Catholic teaching. St. Irenaeus' work is still necessary and helpful to scholars seeking an in-depth look at early theological disputes. The most famous of these works is the *Adversus haereses*, also known as the *Refutation of Gnosticism*.

St. Irenaeus subsequently became the Bishop of Lyons in 178, and held the office for approximately twenty-five years. According to tradition, St. Irenaeus was martyred during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus. His feast day is celebrated on June 28.

THE EDICT OF DECIUS (AD 250)

After the reign of Septimius Severus, Christians enjoyed relative peace for about fifty years. Emperor Alexander Severus (emperor AD 222-235) even permitted Christians to own property and build churches. However, in the second half of the third century the empire entered into a troubling political period. In a short span of just forty-six years (AD 238-284), there were eighteen legitimate emperors, and many others who sought illegitimate ascendancy. Most of these emperors ruled for a brief time before meeting with a violent end.

Emperor Decius (emperor AD 249-251) reigned for only three years, but he inaugurated the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. Other emperors had limited their directives, horrible as

they may have been, to the city of Rome or to specific provincial communities. Decius, however, who believed that the survival of the empire depended upon the restoration of the old pagan cults, sought to extirpate Christianity from the empire.

Decius assumed control of the Roman Empire at a precarious point in its history. The empire was threatened both by the army, which essentially controlled the emperor, and by external enemies, specifically Germanic hordes who constantly attacked along the eastern frontier. Faced with such a bleak political situation, Decius sought to reinvigorate the empire's strength and unity through a return to the ancient religious practices of the state.

Since Christianity called for ultimate allegiance to Christ and not to the state, Decius saw this as incompatible with his plan. In his view, Christianity, which by that time was the religion of roughly one-third of the Roman Empire, was in part the cause of the divided empire.

Emperor Decius promulgated an edict of extermination against the Christians. Anyone suspected of being Christian had to present him or herself before the local magistrate and offer a simple sacrifice to prove he or she had given up the Faith.

Those Christians who offered sacrifice to the pagan gods were known as *sacrificati*; those who burned incense to the pagan gods were called *thurificati*. Certificates, purchased at a price from officials, stating that the bearer had already offered sacrifice to the gods were also available. Christians who purchased these certificates were called *libellatici*.

Decius ordered the arrest of all known Christians who failed to appear before the magistrate or who could not produce a certificate. Christians who refused to renounce their faith were sent into exile or put to death, and all of their property was confiscated.



Pope St. Sixtus II ordains St. Lawrence

The Church's loss was two-fold in these times: she lost those faithful Christians who were martyred during the persecutions, and she lost those unfaithful Christians who committed apostasy. Apostasy is the willful denunciation of the Faith in its entirety.

The persecutions of Decius unfortunately resulted in many apostates, and the leaders of the Church at this time had difficult decisions to make regarding the status of apostates and their possible re-entry into the community of believers. The most rigorous factions of the Church denied that the *lapsi*—Christians who formally renounced their faith, offering sacrifices to pagan gods—could be readmitted. The popes decided that with long penances, the *lapsi* would be allowed to return. The controversy surrounding these *lapsi* gave rise to the Novatianist schism. The Roman presbyter Novatian led a "rigorist" faction, declaring that those who had renounced the Faith (the *lapsi*) could never be re-admitted into the Church.

ORIGEN: THEOLOGIAN AND BIBLICAL EXEGETE

Origen (ca. AD 185–ca. 254) was the most prolific writer and important theologian and biblical exegete in the eastern part of the Empire. Origen was an Egyptian who spent much of his life working and teaching in Alexandria. His father was martyred during a persecution in AD 202,

and Origen later became the head of the first Catechetical School in Alexandria. This institution combined instruction in Catholic doctrine with an investigation into the sciences and philosophy, and in some ways might be considered the first Catholic university.

During the persecution of the Emperor Decius, Origen was taken into custody in AD 250. For approximately two years, he was brutally tortured. Origen, however, held fast to his faith, inspiring many with his zeal. He was eventually released and lived for several more years, but his broken body quickly gave out.

It is estimated that Origen wrote between two and five thousand different tracts, nearly all of which are lost. However, one of his chief works, "De principiis," survives. In addition to his many scholarly writings, Origen is considered to have initiated the concept of the homily.

POPE ST. SIXTUS II AND DEACON ST. LAWRENCE



The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence.
"I am roasted enough on this side; turn me around."

Emperor Valerian ruled from AD 253 to 260, and during this time issued two rescripts, one in AD 257 and one in AD 258. The rescript of AD 257 forbade Christians from meeting in public places and from celebrating the Eucharist in the catacombs. The rescript of AD 258, however, was harsher. Under this rescript, issued because of political pressure, bishops, priests, and deacons were immediately executed, and Christians of rank were removed from their offices and often sold into slavery.

In the days of Valerian's second rescript, Pope St. Sixtus II was apprehended while celebrating Mass with seven deacons, one of whom was St. Lawrence. Pope St. Sixtus and six of the deacons were beheaded on the spot, but Lawrence was spared for the time. The authorities demanded that he bring the Church's treasure to them, and sent him to get it. When he returned a short time later, Lawrence brought with him a group of poor people—the Church's treasure. In response, the Roman authorities sentenced Lawrence to be roasted alive on a gridiron. Tradition holds that as he burned, Lawrence told the judge, "I am roasted enough on this side; turn me around."

PERSECUTIONS UNDER DIOCLETIAN

Born in Dalmatia (modern-day Croatia), Diocletian rose through the ranks of the Roman army to serve with the emperor's guards during the Persian campaign. When Numerian was murdered in AD 284 the army made Diocletian the new emperor. Like his predecessors Decius and Valerian, Diocletian desired to unify the empire. He used his organizational prowess to this end, eventually crushing the Persian Empire and ending the crisis of the third century.

Diocletian spent much of his first ten years as emperor battling the barbarians on the German and Persian frontiers. This diversion initially inclined the early Church historian Eusebius to praise Diocletian's clemency toward Christians. But in AD 303, with the barbarians defeated, Diocletian

turned his attention to the Church. On February 23 a new edict was issued at Nicomedia and The Great Persecution began. Christian Churches were destroyed; books were burned. The palace at Nicomedia was set ablaze prompting additional edicts. For the next ten years, until Constantine's defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge on AD October 28, 312, and the "Edict of Milan" in 313, the Christians throughout the Empire were imprisoned, tortured, forced to offer sacrifices to pagan gods, and martyred according to the changing fortunes of the Imperial rulers.

FOUR EDICTS

Though he was superstitious, Diocletian was initially tolerant of Christianity, and even admired some of its adherents. Maximian and Galerius, on the other hand, were wary of the religion and pressed Diocletian to eradicate it for the good of the empire. At their request, Diocletian issued four edicts. These edicts resulted in the worst of all the persecutions the Christians suffered under the Romans. Diocletian's first edict commanded the destruction of churches and the burning of the Scriptures, as well as banning all Christian gatherings. Those who opposed this law faced execution or enslavement.

The succeeding edicts were applied only in the east by Galerius and Diocletian. The second edict sanctioned the imprisonment of the clergy. The third edict demanded pagan sacrifice from the clergy. Finally, the fourth edict demanded sacrifice from every Christian, not just the clergy. This last edict resulted in the deaths of many thousands of Christians who refused to offer pagan sacrifice. Constantine the Great later commented that if the Romans had slain as many barbarians as they had slaughtered Christians during the reign of Diocletian, there would be no barbarians left to threaten the safety of the Empire.

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHS

Due to his failing health, Diocletian abdicated on May 1, AD 305, and he convinced Maximian to step down as well. Galerius remained in power in the East, and Constantius took over control of the West. Constantius was succeeded by his son Constantine in AD 307.



Constantine was friendly with the Christians, although he was not one himself, but Galerius continued the persecution in the East until just before his death. In AD 311, however, Galerius was stricken with an eastern form of leprosy that left his body crippled and decrepit. He confessed and whimpered in utter terror that his sickness was the divine retribution of the Christian God. On April 30, AD 311, Galerius issued an edict admitting the failure of his policy with regard to the Christians. He then instituted the free exercise of the Christian religion as long as Christians obeyed the law and promised to pray for the emperor



Constantine sought unity in his empire, and he saw that Christianity was a religion likely to provide such unity.

and the empire. Galerius' edict was also adopted in the West. Thus the last and greatest persecution begun under Diocletian gave way to a tentative peace.

Upon the death of Galerius, a complex struggle for power ensued. Maxentius, who was Maximian's son and who now controlled Italy, sought to defeat the army of Constantine and gain control of the Western empire. Constantine, who was well aware of Maxentius' intentions, decided to attack Rome. At the Milvian Bridge, just outside the city, the two armies met.

Before engaging in battle, Constantine claimed that he had looked above the sun and saw the symbol of the cross inscribed with the words in hoc signo vinces ("in this sign you will conquer"). After this vision, Constantine instructed his soldiers to put this sign on their shields. With crosses etched into Roman shields, Constantine's army met Maxentius in battle. Though Maxentius' forces were said to have been four times greater, Constantine won the Battle of Saxa Rubra, securing his rule over the West. Maxentius drowned near the Milvian Bridge.

After his victory against Maxentius, Constantine declared that the Christian God had favored him, and that he intended to stay in this God's good graces. He immediately restored the property of the Church, and began aiding in the construction of churches. In Rome the Arch of Constantine commemorated his victory, and his statue was placed in the city. In one hand the statue held the Labarum, the standard of the cross, with the inscription, "Through this saving sign have I freed your city from the tyrant's yoke."

THE EDICT OF MILAN (AD 313)

Constantine met with the only other living caesar, Licinius, in Milan in AD 313. Together they issued the Edict of Milan. This edict restored all property taken from the Church by the empire, and it granted Christians the freedom to practice their religion. The Edict of Milan represented a milestone for the early Christians and the Catholic Faith. It legitimized a religion that had been outlawed since Nero's decree in AD 64, and solidified the presence of Christianity in the public square.



In Rome, the Arch of Constantine commemorated his victory over Maxentius. His statue was placed in the city. In one hand, his statue held the Labarum, the standard of the cross, with the inscription, "Through this saving sign have I freed your city from the tyrant's yoke."

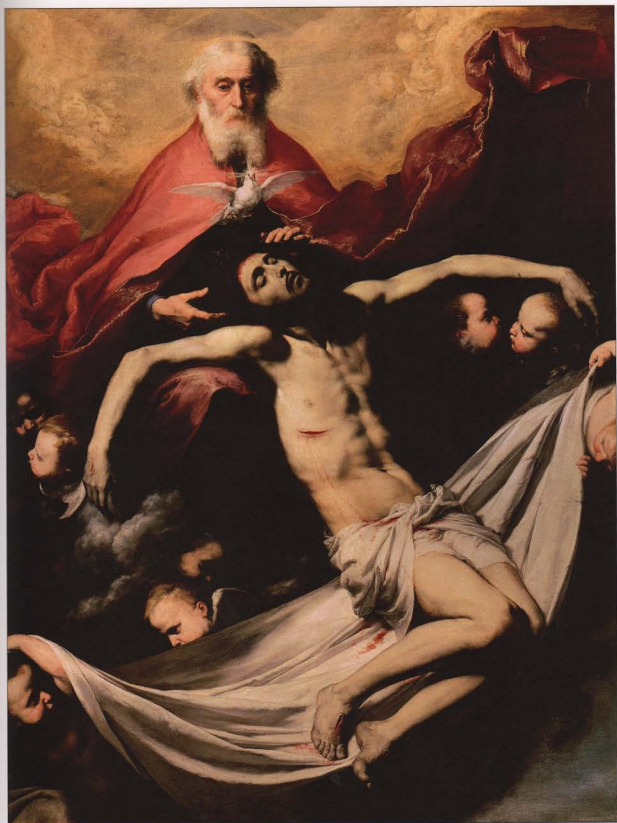
It would be remiss not to mention the clear political motives that were at least partly responsible for the Edict of Milan. Like many Roman rulers before him, Constantine sought unity in his empire, and he saw that Christianity was a religion likely to provide such unity. In this, Constantine followed



the regular practice of using religion to support political ends. However, it would be ridiculous to suppose that for Constantine, Christianity was nothing but a tool for the state. He is known to have prayed daily, and to have received instruction in the Faith until he was formally received into the Church, penitent and hopeful, receiving the Sacrament of Baptism on his deathbed.

The Baptism of Constantine
by Giovan Francesco Penni

Constantine received instruction in the faith and was formally received into the Church.



Striking at the heart of Christianity, early heresies made Jesus Christ inferior to the Father. In Christian teaching, God the Son, the Logos, is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, a person in the Divine Nature, and therefore equal to God the Father.

CONCLUSION

The early Church was often perceived as a small segment of Judaism, beginning after the Resurrection of Jesus. She then suffered through a long period of intermittent, though intense, persecution, and, finally (and quite remarkably), she emerged as an imperially sanctioned religion in AD 313. The first three hundred years of the Church's history were tumultuous, although they contain many lessons that remain perennially applicable. The martyrs of the early Church are emulated today by many Christians who live in cultures that are as hostile to Christianity now as was Rome two-thousand years ago. The lives of martyrs such as Sts. Ignatius of Antioch remain quite relevant to Christians then as well as today, who share in the communion of saints. The complex and often troubling relationship between the Church and the state is one that began in the Roman Empire, and still remains today. Lastly, the structure of the episcopacy and the importance of Tradition for resolving theological disputes both found expression in the many writings of Apostolic Fathers like Sts. Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus.

The Church experienced a moment of freedom and hope with the Edict of Milan in 313, but this by no means meant that the situation in the Church was relaxed over the next two centuries. The Church was convulsed by one theological controversy after another, any number of which threatened to destroy the Faith. Only the providential leadership of the popes, the Church Fathers, and the ecumenical councils under the influence of the Holy Spirit guided the Church through the treacherous waters of heresy that threatened to sink her at any time. The proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire in 391 by Theodosius I the Great inaugurated a new era in Christianity, one filled with the promise of evangelization, as well as with the dangers of temporal meddling in the affairs of the Church.



Emperor Theodosius I the Great declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 391.
Above: The image of Theodosius I the Great embossed on a 4th century silver plate.

VOCABULARY

ANATHEMA

A ban solemnly pronounced by ecclesiastical authority and accompanied by excommunication

ANOMOEANS

From the Greek anhomoiōs, meaning "dissimilar," this sect of Arianism stressed an essential difference between the Father and Son in the Trinity.

APOLLINARIANISM

Founded by Apollinarius in the fourth century, this heresy denied the existence of a human mind and will in Christ.

APOSTASY

Apostasy is the willful renunciation of the Faith in its entirety.

APOSTATE

A person who denies the Faith altogether.

APOSTLES' CREED

A statement of belief of the Apostles based upon the New Testament. It is derived from a baptismal creed used especially in Rome known as the Old Roman, and it is therefore associated particularly with the Church of Rome.

ARIANISM

Third and fourth century heresy founded by the Alexandrian priest Arius. It denied Jesus' divinity, claiming that Jesus is neither God nor equal to the Father, but rather an exceptional creature raised to the level of "Son of God" because of his heroic fidelity to the Father's will and his sublime holiness.

CAESAROPAPISM

Refers to the dual role of head of State and leader of the Church in which the temporal ruler extends his own powers to ecclesiastical and theological matters. The Church in the East, influenced by the growing power of the patriarch of Constantinople at the hands of the emperor, tended to accept a role for the Church in which it was subservient to the interests of the State.

CHRYSTOSTOM

Moniker of St. John Chrysostom meaning "golden mouthed," it refers to the saint's extraordinary preaching skills.

CHURCH FATHERS

Great, holy leaders who have come forward to lead the Church, explain the Faith, and meet the unique challenges posed by different heresies.

DEMIURGE

Gnostic creator god of the material world.

DOCETISM

Derived from the Greek word dokesis, meaning appearance, this Gnostic heresy maintained that Jesus did not die on the cross but was spared by someone else who took his place.

DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

Doctores Ecclesiae, a specific title given by the pope to those whose development of theology and personal sanctity are exemplary.

DOKESIS

Greek word for appearance. Referred to heresy which claimed Jesus only appeared to die on the Cross.

DONATISM

Heresy that rejected the sacraments celebrated by clergy who had formerly betrayed their faith.

ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

Derived from the Greek word oikoumene, meaning "the whole inhabited world," Ecumenical councils bring bishops and others entitled to vote from all over the world to discuss central issues of the Church. They are presided over by the pope and issues decrees which, with the approval of the pope, bind all Christians.

FILIOQUE

Latin word meaning "and the Son," it is used to express the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. St. Augustine's discussion on the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit laid the essential groundwork for the addition of the Filioque clause to the Nicene Creed in the Medieval period.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Where in the Bible is Christianity referred to as "the Way"?
2. If it is true that Nero set the fire in Rome on July 19, what was his ultimate motivation? How did the Christians prove to be expedient political tools?
3. Summarize Trajan's Rescript. How does it differ from the previous law of Nero?
4. What does St. Ignatius have to say about the importance of the episcopacy?
5. How did Hadrian's Rescript (AD 123/124) improve the situation for Christians?
6. How did the Roman emperor Septimius Severus threaten both Judaism and Christianity?
7. St. Irenaeus was an important leader in which region of the empire? (This is of particular interest because he came from the Greek-speaking east.)
8. Summarize Diocletian's Four Edicts.
9. What is the famous story about how Constantine won the Battle at Saxa Rubra?
10. Discuss the importance of the Edict of Milan (AD 313).
11. What were the guiding premises of Gnosticism?
12. What role did asceticism play in Manichaeism and other Gnostic heresies?
13. Who has the power to start, change, and end an ecumenical council?
14. Who is a "Church Father" and what are the five characteristics of a Church Father?
15. How and why did St. Ambrose stand up to the very powerful emperor Theodosius in 390?
16. For what is St. John Chrysostom best known?
17. What was Arianism, and why was Arianism such a threat to Christianity?
18. Who convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 and what was the council's outcome?
19. Under what circumstances was it said of Pope St. Leo I that "Peter has spoken through Leo"? What does this statement really mean?
20. How did Pope St. Leo I increase papal power?
21. How did St. Augustine answer the challenges posed by Donatism?
22. Describe St. Augustine's background. Why would his ordination as bishop have been particularly controversial with the Donatists?
23. What do the words "tolle et lege" mean, and what is their significance in St. Augustine's life?
24. What topics did St. Augustine address in two of his best-known works, *Confessions* and *City of God*?
25. When and by whom was Christianity declared the official religion of the empire?



The Altar of Victory, a replica of the Greek "Winged Victory of Samothrace," was the ultimate symbol of Roman supremacy. The Altar was a "majestic female standing on a globe, with expanded wings, and a crown of laurel in her outstretched hand."

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. During the Columbine school massacre in 1999, one of the shooters asked a young female student if she was a Christian. When she answered "Yes, I believe in God," he executed her. Can you imagine a situation where your faith could be so dramatically tested?
2. How do the presence of martyrs in a culture lead to conversions to the Faith?
3. How could effective apologists like St. Justin Martyr be of great help to the Catholic Church today? What issues would a modern apologist tackle? To whom would the defense be addressed?
4. Check out a local bookstore's religion and philosophy sections. How many books on "finding the light inside yourself" or other New Age movement texts did you find? Why do you think so many people have turned to the New Age movement? What is the difference between these "self-help" solutions and the way of life offered in the example of Christ?

5. What might be some reasons why the pope has authority over the ecumenical councils? If another ecumenical council were called today, what do you think would be the topics for discussion?
6. Think of reasons and examples of how the union of the secular and spiritual powers might cause conflict between the Church and the state.



St. Jerome never stopped advocating or living a penitential life.

FROM THE CATECHISM

465 The first heresies denied not so much Christ's divinity as his true humanity (Gnostic Docetism). From apostolic times the Christian faith has insisted on the true incarnation of God's Son "come in the flesh" (cf. 1 Jn 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7). But already in the third century, the Church in a council at Antioch had to affirm against Paul of Samosata that Jesus Christ is Son of God by nature and not by adoption. The first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 confessed in its Creed that the Son of God is "begotten, not made, of the same substance (homousios) as the Father", and condemned Arius, who had affirmed that the Son of God "came to be from things that were not" and that he was "from another substance" than that of the Father (Council of Nicaea I (325): DS 130, 126).

1173 When the Church keeps the memorials of martyrs and other saints during the annual cycle, she proclaims the Paschal mystery in those "who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ. She proposes them to the faithful as examples who draw all men to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she begs for God's favors" (SC 104; cf. SC 108, 111).

2089 Incredulity is the neglect of revealed truth or the willful refusal to assent to it. "Heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same; apostasy is the total repudiation of the Christian faith; schism is the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him" (CIC, can. 751: emphasis added).