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Early Church Grew Despite Persecution

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It is common knowledge that during the first three centuries of the Christian Era, Christians were frequently subjected to severe persecution. Jesus Himself had prophesied that his followers would suffer for their faith: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (St. Matthew 5:10-12).

Indeed, Christ’s prophecies were not long in being fulfilled.

Of His 12 Apostles, all save St. John were martyred: St. Peter was crucified upside down; St. Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross; St. James, the son of Zebedee, was decapitated; St. Philip was crucified; St. Bartholomew (Nathaniel) was flayed; St. Thomas was run through with spears; according to one account St. Matthew was martyred by fire; St. James, the son of Alphaeus, was sawn to pieces; St. Simon the Zealot was crucified; St. Jude-Thaddaeus was hung on a cross and then killed by spears; and St. Matthias was martyred by stoning. In addition, St. Paul, the apostle to the nations, was beheaded. And so it was that even from the beginning, becoming a follower of Jesus Christ was always arduous and fraught with danger since to live a Christian life required one to live apart from the intrinsic corruption of the pagan society of the Roman Empire.

For more than 300 years, Christianity existed on the fringes of society and near the boundary of legality, a vaguely defined boundary that shifted to and fro according to the whims of the public and of officialdom. Intervals of comparative peace alternated with bouts of savage persecution. All the while, however, the church grew ineluctably, the periodic persecutions purifying and strengthening her in her witness for Christ. So, despite harsh and deadly forms of intimidation meant to destroy the church, the number of Christian believers nonetheless multiplied steadily.

The Pagan Roman Empire and Its Religion

What were the reasons for those periods of persecution? To understand that time better, let us briefly consider the nature of the Roman State and religion. The government of the Roman people had been a republic for nearly 500 years until, in the year 27 B.C., the Senate voted exceptional powers to the first



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Roman emperor, Octavian, better known by the title he assumed, Augustus. Augustus was sufficiently clever to restore the outward features of the republic, that is, to retain what historian Michael Grant calls the “decorous façade” of traditional republicanism. In actual fact, under the new regime, the Senate was reduced to political insignificance. The emperor simply ruled as a dictator, with the Senate acting in the fashion of a rubber stamp. The only institution to which the emperor paid any serious attention was the army, which possessed the *de facto* power to make or break emperors.

The religion of the Roman people underwent a gradual evolution as the empire expanded. The earliest Roman religion was a simple system in which good and evil spirits abounded. There was the spirit of light and lightning, the spirit of crops, the spirit of the woods, the spirit of gardens, and so forth. One was obliged to propitiate these spirits through sacrificial acts if one wished to have a peaceful and prosperous life. Under the influence of the Etruscans, and later the Greeks, these spirits became gods and were transformed from invisible to visible entities in the temples. As before, the gods were appeased through libations and sacrifices.

An important official within the Roman religion was the *haruspex*, who, after the sacrifice of an animal, examined the entrails of the dead creature to determine the will of the gods, according to the shape and condition of certain internal organs. The Roman pagan religion had no moral or ethical content; there was no concept of sin, nor was there any but the vaguest notion of an afterlife in which one might be rewarded or punished. Morality and ethics were regulated by social conventions, not religion.

As new lands and peoples were added to the empire, new gods were added to the pantheon of the Romans, such as Isis and Osiris. For the most part, worshipers of these foreign gods were not troubled by the Roman authorities so long as they were willing also to honor the Roman gods and, especially, to honor the emperor, who was regarded, in a sense, as a living god or, at least, as the living personification of the empire. The adherents to the various foreign cults had no difficulty in rendering religious homage to the Roman gods or the emperor. The only exceptions were the Jews and the Christians, whose religious tenets forbade such activity. The prohibitions prescribed by the Jewish religion were long known to the Romans, and were considered a peculiarity of the Jewish nation, and so were not found objectionable. The Christians, however, were not identified with any particular nation and so their refusal to show proper honor to the emperor and the gods was considered by some a sign of disrespect, or even of subversive intent.

The Christians flatly rejected the idea of blending their religion with that of the pagans. As St. Paul wrote in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians (6:17), “be ye separate”, Christians were to remain separate from all aspects of paganism. Additionally, rumors circulated that the Christians were engaged in horrifyingly evil practices. Because they were commanded to love one another and referred to each other as “brother” and “sister,” it was thought that their rites involved immorality; and because they referred to receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, pagan gossips spread the story that Christians were cannibals, secretly killing babies and consuming their flesh and blood. The second century apologist St. Athenagoras of Athens responded to these calumnies by pointing out that Christians exalted virginity and chastity and forbade even thoughts of an immoral nature, and so obviously would not allow immoral acts of any sort to take place at Christian gatherings. He also noted that Christians believe that “women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion,” and therefore could not possibly murder babies. Despite the attempts by educated Christians to refute the charges made by pagan accusers, the slanders were widely believed.



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Nero (Reigned 54-68)

The first serious attack by the Roman State against the Christians was launched by Nero in 64. That year, a great fire erupted in the Roman capital that some believed was started by order of Nero himself, who wished to clear land to build a huge new palace. (Subsequently, he did build the palace, a fantastically luxurious edifice known as the “Golden House.”) As it turned out, almost half the city was consumed while Nero sang and played a lyre, watching it all burn. Stung by the accusations against him, Nero promptly blamed the fire on the Christians and, as a result, had many of them killed, including Sts. Peter and Paul. According to the historian Tacitus, Nero had Christians wrapped in the skins of wild animals and then torn apart by dogs. He also had them fastened to crosses, drenched in inflammable liquid, and then set ablaze to illuminate a circus he staged in his own gardens. Tacitus remarks that “the victims were pitied” by the crowd since “it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest.” Nero later died by his own hand.

Domitian (Reigned 81-96)

Domitian is remembered by historians for several reasons. For example, he was among the first to show genuine contempt for the old republican system and establish the imperial autocracy more openly. The moment he succeeded to the throne, he presented himself first to the praetorian guard, and only afterwards to the Senate. In so doing, the new emperor sought deliberately to emphasize the impotence of the Senate. In fact, he showed his hatred for the senatorial establishment by refusing to take an oath guaranteeing the traditional immunity of the senators and recognizing their status as coequals in power. Far from regarding them as coequals, he instead replaced defiant senators with men more compliant. To assure a cooperative Senate, which he retained only for the sake of show, toward the end of his life he initiated a veritable reign of terror in which those who dared oppose him were accused of treason and executed. The church historian Philip Hughes writes that the ensuing persecution was directed at “all the better elements of the population and the Christians with them.” Among the many Christians martyred at this time were St. Clement of Rome and the kinsman of the emperor himself, Titus Flavius Clemens, who had apparently converted to Christianity since he was executed for “atheism,” a charge usually leveled at Christians for spurning the gods. Domitian was assassinated by officials in his own court.

Trajan (Reigned 98-117)

Early in the second century, the Roman governor of the province of Bithynia-Pontus (a region along the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor), Pliny the Younger, wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking for advice about dealing with the Christians in that province. Pliny stated that when Christians were obstinate in their adherence to that faith, he ordered them executed, as the law required. He wondered, however, if “any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith, are punishable.” He thus asked the emperor for direction.

In the same letter Pliny said this of the Christians: “They affirmed ... the whole of their guilt, or their error, [and], that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to



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any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, or deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food — but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.” It appears likely that Pliny was trying to convey the truth about Christianity to his monarch and, perhaps, mitigate the needless suffering of the Christians.

The Emperor Trajan responded by reiterating that Christianity was officially forbidden, that membership in that religion was itself a crime, and that those who admitted their membership in that illegal organization and refused to recant must be executed. However, if they did recant they were to be set free. It is clearly evident from this correspondence that there was an ongoing and harsh persecution and that it had not abated in the least. St. Ignatius of Antioch, among many thousands of others, perished during the reign of Trajan.

Marcus Aurelius (Reigned 161-180)

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius was, in certain respects, an admirable man. Philosophically, he was a stoic. In an age when immorality and all manner of excess was rife (much as in our own time), this emperor was rigorously moral and abstemious in his personal life. At a time when rule was often arbitrary and cruel, he was deeply concerned for justice, taking pains, for example, to assist the poor through tax reform. While others used high positions in the imperial government to lead sybaritic lives, Marcus Aurelius devoted his time to selfless duty. He was, for his time, remarkably cultured and refined. And yet, when it came to such matters as Christianity and the Christians, he was not the same man.

Marcus Aurelius was devoted to the traditions of pagan Rome and to the old gods. Christians, with their “strange” belief in a God who was crucified like a common criminal and who refused to honor the traditional gods alongside their new God, were, from his point of view, not only abnormal in their religious observances, but unpatriotic and even dangerous to the empire and to the welfare of its people. Even worse, the emperor had heard all the gossip about the gross indecency and even cannibalism that supposedly took place in the secret ceremonies of this supposedly terrible sect. As a consequence, he was severe in his persecution of his Christian subjects, especially in Italy and Gaul. During this period the persecution became more intense than ever before and included, among countless other victims, St. Justin the Philosopher and, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor.

Septimius Severus (Reigned 193-211)

At the beginning of his reign, Septimius Severus showed certain sympathy toward his Christian subjects, in part because his own physician, a Christian, had cured him of a serious illness. The church writer Tertullian insists that Severus “was graciously mindful of the Christians,” meaning that he did not order persecutions. Tertullian also notes that a number of men and women of the highest rank who were Christians were protected by the emperor’s authority “from the hands of a raging populace.” In contrast, church historian Eusebius of Caesarea counts Severus as one of the persecutors. It seems likely that this emperor was sympathetic to the Christians, but had to contend with the growing trepidation on the part of officialdom about the spread of Christianity. Hence, he is supposed to have issued a decree forbidding conversions to Judaism or Christianity. Much more significant was the



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“raging populace” to which Tertullian referred. Throughout the empire, the mob had been inflamed against Christianity because of the outrageous slanders spread about it. As a consequence, whenever there were earthquakes, fires, floods, crop failures, disease outbreaks, or other untoward events, the public was ready to blame the Christians, since they refused to pay homage to the gods, for which, it was thought, the gods retaliated. Taking matters into their own hands, the rabble would descend on Christians and suspected Christians and literally tear them limb from limb. Where mob justice did not prevail, local officials were sufficiently intimidated by the anger of the people to protect themselves by instituting local persecutions. It was at this time that Sts. Felicitas and Perpetua, and their companions, were martyred.

Maximinus I (Reigned 235-238)

Maximinus I was neither a true Roman nor of aristocratic background. He was, rather, what came to be known as a “barrack-square emperor,” a man who had risen through the ranks of the army and, by brute force, had seized the imperial throne by murdering his predecessor. He was, according to accounts, crude and illiterate, hating the middle and upper classes and setting his tax collectors on them to squeeze ever more money out of them. His immediate predecessors had been tolerant of Christianity, but he reversed that policy and ordered an empire-wide persecution. Whereas Trajan, in his letter to Pliny the Younger, had ruled that the government need not hunt down the Christians but need only act when Christians for some reason came to the government’s attention, Maximinus insisted that the authorities throughout the empire search out the Christians so that every one might be exterminated. This persecution aimed especially at the leadership, the bishops and priests. Sts. Hippolytus of Rome and Pontian of Rome were both exiled to Sardinia and martyred by being worked to death in the mines. Maximinus was assassinated by his own soldiers after a reign of only three years.

Decius (Reigned 249-251)

Before rising to the imperial throne, Decius had served as a senator and as a governor of several Roman provinces. His primary objective during his reign was to roll back the clock of internal decay and, thereby, to revivify the traditions of Rome, bringing back the Golden Age of Augustus, two and a half centuries before. To achieve his goals, Decius believed that the first requirement was the revitalization of the old religion. Christianity, he believed, disturbed the harmony between the gods and the Roman people, thus bringing down the wrath of the gods upon mankind. Decius therefore ordered that prominent Christians be immediately arrested. Second, he issued a decree that everyone in the empire make a sacrifice to the gods by a certain date. The Jews were exempt inasmuch as the government had long been aware of Jewish sensibilities in this matter and accepted it as part of the nature of the age-old religion of that conquered people. By way of contrast, the Christians, in the Roman view, had given up their ancestral religions to become members of an illegal sect.

To each person making the required sacrifice, a certificate was issued testifying to their compliance with the decree. Not only were sacrifices required, but those complying with the order were additionally required publicly to denounce and insult Christ and then to attend a dinner to partake of the sacrificed meat and wine. No one could escape, and so huge numbers of Christians were ensnared and forced to choose, the lukewarm apostatizing through terror, and the faithful going to their deaths. Curiously, Decius, whose reign lasted less than two years, ended his persecution before his death. As Philip Hughes writes, the emperor “realized that he had gained for the State religion merely the



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feeblest and most worthless of the Christians” and “had failed utterly to rally that better element whose falling away from the old ideals he so deplored.”

Valerian (Reigned 253-260)

Like Decius, the Emperor Valerian was a member of the Roman nobility. St. Dionysius of Alexandria wrote of this emperor, “He was kind and well disposed to the men of God, and none of his predecessors ... showed them more sympathy and made them more welcome than did Valerian at the beginning of his reign.” The saint ends by saying that so many were the Christians in service to this emperor that the palace was almost a church. Yet Valerian himself was dedicated to the old religion, and so when one of his trusted advisors told him that the mounting disasters befalling the empire were due to the anger of the gods over the rise of the Christianity, the emperor took notice. In August 257, he decreed that Christian bishops and priests were to be commanded to sacrifice to the gods. Refusal meant exile. Furthermore, all Christian cemeteries, buildings, and other properties were seized by the State. Non-ordained Christians, if they persisted in meeting for their liturgies, were to suffer death. One year later he issued an even stronger decree: Clergy who refused to sacrifice were to be sentenced to death; the laity also must sacrifice or die; nobles who were found to be Christians were to lose their rank, their property, and their lives; and those who were in service in the imperial palace were to be reduced to slavery. Among those perishing at this time were Sts. Sixtus II of Rome, Lawrence of Rome, and Cyprian of Carthage; 300 martyrs in Utica, North Africa; and thousands more elsewhere.

Following is an excerpt from the brief trial of St. Cyprian before the Roman proconsul, Galerius Maximus, which shows the arbitrary nature of the proceedings:

Galerius Maximus: “Are you Thascius Cyprianus?”

St. Cyprian: “I am”

Galerius Maximus: “The Emperors have ordered you to make sacrifices.”

St. Cyprian: “I will not obey.”

Galerius Maximus: “I advise you to think it over.”

St. Cyprian: “Do as you are instructed. There is no need to take counsel in such a righteous deed.”

Galerius Maximus: “It is the sentence of this court that Thascius Cyprianus be executed with the sword.”

St. Cyprian: “Thanks be to God.”

In 260, Valerian was captured in battle by King Shapur I of Persia. His ultimate fate is not known for sure. One account has him humiliated by Shapur, killed, and then stuffed and mounted as a trophy in a Persian temple. Another says that he lived out his years as a slave in Persia. Whatever his fate, his end was ignominious.

Diocletian (Reigned 284-305)

The Emperor Diocletian was one of the more talented and remarkable men to ascend the Roman imperial throne. His ascendancy brought to an end the continual upheavals and near anarchy of the third century and re-established stability and respect for law and order, but also established an extreme form of despotism. Since the sheer magnitude and complexity of imperial rule threatened collapse,



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Diocletian resolved on a comprehensive reform of the imperial system. Most notable was his creation in 293 of the Tetrarchy (“rule by four”) in which the empire was divided between East and West, each half ruled by a senior emperor, or *augustus*, and an assistant emperor, or *caesar*, who, upon the death or disability of the senior emperor, would assume supreme power. Power was thus decentralized, making it possible, in theory anyway, for the gargantuan imperial State to be properly administered. Diocletian himself became *augustus* of the East, assisted by his *caesar*, Galerius. In the West, Maximian was named *augustus*, while Constantius Chlorus (the father of Constantine the Great) became *caesar*. For a number of years the Tetrarchy achieved its goal, though it ultimately failed.

For nearly all of his reign, Diocletian, although a pagan, was tolerant of Christians, allowing several to occupy important positions of trust within the imperial court and in his personal household. Despite that record, in February 303, he launched the bitterest and lengthiest of the anti-Christian persecutions, known to history as the “Great Persecution.” Why did he turn from the fair-minded, tolerant, fatherly ruler to vicious persecutor? First, we must remember that Diocletian was a believer in the religion of the old gods and was extremely superstitious. At some point shortly before the persecution was ordered, the emperor held a religious sacrifice in his palace. All members of the household were expected to attend, including the Christians. When the time came for the *haruspex* to examine the sacrificed animal’s entrails to look for omens that would guide future actions, some of the Christians spontaneously made the Sign of the Cross. Seeing this, the *haruspex* was furious, claiming that the Christians had deliberately spoiled the reading of the omens. Diocletian was shocked and angered by the incident, interpreting the Christian gesture as some sort of dangerous magic that thwarted the purpose of his sacrifice and, doubtless, angered the gods. In addition, his assistant, Galerius, a fanatical pagan, placed great pressure on Diocletian, appealing especially to his superstitious nature, to halt the spread of Christianity, which, he believed, threatened the empire. Edicts against the Christians immediately followed.

The first edict required that all church buildings be demolished, all Bibles and liturgical books surrendered and destroyed, all sacred vessels seized, and all meetings by Christians forbidden. The second edict, a few months later, ordered the arrest of all clergy, though an amnesty was granted on condition that a released clergyman make a sacrifice. Finally, in 304, all citizens of the empire were commanded to sacrifice on pain of death. The edicts were much more strictly enforced in the East, while in the provinces governed by Constantius Chlorus — Britain and Gaul — the edicts were almost totally ignored since he, though remaining a pagan, was friendly to the Christians and had many Christian officials in his court, regarding them as excellent and loyal citizens, which indeed they were. Sts. Agnes of Rome, Felix of Rome, Gorgonius of Nicomedia, and Pamphilus of Caesarea were among the many thousands martyred during the Great Persecution.

The Edict of Milan (313)

In 305, Diocletian abdicated and retired to his estate in Dalmatia, his assistant, Galerius, becoming the new emperor of the East. Galerius continued to fan the flames of persecution until he fell ill in 311 and issued an Edict of Toleration, ending the persecution and granting the Christians freedom of worship. In that document he begged his Christian subjects to pray for the empire and for him, since he was dying from a very painful form of cancer. Despite Galerius’ edict, his assistant, Maximin Daia, continued the persecution. Only with the Edict of Milan, in February 313, issued by Emperors Constantine in the West (who had succeeded his father), and Licinius in the East, was Christianity granted full freedom and



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equality with the old religion.

It is believed by some that when he became sole emperor, Constantine elevated Christianity to the official state religion. That, however, is incorrect. Christians constituted a small minority in most parts of the empire (10 percent or less), and thus, making Christianity a state religion would have been impossible. It is also believed by some that Constantine's legalization of Christianity encouraged a type of syncretistic blending of paganism with Christianity. However, it is absurd to believe that the men and women who stood up against that very syncretism even under torture and even unto death in refusing to honor the old gods would be seduced into doing so by the Edict of Milan. While it is true that Constantine himself had to proceed very carefully as ruler, since paganism remained the majority religion for some time, the church itself ever remained rigorously apart from every taint of paganism.

The Lessons

What can we learn from the persecutions of the first centuries of the Christian Era, when one of the mightiest empires in history failed to defeat the comparatively small, weak early church? First, the witness of those who resisted the attacks by government authorities on Christianity by valiantly facing wild animals, flames, and swords was an inspiration to many at that time, who consequently became Christians, and has inspired much of the world ever since. The millions of Christians who have gone to their deaths for Christ in the 20th and 21st centuries were likewise inspired by the heroism of their spiritual ancestors, and followed courageously in their footsteps.

We learn also that in spite of the apparent victorious march of evil at various times, in the end evil will always lose, though it often takes time. Many in the pagan Roman Empire believed that Christianity was a mere ephemeral aberration. They were wrong. Many people in the 1960s and '70s believed that communism would ultimately defeat freedom. It did not. Many today believe that traditional Christianity will soon disappear, as faith in science seems to replace faith in God. They are mistaken. Many in America today think that the assemblage of disgusting iniquities known as liberalism or leftism will inevitably be victorious. It will not. Let us therefore be confident in our stand for truth, confident in the power of God, and confident that in spite of all, truth will have the last word and will triumph.



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