Written by **Charles Scaliger** on December 25, 2012

Rise of Christendom

If Western civilization were assigned a starting date, Christmas Day in the year 800 would be a very good choice. On that day, the ambitious Frankish monarch Charlemagne, who had recently restored Pope Leo III to his seat at the Vatican from where he had been driven by would-be assassins, attended mass at St. Peter's Basilica. To the astonishment of the assembled multitude, the pope interrupted the service to place a crown on Charlemagne's head, and declared him emperor over a restored Western Roman Empire. What came to be called the Holy Roman Empire was the first great power to emerge in the new Western Christian civilization; it was an attempt to recreate the glory of the realm of the Caesars, but in a Christian, rather than a pagan, setting.

To the ambitious Charlemagne, the coronation was doubtless anticipated, but to the wondering multitudes, who raised a shout of acclamation for "the most pious Augustus, crowned by God the great and pacific emperor of the Romans," it was a miraculous event for Christendom, a crowning triumph, so to speak, after a long climb out of darkness for the once-harried and persecuted Christian faithful. Christmas Day 800 was only a few centuries removed from the dominion of the Caesars at their apogee, yet on that day, the tables had been definitively turned; Caesar was now subordinate to a higher authority — the same authority that the Neros and Diocletians had once tried to burn at the stake and grind into the bloody sands of the Colosseum.

The rise of Christianity, from the hills of Galilee to the crowned heads of Europe, must be regarded as one of history's most extraordinary events, especially given the persecution of early Christians and the overwhelming secular power directed against them. For while the Roman Empire did not at first regard fledgling Christianity as a serious threat, it had taken the life of its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, and its officials in Palestine were susceptible to complaints against them leveled by other Jews. From our early 21st-century perspective, it is difficult to imagine how absolutely Rome ruled her far-flung dominions. But in the time of Caesar Augustus and his successor, Tiberius, Roman legions controlled almost all of southern and western Europe, including Britain, as well as all of North Africa, most of Asia Minor, and the entire Levantine Middle East. Rome remains the only power ever to completely encircle the Mediterranean Sea. At the height of her military power, early in the second century A.D., Roman conquests extended well into Mesopotamia and included a large chunk of Eastern Europe as well. Internally, the empire was scrupulously and minutely administered. From Tiberius onward, a secret police, the *frumentarii*, kept tabs on just about everyone.

The First Few Decades

During the first few decades of its history, Christianity grew by leaps and bounds and, as far as we can ascertain, its first devotees worshiped openly, constructing their own churches for the purpose. The first Christian missionaries, including the apostles, exploited the open borders created by Roman administration and traveled far and wide across the vast sweep of the empire, attracting converts everywhere they went. To be sure, they were sometimes resisted by votaries of local deities who correctly perceived in Christianity a potent new rival, but the Romans themselves, with the latitude typical of polytheism, seem to have regarded Christianity as just another oddball sect of the sort that proliferated in such a sprawling and culturally diverse empire.

All of that changed, however, on July 19, 64 A.D. Sometime late at night on the 18th or very early on the 19th, a fire broke out near the Circus Maximus and burned for almost a week, consuming hundreds of buildings, roughly one-tenth of the city. Many cultural treasures were destroyed, including a temple of Jupiter supposedly set up by Romulus; the palace of early Rome's greatest king, Numa Pompilius; and the sanctuary of the goddess Vesta, filled with the images of Roman tutelary deities. Notwithstanding lurid rumors about Nero himself starting the fire and playing his lyre while the city burned, it is unclear what caused the fire, or whether it was deliberate. But what is beyond dispute is whom Nero publicly blamed for the conflagration: the Christians.

By the time of Nero's blood-soaked reign, Christians in Rome had become fairly numerous, including by some accounts both the apostles Peter and Paul. Nero himself, who was almost certainly clinically insane, may have been a devotee of the Persian deity Mithras, thanks to having allegedly been introduced to the cult of the oriental deity by a captive Armenian king whom Nero had brought to Rome to be displayed in a triumph. Whatever the case, Nero appears to have been the first Roman emperor to be openly hostile to the Christians, and in the wake of the Great Fire of 64, he used them as scapegoats. After supposedly wringing confessions from certain of them by torture, Nero embarked upon the first major public persecution of Christians. The great historian Tacitus, who was nine years old at the time of the fire, recorded the heart-wrenching events:

> An immense multitude [of Christians] was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. 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.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

While most of the names of that first generation of martyrs sacrificed on the bloody altar of the Roman state have not come down to us, tradition holds that both Peter and Paul were among the victims of Nero's holocaust. Fortunately for the progress of early Christianity, however, Nero's bloodlust was sated by his purge of Christians in the city; elsewhere in the empire, they went unmolested — for a time.

Following Nero's example, subsequent Roman rulers, especially local authorities, launched sporadic attacks on Christian communities. Many such episodes were a result of local pressure by non-Christians who (correctly, as events turned out) discerned in the growing new religion a profound threat to Roman culture and its pagan pantheon. During almost the next two centuries of Roman history, the reigns of Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, and Maximinus Thrax all saw outbreaks of

persecution, some of which doubtless had the approval of the emperor. While information on such episodes of persecution is spotty and often colored by bias of one sort or another, it appears that persecution increased in severity more or less as the numbers and influence of Christianity grew.

Picking Up the Persecution

One of the most appalling episodes during this long period, when persecution had yet to become official empire-wide policy, took place in 177 A.D. in Lugdunum (now Lyons, France) under the "good" emperor Marcus Aurelius. Lugdunum had adopted a policy relegating Christians to second-class status, and denying them the right to appear in certain public areas like baths and marketplaces. In that year, Christians were rounded up, imprisoned, and tried, and large numbers were put to death by means wearyingly familiar to modern aficionados of sword-and-sandals cinema: They were fed to wild beasts in the Amphitheater of Three Gauls. Others were subjected to cruel torture or long imprisonment under harsh conditions.

In the middle of the third century A.D., a new emperor, Decius, ascended to the seat of the Caesars with the apparent intention of systematizing the persecution of Christians across the empire. In 250, Decius issued an edict requiring all Roman citizens to perform a sacrifice to the emperor and receive a certificate vouching that he had done so. Performing such a sacrifice was taken to be a renunciation of Christian faith, and large numbers of Christians refused to submit to the new law. The response of the Roman government was severe and far-reaching. Wrote Gregory of Tours more than two centuries after the event, "There was such a slaughter of believers that they could not be numbered" — among them prominent Christian leaders, including many bishops, and women and children as well. Despite the far-reaching effects of this, the first state-sanctioned, empire-wide persecution, it did not seriously dent the numbers of adherents to the new faith (except in Carthage, where many Christians chose to apostatize), and seems to have elicited some sympathy among non-believers for the Christians' principled but passive defiance of the emperor. Within the church, however, there was bitter debate over what to do with those who had chosen to bow to the ordinance to save their own lives, and then afterwards tried to return to the fold. Should they be readmitted to the faith and their shame forgiven, or should they be excluded as apostates?

The emperor himself gained nothing from the persecution, and repealed the law the following year, shortly before his own ignominious death at the hands of the Goths in what is now Bulgaria. Decius, the first Roman emperor to make persecution of the Christians official imperial policy, also was the first to die on the battlefield at the hands of a foreign foe.

After Decius, imperial persecution of the Christians worsened. It is perhaps not coincidental that, by this time, the Cult of the Emperor, associated both with the cult of the Sun and the cult of Mithras, had become the most potent aspect of Roman paganism, surpassing in influence all of the ancient cults associated with the Roman gods and goddesses every modern schoolboy studies. Gone or waning were many of the gods and their cults that had underlain the ancient pagan virtues of the Roman republic. In their place had been substituted a virulent imperial cult equalling anything contrived by the monarchs of Persia or Babylon. Many of Rome's emperors — as well as her military and her mercantile and financial leadership — now owed their allegiance to the secret god Mithras, whose peculiar Oriental cult had spread far and wide across the empire. Devotees of Mithras, nicknamed Sol Invictus or "Unconquerable Sun," worshipped in secret underground cavern-like chapels called *mithraea*. Mithraism was organized into seven initiatory levels, and little is known today about the substance of their beliefs and sacraments, although there is some evidence that human sacrifice was carried out, and

that Mithraists worshipped, in addition to the youthful, bull-slaying Mithras, a lion-headed deity, Ahrimanius, who was synonymous with the Persian Satan Ahriman (the very name comes from the Avestan Angra Maniush, meaning "evil spirit"). Besides Nero, it appears that a number of Roman emperors were full-blown inductees in the cult of Mithras, including Commodus, Elagabalus, Aurelian, Diocletian, and Julian ("the Apostate"). Certainly the iconography of Mithraism is widespread in later pre-Christian imperial Rome, as evidenced, for example, by the frequency of the device "Sol Invictus" on coinage. Not only that, Mithraism came to be regarded by early Christians as perhaps their greatest rival. Certain aspects of the mythology of Mithraism — for example, a youthful god who sacrifices his life — appeared to be contrived to mimic Christianity. For a time, it appeared that Mithraism rather than Christianity would be the shape of things to come.

The general persecution of Christians continued under Valerian, who became emperor in 253, two years after Decius' death. He, like Decius, required all Christians to perform sacrifices to Roman gods, and those who refused to do so were at first punished by exile. By 258, however, the punishment for refusing to sacrifice was death. The bishops of both Rome and Carthage, along with many Christians who had become political and military leaders, were put to death by Valerian's administration. Strangely, he too met a terrible end at the hands of foreigners. In 260, while campaigning against the Sassanid Persians in Mesopotamia, he was taken captive by Shapur I, one of Rome's greatest foes. After a spell in Persian captivity, during which he was subjected to every species of humiliation, he was put to death, probably by being flayed alive. Afterwards, it was claimed, his skin was stuffed and put on display in one of the Persian temples.

The capture of Valerian put a stop to the latest round of Christian persecutions; his son and heir, Gallienus, revoked Valerian's anti-Christian legislation. For a few years, the persecutions appear to have subsided, but the worst was yet to come.

The Worst of Times

The ascent of Diocletian to the imperial throne was, in many ways, one of the most calamitous turns in all of Roman history. Diocletian, a man of tremendous energy and administrative talents, nevertheless ruined the Roman economy, triggering one of the most severe episodes of inflation in the ancient world. Although as ruthless and power-hungry as any of his predecessors, he became the first (and only) Roman emperor to retire voluntarily from office and live out his days in seclusion and relative peace. He loved the emoluments of power (becoming the first Roman emperor to wear the purple robes and diadem associated with the Persian "King of Kings," and repudiating any lingering pretenses to limited republican government that Romans had continued to entertain). Yet it was Diocletian who divided the Roman Empire in twain, appointing separate emperors to rule over each half (and two Caesars under each emperor, constituting what became known as the Tetrarchy). This act ensured that the Eastern Empire, afterwards known as the Byzantine Empire, would last for another 1,100 years, although not as a pagan Roman state. Diocletian identified as strongly as any emperor with the Roman imperial cult, and was probably as hostile to Christianity as any of his predecessors. Yet the last and greatest Roman persecutions, associated with the reign of Diocletian, were probably instigated mostly by his co-regent, Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for many years only gradually introduced anti-Christian policies. He purged Christians from the Roman military, for example, and included in his administration many who were hostile to Christianity. Perhaps most alarming was his campaign to eradicate Manichaeism, an even newer religion similar in certain respects to Christianity (and, like Mithraism, regarded by early

Christians as a satanic counterfeit of Christianity). Thousands of the followers of Mani were put to death or sold into slavery across the empire, in a spasm of persecution that signaled the conservative Diocletian's hostility to religions that threatened the old gods.

In 303, it was the turn of the Christians to endure the full wrath of the Roman state, on a scale they had never before experienced, nor ever would again. At the urging of Galerius, Diocletian consulted the oracle of Apollo to inquire whether he should take action against the Christians. When the oracle replied in the affirmative, Diocletian proceeded to set in motion the "Great Persecution." Edicts went forth to every corner of the empire ordering the destruction of Christian writings and places of worship. Christians with military or political status were stripped of ranks and privileges, and Christians were denied any judicial recourse. Diocletian himself — perhaps chastened by the terrible fates of Decius and Valerian — insisted that no Christian blood be shed, but his authority over far-flung portions of the Tetrarchy was limited by this time, and the anti-Christian zeal of Galerius in particular was not to be placated without bloodshed. Churches and scriptures were destroyed, and Christians were rounded up by the thousands. Uncountable numbers of them were put to death; the preferred method of execution was burning alive. From one end of the Roman world to the other, Christians were hunted down, imprisoned, and executed without trials, an excess of religious persecution that was not to be surpassed in Europe until the religious wars pitting Catholic against Protestant more than a thousand years later.

Many of the victims of the Diocletianic persecution are justly remembered in the annals of martyrology: St. Vincent, who was roasted alive in Valencia; St. Sebastian, who was shot full of arrows and afterwards clubbed to death in Rome; and St. Eulalia of Barcelona, who was subjected to a long series of horrible tortures, including being rolled down a hill in a barrel full of knives, for refusing to deny her Christian faith, before finally being decapitated. Diocletian's agents did not spare the young; Agnes, an innocent Roman girl in her early teens from a privileged family, was dragged by jeering authorities to a brothel where, according to tradition, she was protected from defilement by divine power, but afterwards was martyred by beheading. In Thessalonica, three virgin sisters — Agape, Chionia, and Irene — were arrested for refusing to eat food-offerings to the Roman gods. All three were burned alive for refusing to renounce their Christian faith.

Dozens of martyrs killed during the Great Persecution are today revered as saints by the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Certainly Christianity has never seen a more courageous community than those thousands of suffering Christians ground beneath the iron heel of Rome during 10 terrible years at the beginning of the fourth century. It must have seemed, to the adherents of what had been a flourishing faith, that all the powers of hell had been unleashed in the persons of Diocletian and Galerius, and that Christianity itself would follow Manichaeism into ruin and eventual extinction. (Manichaeism did last for several centuries more, far from Roman power, in Asia, especially far to the east among the Uighur people, but today is completely extinct.)

Christianity Coalesces

But, as suddenly as they began, the persecutions ended. Galerius, perhaps feeling some pangs for the horrors he had helped to unleash, tried to end the persecutions in 311 by issuing a remorseful "Edict of Toleration," but they persisted for two more years in some precincts. In 313, co-emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, which stipulated that all property taken from Christians be restored to its rightful owners. Churches that had not been destroyed were returned to Christian congregations, and compensation was even paid to those whose goods had been taken.

In coming years, Constantine passed more legislation friendly to Christianity. While the authenticity of

his alleged vision of a cross in the heavens preceding the Battle of Milvian Bridge and the sincerity of his conversion have been questioned by secular scholarship, there can be no doubt that Constantine I, afterwards surnamed "the Great," was an entirely new kind of Roman emperor, openly supportive of Christianity where the best of his predecessors had merely shown a grudging toleration. He did away with execution by crucifixion, declared Sunday a day of rest in which business transactions — other than manumission of slaves — could not be undertaken. He even banned gladiatorial sports toward the end of his reign. Meanwhile, Constantine showered property, wealth, and other favors on the church, presumably with a view to transforming it into the new Roman state religion. At the same time, he prohibited the construction of new pagan temples and even, toward the end of his reign, began dismantling old ones. He moved the capital of Rome eastward to the strategically placed city of Byzantium — renamed Constantinople — thereby guaranteeing that a Christian civilization would weather the centuries of barbarism and invasions that were shortly to bring an end to the Western Empire.

Not long before his death Constantine, whose coinage had continued to represent him as Sol Invictus, accepted Christian baptism. His extraordinary reign is often regarded as the starting point of Christendom, and the order he founded was reinforced centuries later, after the ravages of the Roman collapse, by the ascent of another monarch cut from the same mold, Charlemagne.

If the legalization of Christianity under Constantine brought an end to centuries of persecution and discrimination, the troubles of the Christians were not entirely over. A generation later, a brilliant and charismatic young emperor, Julian, made a last, desperate bid to restore the glories of pre-Christian paganism. Julian, who was a fervent devotee of the Mithraic mysteries, did not attempt a resumption of open persecution of the Christians, who by then had become a powerful force throughout Roman dominions. He did, however, attempt to sow discord among Christians by recalling from exile certain controversial Christian heretics; prohibit Christians from teaching classical literature, such as the *Illiad*; and withdraw state funding for certain church activities. He also poured his considerable energy into encouraging a revival of paganism. Rather inexplicably, he also tried to rebuild the Jewish temple at Jerusalem that had been destroyed centuries earlier by Titus, but this project was fraught with setbacks and came to naught.

Whether Julian the Apostate could have succeeded in his project to restore Roman paganism is impossible to know; by his time, the old ways were in such decline and Christianity, in its various forms, was so well-entrenched, that it is doubtful that even a full frontal assault, along the lines of the Diocletian persecutions, could have succeeded. In any case, history left the question unanswered when Julian, like Decius and Valerian before him, perished on foreign soil, mortally wounded by a Persian shaft.

In the centuries to follow, Christian civilization faced many challenges — barbarian invasions, socioeconomic collapse, schisms, the rise of Islam, and periodic waves of heresy like the Paulicians and the Bogomils, but never again was it to suffer an existential threat. By the time of Charlemagne's Christmas coronation, although portions of Europe remained pagan, especially in the far north and east, it was apparent that Christian civilization, against all odds, had triumphed over the greatest worldly powers, and was on the Earth to stay.

Image at top of article: Christian monarch Charlemagne crowned emperor over a revived Roman Empire by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, 800 A.D.