

Lesson 4

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS NOURISHES THE LORD'S VINEYARD

The Church was persecuted by the Pharisees because it was considered a threat to their reforms. It was also seen as a menace to Jewish identity, already threatened by the Hellenistic world. Christians dispensed with the distinctive signs of circumcision, kosher food, and the temple (the issue in Acts 7: 44-50, and Acts 21:27-29). Their worst offence in Jewish eyes was the worship of a man as God. This hostility was increased by the refusal of Christians to join in successive revolts. Later Simeon Bar-Kochba could not tolerate the followers of a rival Messiah. With the spread of the Faith outside of Palestine the Christians in the other parts of the Roman Empire were not subjected to Judaic persecution.

For a brief while, there was a relative calm. Judaism, despite being monotheistic, had been recognized as *religio licita* by Julius Caesar and had been awarded privileges by him and by subsequent rulers. The Jews were permitted to have civil jurisdiction over their own territory; thus making them almost a state within the larger Roman state. The Jews were protected by the State, mainly because of their usefulness to the economy. There were, however, times when they were not in favour with the populace and frequently bore the brunt of cruel taunts and wicked insinuations denigrating their faith. They even, on occasion, suffered physical violence at the hands of illegal mobs.

Judaism, despite occasional opposition, thrived. At one time in Rome - due to the decline of the pagan religions - it became vogue to convert to Judaism. This trend ended with the edicts issued by Hadrian and Septimius Severus which banned proselytism.

The early Church was, at the beginning, tolerated by the Roman authorities who regarded it as merely another Jewish sect, so, Christianity received the same protection and privileges from Roman law that Judaism did. However, the relationship between the Church and Judaism was far more tempestuous, as can be seen within the Acts of the Apostles. It was from the Jews, and only from the Jews, that the early Church was to suffer persecution. The Roman authorities ignored this; viewing it as an insignificant argument between two factious groups of Jews.

This relative peace did not last for long. As the Church grew, the Romans took notice of it and were threatened by its existence. Soon there were attempts to destroy the Church. The Roman persecution of Christians started in 64 A.D. by the emperor Nero, and closed with the implementation of the *Edict of Milan* in 313 A.D., signed by Saint Constantine and Licinius.

Christians, from the time of Nero, were liable to persecution at any moment. It was always a possibility that the wrath of the populace would break out against the Church or that the Roman government might find it politically expedient to punish the Christians.

So, even though there were spells of relative peace and security, these periods were often only transitory and were replaced by terms of renewed hostility.

The persecution of the early Church may be viewed as covering two distinct periods. The first period being from Nero in 64 to the end of the reign of Maximinus in 238. The second period extending from the Decian persecution of 249 through to the signing of the *Edict of Milan* in 313. The first period, in comparison with the second, was neither as systematic nor as relentless. It was sporadic and localised, the result of transient animosity rather than clearly defined legislation against the Church. The persecutions during this period were, although at times ferocious, less severe and had less effect upon the Church than did the period that followed. The second period began with the emperor Decius, who had inherited an Empire in which the Christian Church had grown significantly in size and influence. Decius started a campaign in which he hoped that the Church would be eradicated. Thus began a policy of general persecution against the Church that was to be adhered to by later emperors. It was during this period that many were to be martyred.

To better understand the Holy Martyrs of this period, we should understand the motives behind the violent hatred displayed by the Romans towards Christians and the charges against the Church. There were many reasons for the persecutions and no one reason should be viewed as more or less important than the others. The first is that of the exclusive and separatist nature of the Christian Faith as viewed by the pagan world. The Christians were regarded by both the common people and the authorities as being separatists. The Christian way of life itself distanced it from that of the pagan world. The very moral standards of the Church were seen as a severe reproach of the pagan way of life. Indeed, many Christians lived an ascetic life and thus incurred the wrath of the populace. In the writings of the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, we see that Christians were singled out as being a *gang... of ignorant men and credulous women*, noted for their stubbornness (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 11.3). They were persecuted and hated for their name.

However, some other believers did not distance themselves so far from the world, conforming more to the society in which they lived. A description of a Christian community can be found within the *Epistle to Diognetus*, where it reads: *They pass their lives in whatever township - Greek or foreign - each man's lot has determined: and conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits (The Epistle to Diognetus; 5 - 6.)*. The letter goes on to describe the uniqueness of the Christian in his attitude to persecution, generosity, etc.

The Christian community had begun to acquire some wealth and was found even within the Roman court. Also, believers looked to the immediate needs of their fellow Christians and exhorted one another to be gainfully employed, not idle. The believer did, however, exclude himself from certain professions, such as acting, gladiatorial fighting and, in some cases, even teaching. This made the Church more noticeable. Christian attitude towards wealth, property and the enjoyment of worldly pleasures ran contrary to the materialistic position held by many pagans.

The Roman leaders and aristocrats were also concerned that the Christian attitude to wealth and property was a threat to their welfare. Of prime concern was the church's radical view concerning the position and treatment of slaves. The slave was considered by pagans to be a mere chattel: a possession with no rights or liberties. The teaching of the Church, however, was that slaves were no longer to be regarded in such a way. The slave was to be accepted as a brother and an equal (St. Paul's *Epistle to Philemon*, 1:15-16). It was not unusual for emancipated slaves to rise to positions of importance within the Church, some being appointed as deacons, elders and even bishops, for example, St. Callistus, Bishop of Rome in 217. Such people became highly respected members of the Church.

When the Christians faced hostility from the pagan world, one of the reasons was for their allegedly anti-social nature. For Tacitus, the Holy Martyrs under Nero were convicted *not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race*. What is more, they claimed that loyalty to the Church superseded all other loyalties.

Those Christians, married to pagans, were a source of much concern and consternation. The pagan philosopher and enemy of the Church, Porphyry, said that the pagan god, Apollo, in reply to a question, asked by an oracle, of how to recall a wife from Christianity, said that one would more *easily write in lasting letters on water... than recall to her senses an impious wife who has once polluted herself*. (Augustine, *On The City of God*, XIX, 23).

The position of father within the family was also undermined by some Christian extremists who would refuse to acknowledge any man as father. The only father as far as they were concerned was God the Father. Another problem was that of burial rites. A decision had to be made as to whether the deceased would be given a Christian or a pagan funeral (cremation). Many families were split because of this. For those who had both pagans and Christian believers within them it was impossible to satisfy both parties. Between 150 and 200 A.D., many denunciations of Christians were made because one member of a family had been converted, and incurred the wrath of the family. St. Barbara, St. Marina and St. Perpetua are just a few examples of Martyrs who were the objects of wrath from family members.

The most significant problem appertaining to employment was that of whether or not a Christian could serve in the army. Many did not see that this was in conflict with their Faith. Some said an emphatic *No*. Tertullian, for example, urged that believers should not: Origen and Lactantius also shared this belief. There was another dilemma that faced the Christian soldier, especially those of rank. For example, a centurion was duty-bound to participate in and to witness pagan sacrificial ceremonies. If he did not comply, he would lose his office and, most probably, his life. In 286 A.D., Emperor Maximian ordered the decimation of the Thebaean Legion for their refusal to exterminate fellow Christians. The army was a prime target whenever persecution was to break out; many Christian soldiers choosing to lose their lives rather than deny their faith. Indeed it was the questionable loyalty of some sections of the army that was one of the contributory factors in the *Great Persecution* under Diocletian and Maximian. St. George, St.

Demetrios and St. Theodore are some of the members of the Roman Army who were martyred.

Another reason for the persecutions was that of the pagan misunderstanding of the worship of the Church. A regular accusation propagated against Christianity was that of atheism. Christianity, because of its faith in one God, would not offer the customary sacrifices and worship to other gods: a duty of Roman subjects. St. Justin the Martyr wrote: *Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God...* (Justin Martyr, *Apology*, 1.6). The necessary secrecy surrounding the Divine Liturgy aroused suspicion of immorality. The Divine Liturgy known as the *agape*, or love feast, was regarded as an orgy and as St. Athenagoras records: *Three things are alleged against us: atheism, Thyestean feasts [cannibalism], Oedipodean intercourse [incest]* (Athenagoras, *Supplication for the Christians* 3). These were also some of the reasons given by Nero for the persecution of Christians.

One accusation is repeated time and time again – **Atheism**. The Christians rejected the various deities of their communities. This was a very serious matter; deities were believed to bring good fortune to a town and slighting them might bring down their wrath. According to Tertullian: *If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is, plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!'* Outbreaks of persecution often coincided with natural disasters. Earthquakes in Asia in 152 and an outbreak of plague in Alexandria at the time of Origen, were blamed on the Christians. Around 270, Porphyry blamed the plague in Rome on the fact that the temple of Aesculapius had been abandoned by the pagans, who had become Christians and prayed in their Churches. Often Christians were punished even for defeat in battle; the logic behind this being that the pagan gods had been offended by the Christian's atheism and were making the people suffer as a result. This same accusation was used when the pagan priests failed to foresee the future.

The Church was also considered a political threat. Throughout the whole period of persecution there continually hung a question mark over the loyalty of Christians to the Roman Empire. It would be quite possible to argue that Christianity suffered not so much for the doctrinal differences between its faith and that of the pagans, but rather for its avowed allegiance to a Heavenly throne and Law as opposed to those of Rome. The Roman authorities were sensitive to unrest. Complete submission and obedience was a pre-requisite for peaceful relations with the authorities; Christians gave neither to the State, for their allegiance lay with God. The Church was looking forward to the Kingdom of God and would not obey any secular law that contradicted the Law of God. Celsus, a notable opponent of Christianity, pointed out this failure to comply with the required homage demanded by the State. This refusal was to be a major issue; leading to the martyrdom of many faithful believers who resolutely refused to participate in Roman civic and national ceremonies. The Christian would not offer worship to either throne or State and this was interpreted as treason and disloyalty. The problem increased for the State as the Church, despite policies of persecution against it, continued to flourish in

wealth, influence and number. It was partly because of this rapid growth that the second period of more general persecutions was instigated. The State endeavoured to crush and eradicate the growing Church.

All the above attacks on the Faith were examined closely by Roman philosophers who wrote lengthy attacks on the Church. Celsus was a philosopher who lived during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. He wrote a work entitled *The True Word*, against the Faith. Another Philosopher who attacked the Church was Porphyry, 234 - 301A.D. His work, *Against the Christians*, was 15 volumes long. There were many others who wrote against the Faith. Even the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, wrote against the Christians. These authors attacked the beliefs and practices of the Church.

The Christians answered all these false accusations both when they were accused and in formal writings known as **Apologies** in which they showed that none of these accusations were true. The *Apologies* written by the following Saints, are among the better known: St. Aristides the Philosopher of Athens, St. Miltiades, St. Melito, St. Justin the Martyr, St. Athenagoras, St. Theophilus of Antioch and the Letter to Diognetus.

The following is an example of the content of these *Apologies*.

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, though they know that death is the punishment awarded to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off; since also death is a debt which must at all events be paid. (St. Justin the Martyr, First Apology, 11)

For all these reasons the Christians were hated by both the authorities and by the people. On July, 19th, 64 A.D., a fire started in Rome and burned for nine days, finally destroying or damaging almost three-quarters of the city, including numerous public buildings. Rumors spread that the fire had been planned by Nero. According to the Roman historian, Tacitus, to put an end to such rumors, Nero blamed the disaster on the Christians.

Therefore, to put an end to the rumor Nero created a diversion and subjected to the most extra-ordinary tortures those hated for their abominations by the common people called Christians. The originator of this name (was) Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. Repressed for the time being, the deadly superstition broke out again not only in Judea, the original source of the evil, but also in the city (Rome), where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become

popular. So an arrest was made of all who confessed; then on the basis of their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race. ...

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. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open the 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 drove about in a chariot. 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 that of one man's cruelty, that they were being punished. (Annals 15.44.2-8)

Eventually the mere name **Christian** was enough to be cause for martyrdom. St. Justin the Martyr records the case of Ptolemy, who was asked one question by his judge: *whether he was a Christian?*, and was not convicted of any crime at all, but who has only confessed that he is called by the name of Christian. St. Justin himself and his companions were repeatedly asked at their trial *Are you a Christian?* The martyrs of Scilli in Africa were condemned on the basis of their words *I am a Christian*, after the governor had warned them against speaking evil of our sacred rites, and ordered them to swear by the deity of the emperor.

The following account of the *Martyrdom of the Martyrs of Lyons* will illustrate the nature of the persecutions.

At first, Christians were excluded from the public baths, the market place, and from social and public life. They were subject to attack when they appeared in public, and many Christian homes were vandalized. At this point the government became involved, and began to take Christians into custody for questioning. Some slaves from Christian households were tortured to obtain confessions, and were induced to say that Christians practiced cannibalism and incest. These charges were used to arouse the whole city against the Christians, particularly against Pothinus, the aged bishop of Lyons; Sanctus, a deacon; Attalus; Maturus, a recent convert; and Blandina, a slave. Pothinus was beaten and then released, to die of his wounds a few days later. Sanctus was tormented with red-hot irons. Blandina, tortured all day long, would say nothing except, "I am a Christian, and nothing vile is done among us." Finally, the survivors were put to death in the public arena. ...

We cannot accurately tell or describe in detail the magnitude of the distress in this region, the fury of the heathen against the saints, or the sufferings of the blessed Martyrs. For with all his strength the enemy fell upon us, giving us a foretaste of his future unrestrained activity among us. He used every means to familiarize and train his own subjects against the

servants of God. Not only were we excluded from houses, baths, and the forum, but it was forbidden for any one of us to appear in any place whatsoever. But the grace of God acted as our general against him. It rescued the weak and set them as firm pillars, able through patience to bear up against the whole force of the assaults of the wicked one. These encountered him, enduring every form of shame and torture. They made light of their great sufferings. They hurried on to Christ, showing in reality that the "sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us." (1) First they nobly endured the evils heaped on them by the people, --namely, mocking, beatings, draggings, robberies, stonings, and imprisonments, and everything that an infuriated mob delights to inflict on those whom they consider bitter enemies. Then, being brought to the forum by the tribune of the soldiers and the rulers that had charge of the city, they were examined in the presence of the whole crowd. Having confessed, they were shut up in prison until the arrival of the governor.

These, trapped by Satan and fearing the tortures which they saw the saints enduring, urged on also by the soldiers, falsely accused us of cannibalism and incest and other crimes which it is unlawful for us either to mention or think of. Indeed, we shrink from believing that any such crimes have ever taken place among men. When these accusations were reported, all the people raged against us like wild beasts. If any previously had been moderate in their conduct to us on account of friendship, they were now exceedingly furious and exasperated against us. So was fulfilled that which was spoken by our Lord: "The time shall come when every one who slayeth you shall think that he offereth service to God."(4)

When finally the holy Martyrs suffered tortures beyond all description, Satan striving eagerly that some of the evil reports might be acknowledged by them. But the whole fury of the mob, the governor, and the soldiers particularly fell on Sanctus, a deacon from Vienne; Maturus, a recent convert yet a noble combatant; Attalus, a native of Pergamus, where he had always been a Pillar and foundation of the church; and on Blandina, through whom Christ showed that the things that to men appear vile and deformed and contemptible are with God of great glory, on account of love to Him,- a love which is not a mere boastful appearance, but shows itself in the power which it exercises over the life. We were all afraid, especially her earthly mistress, who was herself one of the combatants among the Martyrs, that she would not be able to make a bold confession on account of the weakness of her body. But, Blandina was filled with such power, that those who tortured her one after the other in every way from morning till evening were wearied and tired. They admitted they were baffled. They had no other torture they could apply to her. They were astonished that she remained alive. Her whole body was torn and opened up. They said that even one of the forms of torture employed was

enough to have destroyed her life, not to mention so many excruciating punishments. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession. Her declaration, "I am a Christian, and there is no evil done amongst us," brought her refreshment, rest, and insensibility to all the sufferings inflicted on her.

Sanctus also nobly endured all the excessive and superhuman tortures which man could possibly devise. For the wicked hoped, because of the continuance and greatness of the tortures, to hear him confess some of the alleged unlawful practices. But he opposed them with such firmness that he did not tell them even his own name, nor that of his nation or city, nor if he were slave or free. In answer to all these questions, he said in Latin, "I am a Christian." . . .He gave this confession to every question placed to him. Therefore the governor and the torturers determined to subdue him. When every other means failed, they at last fixed red-hot plates of brass to the most delicate parts of his body. And these indeed were burned, but he himself remained inflexible, unyielding, and firm in his confession. He was refreshed and strengthened by the heavenly fountain of the water of life which issues from the belly of Christ.⁵ But his body bore witness to what had happened. It was all wounds and welts, shrunk and torn up. It had externally lost the human shape. In him Christ suffering worked great wonders, destroying the enemy. He was an example to the others that there is nothing fearful where there is the Father's love, and nothing painful where there is Christ's glory. For the wicked after some days again tortured the Witness. They thought that, since his body was swollen and inflamed, if they were to apply the same tortures they would gain the victory over him, especially since the parts of his body could not bear to be touched by the hand. Possibly he would die from the tortures and inspire the rest with fear. Yet not only did no such thing happen to him, but even, contrary to every human expectation, his body unbent itself. It became erect during the subsequent tortures and resumed its former appearance and the use of its limbs. The second torture turned out through the grace of Christ a cure, not an affliction.

The persecutions were not caused only by the nature of the Roman state, but by the very Faith of the Christians, that made it impossible for them to conform when asked to sacrifice to false God. Unlike followers of pagan gods, they could not sacrifice to the Roman gods and remain faithful to their own God. This attitude was revolutionary and the Romans looked on it with incomprehension and frustration. For the Church, our Saviour and not Caesar is lord of the whole world and every aspect of our lives. The Christian Martyrs were not afraid to die because of the hope of the resurrection. Being deprived of the Kingdom of Heaven was more frightening than their tormentors. The final attitude can be summed up in one word: love. It can be seen in all the accounts of the Holy Martyrs. It can be seen in St. Polycarp's devotion to the Lord who had never failed him, and the desire of the martyrs at Lyons to be as closely united with our Saviour as possible.

