

## CHAPTER I

# History of Christian Martyrs to the First General Persecutions

## Under Nero

Christ our Savior, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, hearing the confession of Simon Peter, who, first of all other, openly acknowledged Him to be the Son of God, and perceiving the secret hand of His Father therein, called him (alluding to his name) a rock, upon which rock He would build His Church so strong that the gates of hell should not prevail against it. In which words three things are to be noted: First, that Christ will have a Church in this world. Secondly, that the same Church should mightily be impugned, not only by the world, but also by the uttermost strength and powers of all hell. And, thirdly, that the same Church, notwithstanding the uttermost of the devil and all his malice, should continue.

Which prophecy of Christ we see wonderfully to be verified, insomuch that the whole course of the Church to this day may seem nothing else but a verifying of the said prophecy. First, that Christ hath set up a Church, needeth no declaration. Secondly, what force of princes, kings, monarchs, governors, and rulers of this world, with their subjects, publicly and privately, with all their strength and cunning, have bent themselves against this Church! And, thirdly, how the said Church, all this notwithstanding, hath yet endured and holden its own! What storms and tempests it hath overpast, wondrous it is to behold: for the more evident declaration whereof, I have addressed this present history, to the end, first, that the wonderful works of God in His Church might appear to His glory; also that, the continuance and proceedings of the Church, from time to time, being set forth, more knowledge and experience may redound thereby, to the profit of the reader and edification of Christian faith.

As it is not our business to enlarge upon our Savior's history, either before or after His crucifixion, we shall only find it necessary to remind our readers of the discomfiture of the Jews by His subsequent resurrection. Although one apostle had betrayed Him; although another had denied Him, under the solemn sanction of an oath; and although the rest had forsaken Him, unless we may except "the disciple who was known unto the high-priest"; the history of His resurrection gave a new direction to all their hearts, and, after the mission of the Holy Spirit, imparted new confidence to their minds. The powers with which they were endued emboldened them to proclaim His name, to the confusion of the Jewish rulers, and the astonishment of Gentile proselytes.

## I. St. Stephen

St. Stephen suffered the next in order. His death was occasioned by the faithful manner in which he preached the Gospel to the betrayers and murderers of Christ. To such a degree of madness were they excited, that they cast him out of the city and stoned him to death. The time when he suffered is generally supposed to have been at the passover which succeeded to that of our Lord's crucifixion, and to the era of his ascension, in the following spring.

Upon this a great persecution was raised against all who professed their belief in Christ as the Messiah, or as a prophet. We are immediately told by St. Luke, that "there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem;" and that "they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles."

About two thousand Christians, with Nicanor, one of the seven deacons, suffered martyrdom during the "persecution that arose about Stephen."

## II. James the Great

The next martyr we meet with, according to St. Luke, in the History of the Apostles' Acts, was James the son of Zebedee, the elder brother of John, and a relative of our Lord; for his mother Salome was cousin-german to the Virgin Mary. It was not until ten years after the death of Stephen that the second martyrdom took place; for no sooner had Herod Agrippa been appointed governor of Judea, than, with a view to ingratiate himself with them, he raised a sharp persecution against the Christians, and determined to make an effectual blow, by striking at their leaders. The account given us by an eminent primitive writer, Clemens Alexandrinus, ought not to be overlooked; that, as James was led to the place of martyrdom, his accuser was brought to repent of his conduct by the apostle's extraordinary courage and undauntedness, and fell down at his feet to request his pardon, professing himself a Christian, and resolving that James should not receive the crown of martyrdom alone. Hence they were both beheaded at the same time. Thus did the first apostolic martyr cheerfully and resolutely receive that cup, which he had told our Savior he was ready to drink. Timon and Parmenas suffered martyrdom about the same time; the one at Philippi, and the other in Macedonia. These events took place A.D. 44.

## III. Philip

Was born at Bethsaida, in Galilee and was first called by the name of "disciple." He labored diligently in Upper Asia, and suffered martyrdom at Heliopolis, in Phrygia. He was scourged, thrown into prison, and afterwards crucified, A.D. 54.

#### **IV. Matthew**

Whose occupation was that of a toll-gatherer, was born at Nazareth. He wrote his gospel in Hebrew, which was afterwards translated into Greek by James the Less. The scene of his labors was Parthia, and Ethiopia, in which latter country he suffered martyrdom, being slain with a halberd in the city of Nadabah, A.D. 60.

#### **V. James the Less**

Is supposed by some to have been the brother of our Lord, by a former wife of Joseph. This is very doubtful, and accords too much with the Catholic superstition, that Mary never had any other children except our Savior. He was elected to the oversight of the churches of Jerusalem; and was the author of the Epistle ascribed to James in the sacred canon. At the age of ninety-four he was beat and stoned by the Jews; and finally had his brains dashed out with a fuller's club.

#### **VI. Matthias**

Of whom less is known than of most of the other disciples, was elected to fill the vacant place of Judas. He was stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded.

#### **VII. Andrew**

Was the brother of Peter. He preached the gospel to many Asiatic nations; but on his arrival at Edessa he was taken and crucified on a cross, the two ends of which were fixed transversely in the ground. Hence the derivation of the term, St. Andrew's Cross.

#### **VIII. St. Mark**

Was born of Jewish parents of the tribe of Levi. He is supposed to have been converted to Christianity by Peter, whom he served as an amanuensis, and under whose inspection he wrote his Gospel in the Greek language. Mark was dragged to pieces by the people of Alexandria, at the great solemnity of Serapis their idol, ending his life under their merciless hands.

#### **IX. Peter**

Among many other saints, the blessed apostle Peter was condemned to death, and crucified, as some do write, at Rome; albeit some others, and not without cause, do doubt thereof. Hegesippus saith that Nero sought matter against Peter to put him to death; which, when the people perceived, they entreated Peter with much ado that he would fly the city. Peter, through their importunity at length persuaded, prepared himself to avoid. But, coming to the gate, he saw the Lord Christ come to meet him, to whom he, worshipping, said, "Lord, whither dost Thou go?" To whom He answered and said, "I am come again to be crucified." By this, Peter, perceiving his suffering to be understood, returned into the city. Jerome saith that he was crucified, his head being down

and his feet upward, himself so requiring, because he was (he said) unworthy to be crucified after the same form and manner as the Lord was.

#### **X. Paul**

Paul, the apostle, who before was called Saul, after his great travail and unspeakable labors in promoting the Gospel of Christ, suffered also in this first persecution under Nero. Abdias, declareth that under his execution Nero sent two of his esquires, Ferega and Parthemius, to bring him word of his death. They, coming to Paul instructing the people, desired him to pray for them, that they might believe; who told them that shortly after they should believe and be baptised at His sepulcher. This done, the soldiers came and led him out of the city to the place of execution, where he, after his prayers made, gave his neck to the sword.

#### **XI. Jude**

The brother of James, was commonly called Thaddeus. He was crucified at Edessa, A.D. 72.

#### **XII. Bartholomew**

Preached in several countries, and having translated the Gospel of Matthew into the language of India, he propagated it in that country. He was at length cruelly beaten and then crucified by the impatient idolaters.

#### **XIII. Thomas**

Called Didymus, preached the Gospel in Parthia and India, where exciting the rage of the pagan priests, he was martyred by being thrust through with a spear.

#### **XIV. Luke**

The evangelist, was the author of the Gospel which goes under his name. He travelled with Paul through various countries, and is supposed to have been hanged on an olive tree, by the idolatrous priests of Greece.

#### **XV. Simon**

Surnamed Zelotes, preached the Gospel in Mauritania, Africa, and even in Britain, in which latter country he was crucified, A.D. 74.

#### **XVI. John**

The "beloved disciple," was brother to James the Great. The churches of Smyrna, Pergamos, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and Thyatira, were founded by him. From Ephesus he was ordered to be sent to Rome, where it is affirmed he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil. He escaped by miracle, without injury. Domitian afterwards banished him to the Isle of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. Nerva, the successor of Domitian, recalled him. He was the only apostle who escaped a violent death.

## XVII. Barnabas

Was of Cyprus, but of Jewish descent, his death is supposed to have taken place about A.D. 73.

And yet, notwithstanding all these continual persecutions and horrible punishments, the Church daily increased, deeply rooted in the doctrine of the apostles and of men apostolical, and watered plentifully with the blood of saints.

### CHAPTER II

## The Ten Primitive Persecutions

### The First Persecution, Under Nero, A.D. 67

The first persecution of the Church took place in the year 67, under Nero, the sixth emperor of Rome. This monarch reigned for the space of five years, with tolerable credit to himself, but then gave way to the greatest extravagancy of temper, and to the most atrocious barbarities. Among other diabolical whims, he ordered that the city of Rome should be set on fire, which order was executed by his officers, guards, and servants. While the imperial city was in flames, he went up to the tower of Macaenas, played upon his harp, sung the song of the burning of Troy, and openly declared that 'he wished the ruin of all things before his death.' Besides the noble pile, called the Circus, many other palaces and houses were consumed; several thousand perished in the flames, were smothered in the smoke, or buried beneath the ruins.

This dreadful conflagration continued nine days; when Nero, finding that his conduct was greatly blamed, and a severe odium cast upon him, determined to lay the whole upon the Christians, at once to excuse himself, and have an opportunity of glutting his sight with new cruelties. This was the occasion of the first persecution; and the barbarities exercised on the Christians were such as even excited the commiseration of the Romans themselves. Nero even refined upon cruelty, and contrived all manner of punishments for the Christians that the most infernal imagination could design. In particular, he had some sewed up in skins of wild beasts, and then worried by dogs until they expired; and others dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to axletrees, and set on fire in his gardens, in order to illuminate them. This persecution was general throughout the whole Roman Empire; but it rather increased than diminished the spirit of Christianity. In the course of it, St. Paul and St. Peter were martyred.

To their names may be added, Erastus, chamberlain of Corinth; Aristarchus, the Macedonian, and Trophimus, an Ephesian, converted by St. Paul, and fellow-laborer with him, Joseph, commonly called Barsabas, and Ananias, bishop of Damascus; each of the Seventy.

## The Second Persecution, Under Domitian, A.D. 81

The emperor Domitian, who was naturally inclined to cruelty, first slew his brother, and then raised the second persecution against the Christians. In his rage he put to death some of the Roman senators, some through malice; and others to confiscate their estates. He then commanded all the lineage of David be put to death.

Among the numerous martyrs that suffered during this persecution was Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem, who was crucified; and **St. John**, who was boiled in oil, and afterward banished to Patmos. Flavia, the daughter of a Roman senator, was likewise banished to Pontus; and a law was made, "That no Christian, once brought before the tribunal, should be exempted from punishment without renouncing his religion."

A variety of fabricated tales were, during this reign, composed in order to injure the Christians. Such was the infatuation of the pagans, that, if famine, pestilence, or earthquakes afflicted any of the Roman provinces, it was laid upon the Christians. These persecutions among the Christians increased the number of informers and many, for the sake of gain, swore away the lives of the innocent.

Another hardship was, that, when any Christians were brought before the magistrates, a test oath was proposed, when, if they refused to take it, death was pronounced against them; and if they confessed themselves Christians, the sentence was the same.

The following were the most remarkable among the numerous martyrs who suffered during this persecution.

Dionysius, the Areopagite, was an Athenian by birth, and educated in all the useful and ornamental literature of Greece. He then travelled to Egypt to study astronomy, and made very particular observations on the great and supernatural eclipse, which happened at the time of our Savior's crucifixion. The sanctity of his conversation and the purity of his manners recommended him so strongly to the Christians in general, that he was appointed bishop of Athens.

Nicodemus, a benevolent Christian of some distinction, suffered at Rome during the rage of Domitian's persecution.

Protasius and Gervasius were martyred at Milan.

**Timothy** was the celebrated disciple of St. Paul, and bishop of Ephesus, where he zealously governed the Church until A.D. 97. At this period, as the pagans were about to celebrate a feast called Catagogion, Timothy, meeting the procession, severely reproved them for their ridiculous idolatry, which so exasperated the people that they fell upon him with their clubs, and beat him in so dreadful a manner that he expired of the bruises two days later.

### **The Third Persecution, Under Trajan, A.D. 108**

In the third persecution Pliny the Second, a man learned and famous, seeing the lamentable slaughter of Christians, and moved therewith to pity, wrote to Trajan, certifying him that there were many thousands of them daily put to death, of which none did anything contrary to the Roman laws worthy of persecution. "The whole account they gave of their crime or error (whichever it is to be called) amounted only to this-viz. that they were accustomed on a stated day to meet before daylight, and to repeat together a set form of prayer to Christ as a God, and to bind themselves by an obligation-not indeed to commit wickedness; but, on the contrary-never to commit theft, robbery, or adultery, never to falsify their word, never to defraud any man: after which it was their custom to separate, and reassemble to partake in common of a harmless meal."

In this persecution suffered the blessed martyr, **Ignatius**, who is held in famous reverence among very many. This Ignatius was appointed to the bishopric of Antioch next after Peter in succession. Some do say, that he, being sent from Syria to Rome, because he professed Christ, was given to the wild beasts to be devoured. It is also said of him, that when he passed through Asia, being under the most strict custody of his keepers, he strengthened and confirmed the churches through all the cities as he went, both with his exhortations and preaching of the Word of God. Accordingly, having come to Smyrna, he wrote to the Church at Rome, exhorting them not to use means for his deliverance from martyrdom, lest they should deprive him of that which he most longed and hoped for. "Now I begin to be a disciple. I care for nothing, of visible or invisible things, so that I may but win Christ. Let fire and the cross, let the companies of wild beasts, let breaking of bones and tearing of limbs, let the grinding of the whole body, and all the malice of the devil, come upon me; be it so, only may I win Christ Jesus!" And even when he was sentenced to be thrown to the beasts, such as the burning desire that he had to suffer, that he spake, what time he heard the lions roaring, saying: "I am the wheat of Christ: I am going to be ground with the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread."

Trajan being succeeded by Adrian, the latter continued this third persecution with as much severity as his predecessor....

...In Mount Ararat many were crucified, crowned with thorns, and spears run into their sides, in imitation of Christ's passion...

...Many other similar cruelties and rigors were exercised against the Christians, until Quadratus, bishop of Athens, made a learned apology in their favor before the emperor, who happened to be there and Aristides, a philosopher of the same city, wrote an elegant epistle, which caused Adrian to relax in his severities, and relent in their favor.

Adrian dying A.D. 138, was succeeded by Antoninus Pius, one of the most amiable monarchs that ever reigned, and who stayed the persecutions against the Christians.

### **The Fourth Persecution, Under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, A.D. 162**

Marcus Aurelius, followed about the year of our Lord 161, a man of nature more stern and severe; and, although in study of philosophy and in civil government no less commendable, yet, toward the Christians sharp and fierce; by whom was moved the fourth persecution.

The cruelties used in this persecution were such that many of the spectators shuddered with horror at the sight, and were astonished at the intrepidity of the sufferers. Some of the martyrs were obliged to pass, with their already wounded feet, over thorns, nails, sharp shells, etc. upon their points, others were scourged until their sinews and veins lay bare, and after suffering the most excruciating tortures that could be devised, they were destroyed by the most terrible deaths.

Germanicus, a young man, but a true Christian, being delivered to the wild beasts on account of his faith, behaved with such astonishing courage that several pagans became converts to a faith which inspired such fortitude.

**Polycarp**, the venerable bishop of Smyrna, hearing that persons were seeking for him, escaped, but was discovered by a child. After feasting the guards who apprehended him, he desired an hour in prayer, which being allowed, he prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul, condemned, and burnt in the market place.

The proconsul then urged him, saying, "Swear, and I will release thee;--reproach Christ."

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?" At the stake to which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he assured them he should stand immovable, the flames, on their kindling the fagots, encircled his body, like an arch, without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire. But his body, at the instigation of the enemies of the Gospel, especially Jews, was ordered to be consumed in the pile, and the request of his friends, who wished to give it Christian burial, rejected. They nevertheless collected his bones and as much of his remains as possible, and caused them to be decently interred.

Metrodorus and Pionius, ... were likewise burnt. Carpus and Papilus, ... and Agatonica, a pious woman, suffered martyrdom at Pergamopolis, in Asia.

Felicitatis, an illustrious Roman lady, of a considerable family, and the most shining virtues, was a devout Christian. She had seven sons, whom she had educated with the most exemplary piety.

Januarius, the eldest, was scourged, and pressed to death with weights; Felix and Philip, the two next had their brains dashed out with clubs; Silvanus, the fourth, was murdered by being thrown from a precipice; and the three younger sons, Alexander, Vitalis, and Martial, were beheaded. The mother was beheaded with the same sword as the three latter.

Justin, the celebrated philosopher, fell a martyr in this persecution. He was a native of Neapolis, in Samaria, and was born A.D. 103. Justin was a great lover of truth, and a universal scholar; he investigated the Stoic and Peripatetic philosophy, and attempted the Pythagorean; but the behavior of our of its professors disgusting him, he applied himself to the Platonic, in which he took great delight. About the year 133, when he was thirty years of age, he became a convert to Christianity, and then, for the first time, perceived the real nature of truth.

He wrote an elegant epistle to the Gentiles, and employed his talents in convincing the Jews of the truth of the Christian rites; spending a great deal of time in travelling, until he took up his abode in Rome, and fixed his habitation upon the Viminal mount.

He kept a public school, taught many who afterward became great men, and wrote a treatise to confuse heresies of all kinds. As the pagans began to treat the Christians with great severity, Justin wrote his first apology in their favor. This piece displays great learning and genius, and occasioned the emperor to publish an edict in favor of the Christians.

Soon after, he entered into frequent contests with Crescens, a person of a vicious life and conversation, but a celebrated cynic philosopher; and his arguments appeared so powerful, yet disgusting to the cynic, that he resolved on, and in the sequel accomplished, his destruction.

The second apology of Justin, upon certain severities, gave Crescens the cynic an opportunity of prejudicing the emperor against the writer of it; upon which Justin, and six of his companions, were apprehended. Being commanded to sacrifice to the pagan idols, they refused, and were condemned to be scourged, and then beheaded; which sentence was executed with all imaginable severity. Several were beheaded for refusing to sacrifice to the image of Jupiter; in particular Concordus, a deacon of the city of Spolito.

Some of the restless northern nations having risen in arms against Rome, the emperor marched to encounter them. He was, however, drawn into an ambuscade, and dreaded the loss of his whole army. Enveloped with mountains, surrounded by enemies, and perishing with thirst, the pagan deities were invoked in vain; when the men belonging to the militine, or thundering

legion, who were all Christians, were commanded to call upon their God for succor. A miraculous deliverance immediately ensued; a prodigious quantity of rain fell, which, being caught by the men, and filling their dykes, afforded a sudden and astonishing relief. It appears that the storm which miraculously flashed in the face of the enemy so intimidated them, that part deserted to the Roman army; the rest were defeated, and the revolted provinces entirely recovered.

This affair occasioned the persecution to subside for some time, at least in those parts immediately under the inspection of the emperor; but we find that it soon after raged in France, particularly at Lyons, where the tortures to which many of the Christians were put, almost exceed the powers of description. The principal of these martyrs were Vetius Agathus, a young man; Blandina, a Christian lady, of a weak constitution; Sanctus, a deacon of Vienna; red hot plates of brass were placed upon the tenderest parts of his body; Biblias, a weak woman, once an apostate. Attalus, of Pergamus; and Pothinus, the venerable bishop of Lyons, who was ninety years of age. Blandina, on the day when she and the three other champions were first brought into the amphitheater, she was suspended on a piece of wood fixed in the ground, and exposed as food for the wild beasts; at which time, by her earnest prayers, she encouraged others. But none of the wild beasts would touch her, so that she was remanded to prison. When she was again produced for the third and last time, she was accompanied by Ponticus, a youth of fifteen, and the constancy of their faith so enraged the multitude that neither the sex of the one nor the youth of the other were respected, being exposed to all manner of punishments and tortures. Being strengthened by Blandina, he persevered unto death; and she, after enduring all the torments heretofore mentioned, was at length slain with the sword.

When the Christians, upon these occasions, received martyrdom, they were ornamented, and crowned with garlands of flowers; for which they, in heaven, received eternal crowns of glory.

It has been said that the lives of the early Christians consisted of "persecution above ground and prayer below ground." Their lives are expressed by the Coliseum and the catacombs. Beneath Rome are the excavations which we call the catacombs, which were at once temples and tombs. The early Church of Rome might well be called the Church of the Catacombs. There are some sixty catacombs near Rome, in which some six hundred miles of galleries have been traced, and these are not all. These galleries are about eight feet high and from three to five feet wide, containing on either side several rows of long, low, horizontal recesses, one above another like berths in a ship. In these the dead bodies were placed and the front closed, either by a single marble slab or several great tiles laid in mortar. On these slabs or tiles, epitaphs or symbols

are graved or painted. Both pagans and Christians buried their dead in these catacombs. When the Christian graves have been opened the skeletons tell their own terrible tale. Heads are found severed from the body, ribs and shoulder blades are broken, bones are often calcined from fire. But despite the awful story of persecution that we may read here, the inscriptions breathe forth peace and joy and triumph. Here are a few:

*"Here lies Marcia, put to rest in a dream of peace."*

*"Lawrence to his sweetest son, borne away of angels."*

*"Victorious in peace and in Christ."*

*"Being called away, he went in peace."*

*Remember when reading these inscriptions the story the skeletons tell of persecution, of torture, and of fire.*

But the full force of these epitaphs is seen when we contrast them with the pagan epitaphs, such as:

*"Live for the present hour, since we are sure of nothing else."*

*"I lift my hands against the gods who took me away at the age of twenty though I had done no harm."*

*"Once I was not. Now I am not. I know nothing about it, and it is no concern of mine."*

*"Traveler, curse me not as you pass, for I am in darkness and cannot answer."*

The most frequent Christian symbols on the walls of the catacombs, are, the good shepherd with the lamb on his shoulder, a ship under full sail, harps, anchors, crowns, vines, and above all the fish.

### **The Fifth Persecution, Commencing with Severus, A.D. 192**

Severus, having been recovered from a severe fit of sickness by a Christian, became a great favorer of the Christians in general; but the prejudice and fury of the ignorant multitude prevailing, obsolete laws were put in execution against the Christians. The progress of Christianity alarmed the pagans, and they revived the stale calumny of placing accidental misfortunes to the account of its professors, A.D. 192.

But, though persecuting malice raged, yet the Gospel shone with resplendent brightness; and, firm as an impregnable rock, withstood the attacks of its boisterous enemies with success. Tertullian, who lived in this age, informs us that if the Christians had collectively withdrawn themselves from the Roman territories, the empire would have been greatly depopulated.

Victor, bishop of Rome, suffered martyrdom in the first year of the third century, A.D. 201. Leonidus, the father of the celebrated Origen, was beheaded for being a Christian. Many of Origen's hearers likewise suffered martyrdom; particularly two brothers, named Plutarchus and Serenus; another Serenus, Heron, and Heraclides, were beheaded. Rhais had boiled pitch poured upon her head, and was then burnt, as was Marcella her mother. Potainiena, the sister of

Rhais, was executed in the same manner as Rhais had been; but Basilides, an officer belonging to the army, and ordered to attend her execution, became her convert.

Basilides being, as an officer, required to take a certain oath, refused, saying, that he could not swear by the Roman idols, as he was a Christian. Struck with surprise, the people could not, at first, believe what they heard; but he had no sooner confirmed the same, than he was dragged before the judge, committed to prison, and speedily afterward beheaded.

**Irenaeus**, bishop of Lyons, was born in Greece, and received both a polite and a Christian education. It is generally supposed that the account of the persecutions at Lyons was written by himself. He succeeded the martyr Pothinus as bishop of Lyons, and ruled his diocese with great propriety; he was a zealous opposer of heresies in general, and, about A.D. 187, he wrote a celebrated tract against heresy. Victor, the bishop of Rome, wanting to impose the keeping of Easter there, in preference to other places, it occasioned some disorders among the Christians. In particular, Irenaeus wrote him a synodical epistle, in the name of the Gallic churches. This zeal, in favor of Christianity, pointed him out as an object of resentment to the emperor; and in A.D. 202, he was beheaded.

The persecutions now extending to Africa, many were martyred in that quarter of the globe; the most particular of whom we shall mention.

**Perpetua**, a married lady, of about twenty-two years. Those who suffered with her were, **Felicitas**, a married lady, big with child at the time of her being apprehended, and Revocatus, catechumen of Carthage, and a slave. The names of the other prisoners, destined to suffer upon this occasion, were Saturninus, Secundulus, and Satur.... Felicitas and Perpetua were stripped, in order to be thrown to a mad bull, which made his first attack upon Perpetua, and stunned her; he then darted at Felicitas, and gored her dreadfully; but not killing them, the executioner did that office with a sword. Revocatus and Satur were destroyed by wild beasts; Saturninus was beheaded; and Secundulus died in prison. These executions were in the 205, on the eighth day of March.... Cecilia, a young lady of good family in Rome, was married to a gentleman named Valerian. She converted her husband and brother, who were beheaded; and the maximus, or officer, who led them to execution, becoming their convert, suffered the same fate. The lady was placed naked in a scalding bath, and having continued there a considerable time, her head was struck off with a sword, A.D. 222.

Calistus, bishop of Rome, was martyred, A.D. 224; but the manner of his death is not recorded; and Urban, bishop of Rome, met the same fate A.D. 232.

# The Prison Diary of Vibia Perpetua

*This is the prison diary of a young woman martyred in Carthage in AD 202 or 203. The beginning and ending are related by an editor/narrator; the central text contains the words of Perpetua herself.*



*A number of young catechumens were arrested, Revocatus and his fellow slave Felicitas, Saturus, Saturninus, and Secundulus, and with them Vibia Perpetua, a newly married woman of good family and upbringing. Her mother and father were still alive and one of her two brothers was a catechumen like herself. She was about twenty-two years old and had an infant son at the breast. Now from this point on the entire account of her ordeal is her own, according to her own ideas and in the way that she herself wrote it down.*

While we were still under arrest (she said) my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. 'Father,' said I, 'do you see this vase here, for example?'

'Yes, I do', said he.

And I told him: 'Could it be called by any other name than what it is?'

And he said: 'No.'

'Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.'

At this my father was so angered by the word 'Christian' that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.

For a few days afterwards I gave thanks to the Lord that I was separated from my father, and I was comforted by his absence. During these few days I was baptized, and I was inspired by the Spirit not to ask for any other favour after the water but simply the perseverance of the flesh. A few days later we were lodged in the prison; and I was terrified, as I had never before been in such a dark hole. What a difficult time it was! With the crowd the heat was stifling; then there was the extortion of the soldiers; and to crown all, I was tortured with worry for my baby there.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

Then my brother said to me: 'Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed.'

Faithfully I promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience. And so I said: 'I shall tell you tomorrow.' Then I made my request and this was the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested.

And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: 'Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you.'

'He will not harm me,' I said, 'in the name of Christ Jesus.'

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a gray-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; tall he was, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'I am glad you have come, my child.'

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said: 'Amen!' At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

A few days later there was a rumour that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me.

'Daughter,' he said, 'have pity on my grey head--have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favoured you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you.'

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me. With tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him saying: 'It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power.'

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly hurried off for a hearing. We arrived at the forum, and straight away the story went about the neighbourhood near the forum and a huge crowd gathered. We walked up to the prisoner's dock. All the others when questioned admitted their guilt. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: 'Perform the sacrifice--have pity on your baby!'

Hilarianus the governor, who had received his judicial powers as the successor of the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said to me: 'Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors.'

'I will not', I retorted.

'Are you a Christian?' said Hilarianus.

And I said: 'Yes, I am.'

When my father persisted in trying to dissuade me, Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for father, just as if I myself had been beaten. I felt sorry for his pathetic old age.

Then Hilarianus passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits. But my baby had got used to being nursed and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius straight away to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give him over...

...Some days later, an adjutant named Pudens, who was in charge of the prison, began to show us great honour, realizing that we possessed some great power within us. And he began to allow many visitors to see us for our mutual comfort.

Now the day of the contest was approaching, and my father came to see me overwhelmed with sorrow. He started tearing the hairs from his beard and threw them on the ground; he then threw himself on the ground and began to curse his old age and to say such words as would move all creation. I felt sorry for his unhappy old age...

...I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.



*[Here the editor/narrator begins to relate the story]:*

Such were the remarkable experiences of these martyrs, Perpetua and Saturus. As for Secundulus, God called him from this world earlier than the others while he was still in prison, by a special grace that he might not have to face the animals...

...As for Felicitas, she too enjoyed the Lord's favour in this wise. She had been pregnant when she was arrested, and was now in her eighth month. As the day of the spectacle drew near she was very distressed that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy; for it is against the law for women with child to be executed. Thus she might have to shed her holy, innocent blood afterwards along with others who were common criminals. Her comrades in martyrdom were also saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief. And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a good deal in her labour because of the natural difficulty of an eight months' delivery.

Hence one of the assistants of the prison guards said to her: 'You suffer so much now--what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts? Little did you think of them when you refused to sacrifice.'

'What I am suffering now', she replied, 'I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.'

And she gave birth to a girl; and one of the sisters brought her up as her own daughter.

Therefore, since the Holy Spirit has permitted the story of this contest to be written down and by so permitting has willed it, we shall carry out the command or, indeed, the commission of the most saintly Perpetua, however unworthy I might be to add anything to this glorious story. At the same time I shall add one example of her perseverance and nobility of soul.

The military tribune had treated them with extraordinary severity because on the information of certain very foolish people he became afraid that they would be spirited out of the prison by magical spells.

Perpetua spoke to him directly. 'Why can you not even allow us to refresh ourselves properly? For we are the most distinguished of the condemned prisoners, seeing that we belong to the emperor; we are to fight on his very

birthday. Would it not be to your credit if we were brought forth on the day in a healthier condition?'

The officer became disturbed and grew red. So it was that he gave the order that they were to be more humanely treated; and he allowed her brothers and other persons to visit, so that the prisoners could dine in their company. By this time the adjutant who was head of the jail was himself a Christian.

On the day before, when they had their last meal, which is called the free banquet, they celebrated not a banquet but rather a love feast. They spoke to the mob with the same steadfastness, warned them of God's judgment, stressing the joy they would have in their suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those that came to see them. Saturus said: 'Will not tomorrow be enough for you? Why are you so eager to see something that you dislike? Our friends today will be our enemies on the morrow. But take careful note of what we look like so that you will recognize us on the day.' Thus everyone would depart from the prison in amazement, and many of them began to believe.

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheatre joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.

They were then led up to the gates and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

'We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this.'

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus began to warn the on-looking mob. Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their motions and gestures: 'You have condemned us, but God will condemn you' was what they were saying.

At this the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this that they had obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings.

But he who said, **Ask and you shall receive**, answered their prayer by giving each one the death he had asked for. For whenever they would discuss among themselves their desire for martyrdom, Saturninus indeed insisted that he wanted to be exposed to all the different beasts, that his crown might be all the more glorious. And so at the outset of the contest he and Revocatus were matched with a leopard, and then while in the stocks they were attacked by a bear. As for Satorus, he dreaded nothing more than a bear, and he counted on being killed by one bite of a leopard. Then he was matched with a wild boar; but the gladiator who had tied him to the animal was gored by the boar and died a few days after the contest, whereas Satorus was only dragged along. Then when he was bound in the stocks awaiting the bear, the animal refused to come out of the cages, so that Satorus was called back once more unhurt.

For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her hand, and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was by now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life.

There Perpetua was held up by a man named Rusticus who was at the time a catechumen and kept close to her. She awoke from a kind of sleep (so absorbed had she been in ecstasy in the Spirit) and she began to look about her. Then to the amazement of all she said: 'When are we going to be thrown to that heifer or whatever it is?'

When told that this had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her person and her dress. Then she

called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: 'You must all **stand fast in the faith** and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.'

At another gate Satorus was earnestly addressing the soldier Pudens. 'It is exactly', he said, 'as I foretold and predicted. So far not one animal has touched me. So now you may believe me with all your heart: I am going in there and I shall be finished off with one bite of the leopard.' And immediately as the contest was coming to a close a leopard was let loose, and after one bite Satorus was so drenched with blood that as he came away the mob roared in witness to his second baptism: 'Well washed! Well washed!' For well washed indeed was one who had been bathed in this manner.

Then he said to the soldier Pudens: 'Good-bye. Remember me, and remember the faith. These things should not disturb you but rather strengthen you.'

And with this he asked Pudens for a ring from his finger, and dipping it into his wound he gave it back to him again as a pledge and as a record of his bloodshed.

Shortly after he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open that their eyes might be the guilty witnesses of the sword that pierced their flesh. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord as the people wanted them to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Satorus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua, who, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly are you called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord! And any man who exalts, honours, and worships his glory should read for the consolation of the Church these new deeds of heroism which are no less significant than the tales of old. For these new manifestations of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty, to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendour and immeasurable power for all the ages. Amen.

From *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*

texts and translation by Herbert Musurillo  
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# Nicholas and Constantine

Flavius Valerius Constantinus (known to history as Constantine) had been born in A.D. 272 (about the time Nicholas was born), as the illegitimate son of Constantius by his legal concubine Helena (a barmaid from Bythinia). Diocletian ordered Constantius to put away Helena and accept his daughter Theodora as his wife, as a way of avoiding wars of succession.

Constantine, like his father, took to soldiering early and proved his valor in wars with Egypt and Persia. Galerius, suspicious of Constantius, kept Constantine near him as a hostage for his father's loyalty. But Constantine somehow escaped, mounted his horse, and galloped at full speed in relays, night and day, all the way across Europe to his father, who was preparing to attack Britain in Boulonge. When Constantius died at York in 306, his soldiers acclaimed handsome, brave, and energetic Constantine as Caesar.

In Rome, the Praetorian Guard anointed Maximian's son Maxentius as emperor. Severus, in Milan, mobilized his forces and marched on Rome. Maximian resumed his Caesarship and entered the fray. Severus was assassinated by his own troops.

Beleaguered Galerius appointed Flavius Licinius as a new Augustus; Constantine countered by calling himself Augustus, too. So did Maximian's Doza. Now there were six who claimed supremacy—and the empire spiraled into chaos. Maximian tried to dethrone Constantine; Constantine defeated him and kindly permitted him to commit suicide. When Galerius died in 311, full-scale war took place. Constantine led his army across the Alps, defeated one army at Turin, advanced on Rome, and on October 27, 312, Constantine cornered Maxentius at the Tiber.

According to Eusebius of Caesarea (historian and confidant of Constantine), on the afternoon before the battle, Constantine had a vision: he saw a flaming cross in the sky, along with three Greek words, *en touto nika* ("in this sign conquer"). That night, Constantine was commanded in a dream to have his soldiers mark an X with a line drawn through it and curled around the top (the symbol of Christ). When Constantine awakened next morning, he was so impressed by the dream that he immediately ordered the creation of a new standard to be carried into the forefront of the battle. That standard (carrying the initials of Christ interwoven with a cross) would henceforth be known as the *labarum*. As Maxentius's banner displayed his allegiance to the unconquerable Sun of Mithras, the battle took on an unexpected spiritual dimension. Since there were numerous Christians in Constantine's army, he certainly faced no opposition with them!

Under this banner, Constantine drove Maxentius and thousands of his soldiers into the Tiber, where they drowned in their armor. Then Constantine entered Rome, now supreme ruler of the western part of the empire.

Next, Constantine met with Licinius to consolidate their Christian base. Their "Edict of Milan" (313) not only confirmed the edict by Galerius but extended toleration to *all* religions. They also ordered the return of all confiscated Christian property. Ten years after the Edict of Milan, Constantine (now the acknowledged defender of Christianity), with 130,000 men, met Licinius (the defender of paganism), with 160,000 men, at Adrianople, and again at Chrysopolis. Licinius was defeated, and Constantine thereby became undisputed master of the Roman world.

Seventeen long bloody years had passed before Constantine became monarch of the entire empire. During those long treks from battle to battle, he had thought a great deal about the city of Rome. Eventually, he concluded that it was too corrupt to be worth saving. Immediately after Chrysopolis, he implemented his momentous decision to move the capital of the empire from the Tiber to the Golden Horn, from ancient Rome to ancient Byzantium. It was a calculated decision. Once he cast his lot with the Christians, it made sense to move his capital to where Christians were strongest.

If you look at today's map, it's hard to understand Constantine's reasoning. But if you open your Bible to maps that detail the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, you'll notice that the eastern Mediterranean was then the hub of early Christianity. By the time of St. Nicholas and Constantine, almost three centuries later, it was even more so. Throughout Asia Minor, a minimum of 25 percent professed Christianity. Powerful bishops ruled great sees such as Alexandria, Carthage, Jerusalem, Hippo, Caesarea, Damascus, Ephesus, Athens, and Byzantium.

Byzantium was already almost a thousand years old when Constantine decided to build "New Rome" there. The emperor chose wisely, for no site on earth could have surpassed it, situated as it was on the crossroads of the world, the place where Europe and Asia meet, where the West ends and the East begins.



In November of 324, Constantine the Great led a small army of aides, engineers, priests, etc., from the harbor of Byzantium out across the nearby hills. As they progressed, the foundation positions of the proposed new capital were duly marked. When some questioned why the site was so vast, Constantine answered, "I shall advance till He; the invisible God who marches before me, thinks proper to stop." Afterward, he summoned thousands of workmen to build the great city. And he issued orders that the finest and most acclaimed art in the empire should be requisitioned and sent to the new capital. Same for Christian relics. Great walls were constructed, as were palaces, homes, administrative buildings, squares, boulevards, and fountains. A magnificent hippodrome, seating 70,000, for the people's games was also constructed. The city was dedicated on May 11, 330. Within seven years, 50,000 people had moved in; by A.D. 400, 100,000; and by A.D. 500, almost a million. For over a thousand years it would remain the richest, most beautiful, and most civilized city in the world (Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 3-6).

But meanwhile, problems were mounting where the emperor least expected them. Though he had not openly converted to Christianity, he had all but married the Christian community in a political sense. Not because of childhood indoctrination, for his mother hadn't become a Christian until after Constantius divorced her. Nevertheless, Helena was a powerful

force in her own right. After Chrysopolis, she became the imperial requisitioner of Christian relics, bringing them to the new Rome in the name of the emperor.

Constantine was profoundly impressed by the fortitude and courage evidenced by the Christians during the three persecutions during his lifetime. He was also impressed by other qualities evidenced by Christians, especially their integrity and strong sense of marriage and family. Perhaps the support of such a loyal hierarchical church might help him solidify his political power base.

Gradually, as he consolidated his power, he favored Christians more and more, and began curtailing the freedoms of pagan sects. He gave his sons an orthodox Christian education, and gave Christian leaders civil power to go along with their religious power.

What he hadn't counted on was the fall-out from terminating the periodic Christian persecutions. As long as they were suffering or dying for their faith, the church remained pure, but when they became dominant in the political arena, the church gradually succumbed to the blandishments the world had to offer and began to break up into snarling sects, each determined to injure or destroy the others.

From  
St. Nicholas: A Closer Look at Christmas  
by Wheeler & Rosenthal



Constantine was now dismayed to discover great cracks in the Christian community. First there were the Donatists, who believed only the certifiably pure—themselves—could be trusted to lead the church. Second was the rise of monasticism. As the result of the materialism generated by the church's transformation from a persecuted church to the dominant state-sanctioned church, many Christians concluded that only by withdrawing from the world could Christianity be saved. Third, and the most serious crack of all, was that represented by the philosophy of a tall, thin, melancholic mystic from Alexandria named Arius. Arius maintained that Christ was not a co-equal with God at all, but merely the first and highest of all created beings. Congregation after congregation

split right down the middle on this issue, and each side attempted to destroy the other. Needless to say, the pagans were delighted to see the Christians destroying themselves without any outside help.

Constantine did not hear about the schism until 323, when he had just defeated Licinius and was looking forward to some well-deserved rest. As soon as he had digested the news, he wrote both Bishop Alexander and Arius, urging them to peace-

ably resolve their differences; but his letter accomplished nothing. Constantine was stunned by the speed at which Arianism spread, for soon the entire eastern Roman Empire was aflame with it. Even though he was not a theologian, he realized full well that if Christ was not perceived to be God, Christianity would crack wide open; and if that were permitted to happen, the church, instead of being an asset to him, would become a liability. That realization resulted in some of the darkest days of his life.

## The Council of Nicaea

There have been two epic conclaves in the history of the Western world, two defining moments that have never been equaled at any time or any place.

The second was the showdown in 1551 between the twenty-year-old ruler of half of Europe and most of the Americas, Charles V. The host city was Worms, capital city of Hesse, near Heidelberg. In 436, Worms and the Burgundian kingdom had been destroyed by the Huns and Romans after they adopted Arianism. That event was later incorporated into the *Nibelungelied* and *Rosengarten*. The antagonist was until then an almost unknown

Catholic monk named Martin Luther. On April 17, Luther stood alone facing a glittering Diet, composed of the emperor, six electors, and an awesome assembly of princes, nobles, prelates, and burghers. That event changed the world.

The first took place 1,226 years earlier, in 325. Constantine, although not a Christian by profession, decided to assume that role in order to preserve the empire. He summoned a great conclave of bishops from all across the Mediterranean to meet in Nicaea (Iznik in today's Turkey) near his capital, Nicomedia. Ironically, the primary purpose of the enclave was to deal with Arius, whose doctrine would later doom the first city of Worms.

The Council was to meet in the emperor's palace in Nicaea of Bythnia, very close to the summer palace in Nicomedia. For days, ships had been arriving with the bishops and their entourages who came from as far away as Cordova, Spain.

The morning of that May 20 was one the participants never forgot: the deep blue sky of Bythnia, the grandeur of the sprawling palace and its great hall, the sight of famous bishops walking into the hall in all their episcopal glory. Here and there were figures who towered over their age: personages such as the bishop of Alexandria, the bishop of Antioch, the bishop of Jerusalem, the bishop of Nicomedia (Eusebius), the bishop of Cordova, and the bishop of Caesarea (another Eusebius). Also attending were the next generation of bishops, including Athanasius, destined to become bishop of Alexandria.

The opulence of the magnificent palace must have seemed almost surreal to Nicholas and his fellow bishops, so recently tortured and entombed in dungeons. Even more so when the brass trumpets announced the arrival of the emperor, resplendent in his imperial robes. He proceeded until he reached his throne (covered with gold leaf) on a raised dais, one half of the bishops positioned on either side of him. In his role as President, Constantine would coordinate the enclave's discussion during the rest of May, all of June, and finally conclude on July 25.

The emperor opened that first session with an earnest appeal to the bishops, urging them to make church unity their number one priority. Before long, Arius was permitted to make his case. He calmly declared that Christ was "a created being, not equal to the Father, and divine only by participation."

According to the Athenian monk Damaskinos, this is what took place as Arius was presenting his case:

"The emperor was sitting on his throne, flanked by 159 bishops to his left and 159 to his right. Arian was presenting his views with great vigor and detail. As Saint Nicholas observed the scene, the bishops listened to Arius in complete silence and without interrupting this discourse. Outraged, and prompted by his saintly vigor, he left his seat and walked up to Arius, faced him squarely and slapped his face.

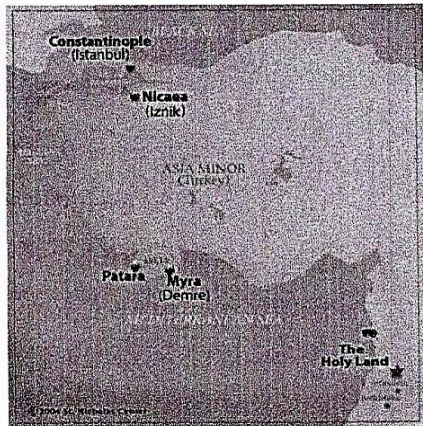
At this, the assembly was shocked. Arius's supporters turned to the emperor, asking that he intervene and punish Nicholas. They said, 'Oh Just One, tell us, can it be fair that in your very presence someone should be permitted, without hindrance, to assault another? If he has anything to say in rebuttal, by all means let him have his say. But if he is not sufficiently learned to make a proper argument, then it were better if he remain in his seat, quietly, and listen to others who are prepared to state their case in words.'

"Arius himself spoke directly to the emperor, 'Should anyone who has the temerity to hit me, in front of Your Majesty, remain unpunished?' Emperor Constantine replied, 'Indeed, there is a law which forbids anyone to lift his hand in violence in the presence of the emperor and it specifies that his hand be cut off. However, it is not up to me, in this Assembly, to act upon it. Instead, you, Your Holinesses, should make the decision in this case; I leave it to your judgment, whether and how this act is to be punished.'

"The bishops conferred with each other, and when they came to a decision, they said to the emperor, 'Your Majesty, the bishop of Myra has acted wrongfully. We all saw it happen and attest to it. We therefore ask your permission to let us strip him of his clerical garments, shackle him, and place him under guard as a prisoner. In this way, he shall not be permitted to participate in the proceedings of the Council for the rest of our deliberations. Once the synod is completed, a final judgment in this case may be made.'

"As a result, that evening, Nicholas was made a prisoner in another wing of the Palace. He was placed in a jail-like room, without his bishop's mantle and shackled on hand and foot. However, during the night he was visited by Jesus [and His] Mother. They observed Saint Nicholas in his cell and said, 'Nicholas, why are you imprisoned?' And Saint Nicholas said, 'Because of my love for you.' First they freed him from his shackles. And then Jesus said, 'Take this!' and he gave him a volume of the Holy Scripture. Then [Mary] went away, returned, and brought him his bishop's garments, so that he might clothe himself with appropriate dignity. At peace, he studied the Holy Book through the night.

Saint Nicholas was the Bishop of Myra  
Myra is a town in what is now Turkey!





up with a statement of belief that left squirm-room for everyone, and put them all on record. This is how it read:

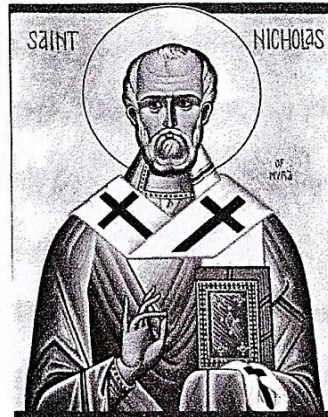
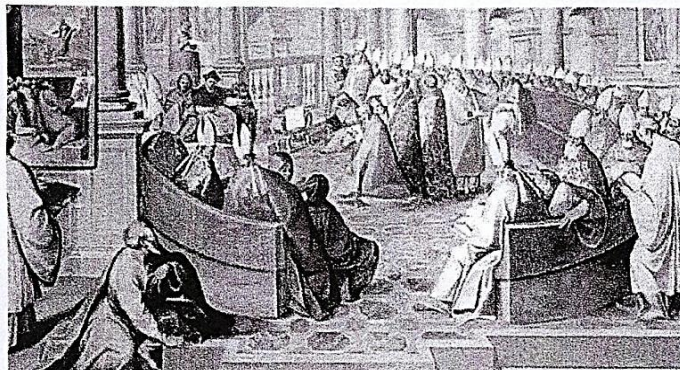
*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible or invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten . . . not made, being of one essence (homoousion) with the Father . . . who for us men and our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and comes to judge the quick and the dead.*

Only five bishops—at the end, only two—refused to sign this statement of belief. Those two, with the “unrepentant Arius,” were anathematized by the Council. The emperor made clear his position on the matter by exiling them. Also, Constantine issued an edict that ordered all Arian books to be burned and made concealment of his books a crime punishable by death. Arianism would continue to disrupt the church and the empire for many centuries to come.

Over time this simple statement of belief became known as the Nicene Creed. The mere fact that they signed it forced the church leaders to debate it, study it, tinker with it, until eventually they hammered it into a creed that would unify believers.

This was not all the Council accomplished. It was here they declared that all churches should observe Easter on the same day (date to be named each year by the bishop of Alexandria, and agreed upon by the bishop of Rome). Some maintain that the Council helped to define the biblical canon; others maintain that there was already a consensus on it. The Nicene Creed would eventually result in the defeat of Arianism and victory of Orthodox Trinitarianism.

The Council also revealed that the emperor was not only supreme in secular matters, he was also supreme in matters that dealt with religion.



The next morning, a jailer came to bring him bread, saw that Nicholas was no longer shackled, that he was clothed in the garments of his position, and that he was studying the Scriptures in his cell. Even his stole was in one hand, while he held the book with the other. News of this miraculous event was quickly brought to the emperor. He asked that Nicholas be freed, and when the two men met, the emperor asked the bishop's forgiveness" (Ebon, 34–35).

It appears probable that the original account has been embellished. Quite possibly, the good bishop may have lost his composure and attacked Arius personally; however, the heavenly visitation section quite likely was added later for effect. In all probability, the fact that Nicholas's impulsive act weighed in on the emperor's side rather than on Arius's saved him. Secretly, Constantine may have enjoyed it; yet felt that the firebrand deserved a lesson for forgetting in whose presence he was sitting.

The issue of Arianism was debated loud and long during the Council, tempers getting frayed in the process. Constantine not only served as moderator, he entered into the discussions. All around the room were attendants of the emperor, as well as members of the Imperial Guard. The opposition had been given plenty of time to get ready for Arius. Clever questioning forced him to admit that if Christ were but a created creature, what was there to prevent him from veering out of virtue into vice? Pugnacious and clever Archdeacon Athanasius of Alexandria, a brilliant theologian and debater, pointed out that if Christ and the Holy Spirit were not one with the Father, then there was no alternative to polytheism.

The deliberations on the matter went through several stages before the final condemnation of Arius. In the end there was a small hard core of support for the Alexandrian position, and another of equal size for the Arian. The rest of the bishops, not being theologians, were strung out somewhere between. But few of them wished to force an outright break with their peers. Had the emperor not forced the issue there would have been no condemnation of Arius. Constantine was far-sighted enough to know that if the bishops adjourned without taking a position on the issue, then the conclave would have been for naught. The bishops, confronted with an intractable emperor, rather grudgingly came

Constantine lived only twelve more years. At Easter of 337, there was an empire-wide celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of his becoming Caesar. But even as the celebrations continued, the emperor knew the sands of his life were running out. As the end drew near, he finally took the long-delayed step: he called for a priest to administer the sacrament of baptism to him. He had many sins to account for, including the executions of a wife, son, and nephew. But even so, he was a far better man than most rulers of his time.

The good bishop would outlive his liege-lord by only six years. By this time, his fame was already radiating in waves out of his native Lycia into the great East. It was his good fortune to be born in the right place at the right time, the end of the old Roman Empire and the beginning of the Byzantine Empire. Born at the end of the post-apostolic church and the beginning of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Born at the end of the pagan world and the beginning of the Christian world. During his brief life-span, he would be a casualty of the last great persecution of the Christians; he would see the rise of Donatism and the beginning of its long decline. He would experience the earliest stage of monasticism. And he would be one of the fiercest gladiators in the most pivotal war the Christian church has ever fought: Trinitarianism versus Arianism.

As we shall see, Nicholas will go on to become all things to all people, as each age reinvents him. The patron saint of practically everybody. A man who will refuse to stay dead. A man who will have immortality thrust upon him, whether he'd have wanted it or not. And, perhaps strangest of all, a man who, like the proverbial Wandering Jew, will wander through the centuries playing many parts in the great drama between the forces of Good and Evil.

According to Voragine's *Golden Legend*, ". . . when the Lord decided to take Nicholas to Him, the Saint prayed that he might send him his angels. With head still bowed in prayer, he saw them approaching. He recited the Psalm 'In te Domine speravi' [In Thee, O Lord, have I trusted (Psalm 30 and 31)], and when he reached the words 'In manus tuas Domine commendo spiritum meum' [Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit (v. 5)], he breathed his last, and at his passing, the heavenly choirs were heard. This was in the year of our Lord 343." . . . And the mists of Myra closed in around him.