

6/Persecution in the Second Century

*Now I begin to be a disciple. . . . Let fire
and cross, flocks of beasts, broken bones,
dismemberment, . . . come upon me, so long
as I attain to Jesus Christ.*

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Although the Roman Empire began persecuting Christians from the time of Nero, throughout the first century the details of such persecutions are scarce. By the second century, however, records begin to afford a clearer view of the issues involved in the persecutions, and of the attitudes of Christians towards martyrdom. Of these, the most dramatic are the "acts of the martyrs," which retell the arrest, trial, and death of various martyrs. Some of these include so many trustworthy details about the trial that they seem to have been taken, in part at least, from official court records. Sometimes we are told that the writer was present at the trial and death of the martyr, and historians are inclined to believe that it was indeed so. On the other hand, a number of these supposed "acts of the martyrs" clearly come from a much later date, and deserve little credit. But, in any case, the genuine "acts" are among the most precious and inspiring documents of early Christianity. Secondly, we learn of the attitude of Christians towards martyrdom through other Christian writings. Of these, the most valuable is probably the set of seven letters that the aged Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote on his way to martyrdom. Finally, the second century offers further glimpses into the attitude of Roman authorities vis-a-vis the new faith. In this context, the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan is most illuminating.

The Correspondence between Pliny and Trajan

In A.D. 111, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of what today is Turkey. From various sources, it would appear that Pliny was a just man with a profound respect for Roman law and traditions. But in Bithynia he had to deal with an unexpected problem. There were many Christians in the region—so many, in fact, that Pliny declared that the pagan temples were almost deserted, and that the sellers of sacrificial victims found few buyers. When somebody sent the new governor a list of Christians, Pliny began inquiries, for he knew that this religion was illegal.

The governor had the accused brought before him, and thus began learning of the beliefs and practices of Christians. Many declared that they were not Christians, and others said that, although they had followed the new faith for a time, they had abandoned it. Of these Pliny required only that they pray to the gods, burn incense before the image of the emperor, and curse Christ, something that he had heard true Christians would never do. Once they performed these rites, he simply let them go.

Those who persisted in their faith posed a different problem. Pliny's practice was to offer them three opportunities to recant, while threatening them with death. If they refused, he had them executed, not so much for being Christians, as for their obstinacy. If they were Roman citizens, he had them sent to Rome, as the law required.

But Pliny considered himself a just man, and therefore felt obliged to find out what crimes, besides sheer obstinacy, Christians committed. All he could learn was that Christians gathered before dawn to sing to Christ "as to a god," and to join in an oath not to commit theft, adultery, or any such sins. They also used to gather for a common meal, but had discontinued this practice when the authorities had outlawed secret meetings. Not quite convinced that this was the whole truth, Pliny put two female Christian ministers to torture. But they simply confirmed what he already knew.

The question then was, should Christians be punished for concrete crimes, or should the very name "Christian" be considered a crime? Not knowing what course to follow, Pliny suspended the proceedings and wrote Emperor Trajan for further instructions.

The emperor's response was brief. When it comes to the punishment of Christians, there is no general rule that is equally valid in all circumstances. On the one hand, the nature of their crime is such that the state should not waste time seeking them out. On the other hand, if they are accused and refuse to recant they should be punished. Those who are willing to worship the gods should be pardoned without further inquiries. Finally, anonymous accusations should be disregarded, for they are a bad legal precedent and are unworthy of this age.

Almost a hundred years later the legal mind of Tertullian, a Christian in North Africa, rebelled against the injustice of such an edict, which was still in force:

What a necessarily confused sentence! It refuses to seek them out, as if they were innocent, and orders that they be punished as if they were guilty. It pardons, and yet is cruel. It ignores, and yet punishes. Why do you circumvent your own censure? If you condemn, why do you not inquire? And, if you do not inquire, why do you not also absolve?*

Yet, although Trajan's decision seemed to lack logic, it did not lack political sense. He understood what Pliny was saying: that Christians, by the mere fact of being such, were not committing any crime against society or against the state. Therefore, the resources of the state should not be wasted in seeking them out. But, once accused and brought before the authorities, Christians had to be forced to worship the gods of the Empire, or face punishment. Otherwise, imperial courts would lose their authority. In other words, Christians were not punished for crimes committed before being brought to trial, but for their seeming contempt of Roman courts. Those who openly refused to worship the gods and the emperor had to be punished, first, because the dignity of the courts required it; and, secondly, because in refusing to worship the emperor they seemed to be denying his right to rule.

For these reasons, the policies which Trajan outlined in his response to Pliny were followed far beyond the borders of Bithynia, and long after Trajan's death. Throughout the second century, and part of the third, it was imperial policy not to seek out Christians, but still to punish them when they were brought before the authorities. That this was true even before the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan may be seen in the circumstances surrounding Ignatius' seven letters.

Ignatius of Antioch, the Bearer of God

About A.D. 107, the elderly bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, was condemned to death by the imperial authorities. Since great festivities were being planned in Rome in celebration of a military victory, Ignatius was sent to the capital so that his death would help amuse the people. On his way to martyrdom, he wrote seven letters that are among the most valuable documents for our knowledge of early Christianity.

Ignatius was probably born around A.D. 30 or 35, and was well over seventy when his life ended in martyrdom. In his letters, he repeatedly calls himself "the bearer of God," as if this were a title by which he was known

**Apology* 1.2.

—and this is an indication of the high respect in which he was held among Christians. Much later, by making a slight change in the Greek text of his letters, people began speaking of Ignatius as “he who was borne by God,” and thus arose the legend according to which he was the little child whom Jesus picked up and placed in the midst of his disciples. In any case, by the beginning of the second century Ignatius had great prestige in the entire Christian community, because he was bishop (the second after the apostles) of one of the most ancient churches, that of Antioch.

Nothing is known about the arrest and trial of Ignatius, nor of who it was that brought in an accusation against him. From his letters, it is clear that there were several factions in Antioch, and that the elderly bishop had tenaciously opposed those doctrines he found heretical. It is not clear whether he was accused before the authorities by a pagan, or by a dissident Christian who sought to undo him. In any case, for one reason or another, Ignatius was arrested, tried, and condemned to die in Rome.

On their way to Rome, Ignatius and the soldiers guarding him passed through Asia Minor. A number of Christians from that area went to see him. Ignatius was able to see them and converse with them. He even had a Christian amanuensis who wrote the letters he dictated. It is clear from this that there was no general persecution of Christians throughout the Empire at this time, but that only those brought before the courts were condemned. This was why Ignatius could receive visitors who were obviously guilty of the same “crime” of which he stood convicted.

Ignatius’ seven letters are the outcome of these visits. He had received the bishop, two elders, and a deacon from the church in Magnesia. From Tralles, Bishop Polybius had come. Ephesus had sent a delegation headed by Bishop Onesimus, who may well have been the same person about whom Paul wrote to Philemon. To each of these churches, Ignatius addressed a letter from Smyrna. Later, from Troas, he wrote three other letters: one to the church of Smyrna, another to its bishop Polycarp, and a third to the church in Philadelphia. But the most significant letter to help us understand the nature of persecution and martyrdom in the second century is the one that Ignatius wrote from Smyrna to the church in Rome.

Somehow, Ignatius had heard that Christians in Rome were considering

A sixth-century mosaic depicting scenes in Antioch.



the possibility of freeing him from death. He did not look upon this with favor. He was ready to seal his witness with his blood, and any move on the part of the Christians in Rome to save him would be an obstacle to his goal. He therefore wrote to them:

I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God.

As Ignatius goes on to say, his purpose is to be an imitator of the passion of his God, that is, Jesus Christ. As he faces the ultimate sacrifice, Ignatius believes that he begins to be a disciple; and therefore all that he wants from Christians in Rome is that they pray, not that he be freed, but that he may have the strength to face every trial, “so that I may not only be called a Christian, but also behave as such. . . . My love is crucified. . . . I no longer savor corruptible food . . . but wish to taste the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ . . . and his blood I wish to drink, which is an immortal drink. . . . When I suffer, I shall be free in Jesus Christ, and with him shall rise again in freedom. . . . I am God’s wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts, so that I may be offered as pure bread of Christ.” And the reason why Ignatius is willing to face death with such courage is that he will thereby become a witness:

If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.*

Shortly thereafter, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna wrote to the Christians in Philippi asking for news regarding Ignatius. The answer from the Philippians has been lost, although it seems certain that Ignatius died as he expected shortly after his arrival in Rome.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Although very little is known of Ignatius’ martyrdom, there is much more information regarding that of his younger friend, Polycarp, when his time came almost half a century later. It was the year 155, and the policy that Trajan had outlined for Pliny was still in effect. Christians were not sought out; but if they were accused and they refused to worship the gods, they had to be punished.

We know of events in Smyrna through a writer who claims to have witnessed them. It all began when a group of Christians was brought before

*Ignatius, *Romani* 1.2-2.1.

the authorities, and all of them refused to worship the gods. Under the cruelest of tortures they remained firm, we are told, because "resting in Christ they scorned the pains of the world." When Germanicus, an elderly Christian, was brought to trial, he was told that he should take into account his old age and recant, rather than submit to torture and death. To this he responded that he had no desire to continue living in a world where the injustices that he had just seen took place. And, to show how deeply he meant his words, he called the beasts to come to him and kill him. This act of courage further aroused the anger of the mob, who began to shout: "Death to the atheists!" (that is, those who had no visible gods) and "Bring Polycarp!"

When the old bishop learned that he was being sought, he followed the advice of the flock, and hid for several days. But after having changed to another hiding place, and still having been discovered, he decided that his arrest was the will of God, refused to flee any further, and calmly awaited those who came after him.

The proconsul who presided at his trial tried to persuade him, urging him to think about his advanced age and worship the emperor. When Polycarp refused, the judge ordered him to cry: "Out with the atheists!" To this Polycarp responded by pointing at the crowd around him and saying: "Yes. Out with the atheists!" Again the judge insisted, promising that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied: "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?"

Thus the dialogue went on. When the judge threatened him with burning him alive, Polycarp simply answered that the fire that the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out. Finally, we are told that after he was tied to the post in the pyre, he looked up and prayed out loud: "Lord Sovereign God . . . I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ. . . . For this . . . I bless and glorify you. Amen."*

Many years earlier, Ignatius of Antioch had advised young bishop Polycarp regarding his duties as bishop and the need to be firm in his faith. Now Polycarp showed himself a worthy hearer of Ignatius' advice, and a follower of his example.

One significant note in this entire account is that Polycarp fled and hid when he learned that he was being sought. We are also told in the same account that a certain Quintus, who offered himself as a martyr, weakened at the last moment and abandoned the faith. This was important for those early Christians, who believed that martyrdom was not something that one chose, but something for which one was chosen by God. Those who were

so chosen were strengthened by Christ, who suffered with them, and for that reason were able to stand firm. Their firmness was not of their own doing, but of God. On the other hand, those who ran forward and offered themselves for martyrdom—the "spontaneous"—were false martyrs, and Christ would desert them.

But not all Christians agreed with the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Throughout the entire period of persecutions, there were occasional spontaneous martyrs. And, when they remained firm to the end, they found the approval of many. This may be seen of another document of the same time, the *Apology of Justin Martyr*, where we are told that at a Christian's trial two others came forth in his defense, and all three died as martyrs. In telling this story, Justin does not give the slightest indication that the martyrdom of the two "spontaneous" was less valid than that of the one originally accused.

Persecution under Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius, who became emperor in A.D. 161, was one of the most enlightened minds of his age. He was not, like Nero and Domitian, enamored with power and vainglory. On the contrary, he was a refined man who left behind a collection of *Meditations*, written for his private use, which are one of the literary masterpieces of the time. There he expresses some of the ideals with which he tried to rule his vast empire:

Think constantly, both as a Roman and as a man, to do the task before you with perfect and simple dignity, and with kindness, freedom, and justice. Try to forget everything else. And you will be able to do so if you undertake every action in your life as if it were the last, leaving aside all negligence and the opposition of passion to the dictates of reason, and leaving aside also all hypocrisy, egotism, and rebelliousness against your own lot.*

Under such an emperor, it could be expected that Christians would enjoy a period of relative peace. And yet, the same emperor who expressed such lofty ideals of government also ordered that Christians be persecuted. In the only reference to Christianity in his *Meditations*, the emperor praises those souls that are ready to abandon their bodies when the time comes, rather than cling to life, and then goes on to say that this attitude is praiseworthy only when it is the outcome of reason, "and not of obstinacy, as is the case with Christians."

Furthermore, as a child of his age, this enlightened emperor was also a superstitious man. He constantly sought the advice of seers, and before every significant undertaking sacrifices had to be offered. During the early years of

**Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.

**Meditations* 2.5.

his reign, there seemed to be an endless string of invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters. Soon the explanation arose that Christians were to be blamed, for they had brought the wrath of the gods upon the Empire. It is impossible to know for certain that the emperor believed this explanation; but, in any case, he gave his full support to the persecution, and favored the revival of the old religion. Perhaps, like Pliny, what he found most objectionable in Christians was their stubbornness.

One of the most informative documents from this time is the one that tells of the martyrdom of the widow Felicitas and her seven sons. Felicitas was one of the consecrated widows, that is, women who devoted all their time to work for the church, which in turn supported them. Her work was such that some pagan priests decided to put an end to it by accusing her before the authorities. When the prefect tried to persuade her, first with promises and then with threats, to abandon her faith, she answered that he was wasting his time, for "while I live, I shall defeat you; and if you kill me, in my death I shall defeat you all the more." He then tried to persuade her sons. But she encouraged them to stand firm, and none of them flinched before the worst threats. Finally, the record of the inquest was sent to Marcus Aurelius, who ordered that they should die in different sections of the city—probably to appease various gods.

Another martyr during this persecution was Justin, perhaps the best Christian scholar of the time, who had founded in Rome a school where he taught what he called "the true philosophy," that is, Christianity. He had recently bested a famous pagan philosopher in a public debate, and there are indications that it was this philosopher who accused him. In any case, Justin died as a martyr in Rome, although the "acts" of his martyrdom are much later, and therefore the details are questionable.

Further insight into this persecution come to us through a letter that the churches of Lyons and Vienne, in Gaul, sent to their fellow Christians in Phrygia and Asia Minor. It seems that at first all that was done in those cities was to forbid Christians to visit public places. But then the mob began following them on the streets, shouting at them and pelting them. Finally, several Christians were arrested and taken before the governor to be tried. There a certain Vetius Epagathus came forth from among the mob and offered to defend the Christians. Asked if he was one of them, he said that he was, and was then added to the group of the accused.

The writers of the letter explain that persecution had appeared unexpectedly, "like a bolt of lightning," and that this was the reason why many were not prepared. Some of them weakened and "left the womb of the church like abortive ones."

The rest, however, stood firm, and this in turn increased the wrath of the governor and the mob. Torture was ordered. A certain Sanctus, when tortured, simply answered, "I am a Christian." The more he was tortured, the more he persisted in saying nothing but these words. Moved by this and



A Mosaic depicting the legend of forty martyrs who froze to death.

many other signs of courage, some who had earlier denied the faith returned to confess it and die as martyrs. We are not told how many died, but the letter does say that the place where Christians were being held was so full that some died of suffocation before the executioners could get to them.

These are only a few examples of what took place under the reign of

the enlightened Marcus Aurelius. There are several other accounts of martyrdoms still extant. One must suppose that the accounts that have survived tell only a partial story of what actually took place, not only in Rome, but throughout the Empire.

Towards the End of the Second Century

Marcus Aurelius died in A.D. 180, and was succeeded by Commodus, who had begun to rule jointly with him eight years earlier. Although Commodus did not issue any edicts against persecution, the storm abated during his reign, and the number of martyrs was relatively low. After the death of Commodus, there was a period of civil war, and Christians were once again ignored in favor of more pressing matters. Finally, in A.D. 193, Septimius Severus became master of the Empire. At first, Christians were able to live in peace under his reign. But eventually he too added his name to the growing list of those who had persecuted the church. However, since this was early in the third century, we shall return to it at another point in our narrative.

In summary, during the entire second century, Christians were in a precarious position. They were not constantly persecuted. Sometimes they were persecuted in some areas of the Empire, and not in others. Since the general policy of the Empire was that outlined by Trajan—Christians were not to be sought, but, if brought before the authorities, they must be forced to recant or be punished—the good will of their neighbors was very important. If any believed the evil rumors about them, they would be accused, and persecution would break out. For this reason it was very important to show that those rumors were untrue, and to give pagans a better and more favorable understanding of Christianity. This was the task of the apologists, to whom we now turn.