

The Good Word

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ON THE PERSECUTION OF THE EARLY CHURCH

By Protopresbyter James Thornton

It is common knowledge that during the first three centuries of the Christian Era, Christians were frequently subjected to severe persecution. Jesus Himself had prophesied that his followers would suffer for their faith: *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.* (St. Matthew 5:10-12). Indeed, Christ's prophecies were not long in being fulfilled.

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

For more than three hundred years, Christianity existed on the fringes of society and near the boundary of legality, a vaguely defined boundary that shifted to and fro according to the whims of the public and of officialdom. Intervals of comparative peace alternated with bouts of savage persecution. All the while, however, the Church grew ineluctably, the periodic

persecutions purifying and strengthening Her in Her witness for Christ. So, despite harsh and deadly forms of intimidation meant to destroy the Church, the number of Christian believers nonetheless multiplied steadily.


The Pagan Roman Empire and Its Religion

What were the reasons for those periods of persecution? To understand that time better, let us briefly consider the nature of the Roman State and religion. The government of the Roman people had been a republic for nearly 500 years until, in the year 27 B.C., the Senate voted exceptional powers to the first Roman Emperor, Octavian, better known by the title he assumed, Augustus. Augustus was sufficiently clever to restore the outward features of the republic, that is, to retain what historian Michael Grant calls the "decorous façade" of traditional republicanism. In actual fact, under the new regime the Senate was reduced to political insignificance. The Emperor simply ruled as a dictator, with the Senate acting in the fashion of a rubber stamp. The only institution to which the Emperor paid any serious attention was the army, which possessed the *de facto* power to make or break Emperors.

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

An important official within the Roman religion was the *haruspex*, who, after the sacrifice of an animal, examined the entrails of the dead creature to determine the will of the gods, according to the shape and condition of certain internal organs. The Roman pagan religion had no moral or ethical content; there was no concept of sin nor was there any but the vaguest notion





of an afterlife in which one might be rewarded or punished. Morality and ethicality were regulated by social conventions, not religion, and, as the Empire grew, that morality and ethicality, which were very strict, indeed almost puritanical, under the old republic, began to decay.

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

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

Nero (Reigned 54-68)

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

Domitian (Reigned 81-96)

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

Trajan (Reigned 98-117)



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

In the same letter Pliny said this of the Christians: “They affirmed ... the whole of their guilt, or their error, [and], that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, or deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.” It appears likely that Pliny was trying to convey the truth about Christianity to his monarch and, perhaps, mitigate the needless suffering of the Christians.

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

Marcus Aurelius (Reigned 161-180)

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius was, in certain respects, an admirable man. Philosophically, he was a stoic. In an age when immorality and all manner of excess was rife (much as in our own time), this Emperor was rigorously moral and abstemious in his personal life. At a time when rule was often arbitrary and cruel, he was deeply concerned for justice, taking pains, for example, to assist the poor through tax


reform. While others used high positions in the imperial government to lead sybaritic lives, Marcus Aurelius devoted his time to selfless duty. He was, for his time, remarkably cultured and refined. And yet, when it came to such matters as Christianity and the Christians, he was not the same man.

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

Septimius Severus (Reigned 193-211)

At the beginning of his reign, Septimius Severus showed certain sympathy towards his Christian subjects, in part because his own physician, a Christian, had cured him of a serious illness. The church writer, Tertullian, insists that Severus “was graciously mindful of the Christians,” meaning that he did not order persecutions. Tertullian also notes that a number of men and women of the highest rank who were Christians were protected by the Emperor’s authority “from the hands of a raging populace.” In contrast, church historian Eusebius of Caesarea counts Severus as one of the persecutors. It seems likely that this Emperor was sympathetic to the Christians, but had to contend with the growing trepidation on the part of officialdom about the spread of Christianity. Hence, he is supposed to have issued a decree forbidding conversions to Judaism or Christianity. Much more significant was the “raging populace” to which Tertullian referred. Throughout the Empire, the mob had been inflamed against Christianity, because of the outrageous slanders spread about it. As a consequence, whenever there were earthquakes, fires, floods, crop failures, disease outbreaks, or other untoward events, the public was ready to blame the Christians, since they refused to pay homage to the gods, for which, it was thought, the gods retaliated. Taking matters into its own hands, the rabble





would descend on Christians and suspected Christians and literally tear them limb from limb. Where mob justice did not prevail, local officials were sufficiently intimidated by the anger of the people to protect themselves by instituting local persecutions. It was at this time that Saints Felicitas and Perpetua, and their companions, were martyred.

Maximinus I (Reigned 235-238)

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

Decius (Reigned 249-251)

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


contrast, the Christians, in the Roman view, had given up their ancestral religions to become members of an illegal sect.

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

Valerian (Reigned 253-260)

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

Following is an excerpt from the brief trial of



Saint Cyprian before the Roman proconsul, Galerius Maximus, which shows the arbitrary nature of the proceedings:

Galerius Maximus: "Are you Thascius Cyprianus?"
Saint Cyprian: "I am"
Galerius Maximus: "The Emperors have ordered you to make sacrifices."
Saint Cyprian: "I will not obey."
Galerius Maximus: "I advise you to think it over."
Saint Cyprian: "Do as you are instructed. There is no need to take counsel in such a righteous deed."
Galerius Maximus: "It is the sentence of this court that Thascius Cyprianus be executed with the sword."
Saint Cyprian: "Thanks be to God."

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

Diocletian (Reigned 284-305)

The Emperor Diocletian was one of the more talented and remarkable men to ascend the Roman imperial throne. His ascendancy brought to an end the continual upheavals and near anarchy of the third century and reestablished stability and respect for law and order, but also established an extreme form of despotism. Since the sheer magnitude and complexity of imperial rule threatened collapse, Diocletian resolved on a comprehensive reform of the imperial system. Most notable was his creation in 293 of the Tetrarchy ("rule by four") in which the Empire was divided between East and West, each half ruled by a senior Emperor, or *Augustus*, and an assistant Emperor, or *Caesar*, who, upon the death or disability of the senior Emperor, would assume supreme power. Power was thus decentralized, making it possible, in theory anyway, for the gargantuan imperial State to be properly administered. Diocletian himself became *Augustus* of the East, assisted by his *Caesar*, Galerius. In the West, Maximian was named *Augustus*, while Constantius Chlorus (the father of Saint Constantine the Great) became *Caesar*. For a number of years the Tetrarchy achieved its goal, though it ultimately failed.


For nearly all of his reign Diocletian, although a pagan, was tolerant of Christians, allowing several to occupy important positions of trust within the imperial court and in his personal household. Despite that record, in February 303, he launched the bitterest and lengthiest of the anti-Christian persecutions, known to history as the "Great Persecution." Why did he turn from the fair-minded, tolerant, fatherly ruler to vicious

persecutor? First, we must remember that Diocletian was a believer in the religion of the old gods and was extremely superstitious. At some point shortly before the persecution was ordered, the Emperor held a religious sacrifice in his palace. All members of the household were expected to attend, including the Christians. When the time came for the *haruspex* to examine the sacrificed animal's entrails to look for omens that would guide future actions, some of the Christians spontaneously made the Sign of the Cross. Seeing this, the *haruspex* was furious, claiming that the Christians had deliberately spoiled the reading of the omens. Diocletian was shocked and angered by the incident, interpreting the Christian gesture as some sort of dangerous magic that thwarted the purpose of his sacrifice and, doubtless, angered the gods. In addition, his assistant, Galerius, a fanatical pagan, placed great pressure on Diocletian, appealing especially to his superstitious nature, to halt the spread of Christianity, which, he believed, threatened the Empire. Edicts against the Christians immediately followed.

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

The Edict of Milan (313)

In 305, Diocletian abdicated and retired to his estate in Dalmatia, his assistant, Galerius, becoming the new Emperor of the East. Galerius continued to fan the flames of persecution until he fell ill in 311 and issued an Edict of Toleration, ending the persecution and granting the Christians freedom of worship. In that document he begged his Christian subjects to pray for the Empire and for him, since he was dying from a very painful form of cancer. Despite Galerius' edict, his assistant, Maximin Daia, continued the persecution. Only with the Edict of Milan, in February 313, issued



by Emperors Saint Constantine in the West (who had succeeded his father), and Licinius in the East, was Christianity granted full freedom and equality with the old religion.

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

The Lessons

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

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

the last word and will triumph.

THE APOLOGY OF ARISTIDES THE PHILOSOPHER:¹

XV. But the Christians, O King, while they went about and made search, have found the truth; and as we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations. For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come. Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols (made) in the image of man; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others; and of the food which is consecrated to idols they do not eat, for they are pure. And their oppressors they appease (lit: comfort) and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; and their women, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest; and their men keep themselves from every unlawful union and from all uncleanness, in the hope of a recompense to come in the other world. Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction.

They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each

1. Saint Aristides the Philosopher was a 2nd century Greek Christian. According to the Syriac text it was delivered to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius in AD 140. He is commemorated on September 13

The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher of Athens, translated from the Syriac Version Source:
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html>



one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.

They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near. And when a child has been born to one of them, they give thanks to God; and if moreover it happen to die in childhood, they give thanks to God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And further if they see that any one of them dies in his ungodliness or in his sins, for him they grieve bitterly, and sorrow as for one who goes to meet his doom.

XVI. Such, O King, is the commandment of the law of the Christians, and such is their manner of life. As men who know God, they ask from Him petitions which are fitting for Him to grant and for them to receive. And thus they employ their whole lifetime. And since they know the loving-kindnesses of God toward them, behold! for their sake the glorious things which are in the world flow forth to view. And verily, they are those who found the truth when they went about and made search for it; and from what we considered, we learned that they alone come near to a knowledge of the truth. And they do not proclaim in the ears of the multitude the kind deeds they do, but are careful that no one should notice them; and they conceal their giving just as he who finds a treasure and conceals it. And they strive to be righteous as those who expect to behold their Messiah, and to receive from Him with great glory the promises made concerning them. And as for their words and their precepts, O King, and their glorying in their worship, and the hope of earning according to the work of each one of them their recompense which they look for in another world, you may learn about these from their writings. It is enough for us to have shortly informed your Majesty concerning the conduct and the truth of the Christians.

For great indeed, and wonderful is their doctrine to him who will search into it and reflect upon it. And verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine (lit: "a divine admixture") in the midst of them.

Take, then, their writings, and read therein, and lo! you will find that I have not put forth these things on my own authority, nor spoken thus as their advocate; but since I read in their writings I was fully assured of these things as also of things which are to come. And for this reason I was constrained to declare the truth to such as care for it and seek the world to come. And to me there is no doubt but that the earth abides through the supplication of the Christians. But the rest of the nations err and cause error in wallowing before the elements of the world, since beyond these their mental vision will not pass. And they search about as if in darkness because they will not recognize the truth; and like drunken men they reel and jostle one another and fall.

XVII. Thus far, O King, I have spoken; for concerning that which remains, as is said above, there are found in their other writings things which are hard to utter and difficult for one to narrate,--which are not only spoken in words but also wrought out in deeds. Now the Greeks, O King, as they follow base practices in intercourse with males, and a mother and a sister and a daughter, impute their monstrous impurity in turn to the Christians. But the Christians are just and good, and the truth is set before their eyes, and their spirit is long-suffering; and, therefore, though they know the error of these (the Greeks), and are persecuted by them, they bear and endure it; and for the most part they have compassion on them, as men who are destitute of knowledge. And on their side, they offer prayer that these may repent of their error; and when it happens that one of them has repented, he is ashamed before the Christians of the works which were done by him; and he makes confession to God, saying, I did these things in ignorance. And he purifies his heart, and his sins are forgiven him, because he committed them in ignorance in the former time, when he used to blaspheme and speak evil of the true knowledge of the Christians. And assuredly the race of the Christians is more blessed than all the men who are upon the face of the earth.

Henceforth let the tongues of those who utter vanity and harass the Christians be silent; and hereafter let them speak the truth. For it is of serious consequence to them that they should worship the true God rather than worship a senseless sound. And verily whatever is spoken in the mouth of the Christians is of God; and





THE GOOD WORD

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their doctrine is the gateway of light. Wherefore let all who are without the knowledge of God draw near thereto; and they will receive incorruptible words, which are from all time and from eternity. So shall they appear before the awful judgment which through Jesus the Messiah is destined to come upon the whole human race.



THE EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS, C. AD 150-225



The Distinctiveness of Christians²

5:1 For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. 2 For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life. 3. This teaching of theirs has not been discovered by the thought and reflection of ingenious people, nor do they promote any human doctrine, as some do. 4 But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. 5 They live in their own

countries but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. 6 They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. 7 They share their food but not their wives. 8 They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. 9 They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. 10 They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. 11 They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. 12 They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. 13 They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. 14 They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. 15 They are cursed, yet they bless; they are insulted, yet they offer respect. 16 When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life. 17 By the Jews they are assaulted as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted, yet those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility.

6.1 In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world.

2. Michael W. Holmes translator and editor, "Epistle to Diognetus," in *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations, 3rd edition*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 701-3.