

PERSECUTIONS

During the first few centuries, Christians were persecuted wherever they lived. But in Egypt, persecutions raged on and off incessantly.

From A.D. 202-642, namely during the Roman- Byzantine period, twenty one persecutions over-took the Copts. The seventh among these persecutions inflamed by Emperor Diocletian, burned for ten consecutive years. So much so, that Mgr. Guerin (a French Cardinal) says in his "Dictionnaire de Dictionnaires" under the word "Martyre" that the number of those martyred is estimated at eight hundred thousand, the last of whom was Abba Petros I, who is therefore entitled "the Seal of the Martyrs". Preceding him were six bishops whose dignity was no deterrent to the persecutor.

In these twenty one persecutions, men, women and children alike, were tortured and killed most ruthlessly. And it should be noted that the Copts never painted a picture, nor raised a statue depicting them. The only reminder is the calendar by which they made the year 284 A.D. (the first of Diocletian's reign) the beginning of their era.

The persecutions through which the Christians of Egypt passed throughout the centuries, filled the annals of their church history with pages and pages giving accounts of those valiant men, women and children. The spiritual heritage they left to the Copts is truly a rich heritage that has given them strong sustenance in times of stress and pride in their church as the mother of martyrs.

Although the life stories of the Coptic saints and martyrs are too many to recount in one article, it is appropriate however, to give the stories of a few, as shining samples of the many. The first story to be given here is that of the men of the Theban legion and of a nurse whose name is associated with them.

Since Egypt was being ruled by the Romans, the latter exercised their right to mobilize Egyptian youth to serve in their army. One of the Egyptian legions that had won high repute in the armed service was known as the Theban legion, so-called because its members were natives of Thebes, capital of Pharaonic Egypt (and site of the present day town of Luxor).

Unknown to the Romans, the soldiers of the Theban legion had all been converted to Christianity, and tried, even as military men "to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's and to God the things that were God's"

When, in the course of the history of the Roman Empire, the province of Gaul (present-day France) rumbled with signs of rebelliousness, Emperor Diocletian commissioned Maximian, whom he had appointed as his second in command and given the title of Caesar, to quell their rebellion. Maximian having heard of the valour of the Theban legion, requested Diocletian to

send it over to him that it might participate in the action.

After the battle, Maximian, as was his habit, decided to go to the pagan temple to pay homage to his gods, and he ordered the men of the Theban legion to go with him. But he was both surprised and infuriated when they unanimously refused to obey his order and admitted they were Christians. He therefor, ordered them to stand in file and had them decimated (i.e. every tenth man killed.) hoping thereby to intimidate them. But the rest assembled together and wrote him a letter through their Captain, Saint Maurice. In it they said "Great Caesar, we are your soldiers, and at the same time we are God's servants. We owe you our military service, but our prime allegiance we owe to God. From you we receive our daily wages; from Him our eternal reward. Great Caesar, we regret that we cannot obey any order if it runs counter to God's commands. If your orders coincide with God's commands we will certainly obey them; if not, "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts5:29), for our loyalty to Him surpasses all other loyalties. We are not rebels; if we were we would defend ourselves for we have our weapons. But we prefer to die upright than to live stained. As Christians we will serve you. But we will not relinquish our faith in our Lord, and this we openly declare"

When Maximian read this letter, the very steadfastness it portrayed angered him all the more. He asked the remnant to accompany him to the temple. Fearlessly they said: "We are Christian." Thereupon Maximian ordered his Roman soldiers to wipe out the whole Legion of six thousand six hundred men.

Pere Cheneau describes this saga in the following terms: "Thus were they martyred, some in Agaune, others in Soleure, in Ventimiglia, in Bergamo, and in Treves. It was a mighty holocaust; an unparalleled massacre, the plains were drunk with their blood. .. But by being willing to make the supreme sacrifice. the men of the Theban Legion proved that their faithfulness to their Heavenly Lord and King surpassed their valour as soldiers in the army of the temporal ruler."

In the midst of this terror, there stands an inexplicable element, Maximian whom even Diocletian described as "a barbarian" spared the nurses accompanying the Theban Legion.

Among them was a young lady whose name was Verena, a native of Garagoz, a town not far from Thebes. As she meditated on the strange circumstances that brought her so far away from her native land, she concluded that Almighty God must have had as a mission for her, the teaching of the people among whom she stayed. Consequently she spent the rest of her life in present-day Switzerland, educating the people to become Christians and at the same time teaching them the principles of hygiene. To this day her icon depicts her holding a water jug in one hand and a comb in the other.

When Verena had run her race, and died in peace, the people of Zurzach where she lived built a church in her name, and buried her in it; but this church was later destroyed by the Germanic tribes. In the ninth century, the Benedictenes built a monastery in its place, and it still bare St. Verena's name. The monastery was transformed into a Bishopric but was burnt in 1279 A.D., then rebuilt as a church once more when the Unionists won the victory.

On being victorious in 1712 A.D., the Protestants destroyed the church. but spared the chapel which remained until the nineteenth century when it was closed. However she has not been

forgotten, and in the town of Soleure, a church named after her still stands. It was built after she had visited the city to meditate over the tombs of St. Ursus and St. Victor, two of the officers of the Theban Legion martyred and buried there.

A contemporary eminent Swiss journalist, writing about her not so long ago, related her amazing story; and concluded by saying that through her utter consecration and her devoted Christian service, Verena the native of Garagoz in Upper Egypt, and the one-time nurse in the Theban Legion, became the matron Saint of housewives, and the lepers in Switzerland".

The story of The five & their mother:

In a small village in the province of Giza, just south of the city of Cairo, there stands a small but old church called the Church of "The five and their Mother". Copts from all over the country visit this church in remembrance of the saintly martyrs after whom it is named.

These martyrs were five brothers whose father had died when they were very young, and whose mother was a pious, Christian woman. When her husband died, she consecrated her life to bringing up her sons to be virtuous and God-fearing. The two older ones named Kuzman and Dimian studied medicine and became doctors. The three younger ones retired to the desert and became monks.

When the Diocletian persecutions started, Kuzman and Dimian spent a lot of their time among the distressed and the suffering, dispensing physical as well as spiritual healing. Their activities brought them to the attention of the Roman authorities, who were told, also, of their mother and brothers and how they were all Christians. Kuzman and Dimian were immediately summoned, ordered to bring the rest of their family and appear together before the governor on a certain day. When they did, they were told to relinquish their faith and bow their knees to the Roman gods. This they categorically refused, proclaiming they were Christian. When neither coercion nor threats succeeded in making them change their firm stand, orders were given that they be tortured with progressive severity until they either give in or die. At first their mother was left standing by to behold what was happening to them, but when instead of breaking down, she kept encouraging them to withstand the suffering by constant prayers and hymn-singing, she was beheaded in front of their eyes and left lying on the ground.

Seeing her lying there, her oldest son Kuzman appealed to the standers-by, saying, "Will he who has a compassionate heart among you remove the body of this old woman and give her a decent burial". No sooner had he said this than someone's heart was stirred and the mother was carried away for burial. As for the five sons they continued steadfast in their faith bearing all suffering for their Master's sake until they too, were beheaded and received the crown of martyrdom. Because they were persecuted together and as one family group, they came to be remembered and celebrated as the "Five and their mother".

When the era of persecutions came to an end, several churches were built in their names, and many of those who prayed fervently to the Lord there, evoking their blessed names received miracles in accordance with their faith. In the city of Rome, a large Cathedral stands, bearing the names of Saints Kuzman and Dimian.

Abba Paphnuti:

Side by side with the martyrs stand the confessors, who withstood severe trials but did not lose their lives. Consequently they are described as "martyrs without shedding of blood". One of those confessors, who patiently endured to the end, is Abba Paphnuti, Bishop of the Thebaid. As a youth he contended with himself thus: "If heaven is our real goal, and we are merely travelers and sojourners on this earth, then I should set my heart, from now, on heavenly goals". This contention led him to leave his home town and go to St. Antoni in the desert, there to become his disciple, soon he became known for his eagerness and diligence, as well as his piety, patience and understanding "A living temple to the Divine Wisdom".

One day, some of the ascetics in the vicinity, came accusing a brother of theirs of a sin which he emphatically denied. Hearing them arguing vehemently with one another, Abba Paphnuti spoke, saying: "A man was once walking on the bank of a river, and his leg got stuck in the mire. Some men saw him and came to help, with the purpose of pulling him out but instead, they pushed him in deeper." The accusers realized that this short simile was meant for them and that their argument would only lead them and their brother to graver errors. In humility they sought forgiveness and pardoned their erring brother. Going back to St. Antoni, the brothers related what has happened. Antoni smiled and commented, "This is indeed a man who judges in equity and who understands the depths of the human spirit."

Shortly after that Abba Paphnuti was chosen and consecrated Bishop of the Thebaid.

When the persecutions of Maximinus flared up, Paphnuti and his people were among the first to endure infliction, his right eye was plucked out, and his left leg broken. Not satisfied with this, his persecutors sent him with a hundred and thirty of his people to the quarries of Sinai, where they were forced to labour under constant use of the whip. Throughout his sufferings, Paphnuti was a rock of endurance and spiritual strength to his fellow-sufferers. He was constantly encouraging, sustaining, praying with them and for them

When finally the persecution subsided. Bishop Paphnuti was miraculously still alive and he returned to his Bishopric, where he again resumed his work of edification.

St. Paphnuti was one of those chosen to accompany Saint Alexander, the Patriarch of Alexandria to the great Ecumenical Council of Nicea, where he was most active in upholding the Faith. And God in his Mercy, granted him grace with the pious Emperor Constantine, who regarded him highly and often invited him to the palace, devoutly kissing the orbit of that eye lost for love of Christ.

During the years which followed, he was one of the staunchest and the most steadfast supporters of St. Athanasius in his lifelong struggle against the Arians.

The foregoing are the stories of but a few, a very few_ of the mighty host of witnesses, many of whom will remain forever nameless, whose love for him who ransomed us was greater than their love for life itself. Not that they did not love life, they certainly did. But when the test came they fearlessly and unequivocally made their choice. They counted it gain to win the crown of Eternal Life. What power they had! What victory was theirs!