

In approximately A.D. 156 anti-Christian persecution broke out in the province of Asia. Civil authorities, for reasons not fully clear, decided to kill certain Christians. Realizing that he was a target, Polycarp, with the help of local believers, went into hiding. But after torturing a servant, as one account relates, the soldiers discovered Polycarp in a hayloft and took him into custody.



Polycarp being burned at the stake in Smyrna.

Execution was not what the authorities wanted, however. After all, Polycarp was a very old man, and what could be gained by putting him to death? What they really wanted was a denial of his faith. What a victory that would be for paganism and what a blow to the “cult” of Jesus. “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense and saving yourself,” the officials pleaded after they had taken him into custody. “Have respect for your age,” the proconsul begged; “swear by the divinity of Caesar; repent and say, ‘Away with the atheists.’... Take the oath, and I will let you go.” Polycarp stood firm, and then uttered the words that will forever be associated with his name: “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”³³

The authorities carried out their threat, and Polycarp was burned at the stake. But the end result was a victory for the Christians. Many nonbelievers were horrified by the spectacle of burning at the stake this revered man, by some accounts 86, by other accounts 104 years old. His death served as a witness to believers and nonbelievers alike to the suffering of Christ and to the courageous commitment of Christ’s followers.

Perpetua

The cessation of persecution in Asia Minor following the death of Polycarp did not apply to the whole Roman Empire. Persecution continued elsewhere, and during the early years of the third century it became widespread and well-coordinated, especially in North Africa where Perpetua and her slave girl Felicitas were executed. Before this period of intense persecution, however, there were isolated instances that were highly publicized—one in Rome just one decade following the death of Polycarp. This time it was Justin, who since his death has been referred to as Justin Martyr.

Schooled in the philosophy of Plato, Justin was converted to Christianity as a young man and soon became one of the faith’s ablest defenders. He was a forceful writer who intelligently presented Christianity to his pagan readers and openly denounced the persecution of his fellow-believers. In Rome he gave instruction to believers and inquirers

in private homes, and it was this crime more than any other, apparently, that led to his martyrdom. After a trial, the death sentence was pronounced by the judge, and Justin, along with five other men and one woman, was beheaded.

Some decades later, under the rule of Emperor Septimus Severus, the first widespread, intense persecution of Christians occurred. In 202 he issued an edict that forbade conversion to either Christianity or Judaism. The emperor himself worshiped Serapis, an Egyptian god of the dead, and he feared Christianity was a threat to his own religion. Although the edict was aimed mainly at prospective converts, its consequences were felt by new believers as well as mature leaders in the church.

The emperor's persecution was most bitterly felt in Carthage. Here in this great Roman city of North Africa, the growth of Christianity was alarming officials, and the emperor's edict extended to anyone "teaching or making converts."³⁴ Among the Christians of Carthage was Saturus, a deacon who conducted catechism classes for a group of converts. Vibia Perpetua, a twenty-two-year-old mother of an infant son and her personal slave Felicitas (who was eight months pregnant) had joined the class and were among those affected by the emperor's edict. Nothing is known of Perpetua's husband, but historians have speculated that either he was dead or he had abandoned her because of her newfound faith. The others condemned to die were Saturus, their teacher, and three other men.

Perpetua's plight has been preserved in a third-century document, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, believed to be based on diaries and records of Perpetua and Saturus. "Some part of the story may be legendary," notes Elliott Wright, "but compared with most hagiography of third-century martyrs the account is filled with convincing human touches."³⁵ In this account, Perpetua tells of the distress and humiliation that her father, a respected nobleman, endured when he was informed that his only daughter had been arrested and imprisoned as a common criminal. He came immediately and pleaded with her to renounce this new faith about which she had been learning. When she refused, he became so incensed that he threatened to beat her, but she remained unmoved.

Perpetua's stolid demeanor, however, was soon broken. What her adamant father could not accomplish, her helpless infant could. She was "racked with anxiety," almost to the breaking point, when two Christians managed to have her baby brought to the prison. "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."³⁶

As the time of her execution approached, the family crisis became more acute. Her father came to the prison, and again he pleaded with her to put family considerations above her creed: "Do not cut us off entirely; for not one of us will ever hold up his head again if anything happens to you." But the stoical young woman would not bend: "This will be done on the scaffold which God has willed; for I know that we have not been placed in our own power but in God's."³⁷ The next day when her father heard the news that she was to be thrown into the arena with wild beasts, he sought to rescue her. Though it was a heroic act of compassion, authorities ordered that the aged man be beaten. It was a pathetic sight. "I grieved for my father's plight," wrote Perpetua, "as if I had been struck myself."³⁸

Perpetua's father was persistent. Again he returned to the prison, laying the ultimate burden of guilt on her. "Then the father laid her child upon her neck, and he ... said: 'Be merciful to us, daughter, and live with us!'" Her response is impossible to comprehend apart from her unbending faith that would testify to the reality of the Christian faith in a pagan world. An account written in the thirteenth century, drawn from early sources,

describes her words and actions in blunt terms: “But she threw the child aside, and repulsed her parents, saying: ‘Begone from me, enemies of God, for I know you not!’”³⁹

Once the so-called trial was over, the fate of the prisoners was sealed and the remaining days before the execution were spent in personal reflection, “more concerned about their worthiness, their loyalty to Christ,” according to Wright, “than about the suffering ahead of them.”⁴⁰ They met for prayer, shared their last meal—their agape love feast—and witnessed their faith to the crowd outside.

On the day of the execution the prisoners were brought to the arena where, according to Roman custom, the men were taken first to be tortured for the entertainment of the crowd before their execution. Saturus stopped at the gate for one last word of testimony with Pudens, the prison governor, who later turned to Christ and became a martyr himself. The men were then sent into the arena with a bear, a leopard, and a wild boar. Saturus was so mangled and bloody after the ordeal that spectators ridiculed him, shouting, “He is well-baptized!” Perpetua and Felicitas (who had given birth to her baby in prison) were stripped and sent into the arena to face a “mad heifer.” The gory torture soon became too much for the crowd, and the people began shouting, “Enough!”⁴¹

When this preliminary exhibition was ended and the young women were brought to the executioner, Perpetua called out to some grieving Christian friends, “Give out the Word to the brothers and sisters; stand fast in the faith, love one another, and don’t let our suffering become a stumbling block to you.”⁴² She was then taken to the gladiator to be beheaded. Whether due to hesitancy or lack of skill, his first blow was not sufficient. Perpetua cried out in pain, took the gladiator’s trembling hand and directed the sword to her throat, and it was over.

After this wave of persecution there followed fifty years of relative peace during which the church grew steadily. Many people who may themselves have never been able to pass such a test of faith were, nevertheless, attracted by the example of Perpetua and her comrades to a faith that demonstrated such serenity and courage.

Ulfilas

Following the much-publicized conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312, the Roman Empire became nominally Christianized, and the vibrant testimony of the Christians seemed to decline. No longer did they suffer for their faith, for it was in vogue to be a Christian, and as a result, there was a weakening in spiritual fervor. Martyrdom from official persecution had become a terror of the past. The church and the state became closely allied, and Christianity was being used more and more as a means of fostering imperial expansion. Missionaries were viewed in a political light in the hope that their evangelistic efforts could bring outlying areas within the scope of Roman control.

Ulfilas was one such missionary. Though he himself was motivated by his desire to spread the gospel, in the eyes of Roman policy, his mission was well-suited to territorial expansion. Ulfilas was one of the greatest cross-cultural missionaries of the early church. His ministry was to the Goths, a barbarian tribe outside the Roman Empire living in the area of present-day Romania.

Born in 311, Ulfilas was raised in the pagan environment of the Goths. His mother is believed to have been Gothic and his father a Cappadocian Christian who was taken captive by Gothic raiders. When he was in his early twenties, Ulfilas was sent to Constantinople for diplomatic service. Here he spent several years and came under the influence of Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, who taught him the Scriptures in Greek and Latin. Under Eusebius he served as a “reader,” ministering possibly to Gothic soldiers in the Roman army.