
ROMAN CIVILIZATION

SELECTED READINGS

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ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshiped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not to falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so [apparently a reference to the Ten Commandments]. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food [see § 168]. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called attendants. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

[Trajan to Pliny]

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshipping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain

I 68. PROPAGANDA AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

During the second and third centuries the spread of Christianity was rapid, especially among the lowest social strata in the urban centers of Asia and Africa. It gradually penetrated the highest circles of the provinces and of Italy, gaining adherents even in the Senate, the court, and the imperial family. The contemporary Christian apologists are given to rhetorical overstatements of the extension of their religion (it has been estimated that by the time of Constantine's conversion in A.D. 312 about one tenth of the inhabitants of the Empire were Christians). As the new religion began to gain sizable strength, it was called upon to defend itself from fantastic charges, the most persistent of which were atheism, eating of babies, sexual orgies, and incest.

SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

Tertullian, *Apology* xxxvii. 4

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled everything of yours—cities, islands, forts, towns, *conciliabula* [see vol. 1, chapter 7, note 38], even the camps, tribes, courts, palace, senate, Forum. We have left you only the temples.

CALUMNIES AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS

Minucius Felix, *Octavius* viii. 3–xii. 6 (abridged)

Is it not deplorable that a faction . . . of abandoned, hopeless outlaws makes attacks against the gods? They gather together ignorant persons from the lowest dregs, and credulous women, easily deceived as their sex is, and organize a rabble of unholy conspirators, leagued together in nocturnal associations and by ritual fasts and barbarous foods, not for the purpose of some sacred rite but for the sake of sacrilege—a secret tribe that shuns the light, silent in public but talkative in secret places. They despise the temples as if they were tombs, they spit upon the gods, they ridicule our sacred rites. Pitiable themselves, they pity . . . our

priests; half-naked themselves, they despise offices and official robes. What amazing folly! What incredible arrogance! They despise present tortures yet dread uncertain future ones; while they fear to die after death, they have no fear of it in the meantime; deceptive hope soothes away their terror with the solace of a life to come.

Already . . . decay of morals spreads from day to day throughout the entire world, and the loathsome shrines of this impious conspiracy multiply. This plot must be completely rooted out and execrated. They recognize one another by secret signs and tokens; they love one another almost before they are acquainted. Everywhere a kind of religion of lust is also associated with them, and they call themselves promiscuously brothers and sisters, so that ordinary fornication, through the medium of a sacred name, becomes incest. And thus their vain and mad superstition glories in crimes. And for themselves, if there were not a basis of truth, knowing rumor would not tell of gross and unspeakable abominations. I hear that in some absurd conviction or other they consecrate and worship the head of an ass,²³ the most repulsive of beasts—a religion worthy of the morals that begot it. Others say that they reverence the private parts of their director and high priest, and adore them as if belonging to a parent. Whether this is false I know not, but suspicion naturally attaches to secret and nocturnal rites. To say that a man put to death for a crime and the lethal wooden cross are objects of their veneration is to assign altars suitable for abandoned and impious men, the kind of worship they deserve. What is told of the initiation of neophytes is as detestable as it is notorious. An infant covered with spelt to deceive the unsuspecting is set before the one to be initiated in the rites. The neophyte is induced to strike what seem to be harmless blows on the surface of the spelt, and this infant is killed by his random and unsuspecting blows. Its blood—oh, shocking!—they greedily lap up; the limbs they eagerly distribute; and by this victim they league themselves, and by this complicity in crime they pledge themselves to mutual silence. . . . Their form of banqueting is notorious; everywhere all talk of it. . . . On an appointed day they assemble at a feast with all their children, sisters, and mothers, people of both sexes and every age. There, after much feasting, when the banquet has become heated and intoxication has inflamed the drunken passions of incestuous lust, a dog which has been tied to a lamp is incited to rush and leap forward after a morsel thrown beyond the range of the cord by which it was tied. The

23. This was also said of the Jews (cf. Tacitus, *Historiae* v. iii. 4–iv. 3).

telltale light is upset and extinguished, and in the shameless dark they exchange embraces indiscriminately, and all, if not actually, yet by complicity are equally involved in incest. . . .

Furthermore, they threaten the whole world and the universe itself and its stars with fire, and work for its destruction. . . .²⁴ Not content with this insane notion, they add to and weave old wives' tales: they say that they are reborn after death from the cinders and ashes, and with unaccountable confidence believe in one another's lies. . . .

But you [Christians] meanwhile in anxious doubt abstain from wholesome pleasures; you do not attend the shows; you take no part in the processions; fight shy of public banquets; abhor the sacred games, meats from the sacrificial victims, drinks poured in libation on the altars.

Athenagoras,²⁵ *Plea for the Christians* ii. 7, 9; iii. 12–13

It is not in accord with your justice that, when others are charged with crimes they are not punished till they are convicted, but in our case the name bears more weight than the evidence at the trial, at which the judges, instead of inquiring whether the accused has committed any wrong, insult the name, as if that were itself a crime. . . . Therefore what is conceded equally to all we claim for ourselves, that we shall not be hated and punished because we are called Christians (for what bearing has the name on evil-doing?), but shall be tried on any charges anyone may bring against us, and either be released on our disproving the charges, or punished if convicted of wickedness—not for the name (for no Christian is a bad man unless he falsely profess our doctrines) but for the wrong done. . . .

Three charges are alleged against us: atheism, cannibalistic banquets, incestuous unions. But if these charges are true, spare no class; proceed at once against the crimes; kill us root and branch, with our wives and children, if any Christian is found to live like the beasts. . . . But if these things are only gossip mongering and empty slanders . . . it is left for you to make inquiry concerning our life, our beliefs, our loyalty and obedience to you [the Emperor Marcus Aurelius], your house, and the monarchy, and thus at length to accord to us nothing more than to those who persecute us.

24. This refers to early Christian belief in the imminent destruction of the world and the coming Day of Judgment.

25. An Athenian convert, whose pamphlet in defense of Christianity was written c. 177.

Tertullian, *Apology* x. 1, xxviii. 2-3, xxxv. 1, xl. 1-2; From *LCL*

"You do not," say you, "worship the gods; you do not offer sacrifice for the emperors." It follows by parity of reasoning that we do not sacrifice for others because we do not for ourselves—it follows from our not worshipping the gods. So we are accused of sacrilege and treason at once. That is the chief of the case against us—the whole of it, in fact. . . .

So now we have come to the second charge, the charge of treason against a majesty more august. For it is with greater fear and shrewd timidity that you watch Caesar than the Olympian Jove himself. . . . So that in this too you will be found irreligious to those gods of yours, when you show more fear for the rule of a man. In fact, among you perjury by all the gods together comes quicker than by the *genius* of a single Caesar. . . .

So that is why Christians are public enemies—because they will not give the emperors vain, false, and rash honors; because, being men of a true religion, they celebrate the emperors' festivals more in heart than in frolic. . . .

On the contrary, the name faction may properly be given to those who join to hate the good and honest, who shout for the blood of the innocent, who use as a pretext to defend their hatred the absurdity that they take the Christians to be the cause of every disaster to the state, of every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to water the fields, if the sky does not move [i.e., if there is no rain] or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry at once arises: "The Christians to the lions!"²⁶

26. Except in the Christian writers (see § 169), praise of the Christian way of life is practically unknown in extant ancient sources. There is evidence, however, that some independent and rational minds were not swept away by the popular anti-Christian hysteria. For example, the Greek scientist Galen (A.D. c. 130-c. 200; cf. p. 223) wrote in his summary of Plato's *Republic* (the work is lost except for some fragments preserved in an Arabic translation): "Now we see the people called Christians . . . acting in the same way [as those who philosophize]. For their contempt of death [and of its sequel] is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabiting all through their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers" (R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* [Oxford, 1949], p. 15).

169. DEFENSE OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

The calumnies and attacks against Christians led to the production of a body of Christian apologetic literature during the second and third centuries. The Christian apologists, such as Aristides of Athens, Justin/Martyr, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix, and Tertullian, give us an idealized picture of the early Christian community, generally glossing over the numerous defections under the stress of the persecutions and the fierce internal schisms.

Tertullian, *Apology* xxx, 1, 4, xxxviii-xxxix, xlii (abridged); Adapted from *LCL*

For we invoke the eternal God, the true God, the living God for the safety of the emperors. . . . Looking up to heaven, the Christians—with hands outspread, because innocent, with head bare because we do not blush, yes! and without a prompter [cf. § 161, first selection] because we pray from the heart—are ever praying for all the emperors. We pray for a fortunate life for them, a secure rule, a safe house, brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, a peaceful world. . . .

Should not this sect have been classed among the legal associations, when it commits no such actions as are commonly feared from unlawful associations? For unless I am mistaken, the reason for prohibiting associations clearly lay in forethought for public order—to save the state from being torn into parties, a thing very likely to disturb election assemblies, public gatherings, local senates, meetings, even the public games, with the clashing and rivalry of partisans. . . .²⁷ We, however, whom all the passion for glory and rank leave cold, have no need to combine; nothing is more foreign to us than the state. One state we recognize for all—the universe.

Your public games, too, we renounce, as heartily as we do their origins; we know these origins lie in superstition. . . . We have nothing to do, in speech, sight, or hearing, with the madness of the circus, the shamelessness of the theater, the savagery of the arena, the vanity of the gymnasium. Why should we offend you if we assume the existence of other pleasures? . . .

I will now show you the proceedings with which the Christian association occupies itself. I have proved they are not wrong; so now I will make you see they are good. We are a society with a common

27. On the Roman government's policy toward associations, see § 51.

religious feeling, unity of discipline, a common bond of hope. We meet in gathering and congregation to approach God in prayer, massing our forces to surround Him. This violence that we do Him pleases God. We pray also for the emperors, for their ministers and those in authority, for the security of the world, for peace on earth, for postponement of the end. We meet to read the divine Scriptures. . . . Our presidents are elders of proved character, men who have reached this office not for a price²⁸ but by character; for nothing that is God's goes for a price.

Even if there is a treasury of a sort, it is not made up of money paid in initiation fees, as if religion were a matter of contract. Every man once a month brings some modest contribution—or whenever he wishes, and only if he does wish, and if he can; for nobody is compelled; it is a voluntary offering. You might call them the trust funds of piety. For they are not spent upon banquets²⁹ or drinking parties or thankless eating houses; but to feed the poor and to bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old and for shipwrecked mariners; and any who may be in mines, islands, or prisons, provided that it is for the sake of God's sect, become the pensioners of their confession. . . .

So we, who are united in mind and soul, have no hesitation about sharing property. All is common among us—except our wives. At that point we dissolve our partnership. . . .

Our dinner shows its idea in its name; it is called by the Greek name for love [i.e., *agape*]. . . . Since it turns on the duty of religion, it allows nothing vile, nothing immodest.³⁰ We do not take our places at table until we have first partaken of prayer to God. Only so much is eaten as satisfies hunger, only so much drunk as meets the needs of the modest. . . . After water for the hands come the lights; and then each, from what he knows of the Holy Scriptures, or from his own heart, is called before the rest to sing to God. . . . Prayer in like manner ends the banquet. . . .

This gathering of Christians may properly be called illegal, if it is like illegal gatherings; may properly be condemned, if any complaint can be made against it such as are made against factions. To whose hurt have we ever met? We are when assembled just what we are when apart; taken together the same as singly; we injure none; we grieve none.

28. Tertullian refers to the purchase of priesthoods among the Greeks and Romans.

29. Formal banquets were one of the principal activities of associations among the Romans (cf. § 52, first selection).

30. For the popular charges against the Christians, see § 168.

When decent people, when good men gather, when the pious and when the chaste assemble, that is not to be called a faction. . . .

But there is another charge of wrong-doing made against us. We are said to be useless in business. How so, when we are human beings and live alongside of you—men with the same ways, the same dress and furniture, the same necessities of life? . . . So not without a *forum*, not without a meat market, not without baths, shops, workshops, stalls, and market days, and the other aspects of business, we live with you—in this world. We sail ships together with you, we serve in the army, go to the country, to market with you. Our skills and yours work together; our labor is openly at your service.

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* lxi, lxxv–lxxvii

All who are convinced and believe that what is taught and said by us is true, and promise that they are able to live accordingly, are taught to pray and with fasting to ask forgiveness of God for their former sins; and we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us to where there is water, and they are reborn in the same manner as we ourselves were reborn [the rite of baptism]. For in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost, they then are washed in the water. . . .

After thus washing the one who has been convinced and has given his assent, we conduct him to the place where those who are called the brethren are assembled, to offer earnest prayers in common for ourselves, for him who has been enlightened, and for all others everywhere, so that we, now that we have learned the truth, may by our works also be deemed worthy of being found to be good practitioners and keepers of the commandments, and thus be saved with eternal salvation. When we end our prayers we greet each other with a kiss. Then bread and a chalice of wine mixed with water are brought to the one who presides over the brethren; and he takes it, and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and the Holy Ghost; and he gives thanks at length for our being deemed worthy of these things by Him. When he has finished the prayers and thanksgiving, all the people present express their assent, saying "Amen." . . . And when he who presides has celebrated the eucharist [thanksgiving], and all the

people have expressed their assent, those called among us deacons allow each one of those present to partake of the bread and wine and water for which thanks have been given, and they bring it also to those not present. And this food is called among us the eucharist. . . .

And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering in one place of all who dwell in the cities or in the country places, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time allows. Then when the reader has finished, he who presides gives oral admonition and exhortation to imitate these excellent examples. Then we all rise together, and offer prayers; and, as stated before, when we have ended our praying, bread and wine and water are brought. And he who presides similarly offers up prayers and thanksgiving, as far as lies in his power, and the people express their approval by saying "Amen." And each receives a share and partakes of the food for which thanks have been given³¹ and through the deacons some is sent to those not present. The prosperous, if they so desire, each contribute what they wish, according to their own judgment, and the collection is entrusted to the one who presides. And he assists orphans and widows, and those who are in need because of illness or any other reason, and those who are in prison, and strangers sojourning with us; in short, all those in need are his care.

DENUNCIATION OF PAGAN AMUSEMENTS

Tatian, ³² *Address to the Greeks* xxii-xxiii; From M. Whitaker, *Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos* (Oxford, 1982)

What is one to make of your teaching? Your official festivals are ridiculous, celebrated in honor of evil demons and bringing shame upon human beings. I saw a certain man on many occasions; when I first saw him I was astonished, but my astonishment was replaced by contempt as I considered how he was one man in himself, but quite another in the outward mask he assumed: very affected and putting on all sorts of delicate airs, now with flashing eyes, now wringing his hands and expressing madness with a clay make-up; sometimes appearing as Aphrodite, and sometimes as Apollo; a one-man accuser of all the gods, epitome of superstition, disparager of heroism, actor of murders, dem-

31. Justin refers to the *agape* ("love feast").

32. Born of pagan parents in Assyria, Tatian received a Greek education, became a pupil of Justin Martyr, and was converted to Christianity in the reign of Antoninus Pius.

onstrator of adultery, repository of madness, teacher of perverts, instigator of condemned criminals—and such a one drew praise from all! But I rejected him as a total falsehood—the godlessness, the practices and the man! Yet you are captivated by these men and abuse those who do not share in your activities. I refuse to stand and gape at a chanting crowd, and I do not want to ape the antics of someone gesticulating and writhing in an unnatural way. Is there any kind of spectacle left for you to devise? They blow through their noses and use foul language, they posture obscenely and demonstrate on the stage how to commit adultery in full view of your daughters and boys. You have splendid lecture halls, publicizing all the wickedness that goes on at night and delighting the audiences with disgraceful speeches; and splendid poets too, liars all, who delude their hearers with their subtle wordplay.

I saw other men who had trained to become heavyweights, and carried round a load of superfluous flesh, to whom prizes and garlands are offered. The judges summon them not to a display of manliness but to a contest of violent brawling, and the garland goes to the hardest hitter. These are the lesser evils; anyone would shrink from mentioning the greater ones. Some men are so abandoned as to make a profession of idleness and actually sell themselves to be murdered; the hungry man sells himself and the rich man buys the murderers-to-be. The spectators take their seats and the gladiators engage in single combat about nothing, and no one goes down to their aid. Are your celebrations of this kind really a good thing? Your great man collects his camp of murderers by promising them a bandit's keep, so bandits are what come out of it. You all gather to watch, and while on the one hand you criticize the president of the games for his villainy, you also criticize the gladiators themselves. Someone who happens to miss the murder is vexed, because he was not condemned to be a spectator of wicked and bloody acts. You sacrifice animals in order to eat meat and you buy men to provide human slaughter for the soul, feeding it with bloodshed of the most impious kind. The bandit murders for the sake of what he can get, but the rich man buys gladiators for the sake of murder.

170. ATROCITIES AGAINST CHRISTIANS

In the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the "philosopher on the throne," occurred the only large-scale persecution of the Christians during the second century. Mass hysteria generated by serious internal and frontier troubles

led to violent anti-Christian outbreaks in various provinces. The cruel torture and execution of forty-eight Christians, with the approval of the emperor, at Lyons and Vienne in A.D. 177, is a gruesome commentary on the brutality of the age.

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* v. i (abridged); From *LCL*

First they endured nobly all that was heaped upon them by the mob, howls and stripes and dragging about, and rapine and stoning and imprisonment, and all things that are wont to happen at the hands of an infuriated populace against its supposed enemies and foes. Then they were dragged into the market place by the tribune and by the chief authorities of the city, were indicted and confessed, and at last they were shut up until the coming of the governor. Then they were brought before the governor, and when he used all his cruelty against them, then intervened Vettius Epagathus, one of the brethren. . . . His character forbade him to endure the unreasonable judgment given against us, and, overcome with indignation, he asked to be heard himself in defense of the brethren to the effect that there was nothing atheistic or impious among us. He was howled down by those around the judgment seat—he was a man of position—and the governor would not tolerate the just requests which he had put forward but merely asked if he were a Christian himself. He then confessed in clear tones and was himself taken into the ranks of the martyrs. . . .

There were also arrested certain heathen slaves of our members, since the governor had publicly commanded that we should all be prosecuted, and these by the snare of Satan, fearing the tortures which they saw the saints suffering, when the soldiers urged them, falsely accused us of cannibalistic feasts and incestuous intercourse [cf. § 168], and things which it is not right for us either to speak of or to think of or even to believe that such things could ever happen among men. When this rumor spread, all men turned like beasts against us, so that even if any had formerly been lenient for friendship's sake, they then became furious and raged against us. . . . All the fury of the mob and of the governor and of the soldiers was raised beyond measure against Sanctus, the deacon from Vienne, and against Maturus, who was a neophyte but a noble contender, and against Attalus, a Pergamene by origin, who had always been a pillar and support of the Christians there, and against Blandina. . . . The blessed woman, like a noble athlete, kept gaining in vigor in her confession, and found comfort and rest and freedom from

pain from what was done to her by saying, "I am a Christian woman and nothing wicked happens among us." . . .

But when the tyrant's torments had been brought to naught by Christ through the endurance of the blessed saints, the devil thought of other devices, imprisonment in jail in darkness and in the most horrible place, and stretching their feet in the stocks, separated to the fifth hole, and the other outrages which angry warders filled with the devil were accustomed to inflict on the prisoners. Thus most of them were strangled in prison. . . .

Maturus, Sanctus, Blandina, and Attalus were led forth to the wild beasts, to the public, and to the common exhibition of the inhumanity of the heathen, for the day of fighting with beasts was specially appointed for the Christians. Maturus and Sanctus passed again through all torture in the amphitheater. . . . Blandina was hung on a stake and offered as a prey to the wild beasts that were let in. . . . Then, when none of the beasts would touch her, she was taken down from the stake and brought back into the jail. . . .

But Attalus was himself loudly called for by the crowd, for he was well known. He went in, a ready combatant, for his conscience was clear, and he had been nobly trained in Christian discipline and had ever been a witness for truth among us. He was led round the amphitheater and a placard was carried before him on which was written in Latin, "This is Attalus, the Christian." The people were very bitter against him, but when the governor learned that he was a Roman [citizen], he commanded him to be put back with the rest, who were in the jail, about whom he had written to the emperor and was awaiting a reply. . . .

Caesar wrote that they should be tortured to death, but that if any should recant they should be let go, and at the beginning of the local feast (and this is widely attended by the concourse of all the heathen to it) the governor led them to the judgment seat, making a show and spectacle of the blessed men to the mob. He accordingly interrogated them again, beheaded all who appeared to possess Roman citizenship, and sent the rest to the beasts. . . .

Those who had been strangled in the jail they threw to the dogs, and watched carefully night and day that none should be cared for by us. Then they threw out the remains left by the beasts and by the fire, torn and charred, and for many days watched with a military guard the heads of the rest, together with their trunks, all unburied. And some raged

and gnashed their teeth at the remains seeking some further vengeance from them, others laughed and jeered glorifying their idols and ascribing to them the punishment of the Christians. . . . Thus the bodies of the martyrs, after having been exposed and insulted in every way for six days, and afterwards burned and turned to ashes, were swept by the wicked into the river Rhone, which flows near by, that not even a relic of them might still appear upon the earth.

171. INTERROGATION OF CHRISTIANS

From the middle of the second century there began to be disseminated in Christian circles descriptions of the manner in which those who perished for their faith endured martyrdom. A number of the early Acts of the Martyrs—the first of which is the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, in A.D. 155/156 recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* iv. xv. 1–24—are contemporary literary testimonials based on official records of the legal proceedings before Roman authorities (cf. § 167). The following is an account of the interrogation of six Christians from Scillium, in the province of Africa, by the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus at Carthage in A.D. 180.

R. Knopf, *Ausgewählte Märtyrerakten*, 3d ed. (Tübingen, 1929), no. 6

In the consulship of Praesens (for the second time) and Claudianus, on July 17, Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia were put on trial in the [governor's] council chamber at Carthage. The proconsul Saturninus said, "You can secure the indulgence of our lord the emperor if you return to your senses."

Speratus said, "We have never done any wrong; we have lent ourselves to no injustice; we have never spoken ill of anyone; but when we have been ill-treated, we have given thanks, because we honor our emperor."

The proconsul Saturninus said, "We, also, are religious, and our religion is simple; and we swear by the *genius* of our lord the emperor, and pray for his welfare, as you too ought to do."

Speratus said, "If you grant me your undivided attention, I will tell you the mystery of simplicity."

Saturninus said, "I shall not grant you a hearing, if you begin to speak evil about our sacred rites; but swear rather by the *genius* of our lord the emperor."

Speratus said, "The empire of this world I do not recognize; but rather I serve that God whom no man has seen nor can see with human eyes. I have not committed theft; if I buy anything, I pay the tax, because I recognize my Lord, the King of kings and Emperor of all peoples."

The proconsul Saturninus said to the others, "Cease to be of this persuasion."

Speratus said, "It is an evil persuasion to commit murder, or to bear false witness."

The proconsul Saturninus said, "Do not participate in this madness." Cittinus said, "We have none other to fear except only our Lord God who is in heaven."

Donata said, "Honor to Caesar as to Caesar, but fear to God."

Vestia said, "I am a Christian."

Secunda said, "What I am, that I wish to be."

The proconsul Saturninus said to Speratus, "Do you persist in being a Christian?"

Speratus said, "I am a Christian." And they all concurred with him.

The proconsul Saturninus said, "Do you desire some time to reconsider?"

Speratus said, "In a matter so just there is no reconsidering."

The proconsul Saturninus said, "What are the things in your box?"

Speratus said, "The Books, and the letters of Paul, a just man."

The proconsul Saturninus said, "Take a postponement of thirty days and reconsider."

Speratus said again, "I am a Christian." And they all concurred with him.

The proconsul Saturninus read out the decree from the tablet: "Since Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the rest who have confessed that they live according to the rite of the Christians have obstinately persevered when an opportunity was offered them to return to the practice of the Romans, it is my decision that they be punished with the sword."

Speratus said, "We give thanks to God."

Nartzalus said, "Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks to God!"

The proconsul Saturninus ordered the herald to proclaim: "I have ordered the execution of Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, and Secunda."

They all said, "Thanks be to God!"

And so they were crowned with martyrdom all together: and they reign with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost forever and ever. Amen.

172. ORGANIZED PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANITY

The statement of Orosius (*History Against the Págens* vii. xxvi. 9), that "the Church of Christ suffered ten persecutions from Nero [see § 38] to Maximian," is unfounded. Before the middle of the third century, action against Christians was sporadic and local, undertaken as police measures in a climate of popular anti-Christian agitation and violence. But in the great crisis of the Empire, by which time the sect had developed into a powerful organization—virtually a "state within a state"—systematic Empire-wide efforts to suppress the religion as a challenge to the state were organized by imperial order.

THE PERSECUTION UNDER DECIUS: THE LOYALTY TEST

The first systematic persecution was that conducted by the Emperor Decius in A.D. 249–251. In the course of the persecution, Decius, in an ineffective attempt to expose all Christians, issued an edict apparently requiring all inhabitants of the Empire to take a "loyalty oath" to the state cult. Local commissions were set up in all communities of the Empire to administer the loyalty test. Each individual, even priests and priestesses of pagan gods, was required to give formal evidence of religious loyalty, which was certified in writing by the commissioners. More than fifty such certificates, all from Egypt, are extant. There were many defections at this time; but considerable numbers of Christians managed to obtain certificates of loyalty (*libelli*) through influence or bribery or by performing pagan sacrifice with mental reservations. The question of readmitting such *libellatici* (certificate holders), after the persecution was over, roused vigorous discussion among Church authorities.

Michigan Papyrus No. 158; A.D. 250

To those superintending the sacrifices of the village of Theadelphia, from Aurelia Bellias, daughter of Peteres, and her daughter Capinis. We have sacrificed to the gods all along, and now in your presence according to orders I poured a libation and sacrificed and tasted of the sacred offerings, and I request you to subscribe this for us. Farewell.

[Signatures] We, Aurelius Serenus and Aurelius Hermas, saw you sacrificing. Signed by me, Hermas.

Year 1 of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus DECIUS Pius Felix Augustus, Payni 27.

THE PERSECUTION UNDER VALERIAN

After disastrous military defeats in A.D. 257, the Emperor Valerian organized a general persecution of the Christians, seeking to destroy the Church as an organization by depriving it of its leaders and by confiscating its economic resources. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, the author of the following letter, perished in this persecution, which lasted until 270.

Cyprian, *Letters* lxxx

Cyprian to Successus, his brother, greeting.

The reason I did not write to you at once, dearest brother, is the fact that all the clergy have been placed under stress of peril and are unable to leave here at all: all are prepared, by virtue of the devotion of their minds, for divine and heavenly glory. You should know, however, that those have come whom I sent to the city [of Rome] for the purpose of investigating and bringing back to us the truth concerning whatsoever had been decreed concerning us. For many, various, and indefinite reports are rumored about. But the truth about them is as follows: Valerian has sent an address to the senate, to the effect that bishops, presbyters, and deacons should be immediately punished,³³ but that senators, distinguished men, and Roman *equites* should lose their rank and be deprived of their property also; and if, when their goods have been taken away, they should persist in being Christians, that they should then also be punished capitally; but that matrons should be deprived of their property and relegated to exile. Moreover, persons of the imperial household who had either previously confessed or should now confess, should be expropriated and put in chains and assigned to Caesar's estates. The Emperor Valerian also appended to his address a copy of the letters he prepared for the governors of the provinces concerning us. We are daily expecting these letters to come, and we are, according to the firmness of our faith, awaiting the endurance of suffer-

33. Here begins the second edict of Valerian, issued in A.D. 258. The first, in 257, ordered bishops and priests who refused to sacrifice to the state gods to be exiled and forbade Christians to assemble or to enter their cemeteries.

ing and expecting from the help and mercy of the Lord the crown of eternal life. But know that Sixtus [the bishop of Rome] was executed in the cemetery on August 6, and four deacons with him. The prefects of the city, furthermore, are daily pressing this persecution; so that any who are brought before them are punished and their property assigned to the fisc.

I beg that these things be made known through you to our other colleagues, so that everywhere by their exhortations the brotherhood may be able to be strengthened and prepared for the spiritual struggle, that each one of our people may not be more concerned about death than about immortality, and, dedicated to the Lord with full faith and complete courage, they may rejoice rather than be afraid in this confession, in which they know that the soldiers of God and Christ are not slain but crowned. I bid you, dearest brother, ever farewell in the Lord.

THE PERSECUTION UNDER DIOCLETIAN

The persecution carried out by Diocletian and his colleagues was the last to which Christians were subjected on an Empire-wide basis, but it was also the severest, lasting from 303 to 311.

Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* xii-xiv

A suitable and auspicious day was sought for accomplishing this business, and the Terminalia [cf. vol. 1, pp. 515-16], which takes place on February 23, was especially chosen to put an end, as it were, to this religion. . . . When that day dawned, in the eighth and seventh consulships of the two emperors [Diocletian and Maximian], suddenly, while it was hardly light, the prefect, together with the military commanders, tribunes, and treasury officers, came to the church [in Nicomedia], and when the doors had been broken down they sought for an image of God. Scriptures were found and burnt; spoil was given to all. Rapine, confusion, and tumult reigned. The emperors, watching from a vantage point (for the church, situated on an elevation, was visible from the palace), disputed for a long time with one another whether it should be set on fire. The opinion of Diocletian prevailed, for he feared that if such a great fire should be started some part of the city might be burned; for many large dwellings surrounded the church on all sides. Accordingly, the Praetorian Guard poured in from all sides in battle array, with axes

and other iron implements, and in a few hours leveled that very lofty shrine to the ground.

On the following day an edict was published providing that men of that religion should be deprived of all honors and rank; that they should be subjected to torture, from whatever rank and station they might come; that every legal action should be pressed against them, but they themselves were not to have the right to sue for any wrong or for adultery or theft; and finally, that they should be accorded no freedom and no voice. A certain person, although it was wrong, yet with great courage ripped down this edict and tore it up, saying in derision, "These are the victories of Goths and Sarmatians." Brought to judgment at once, he was not only tortured but was burned in the legal manner, and displaying admirable endurance was finally consumed by the flames.

But Galerius was not satisfied with the terms of the edict and sought another way to influence Diocletian. For to drive him to a determination to employ an excess of cruelty in persecution, he employed private agents to set the palace on fire; and when some part of it had gone up in flames, the Christians were accused as public enemies, and tremendous prejudice flared up against the very name of Christian as the palace burned. It was said that the Christians had plotted in concert with the eunuchs to destroy the princes, and that the two emperors had almost been burned alive in their own palace. But Diocletian, who always wanted to appear shrewd and intelligent, suspected nothing of the deception; inflamed with anger, he began immediately to torture all his domestics.³⁴

This document from Middle Egypt sheds light on one of the administrative modalities of the persecution: the churches were closed and their valuables confiscated to the imperial privy purse. At that time many churches were still no more than chapels maintained in private houses.

Oxyrhynchus Papyrus No. 2,673; February 5, A.D. 304

In the 9th consulship of our lord emperor Diocletian and the 8th of our lord emperor Maximian Augusti. . . . [To the officials] of the glorious and most glorious city of the Oxyrhynchites from Aurelius Ammonius son of Copres, lector of the erstwhile church of the village of Chysis. Whereas you gave me orders—in accordance with the communication

34. Not only servants in the imperial household but even Diocletian's own wife and daughter had by this time embraced Christianity.

from Aurelius Athansius, procurator of the privy purse, *vir perfectissimus*—concerning surrender of all the goods in the said erstwhile church, and whereas I submitted that the said church had neither gold nor silver nor money nor vestments nor animals nor slaves nor land nor property from gifts or from testamentary bequests, excepting only the bronze material that was found and delivered to the *curator* to be transported down to the most glorious Alexandria in accordance with the communication from our prefect Claudius Culcianus, *vir perfectissimus*, I now swear by the fortune of our lords emperors Diocletian and Maximian Augusti and Constantius and Galerius the most noble Caesars, that this is so and that I have not falsified anything, or may I be liable to the imperial oath. [Date.]

[2nd hand] I, Aurelius Ammonius, swore the oath as above. I, Aurelius Seranus, wrote on behalf of him, who is illiterate.

THE PERSECUTION UNDER MAXIMINUS

Despite the promulgation of the Edict of Toleration and the "Edict of Milan" (see § 173), persecution continued in various parts of the Empire until A.D. 324, especially in the East. The following inscriptions from Asia Minor are connected with renewed persecution by Maximinus Daia.

OGIS, no. 569

[*Arycanda*, A.D. 311/312]

To the saviors of the entire human race, the divine Augustus Caesar Galerius Valerius MAXIMINUS, the divine Augustus Caesar Flavius Valerius CONSTANTINE, and the divine Augustus Caesar Valerius Licinianus LICINIUS. Supplication and petition from the loyal province of Lycia and Pamphylia.

Whereas the gods, of the same family as you, have ever by deeds displayed benevolence to all, O Most Illustrious Emperors who have been seriously concerned with the divine worship on behalf of the eternal safety of yourselves, our lords, conquerors of all, we have decided that it would be well to seek refuge in your immortal majesty, and to request that the Christians, who of old have been seditious and still persist in the same disease, should finally desist and not, by introducing some new mischief, neglect the honor owed to the gods. This would easily be realized if by your divine and eternal will it were ordained to all that the wickedness of the hateful practice of the atheists be forbidden

and prohibited, and if injunctions were given for all to devote themselves steadfastly to the worship of the gods, of the same family as you, on behalf of your eternal and indestructible majesty, the extent of whose benefits to all your people is manifest.

Journal of Roman Studies (1988), 78:105-124

[*Calbasa*, A.D. 312]

[The beginning is lost.] Let them rejoice through the quiet that has finally been granted to them. And let those rejoice especially who have been freed from those blind and deviant obscurities and have returned to upright and good thinking. And as if preserved from a sudden storm or snatched from a great illness, let them henceforth feel a more pleasant enjoyment of life. But those who have persisted in the abominable superstition are to be separated and removed from your city and territory, as you request, so that in conformity with the laudable zeal of your petition your city, separated from the stain of all impiety, may respond as has been your tradition to the rites of the immortal gods with due veneration. Moreover, so that you may know how much your petition has been welcome to us, without any decree and any requests on your part, with spontaneous favor and our just and benevolent spirit, we grant, in response to your declaration, that you request whatever benefaction you wish, in return for your religious devotion of this kind. And you may act and request this now, for you will surely obtain the same without any delay, which granted to your city for all time may both attest to our religious devotion to the immortal gods and demonstrate to your sons and grandsons that you have received rewards from our Clemency worthy of your traditions. Farewell. Given in the second consulship of the Emperors Constantine and Licinius, April 6, at Sardis to the people of Colbasa.

173. THE END OF THE PERSECUTIONS

THE EDICT OF TOLERATION

On April 30, A.D. 311, the Emperor Galerius, stricken with a serious illness from which he died shortly after, promulgated at Nicomedia the famous Edict of Toleration. This marked a turning point in the history of