

Chapter 3 The Blood of Martyrs

In about the year A.D. 155, a most bitter persecution arose against the Christians in Asia Minor. Many believers became martyrs, showing such bravery in the face of the most terrible tortures that they amazed even their tormentors. One man, Germanicus, particularly astounded the crowd. He encouraged his fellow Christians and spurred the wild beasts, to which he had been thrown, to slay him.

The example of such courage only stirred the pagans to rage. They cried out, “Away with the atheists” (as they called the Christians). “Seek Polycarp!” The 86-year-old Polycarp was an important figure in the Christian community. He was bishop of the church of Smyrna, and he was one of the last living links with the age of the apostles. It was said he had spoken with the Apostle John himself. Eventually, Polycarp was seized and brought before the governor.

The governor, who wanted to save the beloved old man, urged him to curse Christ and save himself from death. Polycarp refused. He declared, “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

Since the games were done, Polycarp could not be thrown to the beasts. He was condemned to be burned alive. As the flames roared up around Polycarp in a wall of fire so hot the executioners had to fall back, the old man did not cry out or beg for mercy or release. Finally the executioner, in tears, stabbed through the flames to end Polycarp’s life quickly. His fellow believers rescued his bones from the ashes and kept them “as more precious than gold.”

The Courage of the Martyrs

St. Polycarp was one of countless Christian martyrs of the Roman Empire who underwent tortures and death out of love for Jesus Christ. They counted the loss of this world's goods and life itself as nothing if, to win them, they must lose Christ. The courage of the martyrs often sparked the wrath of the pagans. But just as often, the pagans were filled with awe at the Christians' courage.

*The Martyrdom of the
Ten Thousand* by
Albrecht Dürer



Though the authorities often considered Christians to be lawbreakers, the emperor had no more faithful subjects than they. While Christians believed their first duty was to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, their leaders taught that as citizens of the empire they were bound to obey the emperor and his governors and magistrates. The first Epistle of Peter says:

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. . . . Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:13–17)

To follow the will of their Savior, Christians tried to be both exemplary citizens and virtuous individuals. From the Church's earliest beginnings, Christian communities in every city collected money to support the poor and needy. The Christians tried to live at peace with, and to win the respect of, their non-Christian neighbors.

Nevertheless, before the end of the first century, Roman authorities began to worry about the growing number of Christians in the big cities. Christians steadfastly refused to acknowledge the emperor as a god and pay him worship. Roman officials began to see this refusal as a possible source of revolt and civil disorder. The empire's pagan majority was not disturbed by emperor worship—among so many gods, what was one more? Worshiping the emperor as a god meant doing business without trouble from the police, so it was acceptable. For Jews, however, worshiping the emperor meant denying the One True God. For Christians it also meant denying the Lordship of Jesus. But while imperial law had exempted the Jews from this emperor worship because of their ancient and respected tradition, Christians, who no longer claimed to be part of the Jewish communities, were seen to have no excuse for disobeying the law of the empire.

Beyond refusing to acknowledge the emperor—and the sun, moon, and heavenly stars—as divine, some Christians refused to serve in the army or to kill other men. The authorities thus feared Christianity could undermine legitimate authority and the social order.

Blood of the Martyrs, Seed of the Church

Nero was the first, but not the last, emperor to persecute the Christians. The Emperor Domitian, the first emperor to call himself a god during his own lifetime, ordered the persecution of Christians as **atheists** because they refused to worship the Roman gods—and, more importantly, they refused to worship him. Under Domitian's persecution, the Apostle John

atheist: (from Greek *atheos*—("no-god")); one who believes there are no gods

was exiled to the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, where he received the vision that became the Apocalypse, or the Book of Revelation, in the Bible.

During the next two centuries, Christians around the empire would endure attacks from local authorities and mobs and then from the imperial authorities as well. In an effort to be fair, Emperor Trajan issued an edict that no one could be condemned merely for being a Christian. But if a person were accused, he or she could be sentenced to death for refusing to perform the token public worship of the emperor. Thus Christians were to be left alone—until someone or some event forced them to face the test of making sacrifice to the deified Caesars.

During the reign of the philosopher emperor, Marcus Aurelius, the empire saw another wave of persecution. Attacks against Christians came from the local authorities or the mob, and the empire was not able to control them. In the western part of the Roman Empire—during the year 177—at Lyons in the Rhône River valley of Gaul, the governor incited the mobs to attack and loot Christian shops and homes. The assault on

The Martyrdom of St. Perpetua and St. Felicity

The reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (A.D. 193–211) was marred by another wave of officially sponsored persecution. Among the most famous of the Christian martyrs of this persecution were the young Carthaginian noblewoman, St. Perpetua (Vibia Perpetua), and her maid and fellow Christian, St. Felicitas (or Felicity).

Perpetua was a catechumen and the mother of a small infant. When she came before the Roman procurator for examination, her aged father appeared. A pagan, he begged Perpetua to pity him and her child and offer sacrifice for the emperor. Though moved to pity for her father and tenderness for her child, Perpetua refused to sacrifice. When the procurator asked her, “Are you a Christian?” She answered resolutely, “Yes.”

Felicity was expecting a child when she was imprisoned. While in prison, she delivered her child. Her jailers taunted her, saying that if she groaned so loudly now in childbirth, she would be screaming in the pains of the arena. She replied that she was the one who suffered now but, in the arena, her Savior would suffer for her.

Felicity was also a catechumen. She and her mistress, Perpetua, received baptism in jail. When brought into the arena, the women faced a mad cow that charged Perpetua, tossing her but not killing her. The crowds in the arena, who that day had seen so many martyrs killed by wild beasts, were tired of such spectacles and cried out that the women should be led away. After giving each other the kiss of peace, Perpetua and Felicity were killed by gladiators. Since the day of their martyrdom on March 7, 203, Perpetua and Felicity have been venerated by the Church as great martyrs.

Christians spread throughout all of Gaul, with mobs torturing and killing many Christians. The victims' bones were thrown into the river to prevent surviving Christians from revering them as relics.

Despite the danger of accepting Jesus as Lord, more and more converts flocked to the Church. They were drawn by the example of these brave men and women, the martyrs. In trying to destroy the new religion and restore the old paganism, the persecutions succeeded instead in attracting most of the empire's people to the Faith. As Tertullian, an early church father, wrote in the third century, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians."

The Threat of Heresy

The early Church suffered attacks from without—persecution—as well as assaults from within its own ranks. False teaching or heresy was a greater danger to the Church than persecution; for, while persecution was directed toward the body, heresy struck at the mind and soul.

A **heresy** is an idea that takes a part of God's revelation and exaggerates or distorts it to the point of denying the revelation given to the Church. Yet heresy was not simply a danger, for it gave the Church the opportunity to define and clarify her teachings. In answering heretical errors, the Church came to a better and deeper understanding of the revelation her Lord had given her.

Early Heretics

One of the earliest and most powerful heresies was **Gnosticism**. The Gnostics (from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning "secret knowledge") tried to combine pagan thought with Christian revelation in new mythologies about the powers of the natural universe.

For the Gnostic, the material world, including our bodies, is evil. Only the spiritual world is good. Gnostics believed that this world and all material existence is an evil and painful prison in which the pure spirit is held until liberated or released by divine power. According to Gnosticism, the spirits or "powers" of nature try to prevent the soul's liberation and keep our spirits enslaved to do their will in the material world. Many Christians tried to interpret the life and message of Jesus in a Gnostic way.

A preacher named *Marcion* (ca. A.D. 85–160) formed a movement, called **Marcionism**, after him. Marcion sought to divide the New Testament from the Old Testament. He taught that Christ had come to reveal a God of love who was opposed to the God of judgment presented

heresy: a teaching that emphasizes part of the received faith and ignores or denies the rest of the received tradition; a false teaching (from Greek *hairesis*, a "choice," a "faction")

Gnosticism: One of the most powerful heresies in the early Church. Gnostics claimed there is a secret knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) necessary for salvation. Most Gnostics held the material world to be evil and a prison for the soul.

Marcionism: Heretical sect founded by Marcion that rejected the Old Testament and most of the New. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was not the God of Love revealed in the New Testament.

*Religion Crushing
Heresy* by Giovanni
Battista Tiepolo



in the Old Testament. Marcion called the Old Testament God a false God. Marcion rewrote and edited the Scriptures, removing most of the Hebrew books and all the harsher moral passages from the Christian texts. He said the only true Gospel was Luke and rejected all but 10 of the epistles of the New Testament.

Although Marcion damaged the Christian Faith among his followers, his attempt to remove all Jewish elements from the New Testament gave historians a record of what works the early Church did, in fact, recognize as part of Sacred Scripture. It is a proof of the New Testament's authority that so much of it was already known to the whole Church and revered by the middle of the second century A.D.

Among the developments of the second century was that Christian thinkers began to use Greek philosophy to help them better understand the Scriptures. Some Christians, however, were opposed to using Greek philosophy because it was pagan. A Christian teacher and evangelist, Montanus, was one of those who rejected the use of Greek philosophy to understand Christian revelation. For Montanus, only those who lived a severe and **ascetic** life could be worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus and the love of the Father.

Montanus began to teach that whatever he said had the same authority as Scripture. He claimed to be a prophet of the Paraclete, or the Holy Spirit, and had prophetesses among his followers. The **Montanists** removed themselves from ordinary life and shunned Christians who did not keep the strict moral and theological customs of the heretical sect.

Christian Theologians Fight Heresy

Christian thinkers were forced by attacks from without and within to begin a thoughtful defense of the Faith and to develop a Christian theology to explain and defend true Christian positions.

Justin, known to history as St. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165), had been a student of Greek philosophy before becoming a Christian when he was around 30 years old. Justin was a prolific writer, penning defenses of the Christian faith against the pagans and a Jewish scholar named Trypho.

Justin wrote a treatise against the heretic, Marcion, arguing that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Justin tried to show that Christianity was not contrary to Greek philosophy. Jesus, he said, was the **Logos**, the Word of God, or divine Reason itself, in human form. All truth can be found in Jesus, he said; but the pagan philosophers recognized only traces of truth in nature and its laws.

ascetic: practicing self-denial—fasting and other penances—to achieve spiritual discipline; ascetic practice is called *asceticism*

Montanists: followers of a heretical sect, founded by Montanus, which held that only severe asceticism and strict adherence to the divine law would save a soul

Logos: (Greek for “word.”) The Word of God is the Son of God by whom God made and continues to make all creation what it is. Recorded in the Scriptures, the Word is the record of God’s saving acts in history, his commandments. In Jesus, God’s Word takes a human face.

Justin was martyred in 165 in a local persecution.

One of the greatest defenders of the Christian faith against heresy was St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul. While still very young, Irenaeus had heard St. Polycarp. The most important of Irenaeus' works was *Adversus Haereses* (meaning "Against Heresies"), which was written primarily against Gnosticism but dealt with the major heresies of his age. In this work, Irenaeus witnessed to the unique authority of the bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter, in the Church.

Athenagoras of Alexandria, who lived around the same time as Justin, argued in his writings that not only were Christian moral standards exceptionally high, but Christians had always tried to be loyal citizens. Athenagoras used Greek philosophy to show that the Christian concepts of One God and of the divinity of Christ were similar to the Greek concept of the unity of God. He may have been the first to defend the Trinity, demonstrating that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one Substance.

Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 163–230), himself well educated in philosophy and **rhetoric**, at first taught that philosophy could be used in defense of the Christian belief. He had been a stalwart defender of the Church, especially against the pagans, but he eventually refused to think about Christianity in a philosophic light. He concluded that thinking philosophically would lead to the sin of pride. He wrote, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"—thus setting the seat of Greek philosophy (Athens) against Jerusalem, the birthplace of the Church.

Tertullian later joined the Montanists, separating himself from the Church. He eventually split from the Montanists and founded his own sect.

rhetoric: the art of speaking and writing well and eloquently

Founding Christian Schools

Many Christian converts naturally thought about their experience of faith according to the ideas of their education, the philosophical language of Greece. Early Christians knew that the pagan philosophy of the Greeks, if understood properly, could lead to a deeper understanding of Christian revelation.

To encourage a thoughtful response to heresies, bishops founded Christian schools in the empire's major cities, and Christian writers joined the intellectual life of the empire. In about 190, a catechetical school (offering preparation for Christian preaching) was begun in Alexandria. The school was later headed by St. Clement, bishop of Alexandria, himself

a poet and theologian. For hundreds of years, that school was the most important center for Christian thought. Christian schools grew up and flourished in other Christian centers, such as Carthage and Rome.

Origen, Theologian and Philosopher

During the persecution decreed by the Emperor Septimius Severus in 202, a young man in Alexandria named Origen (185–254) looked on helplessly as his own father was seized and martyred. When it was possible to go about again in safety, Origen found that he was now the sole supporter of his family, which included his mother and six younger brothers. He found work as a teacher and sold all his possessions. The 18-year-old scholar already had mastered the learning of his day and was recognized by his teachers and by Bishop Clement as an authority on Platonic philosophy.

Platonic philosophy, the thought of the Athenian philosopher Plato (ca. 428–348 B.C.), had been revived in the first two centuries of the Christian era. Origen's study of Platonism had strengthened his faith in the Christian message. To develop better the connection of Christian revelation and pagan thought, Bishop Clement left the direction of his school to this young genius, Origen.

Origen became one of the most famous writers of his time, read by Christians and pagans alike. He wrote so much and so fast that he employed a dozen stenographers and copyists to work in shifts, trying to keep up with him in writing down his words and thoughts. Origen held that Christ's love is so strong that all men and angels (including Satan) would be redeemed before the end of time. Because of this teaching, later ages called Origen a heretic. But some of the greatest Church Fathers have acknowledged and revered Origen's ideas and his work on Scripture.



Origen, a medieval portrait

The Last Persecutions: 250–313

In the first half of the third century after Christ, the Christian faith achieved intellectual maturity and penetrated to the highest circles of society, converting many of those who shaped imperial policy and culture. Indeed, the Christian faith was now a respectable alternative to the official pagan religion of Rome. The imperial state would either have to recognize the Faith or exterminate it. The Roman officials opted for extermination.

In 247, Rome celebrated its thousand-year anniversary with festivities and the reopening of the Secular Games. The Secular Games were great shows held at the end of every hundred-year cycle (in Latin, the *saeculum*, from which the word “secular” comes). All the pagan world relished the games, which, involving fights to the death along with other competitions, were often quite bloody, but Christians were forbidden by their Faith to attend these shows, which honored the pagan gods. It appeared to the pagans that the Christians scorned the city’s great heritage or even that they wished Rome ill, and public prejudice ran high against them.

The empire was faltering because of economic troubles and bad management. The Emperor Decius, commander of the Danube legions, tried to rebuild the morale of the empire by restoring the old pagan religion and demanding worship of the emperors as the mark of citizen loyalty. In 250, he began a new and bloody persecution of Christians throughout the

empire—the first official and empire-wide persecution of the Church. The govern-

ment’s purpose was not to kill Christians but to convince them to accept the state religion.

Everyone was required to obtain a certificate stating that he had sacrificed to the pagan Roman gods. For Christians, obtaining a certificate would require denying Christ; for that reason, many of them refused to accept the pagan religion.



Ancient Roman
coin

But the systematic persecution of so large a minority in the empire as the Christians only weakened the Roman state further. Especially in the army, where there were many Christians, there was increasing opposition to the persecution. After only two years, Decius had to call off the persecution. While harassment of Christians would continue over the next 50 years, it was without public support and often faced the opposition of prominent pagan citizens.

“The Long Peace”

Persian assaults in the eastern part of the Roman Empire and German invasion from the north left the empire in need of friends, not more enemies. Emperor Gallienus began to court the loyalty of Christians, particularly those who now filled the ranks of his armies. He restored Christian property and halted persecution with an **Edict of Toleration** in 260. Christians called the period of some 40 years that followed the edict “the Long Peace.”

There had been universal suffering throughout the empire, not just among the persecuted Christians. The government levied crushing taxes and confiscated private property to support its huge armed campaigns in Mesopotamia and on the Danube-Rhine frontiers. The middle classes were ruined, small farmers destroyed, and the urban poor left in misery and near starvation. As the empire began to crumble under the succession of military emperors, the strong organization of the Christian Church stepped in to establish the order that the government could not provide. Bishops became organizers and administrators of large estates left by wealthy converts for the relief of the poor.

It was the Christian spirit of mutual love and brotherly charity that most impressed the pagans. Christians left their fortunes to the relief of the poor; ordinary people donated their tithes to Church associations that fed the poor; took care of orphans; provided aid to old slaves, retired sailors, and soldiers; rescued prisoners in the mines and prison islands; and cared for girls left orphaned or without dowries to secure husbands. The well-organized Christian Church had set up a miniature welfare state in an empire lacking any social services.

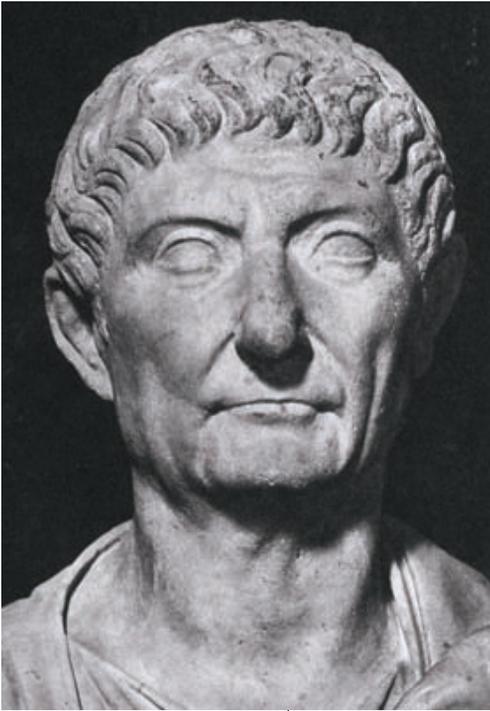
The Great Persecution

The Edict of Toleration remained in effect from 260 to 303 through the reigns of three reforming emperors. Then, in 284, the legions in the eastern

edict: proclamation of a law

toleration: official recognition of the rights of individuals or groups to hold dissenting opinions, especially in religion

currency: coins or government notes used in the buying and selling of goods



**Bust of Emperor
Diocletian**

parts of the Roman Empire acclaimed their commander, Diocletian, emperor.

The large numbers of Christians serving in the government and the military were able to keep the emperors from abandoning the Edict of Toleration. However, an unfortunate event gave Diocletian an excuse to change this policy.

At a sacrifice, Diocletian and his fiercely anti-Christian Caesar, Galerius, surrounded by their staff and courtiers, were observing the pagan priests. The priests were slaughtering animals and then examining the livers of the beasts for omens that would, they believed, predict the empire's future. But the priests failed to find any signs at all. To hide their failure to get a clear "omen," they blamed nonbelievers present at the sacrifice. The Christian historian Lactantius, who was present, recorded that Caesar Galerius had noticed certain members of the staff and court crossing themselves before the sacrifice. Galerius concluded that they must have been making a "magic spell" to spoil the emperor's ceremony.

Diocletian was furious. He had been publicly embarrassed. He ordered all those present to sacrifice to the gods then and there or be flogged. Everyone in the court, both Christian and non-Christian, obeyed. Diocletian soon forgot the incident; but Galerius did not. He began to insist that Christians be forced to comply with the state religion.

On February 23, 303, the Emperor Diocletian, through Galerius, proclaimed an edict, ordering that all Christian churches everywhere were to be torn down, all Christian books were to be turned over to the state authorities and burned, and all Christians were to be dismissed from public office of any kind. Those who protested the sweeping violence of the edict were swiftly and cruelly silenced.

Churches were broken into; and copies of the Scriptures, both Jewish and Christian, were seized and burned. Christians tried to hide these, their most precious documents—the Gospels and the treasured copies of letters of the founding apostles. Some clergy, however, thought they could save themselves and their flocks by handing over their irreplaceable Scriptures to the magistrates. Their compromise, however, did not save them.

Instead, Diocletian issued a second edict condemning to prison all Christian clergy throughout the empire. Even the compromisers were

arrested. So many bishops, priests, and deacons were imprisoned that the overcrowded jails and prisons could not be maintained. So many prisoners filled the jails of Egypt that the government sent thousands to the copper mines of southern Palestine, where they met their deaths by exposure to the poison in these mines.

In the autumn of 303, Diocletian fell ill. He left the powers of government in the hands of his anti-Christian assistant, Caesar Galerius, who in 304 issued a further edict. The edict commanded all men, women, and children of the empire to sacrifice to the old gods on pain of death. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, thousands of Christians who refused to sacrifice were killed. In Asia Minor, all the Christians in a town were burned to death, and their houses were pulled down. In the western part of the Roman Empire, reprisals against Christians were less severe; the western Augustus, Maximian, and his Caesar, Constantius, discreetly ignored the enforcement of Galerius' edicts.

The next year, in 305, Diocletian abdicated rule to Galerius and persuaded the western Augustus, Maximian, to retire with him. Galerius was to rule the eastern empire and Constantius, the western empire.

Galerius, however, quickly seized complete power over the empire. He refused to allow Constantine and Maxentius, the sons of Constantius and Maximian, to become Caesars. Instead, Galerius appointed his nephew, Maximinus Daia, as Caesar in the Eastern Roman Empire and a friend, Severus, as Caesar in the Western Roman Empire. To impress his uncle, Maximinus Daia intended to force Christians back to the old pagan religion. He ordered everyone, regardless of sex or age, to sacrifice to the divine emperors or die. However, the Christian resistance was so firm that he had to change the death sentence to mutilation or slavery in the quarries and mines.



Bust of Maximinus Daia

The Triumph of Constantine

For seven more years the unwise edicts of Diocletian continued to cause misery and disruption throughout the eastern provinces of the empire. Galerius, mistrusting Constantius, held his son Constantine hostage in the



Bust of Constantine

east. But in 305 Constantine escaped; riding over hundreds of miles to the west and eluding his pursuers, he joined his father in Gaul. There, the armies hailed both father and son as supreme commanders. Constantius and his son then crossed to Britain, where Constantius died at York in 306. The army then conferred the title of Augustus on Constantine. Knowing that accepting the title would mean war with Galerius, Constantine took the lesser title of Caesar.

When Severus died in 307, Maximinus Daia moved into Italy—he assumed his uncle Galerius would promote him to Augustus of the west. But fearing his nephew’s ambition, Galerius instead made his brother-in-law, Licinius, Augustus. Both Constantine and Maximinus Daia then proclaimed themselves Augusti of the west, ignoring Licinius.

In the spring of 311, Galerius became mortally sick with a painful illness, probably a cancer. His wife convinced him that he was suffering because he had offended the god of the Christians. In April 311, he issued an Edict of Toleration,

freeing Christian prisoners, allowing Christian assemblies, and removing penalties for refusing to sacrifice to the gods. He wrote that he hoped the Christians “will be bound to entreat their god for our well-being.”

The last official persecution was over. Clergy came out of hiding. The sacred texts, hidden from the book burners, were returned to their places of honor. The stripped and ravaged churches were reopened amid psalms and hymns of praise. Galerius died within a week after issuing his Edict of Toleration.

X—Chi Rho:

Chi and rho (English *ch* and *r*) are the first two letters in the Greek word *Christos*. The PX symbol served in place of the Cross, forbidden by the Roman authorities, as a mark of Christian allegiance. Constantine carried Chi Rho into battle.

In hoc signo vinces

While Constantine was at war on the Rhine trying to hold back the German Franks, Maxentius, son of Maximian, seized Italy. Maximinus Daia fled Italy to Asia Minor, where he claimed for himself Diocletian’s capital of Nicomedia and declared himself the Augustus of the Eastern Roman Empire. Licinius, who was left to hold the Danube, made an alliance with Constantine on the Rhine to take away power from Maxentius in Rome and from Maximinus in the east.

In 312, outnumbered but determined, Constantine moved against Maxentius, marching his army down across the Alps at

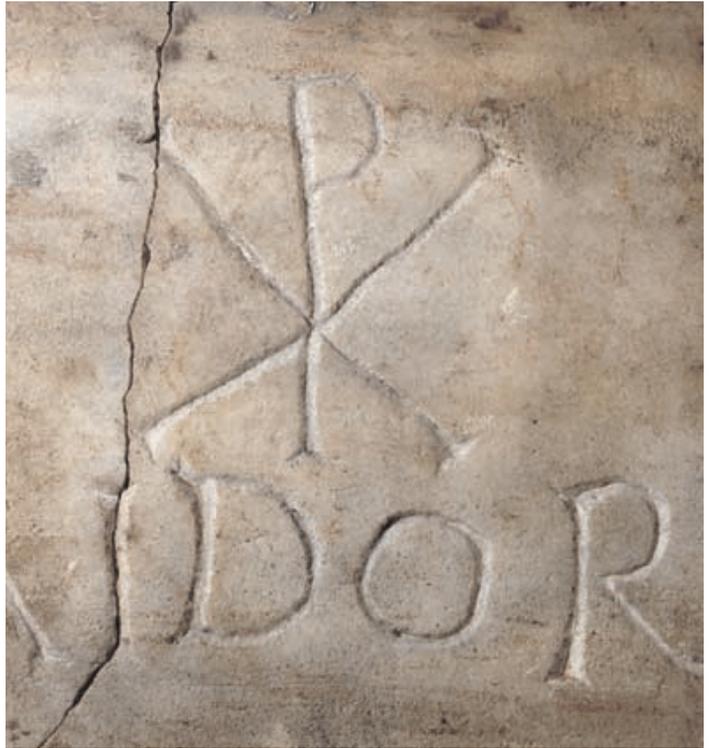
lightning speed. Maxentius drew up his forces along the Tiber River, some nine miles north of Rome. He was confident of victory, for he had received a prophecy: “On this day the enemy of Rome shall perish.” He took it as a good omen, for certainly the gods meant Constantine when they spoke of the “enemy of Rome.” So confident was Maxentius that he made no plan for retreat. His only avenue of escape was over the narrow Milvian Bridge, which spanned the Tiber.

Before the battle, Constantine had a dream or vision. He saw a strange sign in the heavens and heard the words *en toutoi nika*—Greek for “in this, conquer.” (The Latin is sometimes rendered as *In hoc signo vinces*, “In this sign you will conquer.”) Constantine ordered that a new imperial standard bearing the sign be made immediately, and that the mysterious sign be painted on the shields of all his troops. The sign was formed from two Greek letters, *chi* (X) and *rho* (P), the first two letters of the title “Christ” (XPISTOS = CHRISTOS) in Greek.

Though it was smaller, Constantine’s army routed Maxentius’ dispirited troops. They ran from the field, trying to retreat over the Milvian Bridge. So many people were fleeing across the bridge that thousands were thrown into the river from the narrow span and died in the flooded waters of the Tiber. Maxentius himself, the “enemy of Rome,” perished that day in the river. Constantine was victorious—and was now the new Augustus of the Western Roman Empire.

The Edict of Milan

In the east, Licinius claimed the title Augustus after Maximinus Daia died by assassination; the new eastern Augustus then cemented his alliance with Constantine by marrying his sister. The two Augusti joined in issuing a new edict of toleration, the **Edict of Milan**, in A.D. 313. The edict granted



Ancient European inscription with Chi Rho Monogram

Edict of Milan: edict of toleration of all religions in the Roman Empire promulgated by Constantine and Licinius in 313. The Edict of Milan granted legal status to Christians.



**Eastern Roman empire,
A.D. 117**

freedom of worship to all religious groups within the empire, making special mention of the Christians.

Licinius, however, grew jealous of Constantine and in 314 encouraged treasonous designs against him. Twice defeated in battle by Constantine, Licinius made peace with him. War again broke out between the two Augusti in 323, and Constantine defeated his rival in battle in February 324.

In a mere nine years, Constantine had become master of all the empire. To govern the huge territory and be available to oversee the difficult frontiers of Mesopotamia and the Danube, Constantine moved his capital from the west to the east.

Nova Roma

For his new capital, Constantine chose the old Greek city of Byzantium. Set on a triangular ridge of high cliffs overlooking the Bosphorus on one side and a deep bay—the Golden Horn—on the other side, Byzantium was a natural fortress that commanded the European side of the Bosphorus, the route to the Black Sea. Constantine called his new city *Nova Roma*—New Rome. Later generations would name it Constantinople (“Constantine’s City”).

Constantine forced the Roman Senate and the army commanders to relocate to Nova Roma. With Constantine’s support and encouragement, his city received a new Christian bishop and attracted the best preachers and teachers of the Christian Church. Gradually the entire administrative life of the empire moved from Rome and Milan in the west to the glittering new halls of Constantinople.

For the first time ever, there was a Christian emperor and a new, Christian capital city, free of the old dark memories of pagan and persecuting Rome. A new “Golden Age,” a “Christian Empire,” seemed to be dawning for the entire civilized world.

Chapter Review

Summary

- Roman officials saw the Christians’ refusal to acknowledge the emperor as a god and pay him worship as a possible source of revolt and civil disorder.
- Domitian, the first emperor to call himself a god during his own lifetime, ordered the persecution of Christians as atheists because they refused to worship the Roman gods and the emperor.
- Local persecutions of Christians occurred under the “Good Emperors,” though the Emperor Trajan issued an edict that no one could be condemned merely for being a Christian.
- The early Church was threatened not just by persecutions, but by heresy. Early heresies were Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism.
- Christian theologians rose up to defend the Faith against heretics. These theologians included St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Athenagoras of Alexandria, and Tertullian of Carthage.
- Origen of Alexandria was an early Christian who tried to explain divine revelation in light of Greek philosophy. He became one of the most famous writers of his time, read by Christians and pagans alike.

- After a period of some 40 years of peace, the Emperor Diocletian initiated the most brutal persecution of Christians to that time.
- After seeing in a dream a strange sign and hearing the words, “In this, conquer,” Constantine defeated his rival in battle and became Augustus of the Western Roman Empire. He and Licinius, the Augustus of the East, issued the Edict of Milan in 313, granting religious freedom to everyone in the empire, including the Christians.
- After becoming sole ruler of the empire, Constantine established his capital at Byzantium, calling it *Nova Roma*, “New Rome.”

Key Concepts

martyrs: those who gave their lives rather than deny Christ and the Faith

heresy: a teaching that emphasizes part of the received faith and ignores or denies the rest of the received tradition; a false teaching (from Greek *hairesis*, a “choice,” a “faction”)

Marcionism: heretical sect founded by Marcion that rejected the Old Testament and most of the New. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was not the God of Love revealed in the New Testament.

Gnosticism: one of the most powerful heresies in the early Church. Gnostics claimed there is a secret knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) necessary for salvation. Most Gnostics held the material world to be evil and a prison for the soul.

Montanists: followers of a heretical sect, founded by Montanus, which held that only severe asceticism and strict adherence to the divine law would save a soul

Edict of Milan: edict of toleration of all religions in the Roman Empire promulgated by Constantine and Licinius in 313. The Edict of Milan granted legal status to Christians.

Dates to Remember

A.D. 64: burning of Rome under Nero and the first imperial persecution of Christians

260–303: Edict of Toleration under Emperor Gallienus

303–313: Great Persecution of Diocletian and Galerius

313: Constantine and Licinius’ issuing of the Edict of Milan

324: capital of empire moved to Constantinople

Central Characters

St. Polycarp (A.D. 69–155): Christian martyr and bishop of Smyrna who in his youth heard the Apostle John

St. Irenaeus (b. ca. 130): early Christian Church father and one of the greatest theologians and defenders of the faith in the early Church

St. Justin Martyr (185–254): theologian, martyr, and the first Christian philosopher

Tertullian (160–230): theologian and defender of the Faith who rejected philosophy as a means of understanding the Christian Faith

Origen (185–254): theologian and one of the most famous authors of his time. His works explained the connection between the Christian Faith and pagan thought.

Diocletian (245–313): Roman emperor who ordered the last persecution of Christians

Galerius (d. 311): Diocletian’s Caesar and later Augustus of the East (reigned 305–311). Galerius instigated Diocletian’s persecution of Christians and continued it after Diocletian’s retirement.

Constantine I (280–337): first Christian Roman emperor (306–337). Constantine issued the Edict of Milan with the eastern emperor, Licinius.

Questions for Review

1. The emperors persecuted Christians to make sure there would be fewer of them, but Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Why did persecution increase the number of Christians?
2. When and under what emperor did the first imperial persecution occur?
3. What did Gnostics teach?
4. What did Montanists teach?
5. Why did Diocletian persecute the Christians? Why is his persecution called the Great Persecution?
6. What sign did Constantine see before going into battle? What did it stand for?

Ideas in Action

1. The 20th century, it has been said, had more Christian martyrs than any other century since the birth of Christ. Do some research to discover in what countries and when in the 20th century persecution of Christians occurred. Why were Christians persecuted in these lands? Does persecution of Christians still occur in our time? If so, where, when, and why does it happen?
2. Prepare presentations or reports on individual martyrs.
3. Discuss whether Christians suffer persecution in our own country. If so, describe the persecution Christians suffer in our country; how

does it differ from the Roman persecutions? If not, why are Christians in our country not persecuted?

Highways and Byways

The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius

When the bishop of Antioch, St. Ignatius (ca. A.D. 35–107), refused to offer incense before the imperial image, he was brought before the emperor Trajan himself. When cross-examined by Trajan, old Ignatius steadfastly refused to return to the pagan ways of his youth. Before his death as a martyr at the arena in Rome, he wrote that, if he was to be martyred for Christ at the jaws of the lions, he hoped that he would be “a tender little morsel.”

Ignatius was one of the first in an unending line of martyrs who have welcomed their sacrifice. Fearful that his friends in Rome might intervene and prevent his execution, Ignatius wrote to them, “I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness, pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions’ teeth to be made purest bread for Christ No power, visible or invisible, must grudge me my coming to Jesus Christ.”