

Local mobs could readily be stirred to kill Christians and loot their homes; but there were also periods of peace and steady growth among the Christian communities. Persecutions of this period usually were localized; imperial persecutions were less frequent.

Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who reigned from 161-180 A.D., is still remembered for his *Meditations*. (The book may be purchased in paperback.) He was an attractive, intelligent person--a Stoic. Fronto, his teacher, had turned him against Christ. Marcus believed the ills of the empire were caused by the church; and because of this, he persecuted the believers. Justin Martyr, about whom we will learn more in Section II of this PACE, was a famous martyr of this period.

In the year 250 A.D., Emperor Decius issued an edict commanding annual sacrifices to the gods and to himself, the Caesar. He died the year after the edict was issued.

- (4) Which Caesar issued the decree of annual worship of the gods and in what year?
 (a) _____, in (b) _____ A.D.

The next major persecution--the last and greatest--came under Diocletian at the turn of the century (late 200's and early 300's). He was a strong militarist whose reign concluded the three-hundred year democratic traditions of Julius Caesar. The Senate no longer would share responsibility with the emperor. Caesar purposed to save the world by his autocratic rule. This meant that all enemies of pagan, classical culture must be destroyed. The Christians were counted among its enemies.

In March of 303 A.D., Diocletian published the terrible news to the poor, defenseless Christians:

1. Disband all services.
2. Burn all Bibles.
3. Depose all church officers.
4. Destroy all church buildings.
5. The state will imprison all who resist.

Following this, an even more severe persecution edict was published: all Christians must sacrifice to the gods or die! The father of church history (second only to Luke), Eusebius, tells us that the prisons were so filled with Christians that there was no room for criminals. Possibly many of the *real* criminals were converted through the witnessing and hymn-singing of imprisoned Christians.

SMYRNA:
the Blood of the Martyrs

313 A.D.	} Empire-wide Persecutions	CONSTANTINE <i>Edict of Milan</i>
303 A.D.		DIOCLETIAN
250 A.D.		DECIUS
200 A.D.	} Chiefly Local Persecutions	MARCUS AURELIUS
150 A.D.		TRAJAN
100 A.D.		DOMITIAN
96 A.D.		

If you ever visit Rome, you will want to see the catacombs. Originally burying places, the vast, labyrinthine passageways became underground hideouts for the Christians. Here, waiting for freedom of religion, they worshiped, lived, and died. The inscriptions and paintings from this period are the foundations of Christian art. Of the many Christians who were caught, some were sent to slave-labor camps not unlike those of Nazi Germany and the present Soviet states. Others, whose property was confiscated, were exiled (like John), imprisoned, tortured, and many were killed. Death, even for the young and tender maidens, was often inflicted after victims had survived cruel tortures, or fighting wild beasts in the arenas. It is believed by some that the Apostle Paul actually fought wild beasts at Ephesus. Although Paul may have been using a figure of speech when he referred to this incident, it was no figure of speech for the Christians of the Diocletian reign, as the period of Smyrna came to a violent and bloody end.



You will never get the feel of this dreadful yet heroic era in the history of our glorious Faith unless you read a couple of detailed examples of martyrdom. We have chosen a famous man, Ignatius of Antioch from early in the Smyrna era; and a lovely woman, Perpetua of Carthage from the middle of the Smyrna era.



Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-c. 107). Ignatius was bishop of Antioch (perhaps a bishop); the practice of having one bishop in each major church began in this period. Ignatius is remembered for his letters written to several churches before he was martyred in Rome. Some of these letters were written to the same churches that Paul addressed (Ephesians, for example). In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius used a phrase that has become very common, "the catholic church." *Catholic* is simply a Greek word

meaning *according to the whole* or *universal*. It was used by Ignatius to refer to all of the Christian churches that were orthodox in faith. Only later did it take on a denominational meaning; so, when you see the term *Catholic* or *Old Catholic* in books referring to Christianity in the first few centuries, realize that it does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, although the latter group *did* evolve historically out of most of these churches.

In his desire to have strong church leaders during the persecutions of the period, Ignatius promoted the theory that each church should have one monarchical bishop. No service of baptism or communion could take place in the absence of the bishop.

Ignatius actually courted martyrdom when he could have escaped: "I would rather die for Christ than rule the whole earth. Leave me to the beasts that I may by them be a partaker of God." His desire was fulfilled. He was fed to the wild beasts at the Coliseum in Rome.

Perpetua (c. 180-202) and Felicitas (died 202). Born in North Africa of aristocratic parents, Perpetua was an intelligent and gentle young mother. Today, North Africa is largely Muslim (Mohammedan) in religion; but in her day, it was Christian. Perpetua was thrown into prison in Carthage and chained between two Christian slaves. Her pagan father

pled with her to renounce her faith. It would have required a short sentence of denial to have been released from prison, but Perpetua was unwilling to deny her Lord. Many were tempted, without doubt--and some gave in; but a surprisingly large number were faithful unto death as Christ had requested in Revelation 2. After long months in prison, Perpetua's trial date came up. Hilarianus, the procurator, interrogated her in the presence of her companions in the Faith and her pagan father.

"Have pity on your father's white hairs and your son's youth. Sacrifice to the gods!"

"No. I refuse to sacrifice."

"Are you a Christian?"

"I am!"

That was all it took: the amphitheater awaited!

Felicitas, Perpetua's companion, was pregnant and although the law forbade expectant mothers to be sent into the arena, she wanted to die for Christ along with Perpetua. The delivery of a little girl caused Felicitas to moan in her pain. The jailer ridiculed her suffering and asked her what it was going to be like when she faced the lions. Felicitas' answer is classic:

"At the moment it is I who am suffering, but down there in the amphitheater, Someone Else will be within me, and He will suffer for me and I for Him."

On March 7, 202, the cruel torture began in the arena in Carthage. Perpetua's male prison companions were confronted by a bear, a leopard, and a wild boar. Christian women were treated with special cruelty. They were stripped before the whole crowd and placed in a net where they were attacked by an enraged heifer. According to the account, Perpetua and Felicitas were only knocked down by the heifer. They helped each other up and the crowd was satisfied for awhile. Perpetua rearranged her hair and pulled around her a gown which the guards had allowed. Even in death, she wanted to be noble, rejoicing, and not a defeated Christian! A few minutes later, the enraged arena crowd asked for their deaths. They were brought out to face a gladiator, while another leopard was sent out to kill Satorus, one of the male companions. The gladiator was inexperienced and merely succeeded in inflicting a wound in Perpetua's side. She helped him find the right place to strike on her throat. He pressed the blade and she was gone to her martyr's crown. She was only twenty-two years old!

The End of the Persecutions

Such horrible deaths only caused the more cultured people of Rome to pity the Christians. Seeing gentle women and children torn limb from limb by wild animals will eventually anger and sicken some people.

In 305, Diocletian abdicated and the pace of persecution subsided a bit. In 311 from his deathbed, the succeeding Emperor Galerius passed an *edict of toleration* of Christianity on the condition that Christians not violate the peace of the Empire. The persecution came to a complete halt in 313 when *Constantine* issued the *Edict of Milan*.

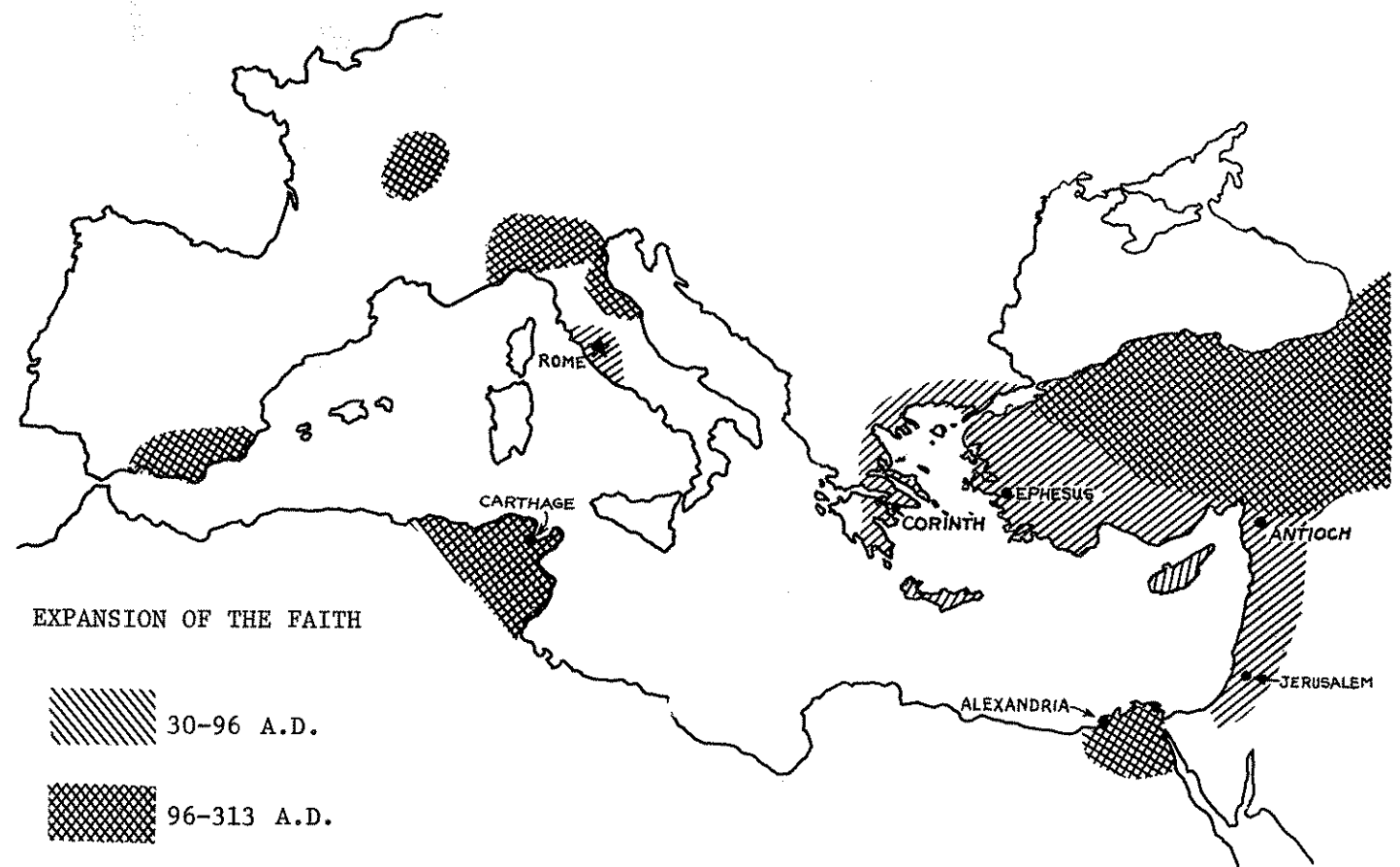
Constantine. Constantine is called the first *Christian* emperor. From a Biblical viewpoint, he was not Christian; although he did permit freedom of religion and favored Christianity--as he saw it. He recognized Christianity as an important unifying force in

the Empire. According to tradition, at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, he had seen a sign in the sky (the sign of the Cross) and the words "*In Hoc Signo Vinces*" (In This Sign Conquer). After he had won the battle, he accepted this sign as God's approval of Christianity; when he became Emperor, he made Christianity a favored religion. He did not, at that time, make Christianity the *state* religion, although many books erroneously assert that he did. At any rate, Christian or not (he delayed baptism until death, believing that it would wash away his sins), Constantine was tolerant of religion--all religion, not just the true one!

- (1) What year was Christianity given toleration by Galerius? _____
- (2) What year did Constantine issue the *Edict of Milan*, ending the Smyrna era of persecution of the Faith by the Roman Empire? _____

The Results of Persecutions

Persecution of the Church had several long-lasting and a few short-lived results.



Spread of Christianity. As the map above shows, the Faith spread far and wide partly in spite of and partly because of persecution. The light-colored areas indicate the extent to which the Church had spread in the period from Pentecost to John's exile to Patmos.

- (1) This means from 30 A.D. to 63, or the period of the Book of (a) _____ plus the (b) _____ era we studied in the last PACE, 63 to 96.

The darker shaded areas indicate those places to which Christianity spread during the Smyrna era (the period you are now studying).

- (2) Give the dates for Smyrna: (a) _____ A.D. to (b) _____ A.D.

By 200, there were believers all over the Empire. In the 200's (the third Christian century), the Western or Latin-speaking areas were evangelized. By the time of Decius (250), historians estimate that between 5 and 12 per cent of the Empire was Christian.

Cleansing of the Church. God's purpose in allowing the persecutions of the Smyrna period was to try the faith of His people. Notice that there is no criticism by our Lord of the church of Smyrna. Only Philadelphia, among the seven churches, has that same distinction. Of course, during the times when there was no persecution (especially before 250), the Heretics were purveying their false doctrines. When living for Christ is difficult, heresies do not seem to rise as readily as in times of peace. Perhaps a comparable situation exists today behind the Iron Curtain. Adulterated Christianity does not seem to exist in China or Russia. The empty husks of unbelief have no power to withstand persecution.

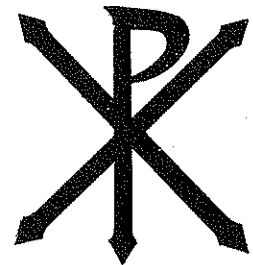


Roman Coin

- (3) Although Satan was out to crush the Church by persecution, what good did the Lord bring out of the fire? _____

The monarchical bishops. Because of the need for strong leadership under the persecution, the elders of the churches became more and more powerful until one in a church became leader over the other elders (soon they were called priests). Many of these men, such as Ignatius, died for their faith. It is debatable whether putting this much power into the hands of one man was necessary or even a good thing. Persecution and the need to combat heresy ushered in this change in church organization. We shall discuss this interesting topic in the next section of the PACE.

The canon. We recognized in the last PACE that the New Testament was the Word of God and was without error. With time, questions arose concerning the inspiration of some of the New Testament writings; therefore, it was necessary for the Church to recognize officially--to canonize--the New Testament books during the age just following the persecutions, although many were already canonized during the persecutions, because death for the sake of God's Word required assurance concerning which books were contained in the Bible. (It is one thing to die for the Word of God--but who wants to be burned at the stake for a religious novel?) Thus, the persecutions produced a decision about which books constituted the New Testament and which were merely sermons and legends. Heretics were also busy producing false gospels, epistles, and apocalypses (Revelation is called Apocalypse in Greek).



Greek Chi Rho — Monogram of Christ

Controversies. After the persecutions were over, the Church had to decide what to do with the traitors (*traditores*, Latin) who had handed over the sacred scrolls to the flames rather than their own bodies. A like problem arose concerning those who had bought *libelli* rather than suffer prison or death. There were some in the Church who were lenient and wanted to forgive the weakness of their fellow believers; others (many with maimed bodies and gouged-out eyes) thought the traitors should be put on probation.

- (4) Give four of the five main results of the persecutions:

- (a) _____
 (b) _____
 (c) _____
 (d) _____

- (5) Who were the *traditores*? _____

Answer these questions to test your understanding of this section. If you score below 90%, restudy the section. If you score above 90%, you should restudy any areas you did not understand.

CHECKUP
 (each answer, 5 points)

- (1) Give four reasons for the persecution of the Christians:

- (a) _____ (c) _____
 (b) _____ (d) _____

- (2) Satan's technique in Smyrna was to (a) _____ the Church but God used it to (b) _____ her from worldliness and coldness of heart.

- (3) A *religio illicita* is an _____ religion, such as Christianity during most of the Smyrna era.

- (4) Persecution was largely local up until the year _____ when Decius made an edict that all must worship the gods.

- (5) The most furious persecution was under Emperor _____ who sought to annihilate the Faith.