



St. Perpetua A Young Mother: “Condemned to Wild Beasts”

St Perpetua and her companions found no greater joy in this world than to share in the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. The story of their martyrdom, though not heard very often, is one that cannot be easily forgotten.

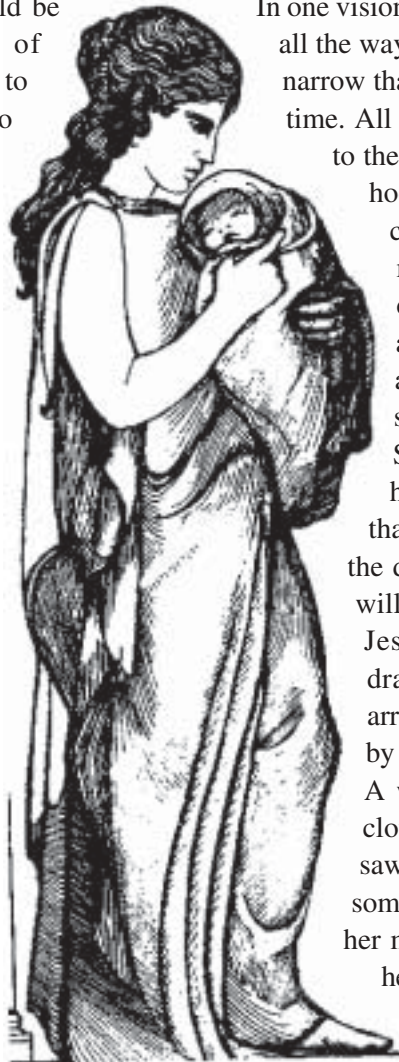
Around 201 A.D., an Edict of Persecution was enforced in Alexandria, stating that anyone guilty of trying to convert to Christianity would be sentenced to death. A group of catechumens (new Christians waiting to be baptized) were arrested and taken to prison, awaiting a hearing before the governor. These catechumens came from all different social backgrounds, though they were all united in their love for the Lord. Among them was 22 year-old Perpetua, a newly widowed mother, who was nursing her infant child while in prison. In pleading guilty to their Christian faith, at the hearing the group was “condemned to the beasts.”

While she was in prison, Perpetua’s family, especially her own father, was trying to persuade Perpetua to break her vow to God and abandon her faith for the sake of her baby and the rest of her family. During one discussion, Perpetua calmly asked her father if a vase could be called by any other name than what it is. When he replied no, she said, “Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.” Though her father

left in anger, Perpetua knew that pleasing her Heavenly Father was more important than pleasing her earthly father. Soon after, Perpetua was baptized, and she only prayed that God would grant her strength to endure the sufferings that lay ahead.

Perpetua was blessed to have visions from the Lord while she was in prison awaiting her victorious death.

In one vision, Perpetua saw a great ladder reaching all the way to the heavens; but the ladder was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. All sorts of metal weapons were attached to the sides of the ladder, including swords, hooks, and spikes, so that one could not climb the ladder carelessly, lest he be mangled by the weapons. An enormous dragon lay at the foot of the ladder, attacking those who tried to climb up, and trying to terrify them from doing so. One of Perpetua’s companions, Saturus, went up the ladder first. Once he arrived at the top, he told Perpetua that he was waiting for her but not to let the dragon bite her. Perpetua replied, “He will not harm me in the name of Christ Jesus.” Perpetua then stepped on the dragon’s head and went up the ladder, arriving to an immense garden surrounded by many people dressed in white garments. A white-haired man wearing shepherd’s clothing was milking sheep, and when he saw Perpetua, welcomed her and gave her some milk to drink, leaving a sweet taste in her mouth. After this vision, Perpetua and her companions realized they would have to suffer, and that they would no





longer have any hope in this life.

The Lord was also gracious enough to allow one of Perpetua's companions, Felicitus who was pregnant while in prison, to deliver her baby after only eight months, since she wanted to be with her companions on the day of their martyrdom, but could not be executed while pregnant.

When the day of their victory arrived, to the astonishment of the large crowd watching, the group confidently walked from the prison to the amphitheatre with their heads held high, as if they were marching to Heaven. Perpetua walked briskly and calmly, as a bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. They sang a song as they were beaten with whips, considering it an honor to share in the Lord's sufferings. They were then to be exposed to various beasts. A bear mangled one of Perpetua's companions, another killed by one bite of a leopard. A mad heifer was let loose before the two women. It tossed Perpetua and she was thrown on her back, tearing the tunic she was wearing. Perpetua's first instinct, however, was to cover herself with the torn tunic, wanting to maintain her purity for her Heavenly Bridegroom, even during her most painful moments of suffering. Also, when she saw that her friend Felicitus had fallen, she went to her and helped her up. The crowd then asked that they be brought in the open so that they

could see their death by the sword. Perpetua and her companions voluntarily rose and went before the crowd, and kissed each other with a ritual kiss of peace. Satorus, who was the first to climb the ladder in Perpetua's vision, silently took the sword first. He waited for Perpetua once again, though she still had more pain to endure. The first strike of the sword by a gladiator was made clumsily, causing Perpetua to scream in great pain. She then, however, took the shaking hand of the gladiator and guided it to her throat, willing her own death for the Lord.

The first time I read this story, I was disturbed by the great amounts of pain Perpetua and her companions went through. But each time I read it after that, I focused less on the pain and suffering they experienced, and more on the presence of God with them and the many blessings He was preparing for them in Eternal Paradise. It may seem hard to relate to the story of Perpetua, since we may never be called to undergo such excruciating physical pain in our expression of love for God. They allowed no barriers from the devil to separate them from their love for God. We should all strive for the same victory over the devil through Jesus Christ our Lord. May the story of these great martyrs be an inspiration for each one of us to be strengthened in Jesus Christ our Lord on our journey towards the Heavenly Kingdom.

“In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence.
And his children will have a place of refuge.”

(Proverbs 14:26)