



# Servants' Preparation Program



Coptic Orthodox  
Diocese of the  
Southern  
United States

*"For I have given you an example,  
that you should do as I have done to you"  
John 13:15*

**Coptic Orthodox  
Diocese of the Southern United States**

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**HIS 101  
MARTYRDOM**

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**Servants' Preparation Program**

**2003  
High School Boys (July 7 – 11)  
High School Girls (July 11 – 15)  
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**San Antonio, TX**

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## ✦ TABLE OF CONTENTS ✦

- **Introduction**
- **Emperors of the Roman Empire**
- **Types of Martyrs**
- **The Tortures of the Martyrs**
- **Evaluating Martyrdom**
- **Acts of the Martyrs**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Our Coptic Church lives by the work of the Holy Spirit inside of her. Her page of martyrdom comes from the fruits of the Spirit. We are amazed how our fathers and our martyrs withstood their sufferings; how they were unshaken, how they conquered, and how their honored blood, which was shed, destroyed the weapons of the evil kings and rulers.

Martyrdom is the story of Christianity from its inception. It is a story of spreading the Gospel all over the world. The witness of the martyr's blood was greater than any teaching or preaching. Martyrdom is a deep philosophy founded on strong spiritual principles for which Christians from all social levels, cultures and throughout the ages have been attached to.

### ❖ **Who is a Christian?**

As the soul is to the body, so is a Christian to the world. The soul lives in the body but it is not part of the body. Likewise, while the body has enmity against the soul and fights against it, the soul loves the body. The soul is eternal in a body that dies and the Christian is a stranger in a temporary world looking forward to his eternal home in heaven.

### ❖ **Understanding Pain**

Christianity is a religion of sacrificial love because her God is Love. We who follow her believe that if you do not know love you do not know God. *"He that loves not knows not God; for God is love."* (1 John 4:8) For her, suffering takes on a new understanding. Her attitude towards pain changed because her pride is the Cross. The suffering Cross has become a symbol of conquering and victory. Whenever there is the Cross there is love. Love does not care for pain or ridicule because:

### ❖ **Pain is fellowship with the suffering Lord**

*"And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with [Him] that we may be also glorified together."* (Romans 8:17)

*"That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death."* (Phil 3:10)

It is a spiritual pleasure that transforms death into a sweet cup to drink from where the Christian, in prayer and with all effort and haste, rushes to drink.

The believer's attitude changed with the understanding that this life is short and his journey in this world is temporary. *"To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you."* (1 Peter 1:4)

The believer's vision was sanctified and he saw in his giving and death the climax of love. His banner became *"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13)

Persecution and Christianity walk a parallel path. Those who wish to live their lives in our Lord Jesus Christ will confront persecution throughout all ages. *"Yes and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* (2 Timothy 3:12) *"For he said, because the Lord has sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."* (Exodus 17:16) When persecution reaches its utmost, which is death, it is expressed in the word *martyrdom*.

The word **martyr** is derived from the word *witness*. It was first used for the apostles who witnessed to the new Christian faith. Afterward, it was used to describe the confessors who suffered for their belief in our Lord Jesus Christ. Finally it was used for those who were killed for the sake of their faith.

Martyrdom started with Jesus Christ Himself, and then His followers. In the midst of evil hatred we witness forbearance, purity and forgiveness. It was a must that the Church be baptized by blood. It started with the persecution of the Jews to the Christians *"Who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets and have persecuted us; and they please not God and are contrary to all men. Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always; for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost."* (1 Thessalonians 2:15-16) It was St. Paul the apostle who wrote these words, he who was once known as Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the Church.

Afterward, pagan Rome became the greatest enemy to the new Christian faith. They fought with all its might to destroy Christianity. But the 'gates of hell will not prevail against it.' It started with Nero and ended with King Constantine. Therefore, the seed of the Church is the blood of her martyrs.

### ✠ **Motives for Martyrdom in Christianity**

Neither humanity nor history experienced death the way it witnessed the death of the Christian martyrdom. Our martyrs went to their death with joy, calmness and meekness that caused their persecutors to wonder. What were their motives? To the believer, the **world is limited as compared to eternity**

*"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."* (2 Corinthians 4:17)

*"And the world passes away, and the lust thereof; but he that does the will of God abides forever." (1 John 2:17)*

✠ **Christians are strangers to this world**

*"And if you call on the Father, who without respect of persons judges according to every man's work, pass the time of your journey here in fear." (1 Peter 1:17)*

*"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them and embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." (Hebrews 11:13)*

*"Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord; (for we walk by faith, not by sight.) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)*

✠ **This world is evil and in life there will be tribulations**

*"And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness." (1 John 5:19)*

*"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)*

*"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." (Rev 21:4)*

✠ **Death will lead to glory**

*"Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone but if it die, it brings forth much fruit. He that loves his life shall lose it and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." (John 12:24-25)*

*"And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:17-18)*

*"It is a faithful saying: for if we were dead with Him, we shall also live with Him."  
(2 Timothy 2:11)*

✠ **Therefore they became unconcerned for anything materialistic or worldly.**

*"Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return thither. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21) "For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content." (1Timothy 6:7-8) "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; and poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing all things." (2 Corinthians 6:10)*

It became so that they desired for the soul to be released from the body *"For I am in a straight between two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better." (Philippians 1:23) "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2).*

✠ **Persecutions of Christians by Romans**

Although Roman persecutions for Christians continued for about three centuries and never stopped during that era, the historians used to assign it into ten great persecutions happened by ten Roman Emperors, will be mentioned later. Many scholars connected these ten persecutions with the ten plagues that happened to Egyptians in the Old Testament and the ten horns of the beast mentioned in the Book of Revelation.



## Emperors of the Roman Empire

### ✦ Nero:

He began the first persecution for Christians where St. Peter and St. Paul got the crowns of martyrdom and apostleship. This persecution began in 64 AD and in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. Nero was the Emperor to whom St. Paul sent his petition, *“So Paul said, I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged”* (Acts 25:11).

Nero, the last Roman emperor (reigned 54-68) of the Julian-Claudian line, was the son of Domitius Ahenobarbus and Julia Agrippina, niece of Emperor Claudius. After the violent death of his first wife, Valeria Messalina, Emperor Claudius married Julia, adopted her son Nero and gave him in marriage his own daughter, Octavia.

Nero's mother had a mind to commit any crime to put him on the throne, and to prepare him for this station she had L. Annaeus Seneca appointed his tutor, and caused the freedman Afranius Burrus, a rough but experienced soldier, to be made commander of the Praetorian guard. These men were the advisers and chief supporters of Nero on his becoming emperor, after the sudden death of Claudius.

Nero was born in Antium on 15 December, A.D. 37, and was seventeen years old when he became emperor. He believed himself to be a great singer and poet. His sensuality and moral perversity had stifled all the better dispositions of his nature. Agrippina had expected to be a partner of her son in the government, but owing to her autocratic character, this lasted only a short time.

The first years of Nero's reign, under the direction of Burrus and Seneca, the real holders of power, were auspicious in every way. A series of regulations either abrogated or lessened the hardships of direct taxation, the arbitrariness of legislation and provincial administration, so that Rome and the empire were delighted. And the first five years of Nero's government were accounted the happiest of all time, regarded by Trajan as the best of the imperial era.

The first 5 years of his reign were the most glorious times of Roman Empire (54 - 59 AD). While the rest of his reign was horrible where Nero became a symbol of evil during that age as he killed his brother “Britannicus”, his mother “Agrippina”, his wives “Octavia” and “Poppaea”, his counselor “Seneca” and many Romans leaders and Generals. Nero, with his mates, rioted by night through the city, attacking men, assaulting women, and filled the vacant positions at the imperial Court from the dregs of the city. In the civic administration extravagance was unbounded, in the court luxury unbridled. Financial deficits grew over night; the



fortunes of those who had been condemned at law, of freedmen, of all pretenders by birth filled the depleted exchequer, and the coin was deliberately debased.

All efforts to stem these disasters were vain, and the general misery had reached its highest, when in AD 64 occurred the terrible conflagration which burnt entirely three, and partly seven, of the fourteen districts into which Rome was divided. The older authors, Tacitus and Suetonius, say clearly, and the testimony of all later Christian writers, that Nero himself gave the order to set the capital on fire, and that the people at large believed this report.

Nero was in Antium when he heard that Rome was in flames, he hastened thither, and is said to have ascended the tower of Maecenas, and looking upon the sea of flame in which Rome lay engulfed, to have sung on his lyre the song of the ruin of Ilium. In place of the old city with its narrow and crooked streets, Nero planned a new residential city, to be called Neronia.

For six days the fire ravaged the closely built quarters, and many thousands perished in the flames; countless great works of art were lost in the ruins. Informers, bribed for the purpose, declared that the Christians had set Rome on fire. Their doctrine of the nothingness of earthly joys in comparison with the delights of immortal souls in heaven was an enduring reproof to the dissolute emperor. There began a fierce persecution throughout the empire, and through robbery and confiscation the Christians were forced to pay in great part for the building of the new Rome. In this persecution Saints Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome in A.D. 67.

Finally the emperor started on a pleasure tour through lower Italy and Greece. As actor, singer, and harp player he gained the scorn of the world. He heaped upon his triumphal chariots the victor-crowns of the great Grecian games, and so dishonored the dignity of Rome that Tacitus through respect for the mighty ancestors of the Caesar would not once mention his name.

Outbreaks in the provinces and in Rome itself now presaged the approaching overthrow of the Neronian tyranny. Julius Vindex, Proconsul of Gallia Lugdunensis, with the intent of giving Gaul an independent and worthy government, raised the banner of revolt, and sought an alliance with the Proconsuls of Spain and the Rhine Provinces. Sulpicius Galba, Proconsul of Hispania Tarraconensis, who was ready for the change, agreed to the plans presented to him, declared his fealty to Nero ended, and was proclaimed emperor by his own army.

L. Verginius Rufus, Proconsul of Upper Germany, was offered the principate by his troops, and let them against the usurper Vindex. In a battle at Vesontio (Besancon) Vindex was defeated, and fell by his own sword. In Rome the praetorians dazzled by the exploits of Galba deserted Nero, the Senate declared

him the enemy of his country, and sentenced him to the death of a common murderer. Outlawed and forsaken, he committed suicide in the house of one of his freedmen, June, A.D. 68. At once and everywhere Sulpicius Galba was accepted as emperor. The sudden disappearance of Nero, whose enemies had spread the report that he had fled to the East, gave rise to the later legend that he was still living, and would return to sit again upon the imperial throne.

#### ✦ **Domitian (TITUS FLAVIUS DOMITIANUS):**

He was a Roman emperor and persecutor of the Church, son of Vespasian and younger brother and successor of the Emperor Titus. He was born 24 Oct., A.D. 51, and reigned from 81 to 96. In spite of his private vices he set himself up as a reformer of morals and religion. He was the first of the emperors to deify himself during his lifetime by assuming the title of "Lord and God". After the revolt of Saturninus he organized a series of bloodthirsty proscriptions against all the wealthy and noble families. A conspiracy, in which his wife joined, was formed against him, and he was murdered, 18 Sept., 96 AD.

When the Acts of Nero's reign were reversed after his death, an exception was made as to the persecution of the Christians (Tertullian). He was the Emperor who exiled St. John to Patmos where he saw his revelation. Among the more famous martyrs in this Second Persecution were Domitian's cousin, Flavius Clemens, the consul, and M' Acilius Glabrio who had also been consul. Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Flavius, was banished to Pandataria. The book of the Apocalypse was written in the midst of this storm, when many of the Christians had already perished (St. Irenæus). Rome, "the great Babylon", "was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus". St. Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians was also written about this time. The Roman Church continued loyal to the empire, and sent up its prayers to God that He would direct the rulers and magistrates in the exercise of the power committed to their hands (Clement Epistle 9, Romans 13, 1 Peter 2). Before the end of his reign Domitian ceased to persecute.

#### ✦ **Trajan:**

Emperor of Rome (A.D. 98-117), born at Italica Spain, 18 September, 53; d. 7 August, 117. He was descended from an old Roman family, and was adopted in 97 by the Emperor Nerva. Trajan was one of the ablest of the Roman emperors; he was stately and majestic in appearance, had a powerful will, and showed admirable consideration and a chivalrous kindness. He gained a large amount of territory for the empire and laid the foundations of civilization all over the provinces by the founding of municipal communities. He established order on the borders of the Rhine, built the larger part of the boundary wall (*limes*) between Roman and Germanic territory from the Danube to the Rhine, and with great

determination led two campaigns (101-2 and 105-7) against the Dacian king, Decebalus, whose country he converted into a new province of the empire. Two other provinces were conquered, although neither proved of importance subsequently. The Governor of Syria conquered Arabia Petraea and Trajan himself entered Armenia during the Parthian War (114-7).

In his internal administration Trajan was incessantly occupied in encouraging commerce and industries. The harbour of Ancona was enlarged and new harbors and roads were constructed. Numerous stately ruins in and around Rome gave proof of the emperor's zeal in erecting buildings for public purposes. The chief of these is the immense Forum Trajanum, which in size and splendour casts the forums of the other emperors into the shade. In the middle of the great open space was the colossal equestrian statute of Trajan; the free area itself was surrounded by rows of columns and niches surmounted by high arches. At the end of the structure was the Bibliotheca Ulpia, in the court of which stood the celebrated Trojan's Column with its relief representing scenes in the Dacian wars. Later Hadrian built a temple to the deified Trajan at the end of the Forum towards the Campus Martius.

Art and learning flourished during Trajan's reign. Among his literary contemporaries were Tacitus, Juvenal, and the younger Pliny with whom the emperor carried on an animated correspondence. This correspondence belonging to the years 111-3 throws light on the persecution of Christians during this reign. Pliny was legate of the double Province of Bithynia and Pontus. In this territory he found many Christians and requested instructions from Trajan. In his reply, Trajan considers the confession of Christianity as a crime worthy of death, but forbade a search for Christians and the acceptance of anonymous denunciations. Whoever shows by sacrificing to the gods that he is not a Christian is to be released. Where the adherence to Christianity is proved the punishment of death is to follow. The action he prescribed rests on the coercive power of the police, the right of repression of the magistracy, which required no settled form of procedure. In pursuance of these orders measures were taken against Christians in other places also. The most distinguished martyrs under Trajan were Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, and Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem.

#### ✦ **Marcus Aurelius:**

Roman Emperor, A.D. 161-180, born at Rome, 26 April, 121; died 17 March, 180. His father died while Marcus was yet a boy, and he was adopted by his grandfather, Annius Verus. In the first pages of his "Meditations" he has left us an account, unique in antiquity, of his education by near relatives and by tutors of distinction; diligence, gratitude and hardiness seem to have been its chief characteristics. From his earliest years he enjoyed the friendship and patronage on the Emperor Hadrian, who bestowed on him the honor of the equestrian order when he was only six years old, made him a member of the Salian priesthood at

eight, and compelled Antoninus Pius immediately after his own adoption to adopt as sons and heirs both the young Marcus and Ceionius Commodus, known later as the Emperor Lucius Verus. In honor of his adopted father he changed his name from M. Julius Aurelius Verus to M. Aurelius Antoninus. By the will of Hadrian he espoused Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus Pius. He was raised to the consularship in 140, and in 147 received the "tribunician power".

His co-reign with Lucius Verus was between 161 and 169. After death of Lucius Verus in 169 he reigned alone till his death in 180. He was a great philosopher. Niebuhr calls him the noblest character of his time. It is true that the most marked trait in his character was his devotion to philosophy and letters. Philosophy became a disease in his mind and cut him off from the truths of practical life. He was steeped in the grossest superstition; he surrounded himself with charlatans and magicians. The highest offices in the empire were sometimes conferred on his philosophic teachers, whose lectures he attended even after he became emperor. In the midst of the Parthian war he found time to keep a kind of private diary, his famous "Meditations", or twelve short books of detached thoughts and sentences in which he gave over to posterity the results of a rigorous self-examination.

In his dealings with the Christians, Marcus Aurelius went a step farther than any of his predecessors. Throughout the reigns of Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius, the procedure followed by Roman authorities in their treatment of the Christians has that outlined in Trajan's prescript to Pliny, by which it was ordered that the Christians should not be sought out. If brought before the courts, legal proof of their guilt should be forthcoming. It is clear that during the reign of Aurelius the comparative leniency of the legislation of Trajan gave way to a more severe temper.

In Southern Gaul, at least, an imperial prescript inaugurated an entirely new and much more violent era of persecution (Eusabius). In Asia Minor and in Syria the blood of Christians flowed in torrents. In general the recrudescence of persecution seems to have come immediately through the local action of the provincial governors impelled by the insane outcries of terrified and demoralized city mobs. If any general imperial edict was issued, it has not survived. It seems more probable that the "new decrees" mentioned by Eusebius were local ordinances of municipal authorities or provincial governors. As to the emperor, he maintained against the Christians the existing legislation, though it has been argued that the imperial edict against those who terrify by superstition "the fickle minds of men" was directed against the Christian society.

It is clear, however, from the scattered references in contemporary writings (Celsus, Origen. *Contra Celsum*", Melito, in Eusabius; Athenagoras, "Legatio pro Christianis",) that throughout the empire an active pursuit of the Christians was now undertaken. In order to encourage their numerous enemies, the ban was raised from the *delatores*, or "denouncers", and they were promised rewards for

all cases of successful conviction. The impulse given by this legislation to an unrelenting pursuit of the followers of Christ rendered their condition so precarious that many changes in ecclesiastical organization and discipline date, at least in embryo, from this reign.

Another significant fact, pointing to the growing numbers and influence of the Christians, and the increasing distrust on the part of the imperial authorities and the cultured classes, is that an active literary propaganda, emanating from the imperial surrounding, was commenced at this period. The Cynic philosopher Crescens took part in a public disputation with St. Justin in Rome. Fronto, the preceptor and bosom friend of Marcus Aurelius, denounced the followers of the new religion in a formal discourse and the satirist Lucian of Samosata turned the shafts of his wit against them, as a party of ignorant fanatics.

No better proof the tone of the period and of the widespread knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices which prevailed among the pagans is needed than the contemporary "True Word" of Celsus (ORIGEN). A work in which were collected all the calumnies of pagan malice and all the arguments, set forth with the skill of the trained rhetorician, which the philosophy and experience of the pagan world could muster against the new creed. The earnestness and frequency with which the Christians replied to these assaults by the apologetic works (ATHENAGORAS, MINUCIUS FELIX, THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH) addressed directly to the emperors themselves, or to the people at large, show how keenly alive they were to the dangers arising from these literary or academic foes.

From such and so many causes it is not surprising that Christian blood flowed freely in all parts of the empire. The excited populace saw in the misery and bloodshed of the period a proof that the gods were angered by the toleration accorded to the Christians, consequently, they threw on the latter all blame for the incredible public calamities. Whether it was famine or pestilence, drought or floods, the cry was the same (Tertullian, "Apologeticum", V, xli): *Christianos ad leonem* (Throw the Christians to the lion).

The pages of the Apologists show how frequently the Christians were condemned and what penalties they had to endure, and these vague and general references are confirmed by some contemporary "Acta" of unquestionable authority, in which the harrowing scenes are described in all their gruesome details. Among them are the "Acta" of Justin and his companions who suffered at Rome (165), of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonica, who were put to death in Asia Minor, of the Scillitan Martyrs in Numidia, and the touching Letters of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne in which is contained the description of the tortures inflicted on Blandina and her companions at Lyons. Incidentally, this document throws much light on the character and extent of the persecution of the Christians in Southern Gaul, and on the share of the emperor therein.

### ✦ **Septimius Severus**

Founder of the African dynasty of Roman emperors, born at Leptis Magna in Africa, 11 April, 146; died at York, England, 4 February, 211. Severus came from a family that had become Roman citizens. In his career as an official at Rome and in the provinces the Emperor Marcus Aurelius had favored him. In the reign of Commodus he was appointed legate of the fourth legion on the Euphrates; this gave him the opportunity to become acquainted with affairs in the East. He married Julia Domna, a member of a priestly family of Emesa, who was the mother of Caracalla and Geta. When the Emperor Pertinax was killed by the mutinous soldiers at Rome, Severus, who was then governor of Upper Pannonia, was proclaimed emperor.

During the reign of Severus the fifth persecution of the Christians broke out. He forbade conversion to Judaism and to Christianity. The persecution raged especially in Syria and Africa. In 203 Saints Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions suffered martyrdom at Carthage. Lionidas, Origen's father, Putamnia, Basil the soldier were of the famous martyrs during his reign.

### ✦ **Caius Julius Verus Maximinus Thrax:**

He reigned as Roman Emperor 235-8. He was barbarian and evil in his persecution to Christians.

### ✦ **Decius:**

Roman Emperor 249-251. He was born, date uncertain, near Sirmium in Pannonia of a Roman or a Romanized family. Practically nothing is known about his career, but the greater part of his life seems to have been passed in the army. He was the first of the great soldier - emperors from the Danubian provinces under whom the senatorial regime ended and the government became an absolute monarchy. Problems of administration, internal as well as external, at once claimed his attention. Oblivious of the changes wrought by time and the march of ideas, he pinned his faith to the almost abandoned paganism of old Rome as the solution of the problems of his time.

Such sweeping reforms necessarily brought into prominence the growing power of the Christian Church, and made it clear that any attempt to realize or enforce the absolutism of earlier Roman politics must necessarily be futile as long as any considerable body of citizens professing the Christian creed was allowed the free exercise of their religion. Belief in the freedom of conscience and the higher estimate of religion found among the Christians could find no part in such schemes as those of Decius and would necessarily prove an insuperable

obstacle to the complete realization of his plans. Various reasons have been assigned for the emperor's hatred of Christianity, some seeing in it an evidence of innate cruelty, others a desire to be avenged on the friends of his predecessor. But there can be little doubt that the main motives for his hostility were political, conceived not in the form of fanaticism but in purposes of political expediency.

The scope of the anti-Christian legislation of Decius was broader than that of his predecessors and much more far-reaching in its effects. The text of his edicts has not survived but their general tenor can be judged from the manner in which they were executed. The object of the emperor was not the extermination of the Christians, but the complete extinction of Christianity itself.

Bishops and priests were unconditionally punished with death. To all others was given an opportunity to recant and, to ensure the abandonment of Christianity, all were compelled to submit to some test of their loyalty to Paganism, such as the offering of sacrifice, the pouring of libations, or the burning of incense to the idols. The unexpectedness of the attack, coupled with the fact that an appalling amount of laxity and corruption had manifested themselves during the long peace, which the Church had just enjoyed, produced the most deplorable effect in the Christian fold.

Multitudes presented themselves to the magistrates to express their compliance with the imperial edict and to these apostates tickets were issued attesting the fact that they had offered sacrifice or burned incense, while others, without actually performing these rites, availed themselves of the venality of the magistrates to purchase certificates attesting their renunciation. These defections, though numerous, were more than counterbalanced by the multitudes who suffered death, exile, confiscation, or torture in all parts of the empire.

The Decian persecution was the severest trial to which the Church up to that time had been subjected and the loss suffered by the Church in consequence of apostasy was almost as damaging as the losses by martyrdom.

#### ✦ Valerian:

He was a Roman emperor (253-60). Member of a distinguished family, he had held several offices before the army proclaimed him emperor in 253 at Rhaetia. Weak and irresolute, his abilities were unequal to the difficulties of the times; his son and coregent, Gallienus, was lacking also in force. Christian tradition regards him as the originator of the persecution of the Christians under Decius.

In 257 Valerian issued a rescript, in kindly language, taking from Christians the right to hold assemblies or to enter the subterranean places of burial, and sending the clergy into exile. In 258, by a new and absolutely merciless edict, bishops, priests, and deacons were executed immediately, men of senatorial and

equestrian rank were is punished with degradation and confiscation of goods to be followed by death if they refused to offer heathen sacrifice. Women were threatened with confiscation of their property and exile, and Christians in the imperial household were sent in chains to perform forced labor on the imperial domains.

In this persecution Christian Rome and Carthage lost their leaders: Bishop Sixtus of Rome was seized on 6 August, 258, in one of the Catacombs and was put to death; Cyprian of Carthage suffered martyrdom on 14 September. Another martyr was the Roman deacon, St. Lawrence. In Spain Bishop Fructuosus of Tarragona and his two deacons were put to death on 21 January, 259. There were also executions in the eastern provinces. Taken altogether, however, the repression was limited to scattered spots and had no great success.

Valerian was finally captured by the Persians and died a prisoner. Macrianus and his two sons were killed in the struggle for the throne. Gal1ienus, who became Valerian's successor, annulled at once his entire father's laws hostile to Christianity.

#### ✦ **Aurelian:**

Roman Emperor, 270-275, born of humble parents, near Sirmium in Pannonia, 9 September, 214; died 275. At the age of twenty he entered the military service, in which, because of exceptional ability and remarkable bodily strength, his advancement was rapid. On the death of Claudius he was proclaimed Emperor by the army at Sirmium, and became sole master of the Roman dominions on the suicide of his rival Quintillus, the candidate of the Senate.

During the early years of his reign Aurelian exhibited remarkable justice and tolerance towards the Christians. In 272, when he had gained possession of Antioch, after defeating Zenobia in several battles, he was appealed to by the Christians to decide whether the "Church building" in Antioch belonged to the Orthodox bishop Domnus, or to the party represented by the favorite of Zenobia, Paul of Samosata, who had been deposed for heresy by a synod held three or four years before. His decision, based probably on the Edict of Gallienus, was that the property belonged to those who were in union with the bishops of Italy and of the city of Rome.

As this act was based on political motives, it cannot be construed into one of friendliness for the Christians. As soon as he was at liberty to carry out his schemes for internal reform Aurelian revived the polity of his predecessor Valerian, threatened to rescind the Edict of Gallienus, and commenced a systematic persecution of the followers of Christ. The exact date of the inauguration of this policy is not known. It is summer of 275 and dispatched to



the governors of the provinces, but Aurelian was slain before he could put it into execution.

### ✦ **Diocletian:**

He was a Roman Emperor and persecutor of the Church, born of parents who had been slaves, at Dioclea, near Salona, in Dalmatia, AD 245; died at Salona, AD 313. Our Coptic Orthodox Church began its own calendar of Martyrs by the first year of his reign 284 AD.

He entered the army and by his marked abilities attained the offices of Governor of Mœsia, consul, and commander of the guards of the palace. In the Persian war, under Carus, he especially distinguished himself. When the son and successor of Carus, Numerian, was murdered at Chalcedon, the choice of the army fell upon Diocletian, who immediately slew with his own hand the murderer Aper (17 Sept., 284). His career as emperor belongs to secular history.

The reign of Diocletian (284-305) marked an era both in the military and political history of the empire. The triumph which he celebrated together with his colleague Maximian (20 Nov., 303) was the last triumph which Rome ever beheld. Britain, the Rhine, the Danube, and the Nile furnished trophies; but the proudest boast of the conqueror was that Persia, the persistent enemy of Rome, had at last been subdued.

Soon after his accession to power Diocletian realized that the empire was too unwieldy and too much exposed to attack to be safely ruled by a single head. Accordingly, he associated with himself Maximian, a bold but rude soldier, at first as Cæsar and afterwards as Augustus (286). Later on, he further distributed his power by granting the inferior title of Cæsar to two generals, Galerius and Constantius (292). He reserved for his own portion Thrace, Egypt, and Asia; Italy and Africa were Maximian's provinces, while Galerius was stationed on the Danube, and Constantius had charge of Gaul, Spain, and Britain.

But the supreme control remained in Diocletian's hands. None of the rulers resided in Rome, and thus the way was prepared for the downfall of the imperial city. Moreover, Diocletian undermined the authority of the Senate, assumed the diadem, and introduced the servile ceremonial of the Persian court. After a prosperous reign of nearly twenty-one years, he abdicated the throne and retired to Salona, where he lived in magnificent seclusion until his death.

Diocletian's name is associated with the last and most terrible of all the ten persecutions of the early Church. Nevertheless it is a fact that the Christians enjoyed peace and prosperity during the greater portion of his reign. Eusebius, who lived at this time, describes in glowing terms "the glory and the liberty with which the doctrine of piety was honored", and he extols the clemency of the

emperors towards the Christian governors whom they appointed, and towards the Christian members of their households. He tells us that the rulers of the Church "were courted and honored with the greatest subservience by all the rulers and governors". He speaks of the vast multitudes that flocked to the religion of Christ, and of the spacious and splendid churches erected in the place of the humbler buildings of earlier days.

At the same time he bewails the falling from ancient fervor "by reason of excessive liberty". Had Diocletian remained sole emperor, he would probably have allowed this toleration to continue undisturbed. It was his subordinate Galerius who first induced him to turn persecutor. These two rulers of the East, at a council held at Nicomedia in 302, resolved to suppress Christianity throughout the empire. The cathedral of Nicomedia was demolished (24 Feb., 303). An edict was issued "to tear down the churches to the foundations and to destroy the Sacred Scriptures by fire and commanding also that those who were in honorable stations should be degraded if they persevered in their adherence to Christianity".

Three further edicts (303-304) marked successive stages in the severity of the persecution: the first ordering that the bishops, presbyters, and deacons should be imprisoned; the second that they should be tortured and compelled by every means to sacrifice; the third including the laity as well as the clergy. The atrocious cruelty with those edicts was enforced, and Eusebius and the Acts of the Martyrs attest the vast numbers of those who suffered for the Faith. We read even of the massacre of the whole population of a town because they declared themselves Christians.

The abdication of Diocletian (1 May, 305) and the subsequent partition of the empire brought relief to many provinces. In the East, however, where Galerius and Maximian held sway, the persecution continued to rage. Thus it will be seen that the so-called Diocletian persecution should be attributed to the influence of Galerius; it continued for seven years after Diocletian's abdication.

### ✠ **Constantine the Great**

Please visit <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04295c.htm>

## Types of Martyrs

### ✦ There are three kinds of martyrs

- Those who die for the sake of faith (these are the majority)
- Those who die for the sake of purity
- Those who die for the sake of dogma

#### ✦ For the sake of faith

These are the majority of our martyrs. We have the stories of their love for our Lord Jesus Christ and their courage in the face of evil. We will not talk about those martyrs but will go into the other two kinds of martyrs.

#### ✦ For the sake of purity

Martyrdom was distinguished in the first centuries by two clear and distinct features – a love for martyrdom and a love for purity because of the deep spirituality in which the early church lived. The believers hated anything materialistic and held on to everything that is pure. You will not find martyrdom and a spirit of immorality or enslavement to bodily desires. To the early Church believers, death was easier to bear than impurity.

The history of the martyrs is full of heroes of purity that preferred death than to be defiled, especially among the Christian women. Most of the judgments handed down against women believers were to force them into defiling their bodies. However, they showed courage in defending their virtues, equal to the courage of their men counterparts. To them being defiled was an evil worse than death.

#### ✦ There are numerous examples of such courageous women.

- St. Putamnia, the pure virgin martyr who cried to the ruler, “By the head of your emperor do not let them remove my clothes and allow them to let me go to the tar pit with my clothes on. Then you will see the power to endure that Christ, whom you do not know, will give me.” A soldier named Basilidis defended her and was also martyred. She was of Origen’s disciples.
- St. Theodora was a seventeen-year-old virgin martyr. She was martyred with Dydimus the soldier who saved her from the plot to shame her by the emperor’s decree to send her to a whorehouse.
- St. Veronica the virgin martyr. In the year 749 the soldiers of Marwan the caliph entered a monastery for virgins close to Akhmim, a city in Egypt. They wanted to assault and rape her because she was very beautiful. But she deceived them, telling them that she had oil that would protect the body from any sword. To convince them she placed this oil on her neck and told them to test her words. One soldier took out his sword and

swung at her neck and she was beheaded. This terrified the soldiers and they left the monastery.

✦ **For the sake of dogma**

There were also many martyrs who died for the preservation of the true faith. Heresies began to appear after the era of persecution during the reign of King Constantine. However, divisions and heresies have been around since the Apostolic era as St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:18 *"For first of all, when you come together in church, I hear that there are divisions among and I partly believe it."* It was during the Arian heresy that we witness an increase in the strength of the heresies as well as those who were martyred. **Among those who died are:**

- The martyrdom of a priest from Barka, one of the five western cities mentioned in scriptures. He was tortured and beaten to death by the Arian bishop Gregory because he would not consent to the Arian teaching. He was a martyr for the true dogma.
- During Pentecost there was a slaying in Alexandria arranged by the Arian bishops. Hundreds of martyrs were killed. St. Theodoros the martyr was tied to a horse and dragged through the streets until he died. This took place during the time when Pope Athanasius was exiled.
- St. Makarous the bishop (one of the three Macari) refused to sign the Arian decree and so was repeatedly kicked by the Arian bishop until he died.
- Riots in Alexandria were the consequence of the Chalcedon council where Pope Discorus was exiled and 30 thousand martyrs were killed. They shed their blood in defense of the true Christian faith.

## The Tortures of the Martyrs

Once more, the confessor obtained martyrdom after much torture and long hardships. The persecutors devised horrific and evil ways to torture the confessors who often became martyrs. Their evil ways included burning the martyrs while they were still alive; crucifixion; thrown to the wild beasts; beheading with the sword. They were often tortured and then enslaved in the mines with heavy chains on their arms and legs. They were exiled, whipped with leather whips; throw them into frozen lakes; dragging through the streets and faced many other kinds of demonic tortures.

### ❖ These tortures were mental, physical and emotional.

#### ▪ **They were tortured mentally**

They faced Insults, degrading, removal from positions, the removal of their wealth, had their houses robbed, they had no legal protection (legal support was issued only to those who raise incense to the pagan gods.)

#### ▪ **They were tortured physically**

The martyr Juliet, when she refused to offer incense to the pagan gods, confessing that she is the servant of Christ Jesus, the ruler judged that she should be burned. To encourage other women she said, 'Eve did not take just Adam's flesh but also his bone', indicating that woman was given the same strength as man to endure.

Our martyrs faced extreme torture. Prison atmosphere by itself was enough to kill many. The prisoners had their hands chained behind their backs and their feet fastened to the stocks (maktara). St. Paul himself was tortured this way (Acts 16:24). They would stay in the stocks for months and sometimes years.

They would put nails in their shoes and have them walk for long distances, they would remove their fingernails and many other harsh tortures.

#### ▪ **Emotional**

The emotional tortures for the virgins are too difficult to write about.

Somehow, above human nature and comprehension and through the work of God's Holy Spirit, the tortures bought joy and the hardships peace "As *unknown and yet well known; as dying and behold we live; as chastened and not killed.*" (2 Corinthians 6:9).

We see Stephen the martyr when he was being stoned asking for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him and Scripture says, *“And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”* (Acts 6:15) This is because of:

- God’s grace.
- The compassion and the prayers of the church for them
- Their feeling of honor that they are partners in pain with the Savior.
- Their visions of the heavenly glory given to them as messages from above.
- They would see the great martyrs who went before them strengthening them saying, ‘we are waiting for you.’
- They would have dreams of angels, lights, glory, and beauty so that the prison and the tortures became the doors of heaven opening to a feast with the angels and the saints.

*“But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony. Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what you shall answer: For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist. And you shall be betrayed both by parents and brothers, and kinfolk and friends, and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And you shall be hated of all men for My name’s sake. But there shall not a hair on your head perish. In your patience possess you your souls.”* (Luke 21:12-19)

### ✠ **The Judgments of the Martyrs and their blessed answers**

We see an amazing picture in front of us. Emperors, rulers and judges in injustice and cruelty were unable to overcome the innocent Christians who, without any weapons were able to withstand and overcome. The rulers, with their raised voices and beastly violence, went after those who opposed their doctrine. Yet the Christians, weak yet strong, peaceful but steadfast, with amazing patience, with wondrous endurance and in complete humility and strong faith stood up to them. They frustrated the kings and rulers after they failed to subdue them.

The courts were filled with fanatic pagans. We hear the unjust rulings without any defense (it was not allowed for any Christians to speak in his own defense, defending the truth.) The judgment is based on one question, ‘Are you a Christian?’ If the answer is ‘yes, I am Christian,’ then they have confessed to a crime and the spectators would shout, ‘death to the Christian!’

So many of our martyrs had only one answer, which was 'I am Christian – I am a free man and a slave to Christ Jesus'. They hated the glory of this world, considering the shame of Christ of more value than all the treasures of the world. There are examples of mothers who loved Christ more than her children and all they had, we see children following the martyrs crying, 'I am a Christian' the way their mothers taught them from the time they could speak.

Our martyrs are so many; whom only God can count. They began with the Apostles, and included princes, nobles, rulers, captains, soldiers, bishops, priests, deacons, monks, nuns, children, boys and girls, mothers, youth, farmers, slaves, philosophers, scientists, magicians, and pagans.

## **Evaluating Martyrdom**

### **✦ Desire**

Martyrdom is not craziness, foolishness or suicide but a beloved desire. They would present themselves to the rulers proclaiming their Christianity without being arrested or called in for judgment. They were given numerous chances to escape but refused because of their love for Jesus Christ. *"Women received their dead raised to life again; and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they may obtain a better resurrection."* (Hebrews 11:35) Origen wrote, "You can see in every martyr God Himself being judged. There is no doubt that it was not a normal person that was thrown in jail but Jesus Christ whom they judged against in the form of that person. *"And he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'"* (Acts 9:4)

Saint Befam said while he was being martyred, "This is the day of my true wedding, the day of my joy and gladness to meet my Lord and King. Mother do not cry and don't feel sad but be happy it's my wedding day."

### **✦ Courage**

It was not foolishness but virtuous courage. The martyr Kibrianous the bishop wrote; "Those who were tortured were more courageous than those who tortured them. The broken members of their bodies conquered the weapons used against them. The blood they shed quieted the waves of persecution, quenched the flames of hell and watered the seeds of the Christian faith. Steadfast and will not be shaken, unafraid, occupied in prayer and praises even while the tigers were eager to tear into their flesh. I don't know how but with a godly power that is incomprehensible, the beasts' mouths were shut. Their courage is a unique example and their language of love a new song to the ears of the world."

### **✦ Evangelizing**

The teacher Tertullian said, "The bloods of the martyrs are the seeds of the church. Continued in the torture, they increased in number more than those who were killed. *"Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone but if it die, it brings forth much fruit."* (John 12:24) The more severe the punishment, the more people were added to the Christian faith. Our Lord Jesus Christ sent out His apostles as sheep among wolves, did the Lord not care that those wolves will kill His sheep? No. What happened was the opposite. In devouring the sheep, the wolves became sheep." So the faith increased with the martyrdom of the saints much more than the preaching of the missionaries.



**Martyrdom is practical proof of the validity of the Christian faith and the truth of her virtues.**

No religion could have withstood all this enmity and hatred without fighting back using warfare as its weapon. But Christianity's only help was the Holy Power. It was fulfilling the words of the Lord of glory; *"Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what you shall answer: For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist. And you shall be betrayed both by parents, and brothers and kinfolk and friends, and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And you shall be hated of all men for My name's sake."* (Luke 21:14-17) Many miracles happened to the suffering Christian: being made whole again after his members were mutilated, poisons losing its affect, wild beasts having their mouths shut, and the nature of fire changing to become like a nice breeze. *"And these signs shall follow them that believe; in My name shall they cast out devils."* (Mark 16:17)

✦ **Martyrdom proved the greatness of the Christian virtues**

- Steadfast and endurance
- Meekness
- Love towards their enemies and prayer on their behalf as St. Stephen prayed for his persecutors ('Lord do not hold this sin against them')
- Purity and holiness
- Abhorring the worldly material and influences
- The desire for the heavenly

To the saints these virtues were witnessed in their actions, not just by what their words. Our martyrs were the greatest examples of Christian virtues and those around them witnessed it and recorded their words and actions. In so doing our martyrs offered the best witness to Christianity as a religion.

## Acts of the Martyrs

In a strict sense the Acts of the Martyrs are the official records of the trials of early Christian martyrs made by the notaries of the court. In a wider sense, however, the title is applied to all the narratives of the martyrs' trial and death. In the latter sense, they may be classified as follows:

- ❖ Official reports of the interrogatories (*acta, gesta*).

Those extant, like the "Acta Proconsulis" are few in number and have only come down to us in editions prepared with a view to the edification of the faithful. The "Passio Cypriani" and "Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum" are typical of this class. Of these the former is a composite work of three separate documents showing the minimum of editorial additions in a few connecting phrases. The first document gives an account of the trial of Cyprian in 257, the second, his arrest and trial in 258, the third, of his martyrdom.

- ❖ Non-official records made by eye-witnesses or at least by contemporaries recording the testimony of eye-witnesses.

Such are the "Martyrium S. Polycarpi", admitting though it does much that may be due to the pious fancy of the eye-witnesses. The "Acta SS. Perpetuæ et Felicitatis" is perhaps of all extant Acta the most beautiful and famous, for it includes the autograph notes of Perpetua and Saturus and an eye-witness's account of the martyrdom. And to these must be added the "Epistola Ecclesiarum Viennensis et Lugdunensis", telling the story of the martyrs of Lyons, and other Acta not so famous.

- ❖ Documents of a later date than the martyrdom based on Acta of the first or second class, and therefore subjected to editorial manipulation of various kinds.

It is this class which affords the critic the greatest scope for his discernment. What distinguishes these Acta from the subsequent classes is their literary basis. The editor was not constructing a story to suit oral tradition or to explain a monument. He was editing a literary document according to his own taste and purpose. The class is numerous and its contents highly debatable, for though additional study may raise any particular Acta to a higher class, it is far more likely as a rule to reduce it.

Besides these, there are other literary documents concerning the life and death of the martyrs such as the Calendaria were lists of martyrs celebrated by the different Churches according to their different dates. The Martyrologies represent collections of different Calendaria and sometimes add details of the martyrdom.

The writings of the Fathers of the Church also embody many references to the martyrs, as, for instance, the sermons of St. Basil, Chrysostom, Augustine, Peter Chrysologus, and John Damascene. Finally there are to be considered the collections of Lives, intended for public and private reading. Most important of all are the "Historia Ecclesiastica" of Eusebius (265-340), and his "De Martyribus Palestinæ"; but unfortunately his *martyron synagoge* or Collection of Acts of the Martyrs, to which he refers in the preface of the fifth book of his "Historia Ecclesiastica", is no longer extant. The fourteen poems of Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, published in 404 as the "Persitephanon liber", celebrated the praises of the martyrs of Spain and Italy.