

Justo Gonzalez

The Story of Christianity Volume I

Chapter 6

AND

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Chapters 9-12

Persecution in the Second Century

Now I begin to be a disciple. . . . Let fire and cross, flocks of beasts,
broken bones, dismemberment, come upon me, so long as I attain to
Jesus Christ.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Although the Roman Empire began persecuting Christians from the time of Nero, throughout the first century the details of such persecutions are scarce. By the second century, however, records begin to afford a clearer view of the issues involved in the persecutions, and of the attitudes of Christians toward martyrdom. Of these, the most dramatic are the *Acts of the Martyrs*, which retell the arrest, trial, and execution of various martyrs. Some of these include so many trustworthy details about the trials that they seem to have been taken, in part at least, from official court records. Sometimes we are told that the writer was present at the trial and death of the martyr, and historians are inclined to believe that it was indeed so. On the other hand, a number of these supposed *Acts of the Martyrs* clearly were penned at a much later date, and deserve little credit. But, in any case, the genuine "acts" are among the most precious and inspiring documents of early Christianity. Secondly, we learn of the attitude of Christians toward martyrdom through other Christian writings. Of these, the most valuable is probably the set of seven letters that the aged Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote on his way to martyrdom. Finally, the second century offers further glimpses into the attitude of Roman authorities vis-à-vis the new faith. In this context, the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan is most illuminating.

THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN PLINY AND TRAJAN

In 111 CE, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of modern-day Turkey. From various sources, it would appear that Pliny was a just man with a profound respect for Roman law and traditions.

But in Bithynia he had to deal with an unexpected problem. There were many Christians in the region—so many, in fact, that Pliny discovered that the pagan temples were almost deserted, and that the sellers of animals for sacrifice found few buyers. When somebody sent the new governor a list of Christians, Pliny began inquiries, for he knew that this religion was illegal.

The governor had the accused brought before him, and thus began learning of the beliefs and practices of Christians. Many declared that they were not Christians, and others said that, although they had followed the new faith for a time, they had abandoned it. Of these Pliny required only that they pray to the gods, burn incense before the image of the emperor, and curse Christ—things he had heard true Christians would never do. Once they met these requirements, he simply let them go.

Those who persisted in their faith posed a different problem. Pliny's practice was to offer them three opportunities to recant, while threatening them with death. If they refused, he had them executed, not so much for being Christians as for their obstinacy. If they were Roman citizens, he had them sent to Rome, as the law required.

But Pliny considered himself a just man, and therefore felt obliged to find out what crimes, besides sheer obstinacy, Christians committed. All he could learn was that Christians gathered before dawn to sing to Christ "as to a god," and to join in an oath not to commit theft, adultery, or any such sins. They also used to gather for a common meal, but had discontinued this practice when the authorities had outlawed secret meetings. Not quite convinced that this was the whole truth, Pliny put two female Christian ministers to torture. But they simply confirmed what he already knew.

The question then was, should Christians be punished for concrete crimes, or should the very name "Christian" be considered a crime? Not knowing what course to follow, Pliny suspended the proceedings and wrote Emperor Trajan for further instructions.

The emperor's response was brief. When it comes to the punishment of Christians, there is no general rule that is equally valid in all circumstances. On the one hand, the nature of their crime is such that the state should not waste time seeking them out. On the other hand, if they are accused and refuse to recant, they should be punished. Those who are willing to worship the gods should be pardoned without further inquiries. Finally, anonymous accusations should be disregarded, for they are a bad legal precedent and are "unworthy of this age."

Almost a hundred years later, the legal mind of Tertullian, a Christian in North Africa, rebelled against the injustice of such an edict, which was still in force:

What a necessarily confused sentence! It refuses to seek them out, as if they were innocent, and orders that they be punished as if they were guilty. It pardons, and yet is cruel. It ignores, and yet punishes. Why do you circumvent your own censure? If you condemn, why do you not inquire? And, if you do not inquire, why do you not also absolve?⁴

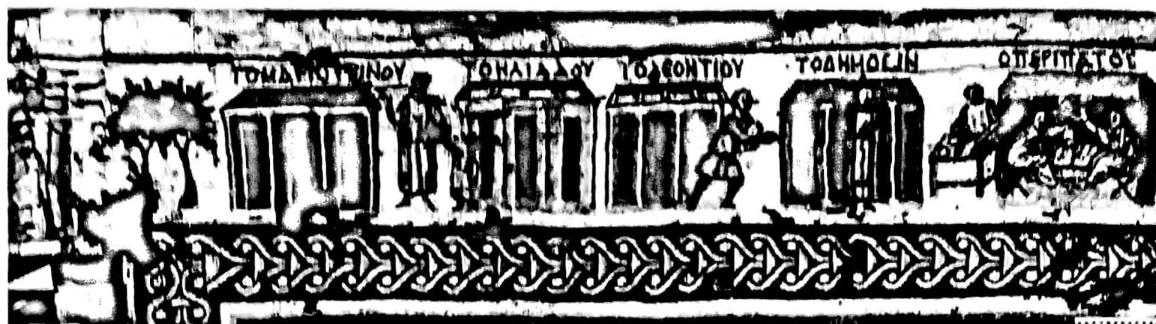
Yet, although Trajan's decision seemed to lack logic, it did not lack political sense. He understood what Pliny was saying: that Christians, by the mere fact of being such, were not committing any crime against society or against the state. Therefore, the resources of the state should not be wasted in seeking them out. But, once accused and brought before the authorities, Christians had to be forced to worship the gods of the empire, or face punishment. Otherwise, imperial courts would lose their authority. In other words, Christians were not punished for crimes committed before being brought to trial, but for what seemed their contempt of Roman courts. Those who openly refused to worship the gods and the emperor had to be punished, first, because the dignity of the courts required it; and, second, because in refusing to worship the emperor they seemed to be denying his right to rule.

The policies Trajan outlined in his response to Pliny were followed far beyond the borders of Bithynia, and long after Trajan's death. Throughout the second century, and part of the third, it was imperial policy not to seek out Christians, but still to punish them when they were brought before the authorities. That this was true even before the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan may be seen in the circumstances surrounding Ignatius's seven letters.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, THE BEARER OF GOD

About the year 107, the elderly bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, was condemned to death by the imperial authorities. Since great festivities were being planned in Rome in celebration of a military victory, Ignatius was sent to the capital so that his death might provide entertainment for the people. On his way to martyrdom, he wrote seven letters that are among the most valuable documents informing our knowledge of early Christianity.

Ignatius was probably born around 30 or 35 CE, and was well over seventy when his life ended in martyrdom. In his letters, he repeatedly calls himself "the bearer of God," as if this were a title by which he was known—and this is an indication of the high respect in which he was held among Christians. Much later, by making a slight change in the Greek text of his letters, people began speaking of Ignatius as "he who was borne by God," and thus arose the legend that he was the little child whom Jesus picked up and placed in the midst of his disciples. In any case, by the beginning of the second century



A sixth-century mosaic depicting scenes in Antioch.

Ignatius had great prestige in the entire Christian community, because he was bishop (the second after the apostles) of one of the most ancient churches, that of Antioch.

Nothing is known about the arrest and trial of Ignatius, nor of who it was that brought an accusation against him. From his letters, it is clear that there were several factions in Antioch, and that the elderly bishop had tenaciously opposed those doctrines he found heretical. It is not clear whether he was accused before the authorities by a pagan, or by a dissident Christian who sought to undo him. In any case, for one reason or another, Ignatius was arrested, tried, and condemned to die in Rome.

On their way to Rome, Ignatius and the soldiers guarding him passed through Asia Minor. A number of Christians from that area came to see him. Ignatius was able to see them and converse with them. He even had a Christian amanuensis with him who wrote the letters he dictated. Since Ignatius could receive visitors who were obviously guilty of the same crime of which he stood convicted, it is clear that there was no general persecution of Christians throughout the empire at this time, but that only those brought before the courts were condemned.

Ignatius's seven letters are the outcome of these visits. He had received the bishop, two elders, and a deacon from the church in Magnesia. From Tralles, Bishop Polybius had come. Ephesus had sent a delegation headed by Bishop Onesimus—who may well have been the same person about whom Paul wrote to Philemon. To each of these churches, Ignatius addressed a letter from Smyrna. Later, from Troas, he wrote three other letters: one to the church of Smyrna, another to its Bishop Polycarp, and a third to the church in Philadelphia. But the most significant letter in helping us understand the nature of persecution and martyrdom in the second century is the one that Ignatius wrote from Smyrna to the church in Rome.

Somehow, Ignatius had heard that Christians in Rome were considering

the possibility of freeing him from death. He did not look upon this with favor. He was ready to seal his witness with his blood, and any move on the part of Christians in Rome to save him would be an obstacle to his goal. He therefore wrote to them:

I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God.

As Ignatius goes on to say, his purpose is to be an imitator of the passion of his God, Jesus Christ. As he faces the ultimate sacrifice, Ignatius believes that he begins to be a disciple; and therefore all that he wants from Christians in Rome is that they pray, not that he be freed, but that he may have the strength to face every trial,

. . . so that I may not only be called a Christian, but also behave as such. . . . My love is crucified. . . . I no longer savor corruptible food . . . but wish to taste the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ . . . and his blood I wish to drink, which is an immortal drink. . . . When I suffer, I shall be free in Jesus Christ, and with him shall rise again in freedom. . . . I am God's wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts, so that I may be offered as pure bread of Christ.

And the reason why Ignatius is willing to face death with such courage is that he will thereby become a witness:

If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.⁵

Shortly thereafter, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna wrote to the Christians in Philippi asking for news regarding Ignatius. The answer from the Philippians has been lost, although it seems certain that Ignatius died as he expected shortly after his arrival in Rome.

THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

Although very little is known of Ignatius's martyrdom, there is much more information regarding that of his younger friend, Polycarp, when his time came almost half a century later. It was the year 155, and the policy that Trajan had

outlined for Pliny was still in effect. Christians were not sought out; but if they were accused and they refused to worship the gods, they had to be punished.

We know of events in Smyrna through the work of a writer who claims to have witnessed them. It all began when a group of Christians was brought before the authorities, and they refused to worship the gods. Under the cruellest of tortures they remained firm, we are told, because "resting in Christ they scorned the pains of the world." When Germanicus, an elderly Christian, was brought to trial, he was told that he should take into account his old age and recant, rather than submit to torture and death. To this he responded that he had no desire to continue living in a world where the injustices that he had just seen took place. And, to show how deeply he meant his words, he called on the beasts to come to him and kill him. This act of courage further aroused the anger of the mob, which began to shout: "Death to the atheists!" (referring to those who had no visible gods) and "Bring Polycarp!"

When the old bishop learned that he was being sought, he followed the advice of his flock, and hid for several days. But after having moved to another hiding place, and still being discovered, he decided that his arrest was the will of God, refused to flee any further, and calmly awaited those who came after him.

The proconsul who presided at his trial tried to persuade him to worship the emperor, urging him to consider his advanced age. When Polycarp refused, the judge ordered him to cry: "Out with the atheists!" To this Polycarp responded by pointing at the crowd around him and saying: "Yes. Out with the atheists!" Again the judge insisted, promising that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied: "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?"

Thus, the dialogue went on. When the judge threatened him with being burned alive, Polycarp simply answered that the fire that the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out. Finally, we are told that after he was tied to the post in the pyre, he looked up and prayed out loud: "Lord Sovereign God . . . I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ. . . . For this . . . I bless and glorify you. Amen."⁶

Many years earlier, Ignatius of Antioch had advised young Bishop Polycarp regarding his duties as bishop and the need to be firm in his faith. Now Polycarp showed himself a worthy recipient of Ignatius's advice, and a follower of his example.

One significant note in this entire account is that Polycarp fled and hid when he learned that he was being sought. We are also told in the same account that a certain Quintus, who offered himself as a martyr, weakened at the last moment

and abandoned the faith. This was important for those early Christians, who believed that martyrdom was not something that one chose, but something for which one was chosen by God. Those who were so chosen were strengthened by Christ who suffered with them, and for that reason were able to stand firm. Their firmness was not of their own doing, but of God. On the other hand, those who ran forward and offered themselves for martyrdom—the “spontaneous”—were false martyrs, and Christ would desert them.

But not all Christians agreed with the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Throughout the entire period of persecutions, there were occasional spontaneous martyrs. And, when they remained firm to the end, they found the approval of many. This may be seen in another document of the same time, the *Apology* by Justin Martyr, in which we are told that at a Christian's trial two others came forth in his defense, and all three died as martyrs. In telling this story, Justin does not give the slightest indication that the martyrdom of the two who were spontaneous was less valid than that of the one originally accused.

PERSECUTION UNDER MARCUS AURELIUS

Marcus Aurelius, who became emperor in 161, possessed one of the most enlightened minds of his age. He was not, like Nero and perhaps Domitian, enamored with power and vainglory. On the contrary, he was a refined man who left behind a collection of *Meditations*, written for his private use, which are literary masterpieces of the time. He expresses some of the ideals with which he tried to rule his vast empire:

Think constantly, both as a Roman and as a man, to do the task before you with perfect and simple dignity, and with kindness, freedom, and justice. Try to forget everything else. And you will be able to do so if you undertake every action in your life as if it were the last, leaving aside all negligence and the opposition of passion to the dictates of reason, and leaving aside also all hypocrisy, egotism, and rebelliousness against your own lot.⁷

Under such an emperor, it could be expected that Christians would enjoy a period of relative peace. And yet, the same emperor who expressed such lofty ideals regarding government also ordered that Christians be persecuted. In the only reference to Christianity in his *Meditations*, the emperor praises those souls who are ready to abandon their bodies when the time comes, rather than cling to life. He then goes on to say that this attitude is praiseworthy only when it is the outcome of reason, “and not of obstinacy, as is the case with Christians.”

Furthermore, as a child of his age, this enlightened emperor was also a

superstitious man. He constantly sought the advice of seers, and before every significant undertaking sacrifices had to be offered. During the early years of his reign, there seemed to be an endless string of invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters. Soon the explanation arose that Christians were to blame, for they had brought the wrath of the gods upon the empire. It is impossible to know for certain whether the emperor believed this explanation; but, in any case, he fully supported the persecution, and favored the revival of the old religion. Perhaps, like Pliny, what he found most objectionable in Christians was their stubbornness.

One of the most informative documents from this time tells of the martyrdom of the widow Felicitas and her seven sons. Felicitas was one of the consecrated widows (that is, women who devoted all their time to work for the church, which in turn supported them). Her work was such that some pagan priests decided to put an end to it by accusing her before the authorities. When the prefect tried to persuade her to abandon her faith, first with promises and then with threats, she answered that he was wasting his time, for "while I live, I shall defeat you; and if you kill me, in my death I shall defeat you all the more." He then tried to persuade her sons. But she encouraged them to stand firm, and none of them flinched before the worst threats. Finally, the record of the inquest was sent to Marcus Aurelius, who ordered that they should die in different sections of the city—probably to appease various gods.

Another martyr during this persecution was Justin, perhaps the best Christian scholar of the time, who had founded a school in Rome where he taught what he called "the true philosophy"—Christianity. He had recently bested a famous pagan philosopher in a public debate, and there are indications that it was this philosopher who accused him. In any case, Justin died as a martyr in Rome—although the accounts of his martyrdom did not appear until much later, and therefore the details are questionable.

Further insight into this persecution comes to us through a letter that the churches of Lyons and Vienne, in Gaul, sent to their fellow Christians in Phrygia and Asia Minor. It seems that at first all that was done in those cities was to forbid Christians to visit public places. But then one day a mob began following them on the street, shouting at them and pelting them. Finally, several Christians were arrested and taken before the governor to be tried. There a certain Epagathus emerged from among the mob members and offered to defend the Christians. Asked if he was one of them, he said that he was, and he was then added to the group of the accused.

The writers of the letter explain that persecution had appeared unexpectedly, "like a bolt of lightning," so that many were not prepared. Some of them weakened and "left the womb of the church like abortive ones."

The rest, however, stood firm, and this in turn increased the wrath of the governor and the mob. Torture was ordered. A certain Sanctus, when tortured, simply answered, "I am a Christian." The more he was tortured, the more he persisted in saying nothing but these words. Moved by this and many other signs of courage, some who had earlier denied their faith returned to confess it and die as martyrs. We are not told how many died, but the letter does say that the place where Christians were being held was so full that some died of suffocation before the executioners could get to them.

These are only a few examples of what took place under the reign of the enlightened Marcus Aurelius. There are several other accounts of martyrdoms still extant. One must suppose that the accounts that have survived tell only a part of the story of what actually happened throughout the empire.

TOWARD THE END OF THE SECOND CENTURY

Marcus Aurelius died in 180 and was succeeded by Commodus, who had begun to rule jointly with him eight years earlier. Although Commodus did not issue any edicts against persecution, the storm abated during his reign, and the number of martyrs was relatively low. After the death of Commodus, there was a period of civil war, and Christians were once again ignored in favor of more pressing matters. Finally, in 193, Septimius Severus became master of the empire. At first, Christians were able to live in peace under his reign. But eventually he too added his name to the growing list of those who had persecuted the church. However, since this was early in the third century, we shall return to it at another point in our narrative.

In summary, during the entire second century Christians were in a precarious position. They were not constantly persecuted. Sometimes they were persecuted in some areas of the empire, and not in others. Since the general policy of the empire was that outlined by Trajan—Christians were not to be sought, but, if brought before the authorities, they must be forced to recant or be punished—the good will of their neighbors was very important. If any believed the evil rumors about them, they would be accused, and persecution would break out. For this reason it was very important to show that those rumors were untrue, and to give pagans a better and more favorable understanding of Christianity. This was the task of the apologists, to whom we now turn.

However, before we move on to that chapter of our "story," it is important to note that, in contrast with much of what we have often been told, it was not usually the worst emperors, and sometimes some of the best, who persecuted Christians. This will become more apparent as the third century advances, and belies the notion that persecution was usually due either to corrupt authorities or to evil and inept rulers. For a number of reasons, some of them justified,



A mosaic depicts the legend of martyrs left to freeze to death in Sebaste.

the authorities saw in Christianity a movement with subversive overtones, and therefore sought to suppress it, not because they were corrupt or ill-informed, but rather as a matter of policy in defense of the integrity of the state.

Chapter 11. No threats have any effect on Polycarp

The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, unless you repent."

But he answered, "Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous."

But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent."

But Polycarp said, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will."

Chapter 12. Polycarp is sentenced to be burned

While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his herald to proclaim in the midst of the stadium thrice, "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." This proclamation having been made by the herald, the whole multitude both of the heathen and Jews, who dwelt at Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable fury, and in a loud voice, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods." Speaking thus, they cried out, and besought Philip the Asiarch to let loose a lion upon Polycarp. But Philip answered that it was not lawful for him to do so, seeing the shows of wild beasts were already finished. Then it seemed good to them to cry out with one consent, that Polycarp should be burnt alive. For thus it behooved the vision which was revealed to him in regard to his pillow to be fulfilled, when, seeing it on fire as he was praying, he turned about and said prophetically to the faithful that were with him, "I must be burnt alive."

Chapter 9. Polycarp refuses to revile Christ

Now, as Polycarp was entering into the stadium, there came to him a voice from heaven, saying, "Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!" No one saw who it was that spoke to him; but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice. And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Have respect to your old age," and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], "Swear by the fortune of Cæsar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists." Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ;" Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

Chapter 10. Polycarp confesses himself a Christian

And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, "Swear by the fortune of Cæsar," he answered,

Since you are vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear by the fortune of Cæsar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them.

The proconsul replied, "Persuade the people." But Polycarp said,

To you I have thought it right to offer an account [of my faith]; for we are taught to give all due honour (which entails no injury upon ourselves) to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1 But as for these, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any account from me.