

FOUNDED UPON ROCK
PART II: SUFFERRING AND TRIUMPH:
THE ROMAN PERSECUTION AND THE TRIUMPH OF CONSTANTINE

I. In the second, third and early fourth centuries, the persecution of Christians varied greatly, ending with the most intense time of suffering. During this time, the church was also formulating her theology in response to challenges from within.

A. During the second and early third centuries, the persecutions were not as intense as the Roman Empire stabilized and the Emperors felt less of a threat. However, the Roman Empire suffered gradual declines in its prosperity and military fortunes.

1. During this time, Christians could usually live in peace. However, they were under a number of disabilities, including the need to avoid being particularly prominent. And the threat of persecution always loomed, for unpopularity with the local population of the government officials could easily make them targets for persecution and death. Certain professions, such as the military, government service and teaching in the academies were off limits, for they would require participation in pagan rites.

2. Over the course of time, the principles generally developed that Christians should not seek out martyrdom, for that would be presuming on the grace of God, and would bring guilt upon their persecutors. If persecutions came to an area, Christians could, and generally did, flee; however, it was considered meritorious to stay and fight for the faith as well. However, as the account of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, the second century bishop of Smyrna indicates, Christians could not even pretend to offer sacrifices to pagan gods in order to avoid persecution. Once asked, they were required to confirm that they were Christians and refuse all worship of the pagan gods.

B. The Church had to continue dealing with divisions within as well.

1. At times, antipopes claimed to be the rightful leaders of the Church for the sake of championing some erroneous cause. The most famous of them was Hippolytus, a theologian for the Church who then claimed to be Pope in 212, arguing that Popes Callistus and then Sixtus were too lenient towards sinners. When the Roman government exiled him and Pope Pontian (230-35) to exile in Sardinia, they reconciled. Pope Pontian resigned the papacy and both of them accepted his successor Pope Fabian in 236.

2. Another group that broke from the Church was the Montanists.

- About the year 170, a charismatic preacher named Montanus preached a particularly severe brand of Christianity. Among other things, it

denounced property and marriage as evils and said that sinners who fell away from the faith could not return.

- About the year 200, Tertullian, who had been a Christian theologian, took up the cause of Montanism and eventually rejected secular philosophy as worthless and the clergy as unnecessary. He also considered marriage to be at best a lesser evil and would forbid remarriage after a spouse had died.

3. The Church also had to deal with Marcionism, the view that the Old Testament was inspired, not by God, but by at best a lesser god, or at worst an evil god. Marcion was a cleric, and probably a bishop who lived in the second century. His own view was that the Old Testament was inspired by a lesser deity of justice, and the Jesus Christ is the true son of the Almighty God. He only accepted the Gospel according to Luke and 10 Pauline letters as Scriptural. Later Marcions disparaged the Old Testament even further, saying that it was inspired by an evil deity.

4. Many great Christian theologians (called apologists after the Greek word for explanation) responded to the heresies by emphasizing the true faith.

- Thus, St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (178-202), wrote expositions of the true faith wrote many works explaining the faith, including *Against Heresies*, in which he refuted Gnosticism and emphasizes the importance of tracing the true faith back to the Apostles.

- Origen (185-232) wrote extensively about the Scriptures and how to understand them. He emphasized the spiritual meanings behind the literal words and the moral lessons from the Bible. Due to disputes with his bishop and some of his views that were later considered heretical (e.g., the pre-existence of souls), he is not called a saint. However, he was faithful to the Church and her teachings as understood in his day; and his theological insights are still considered valuable.

- St. Cyprian of Carthage (200-258) wrote of the Unity of the Church in response to the Montanists and others who would seek to form their own separatist communities. He guided the church in Carthage during the 250s in the time of the persecutions and dealt extensively with how Christians should respond, as well as reconciliation with those who faltered.

- Even Tertullian, although he would eventually break from the Church, wrote defenses of Christianity, exhortations to the moral life and refutations of Gnosticism and Marcionism.

C. The persecutions became much worse in the 250s under the Emperors Decius and then Valerian who believed that they could revive paganism and the fortunes of the Empire by increasing the persecution of Christians.

1. The Emperor Decius tried to restore piety and discipline to the Roman Empire and thought that suppressing Christianity was a part of his program. And so, in 249, he issued a decree mandating that all people make offerings to the Roman gods. He was killed, however, in 250 when fighting the Goths in what is now Germany.
2. His successor Valerian once again ordered a persecution again in 252, especially aimed at the Christian clergy. However, the Persians captured him in battle in 257.
3. His son and successor Gallienus rescinded both orders in 259, and there was relative peace for a time.

D. However, under the influence of his advisor, and later sub-emperor (called Caesar) Galerius, the Emperor Diocletian launched the most vicious persecution of the Christians ever in 303. That persecution lasted until the year 311 when Celsius, now Emperor in the East, called it off under great pressure.

1. Diocletian became Emperor at a time of great political, economic and foreign policy crisis, as the imperial government was becoming more inefficient, trade and transportation were declining, and foreign powers from the Germanic tribes of the north to the Persian Empire from the east were pressing against the frontiers.
2. He did stabilize the situation, and improved government and military discipline. . Diocletian also divided the Roman Empire into two parts, east and west, with the Western Roman Empire being ruled from Rome. He also arranged a system such that, in each half of the Roman Empire, there would be an Emperor (called Augustus) and a sort of vice-emperor called the Caesar. When the Emperor died or retired, the Caesar would become Emperor. Then Diocletian and the Western Emperor Maximilian retired and their successors Galerius and Severus died shortly thereafter. These deaths set off a power struggle because the Senate and the armies also wanted roles in the succession.

3. Precisely because he was so efficient, Diocletian's persecution was the worst in the history of the church. With the exception of the outlining areas, such as Britannia and Gaul, he was able to get officials to put their full effort into this persecution. Thus, the largest portion of martyrs comes from this time.

II. The persecutions of the Roman era ended and the Christian era of the Empire began with the Emperor Constantine's ascension to the throne in 312. From this point on, the Empire, both East and West, usually supported Christianity in principle, but often tried to dominate the Church as well.

A. Constantius was the general of Rome's army in the province of Britain, and eventually became the Caesar. He thus had the right to succeed as Emperor Severus when he died; but Constantius died shortly after Severus. His son Constantine then became a claimant for the imperial throne in the West, along with Maxentius who was already in Rome. Constantine took the Roman army of Britain to Rome, and the armies joined battle there in 312. On the night before this decisive battle, called the Battle of Milvian Bridge (for the place where Maxentius died), Constantine saw a vision of the Cross with the inscription "Under this sign, you will conquer." With Maxentius' death, Constantine became Emperor in the West.

B. In 313, he and the eastern Emperor Licinius signed the Edict of Milan, ending the persecutions and legalizing Christianity. Constantine accused Licinius of violating that edict and of harboring traitors against the West. And, for those and other reasons, he invaded and took over the eastern part of the Roman Empire in 324.

C. As Emperor, Constantine not only legalized Christianity, but favored the faith, especially with the promotion of Church councils and the building of many churches including the basilicas of Saint Peter and Saint John Lateran in Rome. His mother St. Helen became Christian, travelled to the Holy Land and established churches at the sacred sites associated with the life of Christ. After much effort, she also uncovered the Cross of Jesus. Constantine himself was not baptized until his deathbed.

D. As a result, there were numerous conversions, and Christianity became the most common religion in the Roman Empire. But with those rapid conversions came doctrinal disputes and more struggles with having people who joined the faith actually live it out in practice. In addition, the upper class in the West tended to favor the old paganism.

III. The relative peace of the late third century and the legalization of the Church in the fourth century brought a number of issues to the forefront.

A. Both in the 250s and then again after 313, the Church also had to respond to persecutions and the issue of how to deal with people who had lapsed from the faith or otherwise committed grave sins.

1. The issue of reconciling grave sinners was a general one, as St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians indicates. See 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:1-12. In the ancient Church, the three gravest sins were murder, adultery and apostasy. Related sins, such as aggravated injury and fornication were also considered very grave.

2. However, the question of how reconciliation could come about became more prominent when Christians fell away from the faith during persecutions.

a. When a persecution broke out, it was considered acceptable to flee to another place to escape it, but Christians could not even pretend to engage in pagan worship. Other grave crimes, most especially murder (including abortion) and adultery resulted in excommunication.

b. In fact, the desert monastic communities were located there partially to escape the Roman government. It was also considered acceptable to keep a low profile in order to avoid being denounced as a Christian.

3. After the persecution of Decius ended with his death in 250, the issue came to the forefront.

a. Some people, especially called the Novatians, said that people who lapsed from the faith could not come back into the Church.

b. Other Christian groups seemed to think that people who had lapsed could make a confession to anyone who suffered greatly from the persecution. Such people who suffered greatly, but had not been martyred, were often called confessors.

c. The solution, promoted especially by Pope St. Cornelius (251-253) and Saint Cyprian of Carthage (d. 254), was that people who had lapsed from the faith (and by extension all grave sinners) could come back to the Church, but only by going to confession to the bishop or a priest to whom the bishop had specifically given this authority to absolve people of grave sins. St. Cyprian's great work The Lapsed, described the idea behind this resolution and the lengthy penances that were needed for restoration.

B. After the legalization of Christianity, the issue of Arianism came to the forefront. In response, the Council of Nicea in modern day Turkey in 325 defined that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man.

1. A priest and monk named Arius was promoting the teaching that Jesus Christ was a model human whose death was redemptive, but that He was not God. This teaching divided many people in the Church, and in fact riots sometimes broke out.

2. The bishop of Alexandria, Egypt called a council of local bishops to condemn this teaching, but that council only had authority in Egypt.

3. Constantine thought it important to resolve the issue and so called bishops to meet in a universal (ecumenical) council.

- a. Three hundred bishops met at Nicea in modern day Turkey, with the representatives primarily from the eastern half of the Roman Empire, but also representatives from elsewhere in the Empire and even regions such as Persia and Armenia outside of the Empire. St. Nicholas was one of the bishops present.

- b. Pope Sylvester was not there in person, but supported the council and sent his delegate to ensure that the true faith was taught.

- c. The bishops took a baptismal creed and revised it to form the most of what is now called the Nicene Creed, which we recite on Sundays. All but 2 of the 300 bishops present signed that document.

C. However, even then disputes soon arose over the interpretation of the statement that Jesus Christ is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

1. Even some of those who initially agreed with the Council of Nicea then took up semi-Arianism, a view that Jesus Christ is very like God, but not God. Constantine’s son, Constantinius tried to force the Church to accept this view when he became sole Emperor after the death of his brother Constans and a two year civil war. Saint Athanasius (296 – 373) had been a deacon at the Council of Nicea and then became the Bishop of Alexandria. He was the subject of assassination attempts and exile for years on end. He was particularly prominent in defending the true faith, both as a bishop and as a theologian, to the point where he is now considered one of the doctors of the Church.

2. Other theologians, such as the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil the Great of Alexandria, St. Gregory Nazianzen, the bishop of Constantinople, and St. Gregory of Nyssa) in the east and St. Hilary in the west were also very prominent in defending the true faith in response to semi-Arianism.

3. Constantinius died in 361 and his successor Julian turned out to be a pagan. He unsuccessfully tried to revive paganism, but he fortunately also opposed semi-Arianism because he thought it was the more powerful of the two Christian views. And so the imperial support for semi-Arianism temporarily ended. After the death of Julian's successor Jovian, the Empire was divided between East and West again.

4. The dispute continued after Julian's death when the eastern Emperor Valens tried to support semi-Arianism until his death in 378.

D. The controversy required the calling of a second ecumenical council, now at Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 381, that Council reemphasized in stronger terms that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, equal to the Father in divine nature, and also that the Holy Spirit is true God.

E. But then the controversy arose about how Jesus Christ is true God and true man.

1. Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople proposed that there are two distinct persons, the divine Son of God and the human person Jesus Christ. He thought that they were morally united, but not one person. And thus he taught that Mary is the mother of the human person Jesus Christ, but not of the Son of God.

2. In 431, an ecumenical Council took place in Ephesus in Asia Minor (now Turkey), the city where, according to traditional belief, Mary lived at the end of her life.

3. The Council of Ephesus took up the theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria and defined that the Divine Person, the Son of God, is God from all eternity, but then took up human nature in the Incarnation. Thus, one person, the Son of God, has two natures, human and divine. And Mary is the Mother of God because she is the mother of the Son of God through His human nature.

4. Marian devotion, which had always been in the Church, now became even more prominent. Thus, for example, in 432, after a miraculous appearance of snow in summer, the Church established the basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome.

F. Questions then arose about how the Son of God is also human.

1. During the fifth century, some theologians proposed that Jesus Christ has only one nature, or has two natures but only one will, the divine will. These heresies were called monophysitism and monothelism respectively. Some permutations on this view included the idea that Jesus Christ initially had two natures, but that the first nature was immediately subsumed into the divine nature, or that He has one nature, a mix of human and divine.

2. In response, Pope Leo the Great (430-451) wrote his famous Tome to Flavian. He and bishops of the Church then convoked the Council of Chalcedon in 451. When the Tome to Flavian was read at the council, many people responded, "Peter has spoken through Leo," recognizing that the Pope is the successor to St. Peter. Consistent with the Tome to Flavian, the council defined that one person (the divine Son of God) has two natures (human and divine) and that these two natures are whole and complete, unmixed with each other, but united in the one person.

3. In 553, the Second Council of Constantinople refuted what was called the theopachite view, the idea that all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, joined in the human nature of Jesus and thus all of them died and rose again. That Council reaffirmed previous Councils and clarified that it was the Son alone who took on human nature and that through His human nature He truly lived on earth, died and rose again.

G. There were other heresies, such as the Pelagians, who maintained that we are saved by faith alone and not by grace, and the Donatists, who believed that only a meritorious clergyman could validly administer the sacraments. While no one Church council was convened to refute these heresies, the Pope, the bishops, local councils would use the writings of the great theologians to formulate true Church teachings in response to them.