Library Signpost

North African Agony: 203, A.D.

By Rev. Benedict [illegible]

On this earth, there are [illegible] no glory that is not bought with pain: no Easter without its Good Friday. I wrote last week that St. Augustine was the greatest glory of the Church in North Africa. But that glory did not come until the Church had passed through its blood-bath of persecution. In [illegible] North Africa, too, as elsewhere, the Church had its [illegible] and some of its most remarkable witnesses to the Faith.

Best known of the North African Martyrs are the two women, St. Perpetua and St. Felicitas, whose Feast we celebrated last Saturday. They were only two of many who bore blood-witness to Jesus Christ in North Africa, but we know most about these two because the record of their trial is complete, and has come down to us quite intact.

Perpetua was a noble free-woman; Felicitas was a slave: both of them from Carthage. They were taking instructions in the Christian religion. A new edict of the Emperor Septimius Severus made it a crime for the imperial subjects to become Christians. Perpetua and Felicitas were arrested—Perpetua with an unweaned child at home; Felicitas with an unborn child in her womb. They were cast into a dark, dank prison with several other catechumens (i.e., people under instruction). Before they were committed to prison, however, they were baptized.

At the trial Perpetua's aged father begged her to recant, and not to drag his name into dishonor. One time he even brought her babe in his arms to break down her firmness. There is this little scene in the minutes of the trial:

PROCONSUL: "Spare the grey hairs of your father; spare your little infant. Perform the sacred rite for the welfare of the Emperor."

PERPETUA: "I will not do it."

PROCONSUL: "Are you a Christian?"

PERPETUA: "I am."

Condemned to die, they were remanded to prison to await their assignment. As the Roman law forbade pregnant women to be put to death, Felicitas begged her companions that she might be delivered soon of her child, for it was the eighth month with her, and she did not wish to be left behind by her companions. In answer to her prayers, the babe was delivered prematurely. During the moaning of her birth-pangs, the jailer said to her, perhaps half in jest: "If this is the way it is now, what will you do when you are thrown to the wild beasts?" Her answer was one of those rare golden sayings which make the Acts of the Martyrs so fascinating—and she only a recent convert: "This pain I'm suffering now, it is I who suffer it; but then Another shall suffer in me, for Whom I shall suffer."

They were put to death in public spectacle, gored by a wild cow in the imperial games, March 7, 203.

In his "Mint by Night," Fr. Alfred Barrett, S.J., has enshrined their martyrdom so graciously in verse that I beg leave to quote his poem here, through the courtesy of the America Press.

TWO CARTHAGINIAN GIRLS

Walking at night-fall where the pink
And red hibiscus trimly furls,
I watch two petals blow to the grass,
Two crimson stains to make me think
Upon those Carthaginian girls,
Perpetua, Felicitas,
Whose very names our missals link
In perpetual felicity.

* * *

Blurred centuries dissolve. I see
A martyr walking to her crown,
Pale as her ungirded gown,
The tall, serene, patrician
Perpetua . . . Felicitas,
Of humbler origin, a slave,
Nurses her dungeon-born with tears,
Her babe of two brief days. Some man
Derides her travail pain and sneers,
"How against the beasts will you be brave?"
To whom the martyr makes reply,
"I suffer now, but when I die
Christ suffers in me then, not I."
They wait unseeing side by side,
When over the arena sands
Races a tawny, snarling tide,
A surf of lions circling round,
Lions that cringe and paw the ground—
For suddenly no spear can prod
Them on to where Perpetua stands
Like a light-house shining out to God
With the white beams of extended hands.
Careless of death, its when and how,
Perpetua, Felicitas,
The mistress and the serving lass,
Encircle one another's necks,
Embracing, till a goaded cow
Is loosed to match and mock their sex.
Perpetua is tossed. She falls
Piteously. The heifer mauls
With violating horns. But she
Arises, mangled, smoothes her dress
And drapes that riven tunic, less
Mindful of pain than modesty.
Then gathering her streaming hair
In the pathos of her womanly pride,
Begs for some clasp. With skill and care
Both arms sweep in finest curves
To her head, that, though her robes be torn,
His eyes Whom she dying serves
May deem her vain as any bride
And not as one who seems to mourn . . .
Two Carthaginian girls, they kneel,
Perpetua, Felicitas,
Upon their lifted throats to feel
The sacrificial coup-de-grace,
The stroke of consecrating steel.

* * *

So far away and long ago
These girls were born and loved and died,
It daily sets my heart aglow
To see—like petals side by side—
Perpetua, Felicitas,
Pressed in the Canon of the Mass!

STRANGE BUT TRUE

EDITORIALS

(Continued from Page [illegible])

THE TEMPTER CAME

Temptation appeals to our free will, never has power to force it. The devil must sell us on his appeal, otherwise he can never have power over us. Filled with guile, still retaining something of that high intelligence that was his as an angel, he is limited in his planning by man's free will and divine grace, he is limited in his knowledge whenever God sees fit to hide from him.

The tempter saw one fasting in the desert, wondered who He might be, determined to find out if possible. Forty days and forty nights had gone by, had brought hunger to the faster. The tempter showed his hand at once, put the question directly: "If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." The devil suspected the promised Saviour was before him, but did not know; one miracle would convince him. A swift trip away from the desert even to Jerusalem, to the top of the Temple, sets the stage for a second test, now that the first has been so thoroughly rejected: "If thou be the Son of God, throw Thyself down." A new rejection, a new denial of the miraculous guarantee the devil desired of the identity of the faster. Then the lying promise of power over all the world, of riches without end, as the clumsy final futile attempt to win the faster to abandon God and worship him. The dismissal of tempter and temptations in the peremptory command: "Begone Satan—the Lord Thy God shalt thou worship and Him only shalt thou serve!"

Satan can have no power over Christ. He can have no power over the children of Christ, save that which they give him. As he tempted the Master in ignorance, in curiosity, in guile, so he tempts us. May we be eager to use on him our knowledge of Christ, our love of Christ, our surpassing power to overcome that rests on the grace of Christ! Then the devil will leave us and God's angels shall minister unto us.

'Quiz' Corner

Should the confessional keep one from becoming a Catholic if they believe in all the other doctrines?

If one believes that the Catholic Church is the Church established by Christ he must believe that the Church is infallible in matters of faith and morals. Believing this he will be willing to accept the teaching of the Church in the matter of the Sacrament of Penance as the Divinely appointed way to obtain pardon of sin. When one acknowledges the divine character of the Church one must logically submit to her teachings in all things pertaining to faith and morals. To confess one's sins to a priest is hard to human nature, Catholic human nature as well as any other. But, properly explained, the obligation of confession is easily understood. There is no mystery, it is evident from the words of Christ and satisfies every human instinct.

Is it necessary for others besides the head of the family to contribute to the support of the Church?

Every man and woman married or unmarried, rich or poor, who has an income should devote some of it to the support of religion. The Jews of old gave the first one-tenth of all their income to the support of religion. The Christian could hardly feel that he would be justified in doing less for his religion, which is the substance, than the Jew did for his, which was the shadow.

I made a general confession and, though I made a careful preparation, I forgot some sins. What shall I do?

There are two kinds of general confession, one made voluntarily, from a sense of devotion and humility, and the other made of necessity, because former confessions were unworthy. If your general confession was of the first kind, nothing need be done. If it was of the second kind, the forgotten sins must be mentioned in the next confession.

Success Or Failure

One of the commonest mistakes and one of the costliest is thinking that success is due to some genius, some magic—something or other which we do not possess. Success is generally due to holding on, and failure to letting go. You decide to learn a language, study music, take a course of reading, train yourself physically. Will it be success or failure? It depends upon how much pluck and perseverance that word "decide" contains. The decision that nothing can overrule, the grip that nothing can detach, will bring success.

Remember the Chinese proverb "With time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes silk."

Sursum Corda

Byplay in War Times

By Rev. James M. Gillis, C.S.P.

[illegible]

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FIVE and TEN Years Ago—

From Mar. [illegible], 1938, Edition

His Excellency, Archbishop Thomas F. Hickey inaugurated on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas a series of Lenten Lectures, entitled "The Catholic Religion" at Columbus Civic Centre.

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From Mar. 10, 1933, Edition

That it was high time the mask was stripped from Godless Communism propaganda, "which calls itself intellectual progress, liberalism or what you will" was the declaration of His Excellency, Bishop Kearney in opening a radio talk series on WHAM.