

The Blood of the Martyrs: The Seeds of the Church

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church Grows Stronger Through Martyrs

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulations and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another . . . But he who endures to the end will be saved." (Matt. 24, 9-13)

The Roman Canon preserves to this day the roll of honor of the first persecutions:

"We honor Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmos and Damian . . . Let us remember Matthias, Barnabas, Stephen, Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia and all the saints."

Men and women, clergy and laity; Popes, bishops and deacons: none were exempt from the fury of Rome.

The madness began with the maniac, Nero, who had just burned Rome to the ground:

"No human effort, no bribe, no sacrifice to the gods could silence the report that the fire had been ordered. To squelch the rumor, Nero blamed the infamous sect of Christians. He subjected them to the most cruel of punishments . . . Some were clothed in animal skins and savaged by dogs, many were crucified or burned, others were burned as torches at night." (Tacitus, d.119 A.D.)

The first persecutions were local and sporadic. Certain emperors, like Trajan (d. 117), found them distasteful:

"They set a very bad example, and are not done in this day and age." (Letters of Pliny)

The conflict, however, was inevitable. The empire of a man-made god

will always be at odds with the Kingdom of the God made man.

The exact number of the martyrs will never be known. Their joyful courage will never be forgotten:

"In those days, we were eyewitnesses of the marvelous spiritual fervor of the victims, and the truly godly strength and willingness of those who believed in the Christ of God. No sooner was sentence passed on one group than another approached the bench, confessed themselves Christians . . . With joy and gladness they laughed at the death sentences. With their last breath, they sang psalms and hymns to the God who made all things." (Bp. Eusebius c. 340)

The most eloquent memorial to the heroism of the martyrs is the Roman Catacombs. Contrary to popular belief, the Catacombs were not hideaways. They were simply grave-

yards, the resting place of the first "sancti."

"Here, if you ask, lies a host of the pious. Honored graves hold the bodies of the saints, sublime souls drawn to the palaces of heaven . . . Here lies a host of the illustrious ones who served at the altar of Christ. Here lies the aged priest at peace. Here lie the holy confessors come from Greece. Here lie the young and the old, a chaste lineage, who desired above all to keep their pure virginity." (Pope St. Damasus, d. 384)

Two centuries of persecution failed to accomplish the purpose of the Romans. Instead of dying, the Church grew stronger. The word of the Lord was true. Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies; it bears no fruit. If it dies, it will bear much fruit.

"The blood of the Christians is a seed." (Tertullian, c. 22)

St. Ignatius — A Vocation for Martyrdom

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"I know what is best for me. Now I am beginning to be a disciple. Let nothing visible or invisible prevent my attaining to Jesus Christ! Let fire and cross, wild animals, dismembering, breaking of limbs, crushing of the whole body, tortures of the devil come upon me, if only I may attain to Jesus Christ." (Letter of St. Ignatius to the Romans)

One of the most illustrious of the primitive martyrs was St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch. Little is known of his early life. He was probably a convert of St. John. Medieval legend identified him with the child in Matt. 18, 1-6. He was executed in Rome about the year 107 A.D.

His importance rests upon the series of seven letters he wrote to the communities he passed on the way to his martyrdom. They constitute important testimony to the authority of the bishops, the fight against early heresies, the glory of martyrdom, the importance of Rome and the Eucharistic life.

Ignatius witnessed the crucial passage from the apostolic to the sub-apostolic generation of the Church. Authority had passed to the bishops and clergy:

"I urge all to be obedient to the bishops, as Jesus Christ was to the Father. Obey the priests as you would the apostles. Reverence the deacons as you would the command of God. Apart from the bishop one cannot function in the Church." (Letter to the Smyrnaeans)

Heresy was already troubling the Church, and Ignatius warned the people of Tralles:

"Nourish yourselves on nothing but Christian food. Have nothing to do with alien herbs of

heresy. There are men who will assure you of their good faith, and then mingle poison with Jesus Christ. This is like offering a deadly drug in a cup of honeyed wine."

Ignatius approached his death with joy. His glorification of suffering for the sake of Christ became the standard for the vocation of martyrdom:

"I am truly in earnest about dying for God. Put no obstacles in my way. Please do me no such untimely kindness. Leave me to be a meal for the beasts. It is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made pure bread for Christ." (Letter to the Romans)

Then, as now, the city of Rome was the seat of the primacy of the Church. As Ignatius approached the end of his journey he saluted the Apostolic See:

"You are a church worthy of God, worthy of blessing and praise, worthy of success, holy and foremost in all the world in love, obedient to the law of Christ, and signed with the Father's name." (Letter to the Romans)

The Eucharist from the very beginning has been the life blood of the Church. Ignatius found the strength for his martyrdom in the Bread of Life:

"Obey the bishop and the priests with one mind. Break the one bread which is the antidote of death and the medicine of life eternal in Jesus Christ." (Letter to the Ephesians)



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)
ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

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