

THE ROMAN PERSECUTIONS

1. The LEGAL GROUNDS for Christian persecutions:

- a) Refusal to participate in the pagan-emperor cult, by:
 - * burning incense in front of the emperor's statue
 - * bowing and praying to the emperor's statue
- b) The false accusation of cannibalism and incest resulting from :
 - * the Christian language about the Eucharist: eating the Body and Blood of the Lord: cannibalism
 - * the Christian language about AGAPE: universal love, was misunderstood as incest

2. The MAJOR PERSECUTIONS:

I) the persecution during NERO: A.D. 54-68

- * it started in A.D. 64, when Christians were made the scapegoats of the great fire in Rome
- * according to Church tradition, as well as parallel Roman history, thousands of people died refusing to give up Christ. Among them: Peter and Paul; a very inspiring martyrdom is that of Photine, the converted Samaritan woman

II) the persecution during DOMITIAN: A.D. 81-96

- * the emperor was determined to enforce the law which proclaim him "Master and God"
- * the great "thirst for the blood of the Saints" alluded to in the book of Revelation, which was written around that time, is pointing out to this fierce persecution
- * among the many martyrs, the Church recorded: Aquilla and Priscilla

III) the persecution during TRAJAN: A.D. 98-117

- * ancient Roman history has preserved for us a letter addressed to Trajan by Pliny the Younger, governor

of the Roman province of Bithynia, in Asia Minor. The letter was written around A.D. 112, and it describes the state of Christianity in that area, as well as accounts for many executions of Christians

- * among the many martyrs recorded by the Church: *Ignatius of Antioch* (he was a personal disciple of John the Evangelist and the bishop of Antioch beginning with year 67; his writings are preserved and available in English now)

IV) the persecution during ANTONIUS PIUS: A.D. 138-161 and MARCUS AURELIUS: A.D. 161-180

- * among the many martyrs recorded by the Church: *Polycarp of Smyrna*; the details of his martyrdom are available in English now; *Justin the Martyr*, the great Christian defender against pagan accusations; his writings are also available in English now

V) the persecution during SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS: A.D. 193-211

- * among the many martyrs recorded by the Church: *Perpetua and Felicitas*, who died in a packed amphitheater at Carthage (*Perpetua's diary is preserved*); *Irenaeus the bishop of Lugdunum (today's Lyons in France)* also died during this time; his writings against the gnostic heresies are preserved and available in English today
- * the Christian writer *Tertullian* would observe about that time: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"

VI) the persecution during MAXIMINUS: A.D. 235-238 and DECIUS: A.D. 249-251

- * in A.D. 250, *Decius* ordered a systematic persecution requiring that everyone had to possess a certificate (*libellus*) showing that he or she had sacrificed to the pagan gods before special commissioners. Many copies of such certificates have been found in the sands of Egypt.

VII) the persecution during VALERIAN: A.D. 253-260

- * Valerian forbade meetings for worship and ordered arrest and systematic elimination of bishops and presbyters
- * among the many martyrs recorded by the Church: Cyprian, a bishop in Northern Africa; his writings about the unity of the Church have been preserved and are available in English now

VIII) the sporadic persecution during AURELIAN: A.D. 270-275

- * Aurelian revived the ancient Sun-god cult and was a fervent worshipper himself; he tried to force his subjects to follow him and punished the Christians who refused to worship with him

IX) the great persecution during DIOCLETIAN: A.D. 284-305

- * Diocletian posted an edict on February 24, 303, in which he declared that all biblical material, all Christian liturgical books and sacred vessels were to be surrendered and destroyed; all meetings for worship were forbidden; a few months later, he ordered the arrest of so many clergy that the prisons could not accommodate them; amnesty was granted to those who publicly sacrificed to the pagan gods; thousands who refused to comply were publicly executed in what it is often referred to as "the blood bath"

X) the persecution of GALERIUS and MAXIMIN DAIA: A.D. 305-313

- * these short lived persecutions were inspired by many pagan petitions asking for the suppression of "the novelty of the disloyal Christians"; such a petition has been preserved in Arycanda in Lycia and was found in 1892

3. The EDICT OF MEDIOLANUM given in A.D. 313

- a) it was issued at Mediolanum(today's Milan) by Constantine in the West, and by Licinius in the East
- b) it expressed a new imperial policy of religious freedom for all, and the restoration of all properties