

# The Ten Persecutions

During the first three centuries after Christ it rarely happened that the Church was free from persecution, but when we speak of the ten General Persecutions we mean those periods during which the laws against the Christians were more severe, and when greater numbers suffered for the Faith.

**First Persecution**, under Nero, AD 64-68.

**Martyrs:** St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. Andrew.

The cause of the first persecution was the burning of Rome in the year 64. Nero set the city on fire and then accused the Christians of the crime. The martyrs endured most horrible torments. Some were cast into the Tiber with stones around their necks, others were crucified, others again were covered with the skins of wild beasts and exposed to be devoured by dogs. Many were covered with inflammable materials, and set on fire to illuminate the circus at night.

The most illustrious martyrs were St. Peter and St. Paul, who suffered together. While confined in the Mamertine prison they converted the guards and the two captains, and baptized them in the waters of a miraculous spring. St. Peter was crucified with his head downward, at his own request, as he deemed himself unworthy to die in the same posture as his divine Master. St. Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded. St. Andrew was fastened to a cross made in the form of the letter X.

**Second Persecution**, under Domitian, AD 95-96.

**Martyrs:** St. John the Evangelist, Flavius Clemens, and Acilius Glabrio.

The second persecution was caused by the Emperor's hatred of virtue and the advice of wicked counsellors. During the persecution, which continued for two years, many suffered martyrdom in Rome and in other parts of the Empire. Among these martyrs were Flavius Clemens, a cousin of the Emperor, and Glabrio, who had been consul with Trajan. The two Domitillas, the niece and grandniece of Domitian, were beheaded. One of the most famous of the Catacombs was constructed by the younger Flavia Domitilla. St. John the Evangelist was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, but being miraculously preserved, he was banished to the Island of Patmos, where he wrote the Apocalypse.

**Third Persecution**, under Trajan, 106-117.

**Martyrs:** St. Simeon, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Symphorosa with her seven sons.

Trajan did not begin his persecuting policy until the ninth year of his reign. When he returned victorious from the conquest of the Scythians, Dacians, and other nations, the Christians refused to take part in the public service of thanksgiving to the gods, and thus brought down his anger upon themselves.

In addition to the old laws of Nero and Domitian, new ones were added against secret assemblies. These new edicts forced the Christians into the Catacombs, where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered.

Trajan gave the following inconsistent reply to Pliny the Younger, "Do not search for the Christians, but punish them if they persevere in the profession of their Faith." St. Simeon was condemned to death and crucified at the advanced age of one hundred and twenty years. St. Ignatius of Antioch was torn to pieces by the lions in the Roman amphitheater. Hadrian, who succeeded Trajan, put to death the widow Symphorosa and her seven sons.

**Fourth Persecution**, under Marcus Aurelius, AD 161-180.

**Martyrs:** St. Felicitas and her sons, St. Justin and his disciples, St. Polycarp, St. Germanicus, St. Symphorian, St. Blandina, and St. Pothinus.

Marcus Aurelius, although the most virtuous of the Pagan Emperors, signaled the first year of his reign by issuing a decree against the Christians. The persecution raged with greatest severity in Rome, Asia Minor, and Gaul.

St. Felicitas gave a beautiful example of Christian fortitude to her seven sons, whom she encouraged to suffer their various torments. St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of St. John, was placed on a pyre, but the flames encircled without injuring him. He was killed by a spear thrust by one of the soldiers. St. Germanicus, after encouraging his fellow martyrs, was devoured by wild beasts.

Marcus Aurelius put a stop to the persecution on account of a remarkable favor which the Christian soldiers obtained from heaven. The Roman troops were engaged against the Quadi in Bohemia and were cut off from all supply of water. The suffering of the soldiers was intense. In one of the legions there was a number of Christians, who prayed to God for relief. An abundant shower of rain came as an answer to their prayer, while at the same time a violent thunderstorm drove full against the Quadi, who were cut to pieces by the Romans. The Christian troops who had obtained this favor received the name of the Thundering Legion. The Emperor ceased to persecute the Christians for a time, and on his return to Rome erected a monument representing in bas relief this glorious event.

Three years after the persecution broke out again in Gaul. At Lyons, the venerable St. Pothinus, first Bishop of that city, St. Blandina, a young slave, and a great number of others, perished. At Autun, the youthful St. Symphorian displayed his courage.

**Fifth Persecution**, under Septimius Severus, AD 202-211.

**Martyrs:** St. Perpetua, St. Felicitas, St. Leonidas, St. Irenaeus, St. Cecilia.

Septimius Severus was at first favorable to the Christians, but in the tenth year he issued against them the most bloody edicts which were put in force with such severity that many believed the time of Anti-Christ had come. The persecution raged in Africa, Italy, and Gaul.

At Carthage many suffered. Among them St. Perpetua and St. Felicitas, who, with three other Catechumens, were tormented and thrown to the wild beasts. Perpetua's father used every device to induce her to sacrifice to the gods; but, although deeply affected by his pleading, she could only reply that all was in God's hands. St. Leonidas, the father of Origen, also suffered for the Faith.

In Gaul, the Emperor himself conducted the persecution. Hearing that Lyons had become entirely Christian through the labors of St. Irenaeus, its Bishop, he surrounded the city with troops and more than 19,000 of the inhabitants were massacred. This number does not include women and children.

The successors of Septimius Severus did not persecute the Christians, but inferior officers under Alexander Severus took advantage of the absence of the Emperor to put into effect the old edicts. Among the martyrs of this period is St. Cecilia. Descended from a noble Roman family, St. Cecilia was espoused to Valerian, a pagan. He was converted by the prayer of his holy spouse, and with his brother Tiburtius suffered martyrdom before she was apprehended.

**Sixth Persecution**, under Maximin, AD 235-238.

**Martyrs:** Popes St. Pontianus and St. Antherus.

This persecution was directed chiefly against the clergy. The Emperor Maximin thought to shake the faith of the people by taking from them their pastors. After two years of persecution the Church enjoyed peace for eleven years.

**Seventh Persecution**, under Decius, AD 249-251.

**Martyrs:** Pope St. Fabian, St. Alexander of Jerusalem, and St. Agatha.

In the year 249 the Emperor Decius resolved to destroy Christianity. All means of torture that human cruelty could invent were called into use. Many who would have met speedy death bravely recoiled before the horrible torments, and renounced their religion. These were known as "Lapsed."

It was during this persecution that many of the Faithful fled to the deserts, and thus began the eremitical life.

**Eighth Persecution**, under Valerian, AD 257-260.

**Martyrs:** St. Cyprian of Carthage, Pope St. Sixtus, St. Lawrence, and St. Cyrille.

Valerian, like several of his predecessors, was at first favorable to the Christians, but later issued two edicts against them. The first forbade Christians even to go to the Catacombs, and banished bishops and priests who refused to sacrifice to the gods. The second ordered all the clergy to be beheaded and the property of the senators and knights to be confiscated.

While Pope Sixtus II was celebrating Mass in the Catacombs, he was seized and led away with his deacons. Later he was condemned and put to death. St. Lawrence, one of the deacons, was required to deliver up the treasures of the Christians. He collected the poor of the city and presented them to the prefect as the only treasure the Church possessed. St. Lawrence was placed on a gridiron and slowly roasted to death.

St. Cyprian was beheaded before the walls of Carthage. At Utica, in Africa, one hundred and fifty-three Christians were cast alive into pits and covered with quicklime. Their relics are known as the white mass—*massa candida*.

We have a beautiful example of courage and faith in the conduct of a little child called Cyrille. His father was a pagan, and in hatred of the name Christian had driven his son from his house. To the persuasions of the Governor, Cyrille answered, "I rejoice to be driven from my father's house; God will give me one more grand and beautiful." The bystanders wept when they saw him receive the crown of martyrdom.

**Ninth Persecution**, under Aurelian, AD 274-275.

**Martyrs:** Pope St. Felix I, and St. Denis of Paris.

In the fourth year of his reign, the Emperor Aurelian conceived the idea of extirpating Christianity from the Roman Empire. He who formed such an idea of his own power was destined to be less successful than his predecessors, for he was assassinated eight months after he had issued this edict against the Christians. In the meantime, however, many had suffered martyrdom, among them St. Felix, Bishop of Rome, and St. Denis, Bishop of Paris.

**Tenth Persecution**, under Diocletian, AD 303-305.

**Martyrs:** The Theban Legion, St. Sebastian, St. Januarius, St. Eulalia, St. Lucy, St. Agnes, St. Catherine of Alexandria.

The Tenth Persecution was the severest which the Church had to endure. For fourteen years after Diocletian became Emperor the Christians enjoyed freedom of worship. Many belonging to the highest grades of society professed their faith; among these were Prisca, the wife of Diocletian, and Valeria, the wife of Galerius, Governor of Illyricum.

In the division of the empire of Diocletian, Maximinian received Gaul. Here he began to persecute the Christians, about AD 286. He ordered the Theban Legion, which was composed entirely of Christians, to seek out their fellow Christians and put them to death. As the whole legion with their captain, St. Maurice, refused to obey, the head of every tenth man was struck off, by the Emperor's command. A second decimation followed with no better result. Maximinian at last caused them to be surrounded by the rest of the army and slain as they stood. It is said that six thousand received the crown of martyrdom.

Another celebrated martyr was St. Sebastian, captain of the Praetorian Guard. He was denounced by Diocletian for visiting and encouraging the imprisoned Christians. In Spain, St. Eulalia, a child of twelve, was torn with iron hooks, and afterwards burned with torches. St. Justus and St. Pastor, school-boys of thirteen and seven, were beheaded. St. Lucy suffered at Syracuse, St. Agnes at Rome. The latter was only fifteen years of age and very beautiful; so the Prefect's son wanted to make her his wife. But St. Agnes had chosen Jesus Christ as her Spouse, and refused all worldly offers. She was placed on a funeral pile, but the flames separated without touching her, and the Prefect ordered her to be beheaded, AD 304. St. Catherine, of Alexandria, who had fearlessly reproached Caesar Maxentius for his cruelty against the Christians and had refuted the pagan philosophers of his court, died by the sword.

So great and general was the bloodshed that Diocletian had a coin struck "Diocletian, Emperor, destroyed the Christian name."

Fate of the Persecutors.

- **Nero** had to flee before the open revolt of his subjects and stabbed himself in despair.
- **Domitian** was assassinated.
- **Hadrian** became insane.
- **Marcus Aurelius**, heartbroken over the ingratitude of his only son, Commodus, starved himself to death.
- **Septimius Severus**, whose life had been attempted by his only son, died in despair.
- **Decius** ended miserably in a swamp, during a battle with the Goths.
- **Valerian** was taken prisoner by Sapor, King of Persia, and flayed alive.
- **Maxentius** was drowned in the Tiber.
- **Diocletian** starved himself to death.