

Maronite Monks of Adoration

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*“We multiply whenever we are mown
down by you; the blood of Christians is seed.” (Tertullian)*

In the year 249 A.D., Gaius Decius ascended the throne as emperor of a Rome which tottered on the brink of destruction after being the mistress of the ancient world for six hundred years. Barbarian tribes pressed her frontiers while political chaos reigned within. All the previous emperors that century, save one, were assassinated—including Decius’ predecessor Philip the Arab whom he killed. All this together with economic hardship and a declining population pointed to a troublesome future for Rome. Decius was determined to halt the slide and be the savior of Rome.

He would accomplish this through unity. Above all, something had to be done about those **divisive** Christians. Rome must be one, hard, strong, bonded in unity under the old gods, and the divisive rot ruthlessly cut out. The Christians would conform or die. This persecution would not be that of an insane Nero or Domitian, acting out their delusions of being a god. Instead, it would be rationally considered state policy with a purpose: making a better Roman world through unity. Decius promulgated an edict requiring all subjects of the empire, every man, woman and child — save for the Jews, who were exempted— to make sacrifices to Rome’s pagan gods. It would involve sacrificing to Roman idols and eating sacrificial meat, or at least offering the gods a pinch of incense. Upon completion, the subject would be issued a “certificate of good citizenship” which the police or any legal authority could demand he or she present. If you didn’t have one, you would be sent to the nearest idol to sacrifice and procure one. Christians were the targets. Those who complied would be spared.

Decius started with the top. He jailed Pope Fabian, had him beaten to death, and announced that he would not permit the election of a new pope. The Chair of St. Peter would be empty for two years. The bishops of Carthage and Alexandria disappeared; the bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem died in prison. The bishop of Smyrna apostatized.

So did thousands of the faithful. The persecution was hardly two months old, and its success was almost complete. When all seemed lost, the words of Tertullian became reality.

From all over the empire the seed arose to defy the emperor. Old Pionius in Smyrna telling the jailer, *“We do not worship your gods, and we do not bow down to the golden image.”* An apostate bishop was brought in to urge him to sacrifice: to no avail. Pionius was nailed to a stake and burned to death. In Rome, 19 year-old Celerinus refused to sacrifice in the presence of Decius himself for which he was tortured 19 days in the stocks. Eventually released, as a cripple, he returned to his native Africa to become a priest. In Asia Minor Nestor, bishop of Magydus (modern day Turkey), died proclaiming: *“With my Christ I have ever been, with Him am I now, and with Him I shall be forevermore.”* St. Agatha gave her life in Sicily (she was 12 years-old). The more Christians Decius killed, the more arose to take their place. Remember, they all knew that by placing a pinch of incense to the idol, they could save their lives. But their love for Christ was so intense that they would die before denying him. *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* (Rv 2:10). Finally, in 251, Decius disappeared in battle against the Goths and was never seen again. The persecution then ended.

Holy Mother Church has always placed the martyrs at the forefront of her affection from her very beginnings. Originally, Holy Mass was offered only on Sundays (the weekly Easter). It then became the custom to gather at the gravesite of a martyr on the anniversary of his or her death and offer Holy Mass. From this custom comes the beginnings of the weekday Mass. Also, relics of the martyrs would be placed in the altar stone of a consecrated altar to show the intimate connection between their sacrifice and the sacrifice of Our Lord made present in the Mass. This shows that the early Christians saw Mass as a sacrifice offered on an altar and not a “community meal” celebrated on a “table.”

For us today, the martyrs serve both as an inspiration and as intercessors before the throne of Almighty God assisting us with their prayers. We can glean much from their example. The martyrs were quite often ordinary men and women caught in extraordinary circumstances. St. Agnes was only 12 years old. She had “her whole life in front of her.” Coming from a well to do family, she would have enjoyed all that life had to offer. Instead she chose the life that Christ offers. With all the martyrs, when the time of testing came, they opened themselves to divine gifts of grace that filled them with a more-than-human capacity to suffer and to conquer through their suffering. Pope St. Gregory the Great stated, *“The death of the martyrs blossoms in the faith of the living.”* When we’re tempted to compromise our faith, or give in to sin, or remain silent when the truth should be spoken, we need an infusion of the martyrs’ strength and courage.

The martyrs remind us that we have a double citizenship. We are citizens of the country in which we happen to live. But we are also citizens of heaven. Remember the attempt to trip up Our Lord on whether or not to pay taxes to Caesar and he responds, *“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”* We are loyal citizens actively involved in the affairs of our nation. But when the Christian is convinced that it is God’s will that something should be done, it must be done; or, if he is convinced that something is against the will of God, he must resist it and take no part in it. As St Peter told the Sanhedrin, *“We must obey God before men.”* So must the Christian.

We need to ask the martyrs for this strength and courage that we may witness to Christ in the extraordinary circumstances. The history of the 20th century has been written in blood. More Christians suffered death for their faith in Christ in that century than in all the previous centuries put together. This martyrdom continues into the 21st century as every day, somewhere in the world, Christians are put to death simply because they are Christians. This may not be apparent because of the media’s silence on the topic. The anti-Christian bias of much of the Western media not

only minimizes or ignores the oppression of Christians; it actively contributes to a climate of fear and suspicion toward believers. Ask your typical American what comes to his or her mind at the word “extremist” and you will almost always get a characterization of some bible thumping bigot trying to bring about a “new intolerance.”

An additional difficulty for us comes from a crass materialism that has turned love into selfishness and eroded the faith. As writer James Hitchcock comments, *“Most American Christians, including some who are ostensibly orthodox, live by the assumption that one espouses a religion in order to make one’s life richer and more satisfying. The ultimate test is whether, like everything in the culture is supposed to do, it makes the individual ‘feel good about himself.’ Most professed believers cannot conceive of why it should be necessary to make sacrifices for their religion which is why there is almost total indifference to the fate of persecuted believers during one of the great ages of religious persecution in the world.”*

It’s important to remember why the Christians suffered persecution in ancient Rome: it wasn’t because of their religious beliefs per se. Instead they were accused of not being “good citizens” and thereby being “divisive.” They refused to acknowledge the ultimate supremacy of the state in all things. Recall St. Peter’s words: *“We must obey God before men.”* They would not acknowledge the gods of Rome and thereby the supremacy of the state. They believed, at the cost of their lives, that Jesus Christ was “THE Way, THE truth, and THE life.” Christ wasn’t one of many different ways, but an objective Truth for all people. As Cardinal Newman said, *“No one is a martyr for an opinion; it is faith that makes martyrs.”*

When we are put to the test and tempted to put in our pinch of incense to the modern idols by saying, “I’m pro-choice” or “Different strokes for different folks”: let the witness and intercession of the martyrs keep us faithful so that we may for ourselves have “The Crown of Life.” ✠