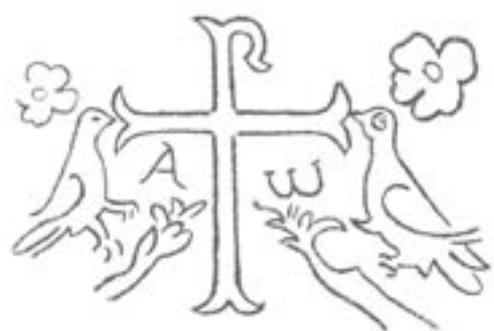


Synopsis

We are Christians	3
John Paul II (†)	
The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church	5
Cardinal Philippe Barbarin	
Map	10
The Origins of the Church in Lyons	13
Jean-Noël Guinot	
Historical presentation of the Letter	17
François Richard	
Letter from the Christians of Vienne and Lyons to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia. Transcribed by Eusebius of Caesarea.	23
The Amphitheatre of the Three Gauls	43
Amable Audin (†)	



We are Christians

"I am a Christian", was the simple and firm reply Sanctus the Deacon gave to his executioners...

We too are Christians, and all our present and future existence, our very vocation and whole mission are contained in this title...

The martyrs of Lyons and Vienne were fully aware of the fact that the name "Christian" carries both extraordinary riches and a great responsibility. They refused to renounce Him who had communicated His life to them and who had called them to bear witness to Him.

We know that, still today, there are many all over the world who suffer outrage, banishment and even torture because they will not break faith with their Christian beliefs. In them Christ manifests His power. The martyrs of the past and present surround us and support us, so that we may keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, who is the head of our faith and who leads it to perfection.



John Paul II (†)

*Amphitheatre of the Three Gauls
4 October 1986*



The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church

"The servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too."
John 15, 20



5

"In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous. I have conquered the world."
John 16, 33

Like "Jesus Christ who gave witness in his noble profession of faith before Pontius Pilate" (1 Timothy 6, 13), the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne were faithful to the One who had brought light to their lives ! This was over 1800 years ago under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, when the Church was just beginning to put down roots in Gaul.

This event was reported by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book V.chap1), written at the beginning of the fourth century. The document is of exceptional value. Eusebeus reports the sources themselves which relate the persecution of 177; an anonymous letter written by an

anonymous witness to the brethren in Asia. "*Christ's servants who live in Vienne and Lyons in Gaul to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia, who hold the same faith and have the same hope in Redemption.*"

The text underlines the apostolic foundation of our Church, the first in Roman Gaul, in the second half of the second century. Saint Irenaeus himself also attests to the truth of the link which unites the Church in Lyons, of which he was the second bishop, to that of Smyrna in Asia, where the bishop was Polycarp, disciple of the Apostle John.

Lyons, the capital of Gaul, was at this time at the height of its political and cultural influence. Living at the very centre of a brilliant but cruel and inegalitarian civilization, the way Christians lived their lives raised questions and aroused popular discontent. This led to the Church being persecuted and brought the Christians to confess publicly their faith in Jesus Christ. Blandine, who to everyone's surprise had survived horrendous torture, finally died in the amphitheatre, whereas the ninety year old Bishop Pothinus suffocated to death in a prison on the hill of Fourvière. The names of the martyrs have been handed down to us. There were at least thirty-eight perhaps forty-eight of them in all and their martyrdom sealed the foundations of the Church of Lyons by a baptism in blood. It had been the same for the Church of Rome, a century earlier, with the martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

Consequently, *the Letter of the martyrs of 177* is extremely precious. But events took place so long ago and the prevailing social context is so different, that the message might seem inaccessible to our contemporaries. Let us not be put off, but let us accept this as the supreme witness to which our predecessors testified before the whole world. History does not repeat itself, but this place is a call to courage and a pure heart, so that we may today bear that witness which the Lord and the world too expect from us.

In October 1986, Pope John Paul II started his pastoral visit



1. A guided visit to historical Christian sites in Lyons now exists for visitors and pilgrims. It covers the amphitheatre, the prison of Saint Pothinus, Fourvière, the church of Saint Irenaeus and the house of Pauline-Marie Jaricot, where restoration work has brought to remains of the a Roman road.

to Lyons by visiting the amphitheatre of the “Three Gauls”. In May 2005, many cardinals and delegates of the Pontifical Missionary Societies from all over the world, who will gather for the inauguration of Pauline-Marie Jaricot’s house, will spend their first moments in prayer in the amphitheatre. “*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*².”

These first disciples of Jesus in our country were of their time, part of a society in which the lower classes and the poor and above all the slaves were despised – at least 40% of the population was made up of slaves. It is their lifestyle, no matter their social origin, that made the Christians different. The famous *Letter to Diognetus*, a document which comes from Egypt and dates from the same epoch, bears witness to this fact. The Christians are like everybody, but at the same time so different! As they obey “*the extraordinary and truly paradoxical laws of their spiritual republic*,” they are designated as “scapegoats” and thus responsible for all that is wrong or dysfunctional within society.

Nevertheless, they show not the slightest hatred. Like Jesus throughout His life and at the moment of his Passion, the Christians remain faithful witnesses to the love of the Father for all men. One also feels the discreet and considerate love that binds them one to another. They love their community and their Church, which is like a mother for them. The strongest among them do not hesitate to defend their brothers and to publicly “confess” their faith in Jesus Christ, Saviour of all men and victor over death.

This attitude fortifies their brothers and sometimes deeply moves their persecutors. With calm audacity they bear witness to the strength of God’s Word and its victory over evil in their lives. Not bearing witness would be cowardice for them, doing the work of the devil, the adversary of mankind, “*a liar, and the father of lies, who desires the death of mankind (John 8, 44)*.”

Christ fills the “confessors of the faith” with joy. It is this that permits them to go through the supreme suffering, free from all fear of death, and to follow in his footsteps: “*For the suffering he himself passed through while being put to the test enables*



2. Tertullian, Apology, book 50, 13.

him to help others when they are being put to the test... and sets free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death" (Hebrews 2, 18 & 15).

If we fervently read *the Letter of the Christians of Vienne and Lyons* which dates back eighteen centuries, we will discover a text of our time, for Christians who are an integral part of a society undergoing significant change.

Considering the example of our elder brothers and sisters awakens us to our vocation of witness. What strikes one in this story is that the martyrs of 177 are not supermen and women. The text points out that some of them who were not sufficiently exercised in their faith weakened at first, before the prayer and the faithful witness of the martyrs "brought them back to life." In our time, as in the past, it is not easy to bear witness. It is experience itself and not just etymology, that shows us that witness and martyr are the same word, the same attitude. Where can one find the strength to remain faithful, and the audacity to move forward? For it is necessary to renew the announcing of the Gospel with each generation.



This *Letter* always makes me think of the sacrament of confirmation. Often, in my meetings with young people who are preparing for the sacrament I tell them the story of the martyrs of Lyons by starting with the first verses of the Acts of the Apostles where Jesus Himself catechises on the sacrament of Confirmation: "You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Acts 1, 8). If the martyrs had given way before legitimate and lazy objections like, "are we going to abandon our old parents, leave our land and home? How can you say what risks the journey will bring? What sort of a welcome will we get in those unknown lands?" the Church of Lyons, the Church of France, would not be here today! Blessed be those who in years gone by gave up everything and left home to announce the death and resurrection of Christ and those who today once more dare to take up the flame of evangelization! This story has come down through the centuries and the witness of fidelity to Christ is required at the place and hour we expect it the least.

Many young people today say it is difficult to admit to being Christian in their schools or universities. They are accused of hundreds of mishaps and infidelities that are sprinkled throughout the history of the Church or imagined because of the widening gap between modern thinking and their way of life and Christian doctrine itself.

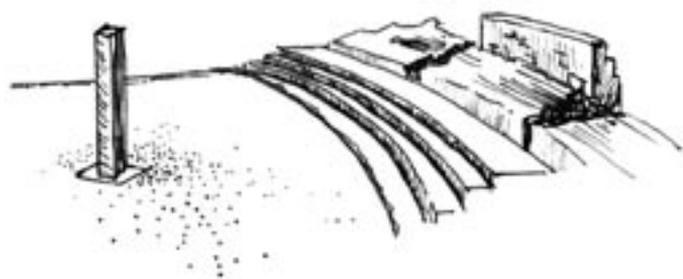
The re-edition of the *Letter* occurred at the end of 2004, shortly after the release of the hostages who had been held prisoner in Iraq for four months. These men, Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, whose training and job of journalist had not prepared them for the supreme witness, were all of a sudden obliged to bear witness to Christ. And they did. They said, at the risk of their lives, that they had been baptised. It was a truth that rose out of the depths of their being, which imposed itself through all the roots of their history and their family. They even went further. By declaring themselves Christians, they understood that also they had to imitate Jesus in the folly of His love, like the martyrs of Lyons whom our *Letter* compares to Stephen, “*the perfect martyr*”, when they prayed for their executioners. Helped by the Italian hostage who was with them, they went so far as to forgive those who had suspended their lives over the void all those months. “Yes, I forgive them”, Christian Chesnot said. “It is nevertheless an unforgivable act. Our kidnappers do not want to be considered terrorists, but they act like them. At the same time they are leading a life of resistance (...) I say with Jesus: “Father forgive, them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23, 34).



That is the Church, a faithful people! It carries through the centuries the flame of the Gospel and on our route of tears proclaims the victory of Compassion!







The origins of the Church in Lyons

Without the testimony recorded by Eusebius of Cesarea in the fifth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, we would probably be unaware of the existence of the martyrs of Lyons in 177. The location of the amphitheatre would not have been sought so relentlessly by archeologists of Lyons, and its discovery in 1958 would not have been so meaningful nor so emotionally powerful.



13

Despite all that, the *Letter* of the martyrs does not say anything about the origin of the Church of Lyons. Some authors even wondered if the title copied out by Eusebius is altogether certain, or whether it is the outcome of some belated deduction from the content of the *Letter* itself. In any case, we can safely admit that the Christian community of Lyons and Vienne had close relationships with the communities of Asia and Phrygia.

Luckily enough, Eusebius also transcribed the beginning of a letter written by some martyrs and sent to Pope Eleutherius, with the aim of recommending Irenaeus. They had chosen him as a bearer of the letter because “*he was already a priest of the community of Lyons*”, and worthy of high esteem. A few lines later Eusebius himself informs the reader that “*Irenaeus succeeded to the episcopal seat of the community of Lyons, which had been guided so far by Pothinus*”. The latter died

in prison "at more than ninety years of age." Writing about Irenaeus, Eusebius states: "It has come to our knowledge that, as a young man, he listened to Polycarp."

How did Eusebius learn about Irenaeus? Simply because the works of Irenaeus of Lyons were kept in the library of Caesarea. Eusebius transcribed entire passages from this work in his own *Ecclesiastical History*, taking from the bishop of Lyons a considerable part of his information about the Churches of Asia. In particular, he transcribes an entire page of Irenaeus' great doctrinal treatise *Against Heresies*, concerning Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna. Thanks to Eusebius, we can read this page in its original Greek as well as in the old and anonymous Latin translation in which the whole treatise has come to us. We shall select the information which is most important for our subject.

Irenaeus says that in the "tender years of his youth" he had known the old bishop Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the apostles and was close to "many of those who had met the Lord". He underscores that "[Polycarp] had been appointed bishop of the Church of Smyrna by the apostles themselves", and indirectly suggests that he had known "John, the disciple of the Lord", during his stay at Ephesus.

This testimony is confirmed by a letter of Irenaeus, which again has been (partially) preserved solely by Eusebius. The bishop of Lyons tries to bring over to orthodoxy a certain Florinus, who was spreading heretical beliefs at Rome. How does he proceed? He recalls to Florinus the teaching he received from Polycarp and, in order to touch his heart, he sketches a living portrait of the bishop, as it remained engraved in his memory since his childhood. The letter features the same account as *Against Heresies*, but this time his relation with the apostle John is clearly affirmed. "I can tell you of the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and speak, his way of entering and leaving, his style of life, his physical appearance, the conversations he held in front of the crowd, what he said about his relationship with John and with those who had seen the Lord, how he recalled their own words, and the things he had heard them relate about the Lord, his miracles, his teaching; how Polycarp, after having received all that from the



eyewitnesses of the Word of Life, related it, in accordance with the Scriptures."

Let us return to the information about Polycarp that can be found in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*. Its full meaning cannot be grasped as long as it remains isolated from its context. To the false traditions trumped up by the Gnostics to make their theses credible, Irenaeus opposes, at the beginning of Book III, the Tradition received from the apostles. In his view this tradition is a guarantee of truth, handed down with no alteration. In the light of the seniority and unity of this Tradition, the new-fangled character and disparate multiplicity of the Gnostic heresies appear even more clearly. As a proof of this, to establish the apostolic succession of each Church would suffice.

Irenaeus gives this proof for the Church of Rome, and this is how we know the list of its first twelve bishops, from Linus, the successor of Peter, until Eleutherus, during whose pontificate Irenaeus wrote his treatise. He concludes: *"It is through this sequence and by means of this succession that the Tradition now living in the Church has come down to us, beginning with the apostles and their preaching of the truth. This is very thorough proof that this life-giving faith – which has been preserved and handed down in the Church, since the time of the apostles to our days – is one and the same."* Irenaeus wanted to point out just one example, that of the Church of Rome. He does give an additional one, however, namely the Church of Smyrna, where Polycarp had been appointed bishop by the apostles. He thus draws a parallel between the Church of Rome and his Church in Asia that deserves to be underlined, even though in this latter case, he does not provide us with a list of Polycarp's successors.

We do not know where Pothinus came from, nor from whom he received the episcopal ordination. On the other hand, before becoming priest and bishop, Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, who himself had known John and *"those who had seen the Lord."* He is therefore the only source enabling us to establish a certain link between the Church of Lyons and that of Smyrna. This makes it likely that part of the community of Lyons at the time of the martyrs was of Asiatic



origin. Furthermore, this explains the wish of the Christians of Lyons and Vienne to inform their brethren in Asia and Phrygia of the terrible events of 177. Finally, Irenaeus had to spend some time in Rome, which explains how he was so well informed about this Church. Now, the “*apostolic succession*” of the Churches of Rome and Smyrna proves that the faith received from the apostles had been truthfully transmitted. Irenaeus places the Church of Lyons within this double apostolic succession. These are the origins of our Church, born a second time from the blood of its martyrs.

Jean-Noël Guinot

Director of Research, CNRS

Director of the Institute for Christian Sources.



Historical presentation of the Letter

The *Letter concerning the martyrs of Lyons* is an extraordinary document that was called by Renan the “*pearl of the primitive Church*.” The very circumstances of its transmission provide us with a beautiful example of the universality of the Christian Church. Written in Lyons, by an anonymous survivor of the persecution — possibly Irenaeus himself, as many, including Renan, believe —, the *Letter* was addressed to the Churches of Asia¹ and of Phrygia.² From there, copies of the *Letter* circulated in the East, one of which found its way to the library of Caesarea in Palestine. There Eusebius, a priest of Caesarea, acquired it with the aim of publishing it in his *Ecclesiastical History*, a work he compiled either at the end of the third century or at the beginning of the fourth. He informs us that he only transcribed long extracts of the *Letter* because he had already reproduced the complete text in a previous *Miscellany of martyrs*.

The text of this *Letter* is very clear and accurately describes the course of events. The year 177, suggested by Eusebius, is uncertain, for Eusebius makes the persecution coincide with first year of the episcopate of Eleutherius which he locates



1. According to the Roman meaning of this term: the western part of Asia Minor.

2. Further to the centre of Asia Minor.

at this date, whereas this episcopate began somewhat earlier (probably around 175). With all that, however, the date of the persecution remains possible. We shall simply state that, in the spring of a certain year during the episcopate of Eleutherius and after the return to Rome of Marcus Aurelius from the East (autumn 176), but before his death (March 180), the Christian community in Lyons went through a difficult period of isolation and boycott, which swelled into a pogrom, without any apparent reasons for this outburst of violence. On two occasions, however, later on in the narrative, the author suggests that this tension had a religious origin: "*All would have considered themselves as guilty of a serious crime and impiety if they had failed in rudeness with respect to him [Pothinus]. In fact, they thought to avenge their gods in this way*" (HE V 1,2). And later on: "*Among the pagans, some mocked and made fun of them while extolling their idols, to whom they ascribed the punishment of the Christians*" (HE V 1,60).



18

Facing this agitation, the authorities of the colony of Lyons intervene and proceed to arrest the Christians (not their persecutors!). As a matter of fact, since the time of Trajan³, profession of the Christian faith was prohibited. Although Christians were not officially persecuted, they were automatically indicted upon being (anonymously) denounced or, as it was the case here, in the event of public disturbances involving them. The governor of the province, who was in charge of justice, takes the matter in hand. He himself conducts the preliminary investigations, which at this time were accompanied, as in all criminal proceedings, with torture. This kind of torture has to be distinguished from punishment. It was put into practice with a view to extort the truth — and here to win denials. Some of the prisoners would be executed (probably in the forum), others would die in prison after having been tortured. Since the denials are not numerous enough, the governor decides to send four convicts to the amphitheatre. Two of them would perish, but the whole procedure would be considered a failure since none of them renounced their faith.

The governor then decides to send a *letter* requesting orders from the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, before executing the

3. Emperor between 98 and 117 A.D.

remaining convicts. One month later, the answer comes back from Rome. It is decisive: "*The Christians should be tortured, but those who would deny should be delivered.*" This would be done in August: All the obstinate Christians would be beheaded (in the forum?) or sent to the beasts in the amphitheatre. But there would still be survivors, and the Church of Lyons would not disappear. It is surprising to learn that, once the list of arrests is determined, other Christians manage to communicate with the prisoners and are present during the questionings and tortures, without being themselves in danger.⁴ It is as if the authorities' purpose was not so much to exterminate the whole community as to eliminate its best elements, to give a public warning that usual tolerance does not contradict strong principles, and to gratify the crowd whose rage could be slaked with the spilling of blood.

The aim of the Letter is to provide heroic testimony. Enjoined to betray its Lord Jesus Christ, a community, through its champions, refuses to be disloyal. The accent is put by the author⁵ on the spiritual worth of the witnesses: They are intrepid and heroic (Sanctus and Blandine underwent suffering on three or four different occasions). But the martyrs do not pride themselves on their values: "They were happy to reserve the title of "martyr' to Christ".



And what is most emphasized by Eusebius is the fact that they remain filled with charity: They do not curse their torturers. Rather than spurning them, they help the weakest among themselves who had fallen away, and they enjoy their return to faith. Aware of their uncommon spiritual authority, they send letters from prison to Asia and Phrygia, in order to give "measured" and "wholly orthodox" (HE V 3,4) opinions concerning the new Montanist prophecies.⁶ They concern themselves about the future of the community by delivering to Irenaeus a letter of recommendation for Eleutherius, bishop of Rome, whose content is reported by Eusebius (HE V,4). Irenaeus is presented as a zealous Christian, and a priest. It is possible that he went to Rome precisely in order to receive the episcopal ordination, but the text does not mention

4. Except for Alexander, who would be added to the list just at the end.

5. And by Eusebius himself, through his rather ingenious textual arrangement.

6. They also write to Rome, perhaps on the same topic.

this, presumably (if our hypothesis is correct) because of an understandable discretion.

In his excerpts, Eusebius hands down the names of only nine martyrs (Pothinus, Attalus, Alexander, Sanctus, Maturus, Blandina, Biblis, Alcibiades, Ponticus), or ten, if we add Vettius Epagathus. He tells us, however, that he knows the complete list, including even the names of the surviving confessors, but that he does not reproduce it in the Letter because one can consult it in his *Miscellany* (op. cit.).

This latter work is unfortunately lost, but it had been preserved by Gregory of Tours, bishop of Gaul in the sixth century, and comprised 48 names. Even if this does not mean that there were really 48 distinct persons,⁷ it is by quite a long way the largest-known contingent of collective Christian martyrdoms of the second century in the Roman empire. Among the names are some of Greek origin, but one would be wrong to believe that all these Christians were born in the East. Indeed it was customary, at that time, to give to slaves Greek names, which they kept when they were emancipated. The *Letter* tells us that the martyrs included men and women, Christian masters and slaves, Christian masters denounced by pagan slaves, people from the East and Gallo-Romans. At least two Roman citizens are cited, Attalus of Pergamon (in Asia) and Vettius Epagathus, the latter a young man very well known in Lyons. Although he had confessed his faith in the first days he was not persecuted, as if his distinguished status constituted a claim to immunity.



Nevertheless, he deserves to be “raised to the rank of martyr” because of his testimony. Other Roman citizens, whose number is unknown, were nevertheless beheaded. When Bishop Pothinus was arrested, “he was escorted by the city magistrates and by all the people, crying out against him, as if he was Christ” — a fact that goes to show how well he had been identified as a leader.

This isolated narrative, a sort of beam of light in the darkness, is the first witness to the existence of a Christian Church in Lyons,

7. Because the same confessor could have had several names. Some argue that the martyrs were “only” 38.

and in Gaul itself. Other passages in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* and in the works of Irenaeus suggest that Lyons was the first city in Gaul to have its own bishop, Pothinus, followed by Irenaeus himself. On the other hand, the big cities of the south, Marseilles, Arles or Narbonne, for example, were still not episcopal seats although the *Letter* mentions a "deacon from Vienne", Sanctus, who would be martyred in Lyons. It is quite possible that the choice of Lyons for the installation of the first bishop in Gaul was in conformity with what may be deemed a very judicious missionary choice, considering the influence of the "Capital of Gaul" at that time.

It would recall the choice of Saint Paul to settle down for long stays in Corinth and Ephesus, two provincial capitals and great economic centers – precisely like Lyons. In order to appreciate this choice, one must also keep in mind that there were very few bishops at this time. No bishop is known in Spain, nor in the North Africa, and only a few were to be found in Italy. Given his Greek name (which means: "hoped for"), Pothinus might have come from Asia Minor, but some argue that he could as well have been a member of the Christian community of Lyons.

At this time the Churches used to choose their own bishops, which implies that they needed time to get to know him. It is therefore likely that, whether or not he came from Asia, Pothinus first spent some time in Lyons. If this is correct, he did not come to Lyons as a bishop but actually had to leave Lyons in order to become bishop. The simplest course is then to assume that he must have gone to Rome in order to receive the episcopal ordination.

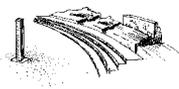
It has been asked – and this was the most debated question at the "Symposium on the martyrs of Lyons" held in 1977 on the anniversary of the persecutions – whether the missionary choice of Lyons had been made by Rome or by some Churches in Asia, where Pothinus, Irenaeus and the martyrs Attalus and Alexander presumably came from. The main question would be to know where, and most of all by whom, Pothinus had been ordained bishop. But this question remains unanswerable. The ties between the Church of Lyons and that of Rome are confirmed by the *letters* from the martyrs to Eleutherius, Pothinus' sudden journey to Rome, and above all by the



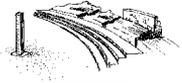
important fact that, under Irenaeus, Lyons celebrated Easter on the same day as Rome (at variance with the date chosen in Asia Minor). This suggests that, at the very least, Rome should not have been totally uninvolved in founding the first Church of Gaul, even if it was not the source of its inspiration.

François Richard

Professor of Roman History at the University Nancy II



**Letter from the
Christians of Vienne
and Lyons
to their brethren
in Asia and Phrygia**



The text of *The letter from the Christians of Lyons* is in Roman characters,
Eusebius of Caesarea's commentary is in italics.
To ease the reading, the publisher has added some under titles.

It is part of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*
(E.H.V. Prologue 1-4; chapters 1-4).

The historian Eusebius recounts...

PROLOGUE

Soter, bishop of the Church of Rome, died after an episcopate of eight years, and was succeeded by Eleutherius, the twelfth from the apostles. In the seventeenth year of the Emperor Antoninus Verus (Marcus Aurelius), persecution of our people was rekindled more fiercely in certain districts by the masses in the cities; and judging by the number in a single nation, myriads must have suffered martyrdom throughout the world. A record of this was written for posterity, and in truth it is worthy of perpetual remembrance. A full account, containing the most reliable information on the subject, is given in our Collection of Martyrdoms, which constitutes a narrative instructive as well as historical. I will repeat here such portions of this account as may be needful for the present purpose.

Other historians record victories in war and trophies won from enemies, the skill of generals and the manly bravery of soldiers, defiled with the blood of innumerable slaughters for the sake of their children, their country and their other interests. But our narrative of the government of God will record in ineffaceable letters the most peaceful wars waged in behalf of the peace of the soul, and will tell of men doing brave deeds for truth rather than for country, and for piety rather than for dearest friends. It



will hand down to imperishable remembrance the discipline and the much-tried fortitude of the athletes of religion, the trophies won from demons, the victories over invisible enemies, and the crowns placed upon their heads. The country in which the arena was prepared for them is Gaul, of which Lyons and Vienne are the principal and most celebrated cities. The Rhone passes through both of them, flowing in a broad stream through the entire region. The most celebrated churches in that country sent an account of the martyrs to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, relating in the following manner what was done among them. I will give their own words.

The servants of Christ residing at Vienne and Lyons, in Gaul, to their brothers throughout Asia and Phrygia, who hold the same faith and hope of redemption, peace and grace and glory from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

THE ATTACK COMES FROM THE PEOPLE



26

Then, after relating some other matters, they begin their account in this manner:

The greatness of the persecution in this region, the fury of the pagans against the Christians, and the sufferings of the blessed martyrs we cannot recount accurately, nor indeed could they possibly be recorded. For with all his might the Adversary fell upon us, giving us a foretaste of his unbridled activity at his future coming. He endeavored in every manner to prepare and exercise his people against the servants of God, not only shutting us out from houses and baths and forum¹, but forbidding any of us to be seen in any place whatever.

But the grace of God led the conflict against him, and protected the weak, and set firm pillars, able through patience to endure all the attacks of the Evil One. They joined battle with him, undergoing all kinds of shame and injury; and regarding their great sufferings as little, they hastened to Christ, manifesting truly that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us.”²

1. The forum: in Roman cities, the central square where principal monuments are located. In Lyons, it was at the Fourvière square.

2. Romans 8,18.

First of all, they endured nobly the injuries heaped upon them by the mob; shouts and blows and draggings and robberies and stonings and imprisonments, and all things which an infuriated crowd delights in inflicting on enemies and adversaries. Then, being taken to the forum by the tribune and the authorities of the city, they were examined in the presence of the whole multitude, and having confessed³, they were imprisoned until the arrival of the governor. When, afterwards, they were brought before him, he treated us with his usual cruelty.

AN INFLUENTIAL CHRISTIAN DEFENDS HIS OWN

Vettius Epagathus, one of the brothers, a man filled with love for God and for his neighbor, intervened. His life was so consistent that, although young, he had attained a reputation equal to that of the elder Zacharias: for he “walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord without blame,”⁴ and was untiring in good work for his neighbors, zealous for God and fervent in spirit. Such being his character, he could not endure the unreasonable judgment against us, but was filled with indignation, and asked to be permitted to testify in behalf of his brothers, that there is among us nothing ungodly or impious.

But those near the tribunal cried out against him, for he was a man of distinction; and the governor refused to grant his just request, but merely asked if he also was a Christian. And he, confessing this with a loud voice, himself shared the fate of the martyrs, being called advocate of the Christians, but having the Advocate in himself, the Holy Spirit, more abundantly than Zacharias. He showed this by the fullness of his love, being well pleased even to risk his own life in defense of his brothers. For he was and is a true disciple of Christ, “following the Lamb wherever he goes”.



3. The words “to confess” and “confession”, used here, do not all have in the texts of Christian antiquity, the sense which Catholics give to them today. They designate the confession of faith made by persecuted Christians when brought before tribunals. This confession, which was often a courageous proclamation of their belonging to Christ—as we will see further—earned them the title of “confessor”.

4. Cf. Luke 1,6.

CERTAIN CHRISTIANS WERE NOT READY

Then the others were divided, and the first martyrs were manifestly ready, and finished their confession with all eagerness. But some appeared unprepared and untrained, weak as yet, and unable to endure so great a conflict. Ten of these encountered defeat, causing us great grief and sorrow beyond measure, and impairing the zeal of the others who had not yet been seized, but who, though suffering all kinds of affliction, remained constantly with the martyrs and did not forsake them. Then all of us were greatly afraid because of our uncertainty as to their confession, not because we dreaded the sufferings to be endured, but because we looked to the end, and were afraid that some of them might fall away.⁵

THE ARRESTS MULTIPLY

But those who were worthy were seized day by day, filling up the number of martyrs, so that all the zealous people, and those through whom especially our affairs had been established, were collected from the two churches.



28

Some of our pagan servants were also arrested, since the governor had commanded that all of us should be examined. These, being ensnared by Satan, and fearing for themselves the tortures which they beheld the saints endure, being urged on by the soldiers, accused us falsely of Thyestean banquets and Œdipodean intercourse⁶, and of deeds which are not only unlawful for us to speak of or to think, but which we cannot believe were ever done by men. When these accusations were reported, all the people raged like wild beasts against us, so that even if any had before been moderate on account of their familiarity with us, they were now furious and gnashed their teeth against us. And that which was spoken by our Lord was fulfilled: "The time will come when whoever kills you will think that he serves God."⁷

5. Cf. Revelation 14,4.

6. Thyestes and Oedipus, characters from Greek mythology. The first ate his children and the second, without knowing it, killed his father and married his mother.

7. John 16,2.

BLANDINE, A WOMAN UNDERGOING TORTURE

Then the holy martyrs endured sufferings beyond description, Satan striving earnestly that also some of them might utter blasphemies. But the whole wrath of the populace, the governor, and the soldiers was aroused against Sanctus, the deacon from Vienne, against Maturus, a recent convert but a courageous athlete, against Attalus, a native of Pergamon who had always been a pillar and foundation for us here, and against Blandine, through whom Christ showed that things which appear mean, obscure and despicable to men are with God of great glory, because of love of Him manifested in power to act, and not in boasting. For while we all trembled, as did her earthly mistress, who was herself also one of the martyrs, fearing that on account of the weakness of her body she would be unable to make her confession with self-assurance, Blandine was filled with such power as to exhaust and defeat those who took turns at torturing her in every manner from morning till dusk, that they acknowledged they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. They were astonished at her endurance, since her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings. But the blessed woman, like a brave athlete, renewed her strength in her confession; and her comfort and recreation and relief from the pain of her sufferings was in exclaiming: "I am a Christian, and there in us there is no evil."



A DEACON FROM VIENNE BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL

But Sanctus also endured marvelously and superhumanly all the outrages which he suffered. While the wicked men hoped by the continuing severity of their tortures to wring something from him which he ought not to say, he girded himself against them with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, nor the nation or city to which he belonged, nor whether he was slave or free, but answered in Latin all their questions: "I am a Christian." He confessed this instead of name and city and race and everything besides, and the pagans heard from him no other word.

8. Cf. John 7,38.

Then there arose on the part of the governor and his tormentors a great desire to conquer him, but having nothing more that they could do, they finally fastened red-hot iron to the most tender parts of his body. And these indeed were burned, but Sanctus continued unbending and unyielding, firm in his confession, refreshed and strengthened by the heavenly fountain of the water of life flowing from Christ⁹. And his poor body was a testimony to his sufferings, being one complete wound and bruise, without shape, altogether unlike a human form. Christ, suffering in him, manifested his glory, delivering him from the Adversary and making him an example for the others, showing that nothing is fearful where there is the love of the Father, and nothing painful where there is the glory of Christ.

For the wicked men tortured him again after some days, supposing that with his body swollen and inflamed to such a degree he could not bear the touch of a hand, and that if they should again apply the same instruments, they would overcome him, or at least that by his death under torture others would become afraid. Not only did this not occur, but, contrary to all human expectations, his body arose and stood erect in the midst of the subsequent torments, and resumed its original appearance and the use of its limbs, so that, through the grace of Christ, these second sufferings became to him, not torture, but healing.



BIBLIS HAD DENIED...

But the Devil, thinking that he had already devoured Biblis,⁹ who was one of those who had denied Christ, desiring to increase her condemnation through the utterance of blasphemy, brought her again to the torture, to compel her, as already feeble and weak, to report impious things about us. But she came to herself under torture, and as if awaking from a deep sleep, and reminded by her present pain of the eternal punishment in Hell, she contradicted the blasphemers. "How," she said, "could those people eat children, who do not think it

9. "Devoured" (and cf. further, "to return still alive to the beast those it thought it had devoured"): one sees, in certain sculptures of the Middle Ages, the Devil represented as a monster that devours in his throat the damned, just as the whale swallowed Jonas who was unfaithful to the mission which God had given to him.

lawful to taste the blood even of animals bereft of reason?"¹⁰ Thereafter she confessed that she was Christian, and shared the fate of the martyrs.

MANY DIE IN PRISON

But since the tortures of the executioners were rendered vain by Christ through the fortitude of the martyrs, the Devil invented other contrivances, confinement in the darkest and most loathsome parts of the prison, stretching the legs to the fifth hole in the stocks,¹¹ and the other outrages which his servants are accustomed to inflict upon prisoners when furious and, as now, possessed by the Devil. Most of them were suffocated in prison, being chosen by the Lord for this manner of death, that he might thus manifest in them his glory. The first to be imprisoned, though they had been tortured so cruelly that it seemed impossible for them to live even with the most careful nursing, yet, destitute of human attention in the prison, being strengthened by the Lord and invigorated in both body and soul, they exhorted and encouraged the rest. But those who had been arrested later and were not yet accustomed to torture, were unable to endure the severity of their confinement, and died in prison.



THE BISHOP WAS AMONG THEM

The blessed Pothinus, who had been entrusted with the bishopric of Lyons, was dragged to the tribunal. He was more than ninety years old and very infirm, scarcely indeed able to breathe because of his weakness; but he was strengthened by spiritual zeal through his earnest desire for martyrdom. Though his body was worn out by old age and disease, his spirit was preserved so that Christ might triumph in it. When he was brought by the soldiers to the tribunal, accompanied by the magistrates and a multitude who shouted against him in every manner as if he were Christ himself, he bore noble witness.

10. Cf. Acts 15, 29. The first Christian communities still observed this prescription, of Jewish origin.

11. A kind of piece of wood pierced by nails at regular intervals, where the feet of prisoners were bound. One could thus gradually quarter them until death ensued.

Asked by the governor: Who is the God of the Christians?, he replied: "If you are worthy, you will know." Then he was dragged away harshly, and received blows of every kind. Those near him struck him with their hands and feet, regardless of his age; and those at a distance hurled at him whatever they could seize, all of them thinking that they would be guilty of great wickedness and impiety if any possible abuse were omitted. For thus they thought to avenge their own deities. Scarcely able to breathe, he was cast into prison and died after two days.

THE RENEGADES ARE NOT SPARED

Then a great dispensation of God occurred, and the compassion of Jesus appeared beyond measure, in a manner rarely seen among the brotherhood, as befitted the grace of Christ. For those who had recanted at their first arrest were imprisoned with the others and shared their sufferings, so that their denial was of no profit to them even for the present. But those who had confessed were simply imprisoned as Christians, no further accusation being brought against them. The first were treated as murderers and criminals, and were considered twice as guilty as the others. The joy of martyrdom, and hope in the promises, and love for Christ, and the Spirit of the Father supported the latter; but their consciences so greatly distressed the former that they were easily distinguishable from all the rest by their very countenances when they were led forth. For the ones went out rejoicing, glory and grace being blended in their faces, so that even their bonds resembled beautiful ornaments, like those of a bride adorned in embroidered garments with golden fringes; and they were perfumed with the sweet scent of Christ,¹² so that some supposed they had been anointed with earthly perfume. But the others were downcast, dejected and covered with disgrace, insulted by the pagans for being cowardly and weak, accused of murder, having lost the honorable and glorious and life-giving Name. The rest, beholding this, were strengthened, and when arrested they confessed without hesitation, paying no attention to the wiles of the Devil.



12. Cf. 2 Corinthians 2,15

After giving certain other details, the letter continues:

After these events, their martyrdom took many forms. Plaiting a wreath of varied colors and different sorts of flowers, they presented it to their Father. It was proper that the noble athletes, having endured manifold combat and conquered greatly, should receive the crown, great and incorruptible.

FIRST CONDEMNATIONS TO DEATH IN THE AMPHITHEATRE

Maturus, Sanctus, Blandine and Attalus were led to the amphitheatre¹³ to be given over to the beasts and provide the public with a spectacle of pagan cruelty during the day appointed for combat against wild animals. Maturus and Sanctus passed again through every torment in the amphitheatre, as if they had suffered nothing before, or rather, as if, having already conquered their antagonist in many contests, they were now striving for the crown itself. They endured again the customary running of the gauntlet and the violence of the beasts, and everything which the furious crowd called for or desired, and at last the iron chair on which their bodies were consumed in a cloud of smoke.



33

Not with this did the persecutors cease, but increased yet more their anger, determined to overcome their endurance. But even thus they did not hear a word from Sanctus, except the confession which he had uttered from the beginning. Since Maturus and Sanctus survived their long combat they were at last sacrificed, after taking the place of different sorts of gladiators¹⁴ in single combat, and offered themselves as a spectacle to the public.

But Blandine was suspended from a stake, to be devoured by the beasts who were to attack her. Because she appeared as if hanging on a cross, and because of her earnest prayers, she inspired the combatants with great zeal: for they looked upon her in their combat, and beheld with their human eyes, in the form of their sister, Him who was crucified for them

13. This is text of the dedication which was found: "(To the health of) Tiberius Caesar Augustus, this amphitheatre with its podium was constructed with funds from C. Julius Rufus, son of Caius, priest of Rome and of Augustus, and from his son, of the tribe of the Santons".

14. Those that, in the games of the amphitheatre, fought armed battles against wild beasts.

to persuade those who believe in Him, that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ is always in communion with the living God. As none of the beasts touched her then, she was taken down from the stake and cast again into prison. Thus she was preserved for another contest, so that, being victorious in more conflicts, she might make irrevocable the condemnation of the faithless Serpent; and that, though small, weak and despised, yet clothed with Christ the mighty and conquering Athlete, she might arouse the brothers' zeal and, overcoming the Adversary many times, might receive through her combat the crown incorruptible. But Attalus was called for loudly by the people, because he was a person of distinction. He entered the arena like a wrestler trained in the Christian faith, as he had always practiced the veritable discipline of Christ and born witness to the truth among us. He was led around the amphitheatre, a tablet being carried before him on which was written in Latin: "This is Attalus the Christian," and the people were filled with indignation against him. But when the governor learned that he was a Roman citizen, he commanded him to be taken back to prison with the others.



THE GOVERNOR CONSULTS EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS

Concerning the others he had written to Caesar, whose answer he was awaiting. But the intervening time was not wasted nor fruitless to them; for by their fortitude the measureless compassion of Christ was manifested. Through their life the dead were made alive, and the martyrs shared their grace with those who had failed to bear witness. The Virgin Mother rejoiced in receiving alive those whom She had brought forth dead.¹⁵ Through their influence, many who had abjured came to themselves and were reborn and rekindled with life. They learned to confess and, once again alive and vigorous, they returned to the tribunal to be again interrogated by the governor. God, who desires not the death of the sinner but facilitates his conversion, treated them with kindness.

15. This parallel between the Virgin Mary and the Church is not rare in Christian antiquity: in that era, Clement of Alexandria, after having recalled the virgin birth of Christ, wrote this: "There is one Father of the universe, one Word of the universe, and also one Holy Spirit, everywhere identical; there is also but one virgin become a mother and I like to call her the Church" (Pedagogue 1, 42, S.C. 70, p. 187).

DURING THE DAYS OF THE GREAT FEAST

Caesar commanded that the Christians should be put to death, but that those who abjured should be set free. Therefore, at the beginning of the public festival which was attended by crowds of men from all of Gaul,¹⁶ the governor brought the martyrs to his tribunal, to make a show of them and a spectacle for the crowd. He examined them again, and had those beheaded who appeared to possess Roman citizenship, but sent the others to the beasts. Christ was glorified greatly in those who had formerly denied him, for, contrary to the expectation of the pagans, they now confessed. For they were examined by themselves, as about to be set free; but when they confessed their faith, they increased the number of the martyrs. Those who remained outside were those who had never possessed a shadow of faith, nor any experience of the wedding garment (Baptism), nor any fear of God; but, as sons of perdition,¹⁷ they blasphemed the Way through their apostasy. But all the others joined the Church.



ALEXANDER AND ATTALUS IN THE ARENA

While they were being examined, a certain Alexander, Phrygian by birth and physician by profession, who had resided in Gaul for many years, and who was well known to all on account of his love of God and the freedom of his speech (for he partook in apostolic grace), standing near the tribunal and by signs encouraging them to confess, appeared to those standing by as if in travail. The people were angry that those who had earlier abjured, now confessed their faith. They cried out against Alexander as if he were the cause of this. The governor summoned him and inquired who he was. When he answered that he was a Christian, in anger the governor condemned him to the beasts.

On the next day he entered the arena beside Attalus; for to please the crowd, the governor had ordered Attalus again to the beasts. They were both tortured in the amphitheatre

16. This solemn feast is well known: it is the celebration of the cult of the emperor and of the goddess Rome by the delegates of the three Gauls (provinces of Aquitaine, Lyons, and Belgium). It was in effect the most important feast of all of Gaul (with the exception of Narbonne, and also the Germanys). The suffering of Christians will gain, by this fact, a considerable renown.

17. Cf. John 17,12.

with all the instruments contrived for that purpose, and having endured great combat, were at last sacrificed. Alexander neither groaned nor murmured in any manner, but communed in his heart with God. But when Attalus was placed on the iron seat, and his body burned on all sides, he said to the people in Latin: "Is this eating human flesh? Is this what you do? We do not devour men, nor do any other wicked thing." And when he was asked the name of God, he replied: "God does not have a name like those of men."

BLANDINE'S LAST COMBAT

After all this, on the last day of the single contests Blandine was again brought in with Ponticus, a boy about fifteen years old. They had been brought every day to witness the sufferings of the others, and had been urged to swear by the idols. But because they remained steadfast, the multitude became furious and had no compassion for the youth of the boy, nor respect for the woman.



36

Therefore they took them through the entire round of tortures, repeatedly urging them, one after the other, to abjure, but being unable to effect this; for Ponticus, encouraged by his sister so that even the pagans could see that she was confirming and strengthening him, having nobly endured every torture, gave up the ghost. But the blessed Blandine, last of all, having, as a noble mother¹⁸, encouraged her children and sent them before her victorious to the King, endured herself all the combats undertaken by her children and hastened after them, glad and rejoicing in her departure as if called to a marriage feast and not to the beasts. After the scourging, after the beasts, after the roasting seat, she was finally enclosed in a net and thrown to a bull. Being tossed about by the animal, but feeling none of the things which were happening to her because of her hope and firm hold upon her faith and her communion with Christ, she also was sacrificed. The pagans themselves confessed that never among them had a woman endured such tortures.

18. Cf. 2 Maccabees 7,21 s.

THE MARTYRS' ASHES IN THE WATERS OF THE RIVER

But not even then were their madness and cruelty toward the saints satisfied. Incited by the Beast, those wild and barbarous tribes were not easily appeased, and their violence found another opportunity in the bodies of their victims. To be vanquished did not put them to shame, since they lacked all human feeling; on the contrary, this kindled their anger yet more, like that of a wild beast, and aroused the hatred of governor and people alike to treat us unjustly, so that Scripture might be fulfilled: "He who is lawless, let him be yet more lawless, and he who is righteous, yet more righteous."¹⁹ They cast to the dogs those who had died of suffocation in the prison, carefully guarding them night and day, lest we should bury any of them. And they exposed without burial the remains left by the beasts and the fire, mangled and charred, and the heads and bodies of those who had been decapitated, and soldiers guarded them for many days.

Some raged and gnashed their teeth against the martyrs, desiring to execute upon them some additional vengeance; others laughed and mocked them, magnifying their own idols, to whom they imputed the punishment of the Christians. Even the more reasonable, and those who seemed to sympathize somewhat, still criticized the martyrs vehemently, saying: "Where is their God, and what has their religion, which they have chosen rather than life, profited them?" Such were the different attitudes of the pagans; but we were in deep affliction, because we could not bury the bodies. Neither did night avail to us, nor did money persuade the soldiers, nor entreaty move them to compassion; they kept watch in every way, as if prevention of burial would be of some great advantage to them.

Further on the letter states, after some other matters:

The bodies of the martyrs, thus exposed in different manners for six days to serve as an example, were then burned and reduced to ashes and swept into the Rhone by the wicked



19. Cf. Revelation 22,11.

men, so that no trace of them might remain on earth. And this they did, as if able to conquer God, and prevent their rebirth; "in order that," as they said, "they may have no hope of a resurrection, by trust in which they bring to us this new foreign religion, and despise terrible things, and are ready even to go to death with joy. Now let us see if they will rise again, and if their God is able to help them and deliver them out of our hands."

Such things happened to the churches of Christ under this emperor, from which we may reasonably conjecture what occurred in the other provinces. It is proper to add other selections from the same letter, in which the moderation and compassion of these martyrs is recorded in the following words:

THEY RESERVED TO CHRIST THE TITLE OF MARTYR



38

They were also zealous in their imitation of Christ, "who, being divine, counted it not a prize to be equal to God,"²⁰ so that, though they had attained such honor, and had borne witness, not once or twice, but many times, being returned to prison from the beasts, covered with burns and scars and wounds, yet they did not proclaim themselves martyrs, nor did they allow us to address them by this name. If any one of us, in letter or in conversation, spoke of them as martyrs, they rebuked him sharply. For they conceded willingly the appellation of martyr to Christ "the faithful and true Witness," "firstborn of the dead" and dispenser of the life of God.²¹

They reminded us of the martyrs who had already departed, and said, "Those are martyrs whom Christ deemed worthy to be taken up in their confession, sealing their testimony by their departure; but we are lowly and humble confessors." They beseeched their brothers with tears, that earnest prayers be offered that they might reach their goal.

They showed in their deeds the power of their testimony, manifesting great boldness towards the pagans, and they made plain their nobility through patience, fearlessness and courage,

20. Philippians 2,6.

21. Cf. Revelation 1,5,3 ; 3,14 and Acts 3,15.

but they refused the title of martyrs as distinguishing them from their brothers, being filled with the fear of God.

THEY DEPARTED IN JOY AND PEACE

A little further on, the letter states:

They humbled themselves under the mighty hand²² by which they are now greatly exalted. They defended all, but accused none. They absolved all, but bound none. They prayed for those who inflicted cruelties upon them, just as did Stephen, the perfect martyr: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."²³ But if he prayed for those who stoned him, how much more for his brothers!

Again, after mentioning other matters, the letter states:

Moved by veritable charity, their greatest contest was against the Adversary, to stifle the Beast and make him cast out alive those whom he supposed he had swallowed. For they did not boast over the fallen, but helped them in their need with those things in which they themselves abounded, showing the compassion of a mother, and shedding many tears on their account before the Father. They asked Him for life, and He gave it to them, and they shared it with their neighbors. Victorious in every fashion, they departed to God. Having always loved peace, and having commended peace to us, they went in peace to God, leaving no sorrow to their mother the Church, nor division or strife to their brothers, but joy, peace, concord and love.

This record of the affection shown by those blessed martyrs towards their brothers who had fallen may be profitably kept before us on account of the inhuman and unmerciful disposition of those who, after these events, acted unsparingly toward the members of Christ.

ALCIBIADES

The same letter of the abovementioned Witnesses contains another account worthy of remembrance. No one will object to our



22. Cf. 1 Peter 5,6.

23. Acts 7,60.

bringing it to the knowledge of our readers. It runs as follows:

For a certain Alcibiades, who was one of them, led a very austere life, partaking of nothing whatever but bread and water. When he endeavored to continue this same sort of life in prison, it was revealed to Attalus after his first conflict in the amphitheatre that Alcibiades was not doing well in refusing the creatures of God and placing a stumbling-block before others. And Alcibiades obeyed; and partook of all things without restraint, giving thanks to God. For they were not deprived of the grace of God, but the Holy Ghost was their counselor.

“Let this suffice for these matters. The followers of Montanus, Alcibiades and Theodotus in Phrygia were now first giving wide circulation to their assumption in regard to prophecy.

For the many other miracles that, through the gift of God, were still wrought in the different churches caused their prophesying to be readily credited by many.



40

As dissension arose concerning them, the brethren in Gaul set forth their own prudent and most orthodox judgment in the matter, and published also several epistles from the Witnesses that had been put to death among them. These they sent, while they were still in prison, to the brethren throughout Asia and Phrygia, and also to Eleutherius, who was then bishop of Rome, negotiating for the peace of the churches.²⁴

LETTER OF THE MARTYRS RECOMMENDING IRENAEUS

The same Witnesses also recommended Irenaeus, who was already at that time a presbyter of the parish of Lyons, to the above-mentioned bishop of Rome, saying many favorable things in regard to him, as the following extract shows:

“We pray, father Eleutherius, that you may rejoice in God in all

24. Montanism is a heresy born in Phrygia, a heavily Christian part of Asia Minor. Montanus claimed to have special revelations concerning the proximity of the end of time and advocated a severe asceticism in order to prepare the faithful. He created a new Church, which opposed the existing Church. This heresy troubled Christians well beyond Asia Minor, all the way to Rome. The confessors of Lyons give their opinions, for they have a particular spiritual authority of which they are well aware, as is shown by their note in favor of Irenaeus.

things and always. We have requested our brother and comrade Irenaeus to carry this letter to you, and we ask you to hold him in esteem, as zealous for the covenant of Christ. For if we thought that office could confer righteousness upon any one, we should commend him among the first as a presbyter of the church, which is his position.

“Why should we transcribe the catalogue of the Witnesses given in the letter already mentioned, of whom some were beheaded, others cast to the wild beasts, and others fell asleep in prison, or give the number of confessors still surviving at that time?

For whoever desires can readily find the full account by consulting the letter itself, which, as I have said, is recorded in our Collection of Martyrdoms.²⁵

Such were the events which happened under Antoninus.



25. A version of the Latin adaptation of Rufinus, translator of Eusebius at the beginning of the 5th century, contains this list; as do the martyrology called Hieronymite and the *De gloria martyrum* of Gregory of Tours. The martyrology contains forty-eight names, but which do not necessarily correspond to forty-eight persons, for there may be for Christians who are Roman citizens double or even triple names. Those who died in the amphitheatre were distinguished from those who died in prison.



The Amphitheatre of the Three Gauls

The letter of the survivors of the persecutions is certainly a wonderful expression of the hopes, fears and willingness for self-sacrifice emanating from the heart of the Christians in Lyons. There is, however, an aspect of this tragic event that the letter seems to consider as secondary, but which became so important during the following centuries that it provoked many controversies: namely, the location of the site where the martyrdom of the witnesses of Christ took place.

This research was first neglected in favor of what was considered essential: possession of the martyrs' relics. The letter nevertheless mentions the fact that the ashes of the martyrs had been thrown into the river Rhône "so that there would remain no trace of them on earth." In all good faith, some ashes washed up by the river on the shore of Ainay, downhill from the place of cremation, were devoutly collected as being those of the martyrs. They were distributed between three churches: the basilica of Ainay, the church of Saint Irenaeus where lay the body of the most famous witness of the tragedy, and the church of Saint Nizier (a mausoleum for the successors of Pothinus, the first martyr of Lyons).

This latter church was particularly dear to the people of Lyons, who until 1400 annually commemorated the miraculous



finding of the ashes with a festive celebration of water, known as the *Feast of Wonders*, which used to end with the singing of psalms under the bridge over the Saône in front of Saint Nizier.

The day came when it was realized that the martyrdom of the Christians had taken place where, according to the Letter, the delegates of the Gallic nations gathered in early August: in the imperial sanctuary of Rome and Augustus on the slope of the hill of the Croix-Rousse, above the confluence of the river Saône with the Rhône. Concerning this identification there remained no room for doubt in 1528. At that time a middle-class citizen of Lyon discovered here the surprising Claudian Tablet comprising the inscription on bronze of the speech of the emperor Claudius, born at Lyons, in favor of granting Roman citizenship to the Gauls. Near some walls in ruins could be seen the remains of an oval building, which were considered without hesitation to be “the Roman amphitheatre” until they were destroyed during the French Revolution as “signs of feudalism.”



At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Artaud, the first local archeologist, began to clear this edifice. Unfortunately, the work had to be stopped because of a powerful inflow of water that was supposed to come from an aqueduct. As a result, Artaud was convinced that the site had been an artificial lake exclusively designed for naval battle shows. This was only an unfortunate conjecture, since he had discovered blocks bearing the names of Gallic nations, which revealed the federal purpose of the edifice. The topic of the amphitheatre had to be raised again. As a result, other mistaken hypotheses were put forward.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, therefore, the connection between the site of the amphitheatre and the Croix-Rousse was forgotten. At the end of the century its location was thought to be at Fourvière. Professor Lafon, after observing the concavity of a garden that he owned on the hill, came to the unfortunate conclusion that he had found the precise spot of the martyrdom. This hypothesis became public opinion.

The search for the remains of what was supposed at that time to be the amphitheatre went on in the nearby Convent of Compassion. The superior, Mother Rivet, was quite excited by the thought that Christians had suffered at that very place, and she did her best, with the help of some sisters and a workman, to excavate the ground that she believed to have been fertilized by the blood of the martyrs. World War II put an end to her work, and brought her death in an extermination camp.

Meanwhile, from 1933 onwards, the local authorities were looking for the amphitheatre at Lafon's site. Soon afterwards they went to the area of the convent of Compassion, which gave the archeologists of Lyon an extensive area to explore.

Their enthusiasm, however, did not last very long. After clearing the steps, they expected to find the high platform surrounding the arena of the amphitheatre. Unfortunately, after only a few months, it became clear that it was not the sand of the arena which spread before them, but the marble floor of the orchestra of a theatre. Undoubtedly the ensuing excavation resulted in discovering a wonderful set of ancient buildings. However, regarding the amphitheatre, the question remained entire. It was necessary to return to the site of the Croix-Rousse.

A first series of probes on this spot proved unlucky. The search was limited due to shortage of funds, and restricted to the narrow pathways of the Botanical Garden. No ancient remains were discovered. After long preparations, a second series of excavations started in 1957 thanks to substantial financial support. At the moment the pickaxe first hit the ground, the platform around the arena came to light. It became possible to locate the ellipse of the arena after digging up the wall at various points. In the meantime, the search was held up by the well-known inflow gushing from the ground. This unfortunate event nevertheless ensured continuation of the search.

These springs had proven to be the cause of much suffering for over half a century. Therefore the city of Lyons, in fear of this danger, undertook to collect the water underground. A deep trench was dug below the arena to divert the water

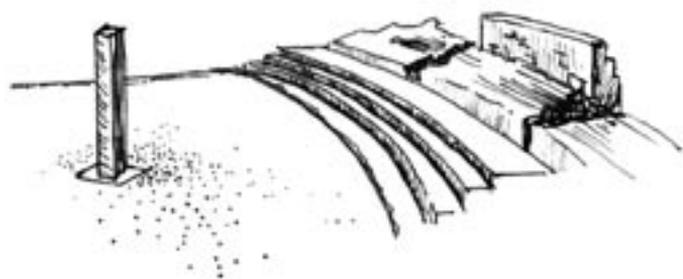


into the nearest drain. Thus in January 1958 (the first month of the two-thousandth anniversary of the city of Lyons), the workmen reached the bottom of an ancient well. Its opening was covered by two huge flagstones. On each of these impressive ancient letters could be read.

The two slabs (the text even called for a missing third one) were extracted at great expense. They carry the monumental inscription of the amphitheatre. Besides the name of the building itself, the text gives the name of the imperial priest who was responsible for its construction, and the date: year 19 of our era.

Now the problem was solved. There remained no obstacle in the way of clearing the edifice. Admittedly the work did not proceed without hitches. None the less, it is now possible to see the rather dilapidated remains of the amphitheatre where the martyrs gave their lives. Above all, we may now tread on the ground sprinkled with their blood.







ILLUSTRATIONS

Inside cover: Shrine of the Holy Martyrs, drawn by Pierre Bossan and made in 1856 by A. Favier and Mephews (crypt of Saint Irenaeus' Church, Lyon 5th ardt.).
Page 4: Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Page 48: Head of Jupiter.

EDITEUR

EGLISE A LYON
6, avenue Adolphe Max
69321 Lyon cedex 05

DIRECTEUR DE PUBLICATION

Père Vincent Feroldi

RÉDACTION

Amable Audin (†)
Mgr Philippe Barbarin
Jean-Noël Guinot
François Richard

ADMINISTRATION

EGLISE A LYON
Tél. 04 78 37 82 75

CRÉDIT PHOTOGRAPHIQUE

Loki Concept
Institut des Sources chrétiennes
Daniëlle Bouteaud
M. Creuzy

CRÉATION

LOKI CONCEPT
185, rue Jean Voillot
69100 Villeurbanne

IMPRESSION

Imprimerie Veluire

Inscrit à la Commission paritaire des publications et
agences de presse sous le n° 0904 G 51112

Dépôt légal imprimeur : 2ème trimestre 2005