

INTRODUCTION

In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox religious traditions, all people in heaven are considered to be saints. But some deserve special recognition for having lived lives of great holiness and virtue. These people are singled out and formally acknowledged for their 'heroic sanctity' – they are revered by the Church as having attained an honored place in heaven. They are a diverse group of people with varied and unusual stories. Their ranks include kings and queens, peasants, missionaries, ascetics, evangelists, theologians, workers, parents, children of all ages, nuns, priests, and 'everyday folks' who dedicated their lives to the loving pursuit of God. It also includes the martyrs and the slaves – people who put their faith and freedom above everything else.

In the 10th century, Pope John XV formalized a canonization process for the identification of saints. Before that time, saints were largely established by popular demand – when the degree of public arousal and adoration was high (spontaneous public attribution).¹ Today, there are more than 10,000 saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church alone, though the names and stories of many of these holy men and women have been lost to history.²

Among the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions, the number is very intractable since there is no fixed process of 'canonization', and each individual jurisdiction within the two Orthodox traditions independently maintains parallel lists of saints that have only partial overlap (the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican Communion, and various Lutheran churches venerate some saints unique to their own traditions). The Coptic church also preserves their own list of martyrs and saints. The number of saints that are honored in all the various Christian traditions is certainly greater than 10,000, but obtaining an exact count is basically impossible. Many are listed as

just members of a group and are nameless; and groups often have an inaccurate or exaggerated number of members. Other persons are duplicated under different names. Others have made-up names, and others have very little creditable evidence to support an actual life, rather than just pure myth. Curiously, Catholic lists of saints often also include angels and archangels (although only a small number). A comprehensive list of all saints is a massive undertaking, but a good start can be found online at Wikipedia, Catholic Online, and Britannica.³

In this book, the focus of interest is on female martyrs in the years prior to 313 AD, the year in which the Christians were guaranteed freedom to practice their religion by the Edict of Milan, under Roman emperor Constantine the Great. Of particular interest are the martyrs who were also slaves, the people at the very bottom of the social strata, whose stories are both tragic and sad, but illustrate their stamina and determination to win freedom. The virgin martyrs are also highlighted, as many of their stories are both heartbreaking and distressing, reflecting the norms of the time. They desired freedom from arranged marriages and imposed childbirth and child-rearing. Both the slave martyrs and the virgin martyrs were richly honored by the early church – their stories are touching and moving – their strength and courage were immeasurable – their faith unwavering – and they provided a bit of hope and solace to a fallen world.

The number of unmarried young women martyrs who have been personally identified as a slave is somewhere around 10, but there are many shades of gray here (e.g. distinction between servants and slaves, lovers and friends, will and circumstance, etc.), so the number is very imprecise. Furthermore, such members of large consolidated group martyrdoms are lost to examination. Very little is known about these forgotten heroes. Their quest for both spiritual and physical freedom was unimaginable to most people today. Marginalized, denigrated, and persecuted, they climbed the highest ladder of all.

They truly were of the greatest holiness and virtue, and deserve to be remembered and acknowledged for their 'heroic sanctity' by those of us still on our earthly journey.

ORGANIZATION

AFTER providing the background setting of historical persecution against Christians, particularly against women, slaves, and unmarried maidens, a more in-depth analysis is presented of just who the persecuted people really were – where they came from, what they did, and where they wanted to go. Following this are the stories of the exalted heroes – the martyrs – Blandina and Felicitas, the unmarried (virgins), the slaves, and the unmarried slaves. Stories of the lesser heroes are in the next chapter.⁴ Commentary and Appendices (containing detailed lists of names and data) complete the main content of the book.

The stories are based on historical records, but the exact degree of ultimate truth in each story is uncertain because of the uncertain veracity of the author of the accounts, and the manner (and integrity) of preservation (oral tradition, letter, document, etc.).⁵ Each story provides a first-hand accounting of events that actually transpired, resulting in severe persecution of Christians, and the martyrdom of one or more heroic figures.

The telling of the stories of Blandina, Felicitas, and the three sisters, Agape, Chionia, and Irene, are in the form of a letter to the religious faithful, by a person close to the action, but not sufficiently close so as to be lumped in with the persecuted group of believers. The letter-writer probably felt some shame in not being able to witness to the level of ultimate sacrifice, and that he had to hide himself under the cover of anonymity (since there was a real possibility that the letter would be intercepted and traced back to the originator – with a high likelihood of extreme repercussions – the writer had to know this, had reconciled himself to the possibility, and was prepared to face the consequences), but he was

sufficiently motivated out of love and compassion (both for the people involved and for the faith) to put pen-to-paper and send out a correspondence that the authorities would probably consider inflammatory.⁶

The three stories are at different points in time and at different geographic locations, so it was not the same letter-writer. In reality, each letter-writer was in a different circumstance with different motivations and different persuasions. In addition to the details of the event, the introductory paragraph of the letter would be different in each case based upon the time, place, mood, and background surroundings. However, to avoid a repetitive beginning to each chapter, the letter has been removed from the beginning of each. A generic letter has been created that is equally applicable to both stories, and improves the readability by removing repetitiveness of the chapter opening.

Therefore, the reader should view the three stories as a narrative (in the form of a letter) from a captivated bystander, of a real-life sequence of events, that has been written with the intent to make sure that others become aware of these events, and that they are never forgotten. It is a letter that tells a story from the heart – a story of unbelievable cruelty by men to their fellow human beings – but at the same time, a story of immense personal faith and fortitude by virtuous individuals, and their commitment to their faith under the most deplorable circumstances – a story that truly illustrates both the very worst and also the very best of qualities of the human condition.

SALUTATION AND OPENING OF A LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL

"To the bishops, deacons, presbyters, and devoted believers in the holy churches of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem; and to the faithful brothers and sisters in all the holy churches scattered throughout Asia, Macedonia, Palestine, Africa, Greece, and Italy:

From an anonymous and humbled servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, fearful of persecution and

saddened by the horrific events of the past few days, but determined to preserve the memories of our most holy saints, and to record the truth of what actually happened here unaltered by official reports or unofficial scurrilous slanders:

I write to you with heavy heart, but with conviction that the love of our most holy God and Lord Jesus Christ will overcome the evil that has tormented us, and that the wicked will be forgiven their sins and the heathen will be saved and baptized. I look forward to the day when all souls will live in harmony with God.

But today I am saddened beyond words. Although the path to salvation and resurrection is rocky, and there are many followers of the 'evil one' ready to cause hurt and despair, the Light of our Lord is still bright – and many good souls are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the faith, just as Jesus of Nazareth did. They will be glorified in heaven, but their names and lives should also be remembered here on earth. We must not forget them. As holy saints, they can help us in our quest for righteousness, and our hopes for eternal salvation, peace, and glory with God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Christ Jesus our Lord.

As such, the events that occurred here, and to which I now relate by my hand, along with the names of the holy souls who sacrificed everything in defense of our most sacred faith, must not be forgotten. The world needs to know and remember what happened here. May the martyrs rest in peace forever."

1 BACKGROUND SETTING

After the Resurrection and Ascension

Shortly after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the apostles Peter and John begin to openly preach the Good News to the Jews in Jerusalem, boldly and confidently. Their message?

The Almighty God of the Universe has ordained that the man from Nazareth named Jesus, who has been crucified on the hill of Golgotha,⁷ is in Truth the Lord and Messiah, as predicted by the prophets – and that through sincere belief in Him, repentant sins can be forgiven, and people can be resurrected from death and achieve everlasting life.

The Good News is that God has given us a new covenant, one that puts the old covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses, in a new perspective – one that is full of grace and provides real hope for all people.

On the day of Pentecost, following a riveting sermon by Peter, 3000 people are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The year is 33 AD.⁸ The ‘Christian’ movement – at first known as ‘The Way’⁹ – has started, although it is not until a few years later that the believers are first called ‘Christians’.¹⁰

In the following days, Peter and John testify to the crowds in the temple under Solomon’s Portico (Colonnade)¹¹ and heal a crippled beggar at the gate, converting many into believers and

disciples. In less than two months, through a combination of selected healing and earnest preaching, the ‘Christian’ movement grows to about 5000 men, not counting family members. And this growth spurt catches the attention of the 70-member Jewish governing council, known as the Sanhedrin, that had just recently tried Jesus and sentenced him to death through deft political maneuvering. But the ‘church’ of Jesus Christ has officially begun.¹²

The high priests of the temple, particularly the Sadducees,¹³ are annoyed and irritated by this growing movement. Identified as the chief agitators, Peter and John are briefly brought before the high council of the Sanhedrin, and subsequently are arrested and put in the public prison.¹⁴ When confronted face-to-face the next day, they exclaim:

*The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.*¹⁵

When the priests on the council hear this, they are disturbed and consider it the worst kind of blasphemy. They are so angry, that they want to kill the two apostles. But a respected Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel provides some relief by admonishing the apostles and then convincing the high priests that a stern warning, accompanied by a good flogging, would be sufficient to shut them up.

Of course, it doesn’t work. Every day thereafter, Peter, John, and all the apostles, continue to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah both in the temple and from house to house throughout

the city.

NOTES

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1. In 1969, Pope Paul VI created the 'Congregation for the Causes of Saints' to oversee and validate the canonization process. He also suppressed several older saints' veneration largely on the basis that the attributed acts, miracles, and even basic facts of their existence, could not be verified with any reasonable degree of certainty (however, people already under their patronage could continue to venerate them, but they would no longer appear on the Roman calendar, and no new parishes or other institutions could open under their name).
 2. The precise number of Catholic saints will always be debatable. Early Christian communities venerated hundreds of saints, but historical research by 17th- and 18th-century Catholic scholars determined that very few of these saints' stories were backed by solid historical evidence. Nevertheless, there have been thousands of canonizations in modern times. Pope John Paul II alone canonized 110 individuals, as well as many group canonizations such as 110 martyr saints of China, 103 Korean martyrs, 117 Vietnamese martyrs, the Mexican Martyrs, Spanish martyrs, and French revolutionary martyrs. On May 12, 2013 Pope Francis recognized another 802 saints – one from Colombia, one from Mexico, and 800 residents of Otranto in southern Italy, killed for refusing to convert to Islam after Ottoman Turks besieged their town in 1480 (The Martyrs of Otranto).
 3. Check out https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_saints; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronological_list_of_saints_and_blesseds; <http://www.gcatholic.org/saints/index.htm>; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-saints-2061264>.
 4. Please note that the lesser heroes are not 'lesser' in divine importance, nor even in earthly historical impact/importance. They just have ended up with reduced substantiating information, and lesser widespread dissemination, lobbying weight, and hype. The exalted heroes simply make for a better story. In reality, from the standpoint of salvation and everlasting life, whether icon or minion, all sincere saints and martyrs are equal in the eyes of God.
 5. In addition, certain literary license was invoked in order to dramatize the story for emotional effect, by both the historical author and the present author.
 6. Of course, this is not meant to imply that the letter-writer was male – it could just as readily have been a female writer.
 7. Golgotha means 'skull' in Hebrew. The native Roman Latin word is Calvary. People call the place 'skull' because it's the city's execution site outside the walls, it more-or-less looks like a skull, and it is near some local tombs.
 8. Jimmy Akin, National Catholic Register, 10 April 2020, <https://www.ncregister.com/>
 9. The Christians got this name for their religious movement because they believed that Jesus was the only way to the Father, as evidenced by when He said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6). Refer also to Acts 9:2 and Acts 11:26.
 10. The nickname 'Christian' (which may have originally been akin to an insult) started in Antioch, Syria, where Barnabas was pastor of a church of Greek and Hebrew Jews. Eventually, the new name stuck, and the former designation, believers in 'The Way', faded into obscurity.
 11. Solomon's Colonnade was a wall of the outer courtyard of the temple, where both Jews and non-Jews were allowed to congregate. It was covered with a cedar roof and stretched 300 yards long. This is where the very first Christians first met for worship.
 12. In actuality, the 'church' officially began with Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16:18, *And so I tell you Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and the forces of Hell will not prevail against it.*
 13. The Sadducees were mainly the priests and the social influential elite. They felt bound only to the laws of Moses, and not the hundreds of extra laws (detailed specifics) that the Pharisees had added. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were oppressively legalistic, insisting that all their added extra laws were just as important as the laws of Moses. The Sadducees believed in God, but rejected the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the existence of angels and spirits.
 14. During that night, Peter and John were freed by an angel of God, and instructed to continue preaching in the temple. This they did the very next morning, surprising the priests and council members who thought that they were incarcerated. Temple police were dispatched to round them up and bring them back into the council chambers, where they were interrogated by the high priest. See Acts 5:19-28.
 15. Acts 5:30-32