

# THE ROMAN PERSECUTIONS

## 1. The **LEGAL GROUNDS** for Christian persecutions:

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

## 2. The **MAJOR PERSECUTIONS**:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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