

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

The First 400 years

Special Topic

Persecution in the Early Church

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Historical Survey

Nero (54-68)

- Paul & Peter martyred

Domitian (81-96)

- Apostle John banished to Patmos (95)

Trajan (98-117)

- Christianity is officially “religio illicita”
- Ignatius of Antioch martyred in Rome (107)

Antonius Pius (138-161)

- Polycarp martyred in Smyrna (156)

Marcus Aurelius (161-180)

- Justin (Martyr) executed in Rome (166)
- Severe persecution in Lyons

Septimius Severus (193-211)

- Persecutions against new converts in Egypt and North Africa
- Leonides, Perpetua & Felicitas martyred

Persecution in the Early Church **“Empire Wide”**

Historical Survey

(relative peace for 40yrs—church grows)

Decius (249-251)

- Required yearly sacrifice (“libellus”)
- Many Christians lapse
- Fabian (Rome) executed; Origen imprisoned
- Cyprian (Carthage) went into hiding

Valerian (253-260)

- Orders the execution of church leaders—
Cyprian and Sixtus II (Rome) executed

Diocletian (284-305) (Galerius)

- “Great Persecution” (303-311)—goal is to exterminate Christianity from the empire
- many Christians lapse at first; many are martyred and tortured—most severe

Edict of Milan (313)—toleration of Christianity

Penance for Apostates?

What to do with Christians who lapsed?

Two Views

1. *Novatianism*: excommunicated for life;
 - no second repentance after baptism (sins incompatible with regeneration-Tertullian)
 - church is a pure bride; spiritually elite

2. *Traditional*: admitted all to penance
 - Admitted to penance but not fellowship of the church for some time; some only at point of death
 - Clergy were removed permanently from office

(this view prevailed)

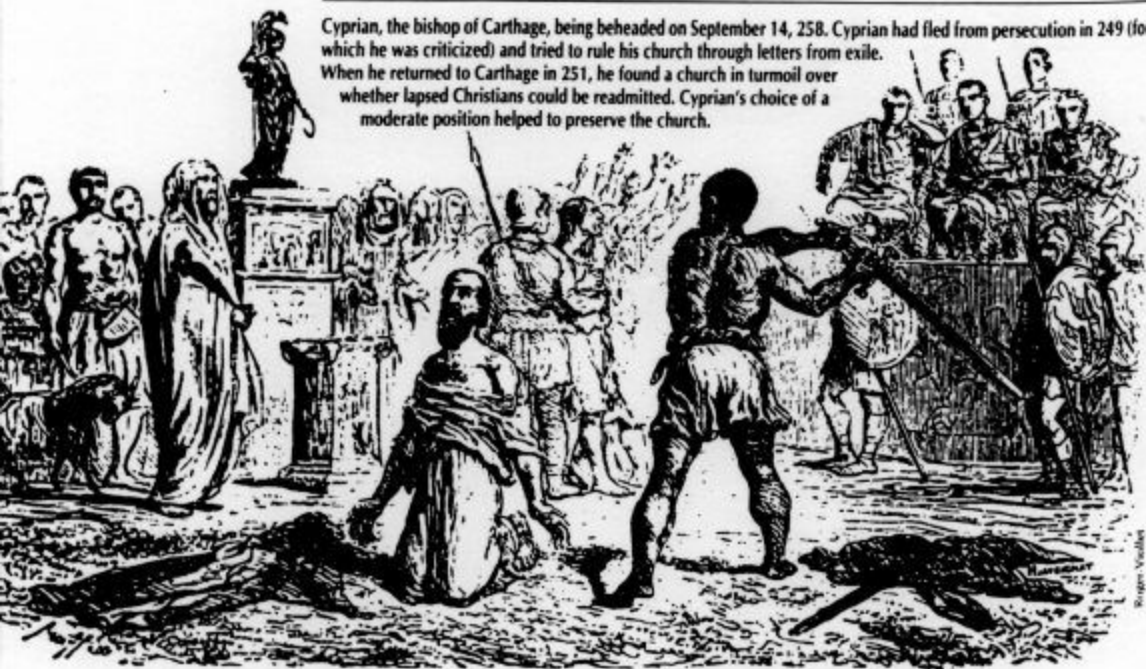
Resulted in church split: Novatian in Rome;
Meletius in Egypt; Donatus in North Africa



G. Dagli Orti

A young man is attacked by a voracious beast in this detail from a second-century floor mosaic. In Lyon (in modern France) in 177, the revered Blandina endured similar treatment.

Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, being beheaded on September 14, 258. Cyprian had fled from persecution in 249 (for which he was criticized) and tried to rule his church through letters from exile. When he returned to Carthage in 251, he found a church in turmoil over whether lapsed Christians could be readmitted. Cyprian's choice of a moderate position helped to preserve the church.





Roman soldiers seize the leader of a Christian service in the catacombs. The use of these subterranean burial chambers for secret Christian gatherings probably has been overmagnified. However, Roman law regarded cemeteries as sacrosanct, so in times of persecution Christians did worship in them. Under Emperor Valerian, however, believers were forbidden even to use their cemeteries. Thus, in 258, Pope Sixtus II was apprehended while leading a service in the Catacomb of Praetextatus. He and all seven of his deacons were killed.

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University of Michigan Library

A *libellus*, a certificate proving that a person had sacrificed to the gods, as ordered by emperor Decius (249–251). Some Christians sacrificed and received a *libellus*; others refused and were killed. Still others, however, bribed authorities to grant them a *libellus* without their actually having sacrificed.