



Eighteen hundred years ago, a cell group of Christians was arrested during the persecution of A.D. 202–203 that accompanied a brief stopover at Rome of the pugnacious Roman emperor Lucius Septimius Severus. At Antioch on January 1, 202, Severus had declared his son Bassianus (nicknamed “Caracalla,” or “greatcoat” for the military outfit he habitually wore) joint counsel with him and returned to Rome, only to set out for a trip to Africa in 203–04.

The leader of the cell group, twenty- to twenty-one-year-old Vibia Perpetua, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, had recently given birth and was still nursing her infant son. While awaiting execution, she and her catechetical teacher Saturus kept a record of their experiences. Perpetua recounted visits by her desperate pagan father, agony at the separation from her child and joy at his return, the intercession and support of other Christians, the visions she was afforded, and tremendous courage she and her companions displayed, shored up, as they were, with God's grace.

The diary was smuggled out of prison, copied, and distributed among the churches, and still is extant today in various collections, making it one of the earliest and most reliable first-person accounts of the courage of martyrs of the early church (my copy is Rosemary Rader's edition in Patricia Wilson-Kastner, et al., *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1981]). It is striking for the mildness of its language, lack of complaint or rhetoric against her persecutors, and absence of hysterics. Perpetua is revealed as a brave, pleasant, calm, mature individual whose concern is for the wellbeing of her family, encouragement of her friends, and absolute loyalty and outspoken devotion to her God. She is exactly the kind of person the emperor should have been valuing in his

empire. She is valiant, unassuming, realistic, and completely loyal to her convictions. She stands today as a paradigm of the kind of virtue that characterizes the most serious of our faith: generous to others and unswerving in her dedication to God.

Sadly, Severus chose his favorites poorly. His real enemy and the actual enemy of the state was not Perpetua and her fellow Christians; it was his own son Caracalla, his joint consul. Severus heaped titles on him and kept gracing him with the names of illustrious emperors, such as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Augustus. But this bestial individual, similar to a stock and self-caricatured villain in a silent movie, was both gross in appearance and in temperament. One of the most cruel and ruthless of emperors, his conduct so broke his father's heart on a joint campaign they waged in Britain against the Scots that we are told, “Worn out by sickness and broken in spirit by Caracalla's unfilial conduct,” Severus gave up and died.¹ On his deathbed, Severus is said to have encouraged his sons to live peacefully, invest in the military, and ignore everyone else. The brothers became joint rulers. But, Caracalla had his brother murdered in his mother's arms, accounted for the deaths of his father-in-law, wife, brother-in-law, and brother, and, by all indications, was “suspected of trying to hasten the end of his father.”² He was a busy young man. Finally, following the least valuable of his father's advice, he invested so heavily in the army, built so irresponsibly, and swaggered so much that he managed to alienate one of his own officers enough to get himself murdered while on campaign in the Near East in the eighth year of his rule.

Clearly, Septimius Severus would have done better if he had not had a model of virtue like Perpetua murdered in what amounts to a drive-by persecution but had, instead, wisely made her the official tutor of his son. She could have schooled this brute on godliness, filial loyalty, keeping one's wits in times of emergency, and true concern for his family and the country he

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ASSOCIATE EDITOR / GRAPHIC DESIGNER • Deb Beatty Mel

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122 West Franklin Avenue, Suite 218, Minneapolis, MN 55404-2451. For address changes and other information, phone: 612-872-6898;

fax: 612-872-6891; or e-mail: cbe@cbeinternational.org. CBE is on the Web at www.cbeinternational.org.

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ruled. In short, she might have made an outstanding emperor of him (or made an outstanding empress herself). As it was, he made a thoroughly lousy emperor—a standout embarrassment to his line. She, today, is an admired champion of Christ.

As an academic, I must note that I am constantly reading complaints heaped on the Emperor Constantine—a favorite target among revisionist historians who ignore the joy and respect of early church leaders like the historian Eusebius and the guardian of orthodoxy Athanasius who saw him as the deliverer of the church from persecution. Instead, we are counseled these days that Constantine ruined the church by wedding it to the state as an institution. He has also come into a bad reputation with the ninth commandment breaking calumnies of Dan Brown in his historical travesty *The Da Vinci Code*.

While, of course, there is merit to the argument the state co-opted the church, we also need, at the same time, to recognize the great service Constantine did in rescuing countless believers like Perpetua from senseless slaughter. While the blood of martyrs may be the fertilizer that nourished the church, since God's word never returns without effect (see Isa. 55:11), those contemporary Christians I keep hearing who shake their heads and lament, "Maybe we need another persecution here to clean up the church," have obviously never themselves suffered. They don't need a persecution. They need to get serious about their own faith, clear their heads of their own whining, take a serious look around at the plight of Christians suffering all around the globe, and get Constantinian in praying and acting for the present martyrs in Nigeria, the Sudan, Pakistan, Columbia—actually, all across the world.

The lesson all, particularly world government officials, should learn from the heroic story of Perpetua and the other valiant Christian leaders we encounter in this winter issue of *Priscilla Papers* should be to make the opposite choice of the foolish Severus. Perpetua, who with all the other children of the empire should have been regarded by the emperor as a daughter of his extended national family, should have been honored, and his own violent son Caracalla should have been thoroughly corrected and not irresponsibly empowered. Perpetua was concerned with caring for her child. Caracalla was occupied with murdering his family. Perpetua was devoted to God, who rewarded her with eternal life. Caracalla was dedicated to the army, one of whom murdered him. Perpetua exhibited all the refinement and virtue anyone would want to see developed in a daughter. Caracalla was a nightmare of a son. Christians are only placed in opposition to their nations when the rulers of those nations attempt to usurp the place of the Great God who rules over all. When rulers do not create the conflict, true Christians make the best and most loyal citizens any nation could want. Like Jesus their Lord, they dedicate themselves to doing good to others.

In this issue, we meet a number of dedicated Christian saints from the past. Andrea Lorenzo Molinari, president of Blessed

When rulers do not create the conflict, true Christians make the best and most loyal citizens any nation could want. Like Jesus their Lord, they dedicate themselves to doing good to others.

Edmund Rice School of Pastoral Ministry in Arcadia, Florida, who is the author of a delightful and painstakingly researched novel on Perpetua, which is also reviewed in this issue, leads off with an edifying survey of Perpetua's spiritual sisters, other women martyrs in the early church. Next, Kristin Johnson, executive director of OneByOne, which is also Florida-based, revisits the first great Christian woman, Jesus' mother Mary, and examines how her image fared in the Middle Ages. Charlotte, North Carolina-based Whit Trumbull next takes an intriguing

look at the inner conflict about implementing equality in the thinking of Pope Gregory. Then, we take a look at two controversial saints: Julian of Norwich by Washington, D.C.-based Anne Clift Boris and St. Margaret by Bridget Nichols of the Diocese of Ely in England. Finally, Jennifer Stewart, who is based in Lithuania, contributes a wonderful poem on the controversial warrior saint, Joan of Arc. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary senior professor of New Testament, Aída Besançon Spencer, completes the issue with a careful review of Dr. Molinari's novel on Perpetua. The beautiful cover illustration from the novel was graciously provided by the artist Tyler J. Walpole and President Molinari.

Our hope for this issue is that readers will be encouraged by the examples of these dedicated saints of our history so that we might emulate the best of their thoughts and actions and disregard the rest. At the same time, as we review the heartrending record of what they underwent in their dedication to bringing in Christ's rule, let us feel gratitude for the vast and heroic record of the devotion of those who went before us to preserve and foster our Christian faith and be even more cognizant of our responsibility to do our part to promote that faith ourselves in our own spheres of influence, while at the same time working to ease the suffering of our fellow Christians undergoing persecution today.

Blessings,



Priscilla Papers editorial team members, from left to right, Deb Beatty Mel, William Spencer, and Aída Besançon Spencer.

Notes

1. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Severus."
2. *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 38th ed., s.v. "Caracalla."

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