

The Martyrdom Of Saint Perpetua And Saint Felicitas

And Their Companions

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A violent persecution being set on foot by the emperor Severus, in 202, it reached Africa the following year; when, by order of Minutius Timinianus, (or Firminianus,) five catechumens were apprehended at Carthage for the faith: namely, Revocatus, and his fellow-slave Felicitas, who was with child, and Saturninus, and Secundulus, and the Lady Vibia Perpetua. Felicitas was seven months gone with child; and Perpetua had an infant at her breast. Perpetua was of a good family, twenty-two years of age, and married to a person of quality in the city. She had a father, a mother, and two brothers living; the third, Dinocrates, died at about seven years old. These five martyrs were joined by Saturus, probably brother to Saturninus, and who seems to have been their instructor: he underwent a voluntary imprisonment, because he would not abandon them.

We are blessed to have historical accounts of their martyrdom, some of their last days being recorded in their own hand or by their immediate eye-witnesses.

The father of Saint Perpetua, who was a pagan, and advanced in years, loved her more than all his other children. Her mother was probably a Christian, as was one of her brothers, the other a catechumen. The martyrs were for some days before their commitment kept under a strong guard in a private house: and the account Perpetua gives of their sufferings to the eve of their death, is as follows:

“We were in the hands of our persecutors, when my father, out of the affection he bore me, made new efforts to shake my resolution.

“I said to him: ‘Can that vessel, which you see, change its name?’

“He said: ‘No.’

“I replied: ‘Nor can I call myself any other than I am, that is to say, a Christian.’

“At that word my father in a rage fell upon me, as if he would have pulled my eyes out, and beat me: but went away in confusion, seeing me invincible: after this, we enjoyed a little repose, and in that interval received baptism. The Holy Ghost, on our coming out of the water, inspired me to pray for nothing but patience under corporal pains. A few days after this, we were put into prison: I was shocked at the horror and darkness of the place, for till then I knew not what such sort of places were. We suffered much that day, chiefly on account of the great heat caused by the crowd, and the ill-treatment we met with from the soldiers.

“I was moreover tortured with concern, for that I had not my infant. But the deacons, Tertius and Pomponius, who assisted us, obtained, by money, that we might pass some hours in a more commodious part of the prison to refresh ourselves. My infant being brought to me almost

famished, I gave it the breast. I recommended him afterwards carefully to my mother, and encouraged my brother, but was much afflicted to see their concern for me. After a few days, my sorrow was changed into comfort, and my prison itself seemed agreeable.

“One day, my brother said to me: ‘Sister, I am persuaded that you are a peculiar favorite of Heaven: pray to God to reveal to you whether this imprisonment will end in martyrdom or not, and acquaint me of it.’ “I, knowing God gave me daily tokens of his goodness, answered, full of confidence, ‘I will inform you tomorrow.’

“I therefore asked that favor of God, and had this vision. I saw a golden ladder, which reached from earth to the heavens; but so narrow, that only one could mount it at a time. To the two sides were fastened all sorts of iron instruments, as swords, lances, hooks, and knives; so that if any one went up carelessly he was in great danger of having his flesh torn by those weapons. At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of an enormous size, who kept guard to turn back and terrify those that endeavored to mount it.

“The first that went up was Saturus, who was not apprehended with us, but voluntarily surrendered himself afterwards on our account: when he was got to the top of the ladder, he turned towards me and said: ‘Perpetua, I wait for you; but take care lest the dragon bite you.’ “I answered: ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me.’

“Then the dragon, as if afraid of me, gently lifted his head from under the ladder, and I, having got upon the first step, set my foot upon his head. Thus, I mounted to the top, and there I saw a garden of an immense space, and in the middle of it a tall man sitting down dressed like a shepherd, having white hair. He was milking his sheep, surrounded with many thousands of persons clad in white. He called me by my name, bid me welcome, and gave me some curds made of the milk, which he had drawn: I put my hands together and took and ate them; and all that were present said aloud, ‘Amen’. The noise awaked me, chewing something very sweet. As soon as I had related to my brother this vision, we both concluded that we should suffer death.

“After some days, a rumor being spread that we were to be examined, my father came from the city to the prison overwhelmed with grief: ‘Daughter,’ said he, ‘have pity on my gray hairs, have compassion on your father, if I yet deserve to be called your father; if I myself have brought you up to this age: if you consider that my extreme love of you, made me always prefer you to all your brothers, make me not a reproach to mankind. Have respect for your mother and your aunt; have compassion on your child that cannot survive you; lay aside this resolution, this obstinacy, lest you ruin us all: for not one of us will dare open his lips any more if any misfortune befall you.’

“He took me by the hands at the same time and kissed them; he threw himself at my feet in tears, and called me no longer daughter, but, my lady. I confess, I was pierced with sharp sorrow when I considered that my father was the only person of our family that would not rejoice at my martyrdom.

“I endeavored to comfort him, saying: ‘Father, grieve not; nothing will happen but what pleases God; for we are not at our own disposal.’ He then departed very much concerned.

“The next day, while we were at dinner, a person came all on a sudden to summon us to examination. The report of this was soon spread, and brought together a vast crowd of people into the audience-chamber. We were placed on a sort of scaffold before the judge, who was Hilarian, procurator of the province, the proconsul being lately dead. All who were interrogated before me confessed boldly Jesus Christ. When it came to my turn, my father instantly appeared with my

infant. He drew me a little aside, conjuring me in the most tender manner not to be insensible to the misery I should bring on that innocent creature to which I had given life. "The president Hilarian joined with my father, and said: 'What! will neither the gray hairs of a father you are going to make miserable, nor the tender innocence of a child, which your death will leave an orphan, move you? Sacrifice for the prosperity of the emperor.'

"I replied, 'I will not do it.'

"Next, 'Are you then a Christian?' said Hilarian.

"I answered: 'Yes, I am.'

"As my father attempted to draw me from the scaffold, Hilarian commanded him to be beaten off, and he had a blow given him with a stick, which I felt as much as if I had been struck myself; so much was I grieved to see my father thus treated in his old age. Then the judge pronounced our sentence, by which we were all condemned to be exposed to wild beasts. We then joyfully returned to our prison; and as my infant had been used to the breast, I immediately sent Pomponius, the deacon, to demand him of my father, who refused to send him. And God so ordered it that the child no longer required to suck, nor did my milk incommode me."

Secundulus, being no more mentioned, seems to have died in prison before this interrogatory. Before Hilarian pronounced sentence, he had caused Satorius, Saturninus, and Revocatus, to be scourged; and Perpetua and Felicitas to be beaten on the face. They were reserved for the shows, which were to be exhibited for the soldiers in the camp, on the festival of Geta, who had been made Caesar four years before by his father Severus, when his brother Caracalla was created Augustus. Saint Perpetua relates another vision with which she was favored, as follows:

"A few days after receiving sentence, when we were all together in prayer, I happened to name Dinocrates, at which I was astonished, because I had not before had him in my thoughts; and I that moment knew that I ought to pray for him. This I began to do with great fervor and sighing before God; and the same night I had the following vision: I saw Dinocrates coming out of a dark place, where there were many others, exceeding hot and thirsty; his face was dirty, his complexion pale, with the ulcer in his face of which he died at seven years of age, and it was for him that I had prayed. There seemed a great distance between him and me, so that it was impossible for us to come to each other. Near him stood a vessel full of water, whose brim was higher than the statue of an infant: he attempted to drink, but though he had water, he could not reach it. This mightily grieved me, and I awoke. By this I knew my brother was in pain, but I trusted I could by prayer relieve him: so I began to pray for him, beseeching God with tears, day and night, that he would grant me my request; as I continued to do till we were removed to the damp prison: being destined for a public show on the festival of Caesar Geta.

"The day we were in the stocks I had this vision: I saw the place, which I had beheld dark before, now luminous; and Dinocrates, with his body very clean and well clad, refreshing himself, and instead of his wound a scar only. I awoke, and I knew he was relieved from his pain.

"Some days after, Pudens, the officer who commanded the guards of the prison, seeing that God favored us with many gifts, had a great esteem of us, and admitted many people to visit us for our mutual comfort. On the day of the public shows my father came to find me out, overwhelmed with sorrow. He tore his beard, he threw himself prostrate on the ground, cursed his years, and said enough to move any creature; and I was ready to die with sorrow to see my father in so deplorable a condition.

“On the eve of the shows, I was favored with the following vision. The deacon Pomponius, I thought, knocked very hard at the prison-door, which I opened to him. He was clothed with a white robe, embroidered with innumerable pomegranates of gold.

“He said to me: ‘Perpetua, we wait for you, come along.’

“He then took me by the hand and led me through very rough places into the middle of the amphitheatre, and said: ‘Fear not.’

“And, leaving me, said again: ‘I will be with you in a moment, and bear a part with you in your pains.’

“I was wondering the beasts were not let out against us, when there appeared a very ill-favored Egyptian, who came to encounter me with others. But another beautiful troop of young men declared for me, and anointed me with oil for the combat. Then appeared a man of prodigious stature, in rich apparel, having a wand in his hand like the masters of the gladiators, and a green bough on which hung golden apples. Having ordered silence, he said that the bough should be my prize, if I vanquished the Egyptian: but that if he conquered me, he should kill me with a sword. After a long and obstinate engagement, I threw him on his face, and trod upon his head. The people applauded my victory with loud acclamations.

“I then approached the master of the amphitheatre, who gave me the bough with a kiss, and said: ‘Peace be with you, my daughter.’ After this I awoke, and found that I was not so much to combat with wild beasts as with the devils.” Here ends the relation of Saint Perpetua.

Saint Saturus had also a vision, which he wrote himself. He and his companions were conducted by a bright angel into a most delightful garden, in which they met some holy martyrs lately dead, namely, Jocundus, Saturninus, and Artaxius, who had been burned alive for the faith, and Quintus, who died in prison. They inquired after other martyrs of their acquaintance, say the acts, and were conducted into a most stately place, shining like the sun: and in it saw the king of this most glorious place surrounded by his happy subjects, and heard a voice composed of many, which continually cried: “Holy, holy, holy.”

Saturus, turning to Perpetua, said: “You have here what you desired.”

She replied: “God be praised, I have more joy here than ever I had in the flesh.”

He adds, “Going out of the garden they found before the gate, on the right hand, their bishop of Carthage, Optatus, and on the left, Aspasius, priest of the same church, both of them alone and sorrowful.”

They fell at the martyrs’ feet, and begged they would reconcile them together, for a dissension had happened between them.

The martyrs embraced them, saying: “Are not you our bishop, and you a priest of our Lord? It is our duty to prostrate ourselves before you.”

Perpetua was discoursing with them; but certain angels came and drove hence Optatus and Aspasius; and bade them not to disturb the martyrs, but be reconciled to each other. The bishop Optatus was also charged to heal the divisions that reigned among several of his church. The angels, after these reprimands, seemed ready to shut the gates of the garden.

“Here,” says he, “we saw many of our brethren and martyrs likewise. We were fed with an ineffable odor, which delighted and satisfied us.”

Such was the vision of Saturus.

The rest of the acts were added by an eye-witness. God had called to himself Secundulus in prison. Felicitas was now eight months gone with child, and as the day of the shows approached, she was inconsolable lest she should not be brought to bed before it came; fearing that her martyrdom would be deferred on that account, because women with child were not allowed to be executed before they were delivered: the rest also were sensibly afflicted on their part to leave her alone in the road to their common hope. Wherefore they unanimously joined in prayer to obtain of God that she might be delivered against the shows. Scarce had they finished their prayer, when Felicitas found herself in labor. She cried out under the violence of her pain: one of the guards asked her, if she could not bear the throes of childbirth without crying out, what she would do when exposed to the wild beasts. She answered: "It is I that suffer what I now suffer; but then there will be another in me that will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for him." She was then delivered of a daughter, which a certain Christian woman took care of, and brought up as her own child.

The tribune, who had the holy martyrs in custody, being informed by some persons of little credit, that the Christians would free themselves out of prison by some magic enchantments, used them the more cruelly on that account, and forbade any to see them. Thereupon Perpetua said to him: "Why do you not afford us some relief, since we are condemned by Caesar, and destined to combat at his festival? Will it not be to your honor that we appear well fed?" At this the tribune trembled and blushed, and ordered them to be used with more humanity, and their friends to be admitted to see them.

Pudens, the keeper of the prison, being already converted, secretly did them all the good offices in his power. The day before they suffered, they gave them, according to custom, their last meal, which was called 'a free supper' and they ate in public. But the martyrs did their utmost to change it into an Agape, or Love-feast. Their chamber was full of people, whom they talked to with their usual resolution, threatening them with the judgments of God, and extolling the happiness of their own sufferings.

Saturus smiling at the curiosity of those that came to see them, said to them, "Will not tomorrow suffice to satisfy your inhuman curiosity in our regard? However you may seem now to pity us, tomorrow you will clap your hands at our death, and applaud our murderers. But observe well our faces, that you may know them again at that terrible day when all men shall be judged." They spoke with such courage and intrepidity, as astonished the infidels, and occasioned the conversion of several among them.

The day of their triumph being come, they went out of the prison to go to the amphitheatre. Joy sparkled in their eyes, and appeared in all their gestures and words. Perpetua walked with a composed countenance and easy pace, as a woman cherished by Jesus Christ, with her eyes modestly cast down: Felicitas went with her, following the men, not able to contain her joy. When they came to the gate of the amphitheatre the guards would have given them, according to custom, the superstitious habits with which they adorned such as appeared at these sights. For the men, a red mantle, which was the habit of the priests of Saturn: for the women, a little fillet round the head, by which the priestesses of Ceres were known. The martyrs rejected those idolatrous ceremonies; and, by the mouth of Perpetua, said, they came thither of their own accord on the promise made them that they should not be forced to any thing contrary to their religion. The tribune then consented that they might appear in the amphitheatre habited as they were.

Perpetua sung, as being already victorious; Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus threatened the people that beheld them with the judgments of God: and as they passed over against the balcony of Hilarian, they said to him; “You judge us in this world, but God will judge you in the next.”

The people, enraged at their boldness, begged they might be scourged, which was granted. They accordingly passed before the Venatores, or hunters, each of whom gave them a lash. They rejoiced exceedingly in being thought worthy to resemble our Savior in his sufferings. God granted to each of them the death they desired; for when they were discoursing together about what kind of martyrdom would be agreeable to each, Saturninus declared that he would choose to be exposed to beasts of several sorts in order to the aggravation of his sufferings. Accordingly, he and Revocatus, after having been attacked by a leopard, were also assaulted by a bear.

Saturus dreaded nothing so much as a bear, and therefore hoped a leopard would dispatch him at once with his teeth. He was then exposed to a wild boar, but the beast turned upon his keeper, who received such a wound from him that he died in a few days after, and Saturus was only dragged along by him. Then they tied the martyr to the bridge near a bear, but that beast came not out of his lodge, so that Saturus, being sound and not hurt, was called upon for a second encounter. This gave him an opportunity of speaking to Pudens, the jailer that had been converted.

The martyr encouraged him to constancy in the faith, and said to him: “You see I have not yet been hurt by any beast, as I desired and foretold; believe then steadfastly in Christ; I am going where you will see a leopard with one bite take away my life.”

It happened so, for a leopard being let out upon him, covered him all over with blood, whereupon the people jeering, cried out, “He is well baptized.” The martyr said to Pudens, “Go, remember my faith, and let our sufferings rather strengthen than trouble you. Give me the ring you have on your finger.” Saturus, having dipped it in his wound, gave it him back to keep as a pledge to animate him to a constancy in his faith, and fell down dead soon after. Thus, he went first to glory to wait for Perpetua, according to her vision. Some with Mabillon, (in his *Annals* tome 3, page 403.) think this Pudens (or Prudens) is the martyr honored in Africa, on the 29th of April.

In the meantime, Perpetua and Felicitas had been exposed to a wild cow; Perpetua was first attacked, and the cow having tossed her up, she fell on her back. Then putting herself in a sitting posture, and perceiving her clothes were torn, she gathered them about her in the best manner she could, to cover herself, thinking more of decency than her sufferings. Getting up, not to seem disconsolate, she tied up her hair, which was fallen loose, and perceiving Felicitas on the ground much hurt by a toss of the cow, she helped her to rise. They stood together, expecting another assault from the beasts, but the people crying out that it was enough, they were led to the gate Sanevivaria, where those that were not killed by the beasts were dispatched at the end of the shows by the Confectores or Slayers.

Perpetua was here received by Rusticus, a catechumen, who attended her. This admirable woman seemed just returning to herself out of a long ecstasy, and asked when she was to fight the wild cow. Being told what had passed, she could not believe it till she saw on her body and clothes the marks of what she had suffered, and knew the catechumen was correct. With regard to this circumstance of her acts, Saint Austin (Augustine) cries out, “Where was she when assaulted and torn by so furious a wild beast, without feeling her wounds, and when, after that furious combat, she asked when it would begin? What did she, not to see what all the world saw? What did she enjoy who did not feel

such pain? By what love, by what vision, by what potion was she so transported out of herself, and as it were divinely inebriated, to seem without feeling in a mortal body?"

She called for her brother, and said to him and Rusticus, "Continue firm in the faith, love one another, and be not scandalized at our sufferings."

All the martyrs were now brought to the place of their butchery. But the people, not yet satisfied with beholding blood, cried out to have them brought into the middle of the amphitheatre, that they might have the pleasure of seeing them receive the last blow. Upon this, some of the martyrs rose up, and having given one another the kiss of peace, went of their own accord into the middle of the arena; others were dispatched without speaking, or stirring out of the place they were in.

Saint Perpetua fell into the hands of a very timorous and unskillful apprentice of the gladiators, who, with a trembling hand, gave her many slight wounds, which made her languish a long time. Thus, says Saint Austin, did two women, amidst fierce beasts and the swords of gladiators, vanquish the devil and all his fury.

The day of their martyrdom was the 7th of March, as it is marked in the most ancient martyrologies, and in the Roman calendar as old as the year 354, published by Eucherius. Saint Prosper says they suffered at Carthage, which agrees with all the circumstances. Their bodies were in the great church of Carthage, in the fifth age, as Saint Victor (see Victor, Tome 1, Volume 1, page 4) informs us. Saint Austin says their festival drew yearly more to honor their memory in their church, than curiosity had done to their martyrdom. They are mentioned in the canon of the Mass.
