

Question: Can you give an example of an early Christian martyr?

Answer: During the early formation of the Church, many persecutions of Christians took place. Those who resisted the bullish methods of the Romans became martyrs because they refused to give worship to the gods of the Roman Imperial Cult. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus from 193-211 many small scale persecutions of Christians took place. While Christians were still a small minority group within the Roman Empire, their numbers were growing extraordinarily quickly. (*Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 103) The new Christian threat sparked a series of persecutions by the Roman Emperors in an attempt to quell the storm of those converting to Christianity. To the Roman mind, the threat of Christianity was very serious because with conversion came the turning away of the Roman ideal including the refusal to worship Roman gods.

Perhaps one of the best known accounts of martyrdom took place during the reign of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus in Carthage, Africa in the year 203 A.D. Her name was Vibia Perpetua. Perpetua was a young woman from Carthage who was a Christian catechumen. She was arrested for partaking in Christian activities and thrown into prison. Perpetua was around the age of 22 when imprisoned. She was of noble birth, married, and had an infant child. Her father was a pagan. Her mother and brothers were also catechumens but not imprisoned for their beliefs, probably because they were not public confessors as Perpetua was. The reason that Perpetua's martyrdom is so well known is because she was able to write during her time of imprisonment. She also experienced a series of visions while jailed. Imprisonment was a terrifying experience for her; she writes that she had never experienced such darkness in her life. The conditions were crowded, the heat was unbearable and the soldiers treated her roughly. For Perpetua, the worst part of the imprisonment was the anxiety she felt for her infant child. Her child was so young that she was still nursing him. Perpetua describes a period of time while incarcerated in which she was moved for a few hours to a better portion of the prison, less crowded and hot as a result of a bribe that had been received by the soldiers on guard from a few kind deacons. Due to this kind gesture Perpetua was able to nurse her child. Perpetua's father came to the prison several times pleading with her to renounce her Christian faith so that she would not face death and shame his family name. Perpetua refused to renounce her faith.

When tried for the accusations charged against her, Perpetua and the other catechists who were imprisoned were taken to the governor Hilarion. Even Hilarion asked that Perpetua renounce her Christian faith. Perpetua writes that the governor pleaded with her, "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son; offer sacrifice for the emperor's welfare." Perpetua righteously answered, "I will not." Hilarion rebutted, "Are you a Christian?" and she answered, "I am a Christian." (*Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 107) All Perpetua would have had to do to save her life would have been to sacrifice a small offering to the Roman gods and say that she would no longer follow the Christian faith. Instead, she righteously stood up and professed her faith. Thus, her sentence was passed; she and the other confessors were to face the beasts in the Roman arena. Instead of being distraught at the sentence, Perpetua writes that, "We were overjoyed as we went back to the prison cell."

After the condemnation by Hilarion, Perpetua underwent a series of vivid visions. One in particular involved a brother of hers who had died a pagan at the tender age of seven due to a cancerous disease. After their condemnation, Perpetua had realized that she had not thought of her deceased brother until now. She felt that she absolutely needed to pray for him. After praying, Perpetua experienced a vision in which her brother was wandering in dark places, seeming very hot and thirsty and his face was grimy and colorless. (*CRE*, 107) Perpetua writes that she continued to pray for her brother. Days later, Perpetua again saw her brother in a vision. This time she saw him drinking out of a golden bowl filled with water. She also noticed that the bowl her brother was drinking from never emptied. After drinking from the water, instead of looking ill and in need, Dinocrates, "was no longer thirsty, he gladly went to play as children do." Perpetua then awoke from her vision knowing that her brother had been relieved from the bonds of suffering. (*CRE*, 108) As a result of her fervent prayer, her brother was no longer suffering.

On the day of Perpetua's death by the wild beasts, her writings cease. From this point on either an eyewitness or a source close to the events writes about the sequences leading up to her death. Sadly, Perpetua was trampled by a mad cow in the Roman arena. Not dying from the wounds inflicted by the stampeding animal, she was ultimately killed by a gladiator. The witness is quick to note that to the end, Perpetua was upright and righteous to her faith in Christ.

The martyrdom of Perpetua and her fellow catechumens took place in games honoring the birthday of Caesar Geta, a Roman who eventually became co-emperor of the entire Empire. The story of Perpetua accentuates the point that Christian women were leaders in the faith life of themselves and people around them. Instead of being the status-quo daughter, wife, and mother as all Roman women were expected to be, Perpetua chose to be an advocate for Christ. The account of Perpetua is a testament to her own strength and the important role of women in forming and maintaining the early Church.