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The Story of Catholicism Part 2: The Early Church Faces Persecution

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The Early Church

THE power that Catholic priests through the centuries have wielded over their congregations has always amazed Protestants. To explain, at least in part, how Catholic clergy came to have so much authority is the purpose of this week's article and of the next one.

This authority of the priest is rooted in the doctrine of the "power of the keys," that is, the right of the priest as a priest to open or close the gates of heaven for an individual sinner. It grew to a large extent out of the severe external and internal problems that confronted the church of the second and third centuries.

The most severe external problem that confronted the early church was, of course, persecution.

Now, a certain misunderstanding about this early persecution must be removed if we are to understand how persecution helped develop the "power of the keys." From the time of Paul until the victory of Constantine the truth seems to be that only a limited number of Christians died, except, of course, during the very sharp Diocletian persecution, which began in 303.

The Roman Empire was not so prone to persecute as is sometimes supposed. In the New Testament, for example, the Romans are found repeatedly protecting Paul from his enemies, as is well known. It is a matter of record that the Emperor Trajan (98-117) told one of his governors, Pliny, not to hunt out Christians and not to accept anonymous charges against them. The Emperor Hadrian (117-138) insisted that before a Christian could be made to suffer he had to be convicted of a crime in an open court. When a pagan philosopher, Crescens, tried to have the Christian philosopher, Justin, executed, Roman justice saved Justin's life. The Emperor Commodus (180-192) brought many Christians back from exile at the request of his Christian concubine, Marcia. Because Christians objected to taking a loyalty oath by the "genius" (or spirit) of the emperor, considering it idolatry, one kindly governor resurrounded an old precedent from the law books and suggested that they swear by the emperor's "health" instead, and many Christians did so, gratefully, and were released.

Of course, there *was* persecution, and at times it was bitter. Nero, as everyone knows, had a good many Christians burned as lampposts or fed to beasts on the charge that they had

set Rome on fire. Under the Emperor Domitian, John was exiled to Patmos. Under Diocletian (284-305), 200 years later, there was a real pogrom: An eyewitness in Egypt reported seeing so many Christians killed at one time that the executioners' axes grew dull and had to be replaced. And that the executioners grew tired, and had to be relieved, in shifts.

Persecutions Usually Local

But such other persecutions as occurred in the early church were usually quite local and involved only a small number of people at a time. Pliny martyred a few Christians in Bythnia around 112, then checked with the emperor to see if he was doing the right thing. Hadrian (or was it Antoninus Pius?) executed a Roman bishop or two. Some angry Jews in Smyrna failed to get grand old Polycarp to the amphitheater until after the legal hours for the community lion and so got permission from the magistrate to have him burned instead. And under Marcus Aurelius (161-180) Justin was finally martyred in Rome, and Blandina and a dozen or so others were killed in Gaul (France). Blandina, incidentally, was remarkably brave. Though apparently only a teen-ager, she survived such a long day of torture that her tormentors gave up for the night. On a subsequent day she was hung in the shape of a cross for animals to eat, but was left alone by them. On still another day she was tortured again—and through it all uttered over and over, "I am a Christian," and stood firm. She finally died tangled in a net, gored by a bull. A courageous Christian girl!

Of course, even though persecution was spotty, it always loomed as a possibility. Whenever there was a natural disaster the cry arose, "The Christians to the lion!" For instance, a rash of earthquakes that swallowed whole villages in Cappadocia in 236 panicked the pagans against the Christians and a "severe persecution arose," says a witness. But the neighboring provinces were peaceful, so the faithful fled to them and saved their lives if not their property.

The facts of history are that while

there was some persecution, the Romans did not particularly enjoy persecuting Christians. Many a governor preferred to boast that he returned to Rome from his service in a province with his sword unbloodied by anyone's life, even a criminal's. The governors were appointed to keep the Roman peace, and as long as things were peaceful a man could believe almost anything he chose. If it became desirable that someone should die to quell a riot, a single Christian, or a handful at most, might be taken as examples, and the rest left alone. When Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage in North Africa, was martyred in 258, his entire congregation came out to see his end, and the Roman officials did not lay a hand on a single layman!

But what is the relationship, now, between all of this and our question about the historical power of priests over their church members?

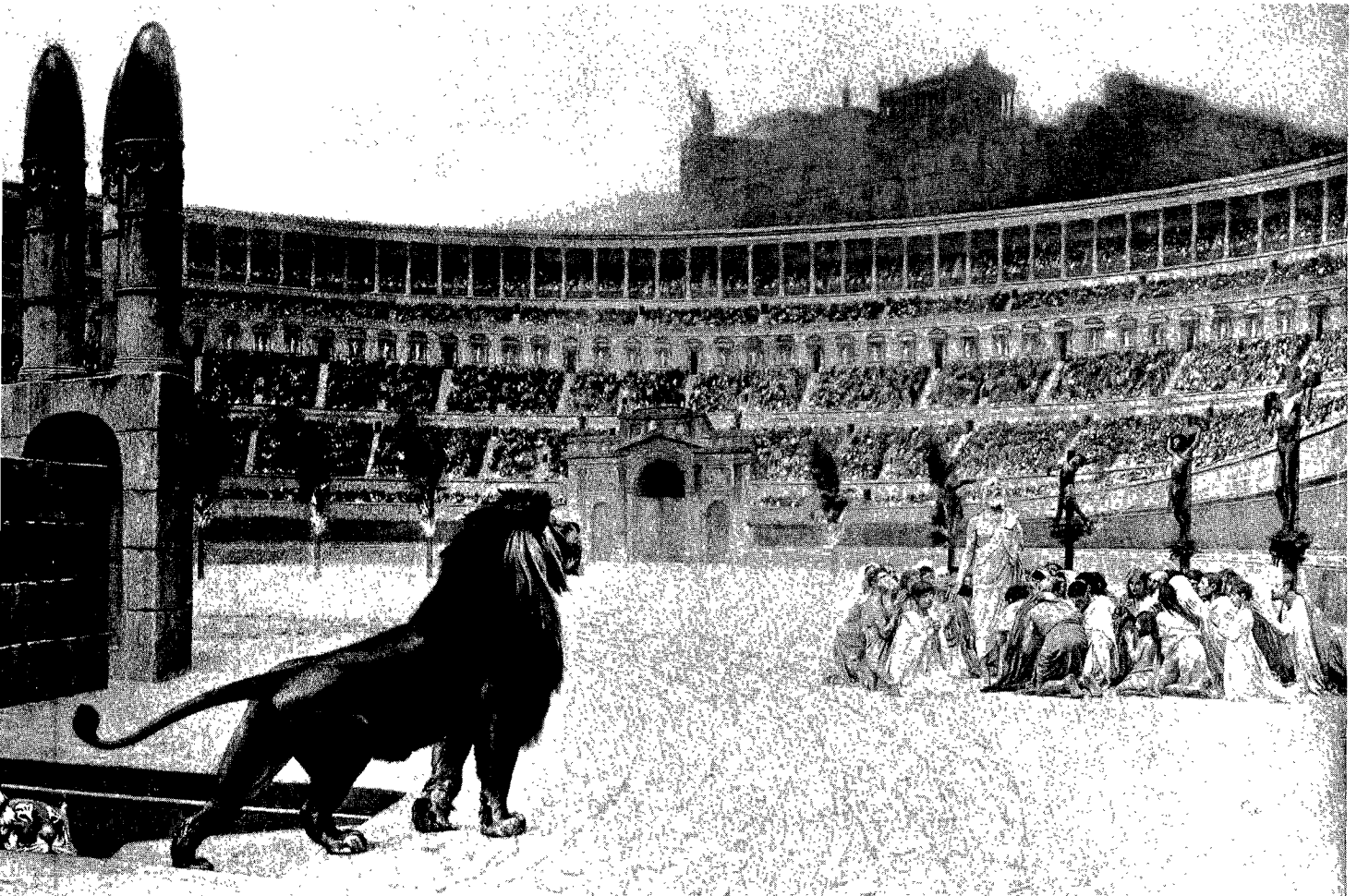
As everyone knows, Tertullian, a contemporary witness, said that "the blood of Christians is seed." Persecution lent an attractive aura of excitement to being a Christian. It persuaded pagans that Christians had a message, as indeed they did, that changed lives. Persecution, thus, was excellent public relations. It polished the image of the church and influenced large numbers of people to become members.

But, unfortunately, the élan of persecution without the reality of it can do untold harm. Many people joined the church who thought, like Peter, they would die with Christ though all men should deny Him, but who were all too prone to behave as Peter did when trouble came.

So when under the Emperor Decius (249-251) there occurred a short, sharp persecution, which, surprisingly, attempted to exterminate Christianity, it had grave repercussions. This persecution was very subtle. It required all citizens to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods as proof of their loyalty, but at the same time it appears to have made provision for Christians to buy a certificate swearing that they had offered the loyalty sacrifice even though they had not done so. While many Christians kept

Faces Persecution

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL



J. L. GEROME, ARTIST

The emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68) had many Christians burned as lampposts or fed to beasts on the charge that they had set Rome on fire.

their heads clear, refused every pretense, and were hustled off to prison, thousands of other Christians all around the Mediterranean were caught in the trap and bought the certificates. So many, in fact, rushed to the magistrates' benches in one city that at closing time there were still long lines waiting to be served.

Acting a cowardly lie like this was clearly tantamount to apostasy. And when the emperor suddenly died and the persecution passed like a summer thunderstorm, the bishops found themselves all at once with a vast membership that had played false. One bishop wrote that "the ruins of the fallen are lying about" over "almost the whole world" (Epistles of

Cyprian 30 in *ANF* V, 310). It was a time for deep searching of heart.

In harmony with the old custom that idolatry committed after baptism was unforgivable, as discussed in last week's article, every backslider was disfellowshipped.

But there were so many backsliders! And many of these, relieved perhaps to see the fearful persecution so quickly over and with so few Christians martyred, were soon asking for forgiveness and readmission into the church.

Most of the bishops refused. To forgive under such circumstances, they said, would destroy the church and was beyond their power anyway. But when the bishops refused them,

the apostates turned to the "confessors." The confessors were all those faithful Christians who had been arrested for their faith but who had not become "martyrs" by being executed for it. Unfortunately—and this is most important—the early church had quickly come to disregard the counsel in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 6 that a whole congregation meeting together was to decide matters of church discipline. Instead, the custom had developed of having either the bishops or the confessors decide who might be forgiven. Before A.D. 250 this custom had not been codified into a specific doctrine, partly because very few serious sins committed after baptism were considered

forgivable anyway and partly because before 250 there had not been many confessors, because there had not been much persecution, and so no issue between the prerogatives of the

confessors and of the bishops in this regard had arisen to bring them into focus.

But now there were a good many confessors and some of them were

eager to make the most of their new powers. These ambitious confessors recommended members almost indiscriminately, for forgiveness, whether they were truly repentant or not. The bishops were scandalized, and from Spain to Palestine there was a great confusion in the church.

Books were written, councils were held, and decisions were made. All bishops agreed that confessors could no longer forgive; only bishops could. And the majority voted that the bishops *should* forgive, and most of the apostates were recalled.

But there were strict bishops who refused to forgive apostasy, who insisted that Christ had never given bishops the power to forgive so wicked a sin. These were led by a learned Roman theologian, Novatian by name, and they formed a vigorous sect known as the Novatians. The formation of this sect greatly aggravated the total problem.

As usual in such quarrels, each side moved to increasingly extreme positions, and the statements they made lasted much longer than the quarrel itself. Cyprian in particular rolled out his big intellectual guns against the Novatians and argued in a most significant and influential book on church unity (1) that through Peter, Christ had indeed given to bishops the power to forgive all kinds of sins, and (2) that small groups of bishops such as the Novatians had better not be starting up strict little churches of their own which are really not churches at all. "He cannot have God for His Father," roared Cyprian, "who does not have the Church for his mother." "There is no salvation outside the [Catholic] Church!"

The controversy ultimately subsided, but the arguments and decisions it occasioned remained. As the smoke of battle blew away, the clergy were seen standing on every side grasping securely in their hands the "power of the keys," the authority exclusively vested in themselves to open the gates of heaven for a sinner—and to close them. For the power to forgive is also the power to choose not to.

The reason why Catholic laymen even today characteristically attribute almost absolute power to their priests, is that the priest "holds the power of the keys" to their salvation.

It is a way of thinking that goes back a long way in history, to a time when an unusual persecution caught a self-assured church by surprise and acted as a catalyst to help the bishops crystallize and codify their power.

(Continued next week)

The art of living

By MIRIAM WOOD

when you're Young

"THINGS ALWAYS WORK OUT"

Over the eardrums of conversation sometimes are tremendously fascinating. I'm not referring to eavesdropping, which might turn out to be painful for the hearer, and always is horrible social behaviour. The "snatches" I find distinctly titillating are overheard in public places—on crowded sidewalks while pedestrians are waiting for the signal light to assure their safe (?) scurry across the wildly busy intersection; in shoe stores, where frustrated would-be buyers exchange informal philosophies—you know, "one shoe off and one shoe on," and where in the world did the salesperson go? And so on. People are always talking, talking!

As I plunged along a shopping plaza recently, furrowed of brow and grim of intent, I was brought to a dead stop for a few seconds by the sudden appearance in my path of a small, merry runaway, whose mother loped yards behind in frantic pursuit. Assisting in his capture to the extent of blocking his getaway, I was favorably positioned to hear this remark from nearby: "I'm just not going to worry about it! *Things always work out!*"

Since the voice was young, and since I'm decidedly interested in the opinions and attitudes of young people, I turned immediately to trace the source of this bit of dubious philosophy. Hair flying, coat unbuttoned in near-freezing weather, a rather disorganized-looking girl was addressing a friend who didn't seem quite so sure that "things" can be counted on always to behave properly.

And I'm not so sure either. It seems to me that the factors that make for successful living can't be left to chance. When God created the universe, He built into it a definite structure. I've never seen any evidence, either in nature or in the Bible, that the human being will reach a desirable ultimate destination if he adopts a breezy, unconcerned attitude toward living. I don't mean that people have to go about with a frozen-faced, inflexible manner, giving unmistakable signals to all would-be distractors that they're goal-directed people. People don't need to fret and fume incessantly, twittering like nervous sparrows. They do, though, have to

have a clear idea of their goals in life and how they plan to achieve them.

For instance, no amount of happy unconcern in the area of schoolwork will (a) get a term paper written, or (b) prepare a student to pass an examination with a respectable grade. The intellectual bones of students strewn along the pathway of education give mute testimony to the failure of "things" to work out of their own accord. (There are other factors, of course, but this is the one we're concerned with at the moment.)

Spiritual life also has to be nourished and cultivated. Time must be set aside for devotional reading, for prayer, for communication with and from God. Of all planning, this one must be most precise and most protected, since it's the one under constant assault by the enemy of all spirituality. "Things" *won't* work out to give you firmly grounded knowledge, belief, and faith—that is, unless you're right in there *making* them work out. If you're blithely leaving this area to chance, it's almost certain that just when iron in your spiritual backbone is definitely called for, you'll find sponge rubber; when a diamond-clear decision is vital, you'll find no well-oiled mechanism in your soul for *making* decisions of this kind.

The list of "things" that won't always work out spontaneously is endless. Marriage? You'll have to acquaint yourself with the basic principles of this most complicated of human relationships. But preceding this exercise is the need to take a firm grip on your emotions in order to evaluate successfully the marital candidates who appear on your horizon. Well-muscled, broad-shouldered, and perfectly proportioned figures—even sparkling intellectual capacities—won't make things always work out unless some pretty solid character traits accompany them.

Well, I don't know what the young wind-blown girl was referring to. I started to say that I hope it worked out, but then it occurred to me that she might be a great deal better off if everything in her life got into a great, enormous tangle. That way, she might learn, while she's still young and flexible, that "things" don't always work out—not without careful planning and effort, that is.