

THE
MARTYRS OF THE COLISEUM

HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE
GREAT AMPHITHEATRE OF ANCIENT ROME

BY THE
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“We are made a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.”

1 Cor. 4:9

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Endorsed and praised in 1874 by Pope Pius IX (see page v) and His Grace, the Archbishop of Toronto (see page ix).



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Preface

The present work, imperfect as it is, has the recommendation of being the only one on the subject ever published in the English language. With a slight modification, this assertion may be extended to every other European tongue. Some works have been printed in Italy on the Coliseum, but they treat it as a pagan monument, or as a work of art. I have not found any one give more than a couple of pages to its Christian records. Marangoni's *Memorie Sacre e Profane dell'Anfiteatro Flavio*, which is by far the best published, and from which I have largely drawn in the following pages, does not give more than some of the names of the Martyrs of the Coliseum, with references to their Acts. All admit that the Coliseum was sanctified by the blood of thousands of martyrs: they mention a few of the most important, and then pass on as if the world no longer took an interest in the most sacred and solemn reminiscences of the Christian past.

Cardinal Wiseman, in his preface to *Fabiola*, wrote thus: "If the modern Christian wishes really to know what his forefathers underwent for the Faith during three centuries of persecution, we would not have him content himself with visiting the Catacombs, as we have endeavoured to do, and thus learn what sort of life they were compelled to live; but we would advise him to read those imperishable records, the *Acts of the Martyrs*, which will show him how they were made to die. We know of no writings so moving, so tender, so consoling, and so ministering of strength to faith and hope, after God's inspired words, as these venerable monuments. And if our reader, so advised, have not leisure to read much upon this subject, we would limit him willingly to even one specimen—the genuine *Acts of SS. Perpetua and*

Felicitas. It is true that they will be best read by the scholar in their plain African Latinity, but we trust that some one will soon give us a worthy English version of these, and some other similar early Christian documents... When our minds are sad, or the petty persecution of our times inclines our feeble hearts to murmur, we cannot do better than turn to those golden, because truthful, legends, to nerve our courage by the contemplation of what children and women, catechumens and slaves, suffered unmurmuring for Christ."

I need scarcely say how I have taken up, according to my ability, this suggestion of the most eminent of modern writers. I have long loved to prize the deep mine of spiritual riches contained in the *Acts of the Martyrs*. But these valuable records of the past are not in the hands of all. The outlay required to purchase the fifty large folio tomes of the Bollandists, and the erudition necessary to understand the old Latin and Greek in which they are written, place them above the reach of the great majority of readers. Any translation, therefore, of these memorials of the early Church must be interesting and useful. The virtue, the power, and the extraordinary lives of the first Christians, are in wonderful contrast with those of the Christians of the present day.

Yet Christianity is now as brilliant and powerful as when it was triumphant in the Coliseum. It is the same faith that animates the virtue of the righteous; it is the same Holy Spirit that guides and preserves the imperishable Church built upon the rock.

In the following translations I have not always confined myself to the literal rendering of the original. I have, on the contrary, endeavoured to avoid the monotony and dryness of verbatim translations. I have taken the ideas given in the Acts, and moulded them into English form, often casting flowers around them, when none such were given in the original. This is particularly the

case of the romantic history of Placidus. Where I have met with extraordinary passages in the most authentic Acts, I have quoted the text in the notes, and given the necessary references.

Suddenly called away to the scene of my early labours, I have submitted to the judgment of my superiors in giving the manuscript to the printers in its imperfect state; and without further thought for its success or failure, I commit the little volume to the indulgence of my readers. If perchance the beautiful and interesting matter I have hastily thrown together should induce some experienced and skilful writer to take up and treat, in a masterly and historical manner, this important part of the early history of Christianity, I shall feel repaid for my humble efforts; if, moreover, these touching tales of love, these marvels and miracles flowing from the mercy of God, and found in every page of these records, excite in the Christian reader even one sentiment of piety and charity, I shall feel that my labour has not been spent in vain.

The Pope's Letter

The following has been received from His Holiness, Pius IX, through the Secretary of the Propaganda:

Rev. Domine,

Sanctissimus Dominus Noster mihi in mandatis dedit Tibi significare se libenter excepsisse, una cum tuis officiosis litteris, volumen cui titulus 'I MARTIRI DEL COLOSSEO,' a te in lucem editum.

Eo vero gratius hoc tuum opus Sanctitatæ Suæ fuit, quo magis illud acerbitate et nequitiæ temporum opportunum visum est. Nam dum religionis hostes ac ethnicæ licentiæ instauratores gravem injuriam intulerunt sanctitati ejus loci triumphali sanguine tot Martyrum consecrati, deletis nempe illic venerandis religiosi cultus monumentis, queis ornabatur, et ipsa precandi potestate Fidelibus adempta non potest profecto peculiari utilitate carere tua opera, quæ ad debitam eisdem loci venerationem tuendam spectat, et ad piam memoriam fovendam gloriosorum certaminum quæ ibidem Christi Martyres sustinuerunt. Quibus adjiciens Sanctitatem Suam apostolicam benedictionem Tibi benigne impertitam esse precor Deum ut Tibi fausta quæque largiatur.

Romæ ex æd. S. Cong, de P. Fide.

Die 4 Martii, 1874.

Dom. Tuæ.

Humillimus addictissimus famulus,

JOANNES SIMEONI,

Secretarius.

Some pages have been removed here from this preview.

Chapter 10

ALEXANDER, BISHOP AND MARTYR

Alexander is the third Bishop whom we find to have been exposed to the wild beasts in the Coliseum. He seems to have been fired with the zeal and love of an Ignatius, and raised to the wonderful and supernatural like Eleutherius. His Acts present us with another scene of baffled tyranny and triumphant grace; and although we find repeated the same tale of wonder and mercy, yet, as with the annual return of spring, the flowers have ever new charms and nature new beauties, so each well-earned crown that we meet with in our path delights us with its wondrous fragrance and its surpassing beauty. Each martyrdom is like a garden decked with all the flowers and exhaling all the odours of sanctity and virtue. Stern facts only have come down to us through the lapse of centuries, yet they are caught up by the imagination like rugged cliffs in a mirage, and decorated with all the charms of poetry and romance. We might almost imagine that the same pen that wrote the biography of the Bible, in its rugged simplicity had been borrowed for the Acts of the Martyrs. The great heroes of those remote times had their long lives of eight hundred or nine hundred years summed up in these simple words, "he lived and died." Thus in the Acts of the Martyrs we frequently find short rapid sentences, and the briefest possible expressions: months, and even years sometimes, pass between events that are recorded in the same line, and, to a casual reader, they would seem to have passed in the same hour.

The Acts of Alexander bear a very ancient date; they are simple and beautiful. They do not mention in what part of the reign of Antoninus the holy Bishop suffered. The Emperor reigned for

twenty-three years, and it is probable twenty of these passed between the martyrdom of Potitus and Alexander. We are inclined to believe that Alexander suffered first, although we have accidentally placed the Acts of Potitus first. Both are well authenticated, and both suffered under Antoninus; their chronological position will not interfere with these interesting records.

Our present sketch commences with a scene in a small town in Italy. The Acts introduce Alexander at once as a Bishop at his post in the midst of his people, combating the powers of darkness and spreading the glad tidings of the gospel. His sanctity and zeal, aided by a supernatural power of miracles, were fast breaking through the barriers of sin and infidelity, and raising the cross of the Crucified over the temples of the false gods.

Alexander was one of those holy men sent by Almighty God for the establishment of His Church. His preaching was confirmed by the most wonderful miracles; the promise of our Blessed Lord was fulfilled in him, that His disciples should perform even greater miracles than He himself. One morning, when he was engaged in prayer, he was disturbed by a pagan woman, who came to him wailing and crying, for her only son was dead. The poor mother had heard of the wonders worked by the Bishop. She was yet a pagan and unconverted; but in the deep sorrow of her disconsolate heart she madly seized the last hope that came to her with the name of the powerful Christian, and, throwing herself on her knees before him, begged of him to call her son back again to life. Alexander heard the voice of God calling him to promote His greater glory and save innumerable souls. He consoled the weeping mother, and bade her return to her house, promising he would follow immediately. After a few moments spent in prayer, he rose up and went to her house.

The boy had been dead for several hours. He was a beautiful child, cut off in the bloom of youth by an accident. He left his

mother's house that morning full of health and spirits to play with his companions, but in a few hours was brought home dead. A large crowd of friends and sympathisers had already gathered round the couch on which he lay; some were looking sorrowfully on the calm features of the beautiful boy, others were slowly and solemnly repeating his name, according to the custom of the ancients, whilst others cast fresh flowers on his bed. His little companions cried lustily, for they loved him much. Near his pillow there was one in particular overcome with grief, who exclaimed from time to time, in the midst of convulsive sobs: "Poor Lucius! you said you would become a Christian when you'd get big." This was a Christian boy who used to serve the Bishop's mass every morning, and who afterwards became a priest.

When Alexander arrived, all became silent, and stood aside to allow him to pass. The Christians who were present saw in their saintly Bishop the representative of Him who gave joy to the weeping widow outside the gates of Nain. He approached the bed, and remained wrapt in prayer for a moment, then taking the boy's hand, said, in a loud voice, "Lucius, arise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Immediately the eyes moved, the hands and limbs were convulsed; life, which had entered the heart, was sending the vital stream through every fibre and vein; the next moment the boy sat erect before the Bishop. His countenance changed from the marble tranquillity of death to an expression of terror and fright—he seemed to have been awakened from a frightful dream. Then a smile of joy lit up his countenance when he found himself in the land of the living again, and felt the warm kiss of his mother. Whilst greeting his companions, and receiving the congratulations of wondering friends, he suddenly lapsed into his feelings of terror. Putting his hand to his brow, he used incoherent expressions of fright, and speaking to himself, said: "Is it true? Am I dreaming? Where am

I?" Some thought he was still raving from the stunning effects of the fall that fractured his skull and took away his life, but the holy Bishop advancing once more to the couch on which he sat, calmly bade him say what he saw. The boy instantly cried out in a hasty and excited tone:

"Hear me, O parents and friends! I was taken by two Egyptians of frightful looks and full of anger, and they led me through a gloomy region to the brink of a dreadful pit, when there appeared a beautiful young man with a shining countenance, who made the whole place tremble as if shaken by an earthquake. He cried out in a loud voice, 'Let go the boy, for he is called by the servant of God, Alexander!' and behold I have been brought back to my body." Then falling on his knees before Alexander, he clasped his hands, and said with great vehemence: "O Bishop of God! baptize me in the name of thy Lord, that I may never again see what I saw this morning." A few days passed, and Lucius and fourteen thousand others were regenerated in the saving waters of Baptism.

Rumours of the wonderful doings were brought to Rome. Antoninus, who was more a fanatic than a tyrant, sent an officer named Cornelianus with a hundred and fifty men to seize the Bishop and bring him to Rome. They found Alexander preaching to an immense concourse of people. A temporary altar had been erected in an open plain, and he was surrounded by his faithful flock. Seeing the great multitude of people surrounding the Bishop, Cornelianus was afraid to seize him; he remained with his soldiers on the outskirts of the crowd until the Bishop had offered the Holy Sacrifice. After the celebration of the divine mysteries, the holy pastor turned to his flock and announced to them it was the will of God he should go to Rome to suffer for the faith and Church of their Divine Master. More sad or startling news could not have been given them; every eye was

wet with tears; some cried out loud whilst the Bishop was yet speaking. Sublime and eloquent was the last warning he gave them; he poured out all the unction of his burning heart, and spake at length of the joys of heaven, and the glory of suffering for Jesus Christ. When he had given them his last blessing, he paused for a moment, and then changing his tone of voice, he said, slowly and majestically:

“The servants of the Emperor are already come to make me a prisoner of Jesus Christ: I command you to allow me to pass without any resistance. He who molests one of those men will be an enemy of the Great Master, who has told us to pray for our enemies.” Pointing to the crucifixion on the altar, he said: “Remain you here in prayer before the great model of your patience whilst I go to my crown.”

He then descended calmly from the altar and passed through his flock, who were bathed in tears. There were hundreds of stalwart young men in that assembly, who might have offered effectual opposition to Cornelianus and his soldiers, but their faith and obedience to the Bishop tied their hands, and taught them the sublime morality of forbearance. A more touching scene is not recorded in the annals of sacred history. Grief, indignation, and all the passions of the soul were restrained by the noble power of patience. Their hearts were breaking to see their pastor and their father torn rudely from them as if he were a public malefactor, or an infamous conspirator against the throne of the Emperor. The self-possession and bravery of the pastor were reflected in the sublime forbearance of the people. The angels of God must have looked down with joy on a scene that was the nearest thing on earth to the perfection of heaven. Alexander, already a martyr in his heart, as firm as a rock, and as zealous as an apostle, thought more of his widowed people than of the racks, the cauldrons of boiling oil, and the roaring lions he knew were awaiting him in

Rome, and giving one last, long and loving look on his weeping children, he raised his eyes, now sparkling with tears of affection, towards heaven, and breathed over the prostrate crowd this short but loving prayer, “O Lord! I leave them to thee.”

He was accompanied to Rome by one of his priests, named Crescentianus. He followed him through all the different scenes of his martyrdom, and to him we are indebted for the beautiful Acts from which we are now quoting. Strange to say, Crescentianus did not say of what city Alexander was Bishop, nor have we any documents to indicate his see. It is generally presumed that it was not far from Rome, but from some expressions in the Acts, I am inclined to think his see was on the eastern coast of Italy.

On reaching Rome, Alexander was immediately presented to the Emperor. He was surrounded by soldiers, and his hands were tied behind his back. Antoninus sat on his throne silent and thoughtful, giving evident signs of uneasiness. Perhaps the recollection of past defeats deterred him from the risk of additional shame. Well he remembered the invincible spirit of the Christians, and the extraordinary power that made them terrible. He felt a supernatural awe steal over him when the Bishop appeared; fear calmed the fanaticism of his blind devotion to the worship of the gods. He quailed under the steady gaze of his handcuffed victim, and would have given half his empire to purchase his apostasy, to save himself from the anticipated opprobrium of another humiliation and defeat. His biographers, and even contemporary writers, tell us that he was not a man of bloodshed or cruelty. He shuddered at the horrors of the reigns of Nero and Domitian; but he felt some invisible power urging him on to persecute the Christians. Theirs was the only blood that stained his hands; they were the terror of his dreams by night, the remorse of his conscience by day, and the mystery of

his life. His interrogatory of the holy Bishop is a tissue of pride, hypocrisy and cowardice.

“Are you Alexander,” he commenced, in a haughty tone, “who is bringing ruin on the East, deceiving men, and persuading them to believe in a desperate man who was slain by his companions? If he were God, would he have suffered like a man?”

“Yes! He would have suffered as a man,” said Alexander, taking up the last part of the Emperor’s address as involving an attack on the great mystery of the incarnation. “It was for that purpose He came down from heaven, took on Himself human nature, that He might suffer for and redeem the creature He made.”

Antoninus was silent for a moment; he vainly tried to fathom the great mystery contained in the words of the Bishop; the brightest pagan intellect could never grasp the sublimity of Catholic truth; faith is alone the key that unlocks its treasures to the mind of fallen man. The Emperor was a philosopher and thought he knew a great deal, but finding the Christian prisoner before him so familiar with things he never heard before, he endeavoured to hide the blush that mantled his brow, and in a hurried and confused way resumed his address.

“I don’t want to have much to say to you, young man, but come, deny your God, and offer sacrifice to our deities, and I will reward you by giving you an office of honour in my own palace; but if you refuse, I will put you to the torture, and your God will not be able to take you out of my hands.”

“Was it to make one worship those dumb stones you brought me here?” asked the holy martyr, indignantly. “Then, Antoninus, if you are resolved to torture me, do so at once, for I will always put my trust in Him who reigns above; I will never burn incense to a senseless idol.”

“Let this insolent man be beaten with rods,” said Antoninus, angrily; “he does not know to whom he is speaking. You have insulted me, who am the ruler of the world!”

Alexander smiled, and said, majestically: “Do not boast of thy power. A few days and thou wilt go where thou dost not wish; thou wilt have less power than the worm we crush to death beneath our feet.”

Whilst he was thus speaking, the lictors were untying their fasces, and picking out some of the strongest rods that guarded the axe. A soldier had approached to tear off the garments of the Bishop, when the Emperor, who seemed undecided and irresolute, cried out:

“Hold! let me see! Take him to prison; give him four days to think over his folly, that he may give up the worship of his vanity, and come of his own accord to worship our gods.”

“Look upon the four days as already passed,” exclaimed the Bishop; “and do with me now what thou intendentest.”

Alexander was led away to prison. He was patient and cheerful. The horrors of a Roman dungeon were not unknown to him, yet there was no expression of reluctance in his countenance, not a word escaped his lips indicative of fear. He spoke freely with his guards, and surprised them by his indifference. He seemed to consider himself their guest, and chatted as freely as if they were accompanying him to some delicious suburban villa to pass a few days in retirement. When they reached the prison, they pushed him rudely in, and drew the heavy bolt across the iron door, then grinned sarcastically at each other as if they had caught and subdued the wildest lion of the African deserts. They little thought the power of the God of the Christians could pass through iron doors; they go to sleep with the keys of the prison

door under their pillow, yet another hour will find their prison empty and their victim escaped.

Poor Crescentianus, the faithful priest of the noble Bishop, followed as far as he could prudently go; but when he saw him cast into a gloomy dungeon, and heard the door ring as it was closed and the lock grate as the heavy bolt was drawn into its marble socket, he was filled with grief, and went away from the sad scene with a heavy and sorrowful heart. He rambled on through Forum and square and crowded piazzas, unmindful of everything, and wrapt in silence and gloom. The noise of the city was irksome; he longed to find some retired shady spot, where he could indulge in the consolation of tears in solitude and silence. Thus he strolled on until he passed through the gates, and felt the fresh breeze of the Sabine hills. He threw himself down under the shade of a large tree, and soon fell into a slumber.

Immediately a strange vision passed before him. He thought he saw Alexander kneeling in one corner of his loathsome prison; beside him was an angel of light, who joined him in singing alternately the verses of a hymn then commonly in use amongst the Christians. After this, he saw the angel untie his bonds, and lead him towards the door of the prison. The heavy door flew open, and they went through: the guards were all asleep, and they passed by unnoticed. The angel led him through the Forum, and those streets which lead to the Porta Capena.¹ Crescentianus, still asleep, thought he was then passing over every inch of the ground he had just walked. They were engaged in the most cheerful conversation, and the brilliant light that shone from the countenance of the angel made everything around brighter than day. The people crossed on either side, but seemed not

¹ The gate that led to the Appian Way.

to see them. At length they passed under the gate, and every step brought them nearer to where he was. He thought he could hear them talking when the angel suddenly stopped, and pointed out where he was sleeping, and, singing Alleluia in the most exquisite manner, began to rise gradually towards heaven. Alexander was riveted to the spot, and remained for a few moments gazing in the direction whence the lovely spirit had disappeared. Crescentianus, still in his dream, thought he saw the holy Bishop come towards him; his heart begins to leap—now he is nearer—another moment and he sees the venerable form of the Bishop bending over him. Starting from his dream, Crescentianus awoke, sprang to his feet, and cried out, “Alexander!”

It was no dream. Alexander was really there. That moment they were clasped in each other’s arms.

Alexander told the good priest how the angel came to him in prison, delivered him, and led him within a few yards of the spot on which they were standing; and the priest, in tears of joy, recognised that his vision was not a disappointing dream, but a consoling reality. They moved off together along the Appian Way, expatiating on the mercies of God. Alexander spoke with much fervour on what the angel told him; how he was to be taken back again to the hands of his persecutors, and to suffer martyrdom for the faith; that he was liberated from prison for a few days in order to confound the pagans, and to carry spiritual relief to some poor Christians dwelling in a small town in the vicinity of the city, who were wavering in their faith. Thus the joy and love of their hearts made them unconscious of the fatigues of the journey; they did not stop until they arrived at the town pointed out by the angel.

Next morning the governor of the prison came in fear and trembling to announce to the Emperor that, by some unknown means, the prisoner Alexander had escaped. The wretched man

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