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# Resurrecting the martyrs: the role of the Cult of the Saints, A.D. 370-430

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RESURRECTING THE MARTYRS:  
THE ROLE OF THE CULT OF THE SAINTS, A.D. 370–430

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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by

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The names and abbreviations in this work, for the most part, conform to *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999).

<i>Adv. Jud.</i>	<i>Adversus Judaeos</i>
<i>Aux.</i>	<i>Sermo contra Auxentium de basilicas</i>
<i>Bab.</i>	<i>De sancto hieromartyre Babyla</i>
<i>Barl.</i>	<i>In sanctum Barlaam martyrem</i>
<i>Bern.</i>	<i>De sanctis Bernice et Prosdoce</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>Bon. Mort.</i>	<i>De bono mortis</i>
<i>Civ.</i>	<i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>Cod. theod.</i>	<i>Codex theodosianus</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones</i>
<i>Contra Gaud.</i>	<i>Contra Gaudentius</i>
<i>Cur.</i>	<i>De cura pro mortuis gerenda</i>
<i>Dros.</i>	<i>De sancta Droside martyre</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Fid.</i>	<i>De fide</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Hom. 1 Cor.</i>	<i>Homiliae in epistulam i ad Corinthios</i>
<i>Hom. Heb.</i>	<i>Homiliae in epistulam ad Hebraeos</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Ign.</i>	<i>In sanctum Ignatium martyrem</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JLAnt</i>	<i>Journal of Late Antiquity</i>
<i>Laud. Paul.</i>	<i>De laudibus sancti Pauli apostoli</i>
<i>Lucian.</i>	<i>In sanctum Lucianum martyrem</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Miscellanea Agostiniana</i>
<i>Macc.</i>	<i>De Maccabeis</i>
<i>Mart.</i>	<i>De sanctis martyribus (John Chrysostom)</i>
<i>Mart.</i>	<i>Ad Martyras (Tertullian)</i>
<i>Mart. Lyons</i>	<i>Martyrs of Lyons</i>
<i>Mart. Pal.</i>	<i>De martyribus Palaestinae</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
<i>Passio Donati</i>	<i>Sermo de passione Advocati et Donati</i>
<i>Passio Perp.</i>	<i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i>

<i>Pelag.</i>	<i>De sancta Pelagia virgine et martyre</i>
PG	Patrologia graeca
<i>Phoc.</i>	<i>De sancto hieromartyre Phoca</i>
PL	Patrologia latina
PLS	Patrologia latina supplementum
<i>Quad. Mart.</i>	<i>In sanctos quadraginta martyres</i>
<i>Rom.</i>	<i>Ad Romanos</i>
<i>Serm.</i>	<i>Sermones</i>
<i>Spect.</i>	<i>De spectaculis</i>
<i>Stat.</i>	<i>Ad populum Antiochenum de statu</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>Virg.</i>	<i>De virginibus</i>
<i>Vit. Amb.</i>	<i>Vita Ambrosii</i>

## ABSTRACT

In the late fourth and early fifth centuries Christians actively sought to reimagine the persecutions of the pre-Constantinian era by keeping the memory of the martyrs alive. The cult of martyrs became one tool for navigating present difficulties and establishing a source of legitimacy. As a valuable connection with the past, the cult of martyrs enabled Christian communities to build identity, and bishops could use it to promote the Christianization of the empire. In spite of the cult's widespread popularity, churches imputed widely disparate meanings to the cult. The cult's function in a particular locale was often shaped by that place's specific religious and political context. Chapter one deals with the martyrdom phenomenon, the earliest Christians' views on this phenomenon, and the development of the cult of the martyrs. Chapters two and three investigate the relationship of the cult of martyrs to its Roman cultural context by analyzing suicide martyrdoms and the tendency of bishops to portray the cult as spectacle. Chapters four, five, and six describe the cult's relationship to three notable bishops: Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), John Chrysostom (d. 407), and Augustine of Hippo (d. 430). Though contemporary with one another, these three men all viewed the cult of the martyrs as fulfilling somewhat different needs for their congregations. The last chapter describes the controversy over the cult in Gaul, where some clergy resisted its development.



## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO MARTYRDOM AND THE CULT OF MARTYRS

In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Christian communities around the Mediterranean actively created for themselves an orderly and usable view of their origins.<sup>1</sup> The second and third centuries were characterized by both governmental hostility and neglect, but the fourth century, beginning with Constantine's rise to power, saw Christianity favored by the emperor. Doctrinal and political divisions within the wider Church, however, characterized this fourth century, leading to questions over who were the "real" Christians.<sup>2</sup> A key component in this quest for authority was demonstrating the continuity between the pre-Constantinian Church and the Church enjoying imperial favor. In the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries Christians actively sought to reimagine their past persecution to help them navigate present difficulties as well as give themselves a source of legitimacy.

This Christian desire to incorporate the persecuted past with the present can be viewed as analogous to the Roman ideal of *mos maiorum*, the ancestral customs. The Roman people had

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<sup>1</sup>I borrow this idea of an "orderly and usable view of origins" from Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 8. Brown, however, is discussing not the Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries, but the German tribes of the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries.

<sup>2</sup>I will use the word "church" in a couple of ways. If capitalized the word indicates a theological orientation to the universal Church. Lower-case "churches" usually refers to local congregations, manifestations of what the theologians would call the "visible church." Occasionally, "church" will describe a physical structure, but context will clarify this usage.

*lex*, which was the written law of the Roman state, but they also had *mos maiorum*, which was the unwritten sense of what a Roman citizen should do. Law by itself was not enough to guide the Romans as they lived their lives; by looking to the customs of the ancestors, a Roman could navigate his shifting present reality. In the same way, Christians had their own written *lex* in the pages of the Scriptures, but the Scriptures did not satisfy everyone in maintaining a continuous identity with the past. The post-Constantinian churches looked to the martyrs and the persecuted Church as “the ancestors” and created for themselves a *mos maiorum*. The cult of the martyrs became that unwritten, yet valuable, connection with the past that allowed Christian communities to interpret their origins in a way that built identity in the present and helped them navigate the future.

This dissertation highlights some of the diversity that existed within this attempt to interpret the meaning of a persecuted past. Modern scholarship has tended to view the cult of the martyrs in a homogenized manner, attempting to reconstruct an overarching cult, but the cult was actually multifarious in both theology and praxis. Much of this dissertation will focus on analyzing bishops’ sermons on the martyrs, which provide the key for seeing the diversity within the cult.<sup>3</sup> The sermons provide a window through which scholars can glimpse the realities and concerns of local congregations. Local congregations rarely conform to theoretical ecclesiastical practices, especially regarding those surrounding the cult of the martyrs. Many Christian leaders at the end of the fourth century were attempting to homogenize religious experience, which gives

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<sup>3</sup>Scholarly interest in late-antique sermons is relatively recent, and working on the sermons has provided great insight to the social history of Christianity. For this dissertation, Wendy Mayer’s work on John Chrysostom has been especially useful. See Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (London: Routledge, 2000); Johan Leemans et al., “*Let Us Die that We May Live: Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450)*” (London: Routledge, 2003); and Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil, *The Cult of the Saints: Select Homilies and Letters* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006).

a false impression of a monolithic Church. Diversity, however, can still be seen within the formation of the cult of the martyrs as local concerns and theological emphases trumped uniformity. The cult of martyrs could assume a variety of meanings for late-antique Christians, but this situation is unsurprising when one reflects on the fact that “martyrdom” always contained various shades of meaning.

### **Martyrdom and Its Meanings**

Early in the martyrdom phenomenon, Christians began imputing to martyrdom a variety of meanings, and the conceptions and definitions of martyrdom continued to develop and shift throughout the history of early Christianity. Etymologically, “martyr” comes from the Greek word μάρτυς, which means “testifier” or “witness.” At some point during Christianity’s first 150 years, Christians began using this word to describe those who had died violently for the faith. The writers of the New Testament used μάρτυς and its cognates frequently, but in the New Testament the word’s semantic range stays close to the idea of bearing witness or testifying.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the μάρτυς is an apostle, but often the μάρτυς is God himself.<sup>5</sup> In a couple of New Testament passages, however, the term μάρτυς seems closest to carrying overtones of the sense of “martyr.”

In the Revelation to John, a certain Antipas is described as “my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you.”<sup>6</sup> Antipas’s being a faithful witness is not necessarily

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<sup>4</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker [BDAG], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), v.s. μάρτυς, μαρτυρία, μαρτύριον.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. Rom 1:9; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess 2:5,10; 2 Cor 1:23. All biblical quotations are from the RSV. All other English quotations from the source material are from the translations listed in the bibliography, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup>Rev 2:13. ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ’ ὑμῶν.

contingent on his being killed, but the ideas are closely linked in this passage. John's use of μάρτυς is of interest, however, because he also calls Jesus a faithful witness just before and just after the passage about Antipas.<sup>7</sup> So either Antipas and Jesus are both martyrs or neither is. The second instance of μάρτυς being related to violent death comes when Paul is giving his own testimony to the people of Jerusalem in the twenty-second chapter of Acts. He says, "And when the blood of Stephen thy witness (μάρτυς) was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping the garments of those who killed him."<sup>8</sup> Here again, the act of witnessing leads to violent death. Just previous to this statement, however, Paul tells the listening crowd that God told him that he, Paul, would be a μάρτυς. Again, either Luke refers to Paul and Stephen as both being martyrs, or he means that they were both merely witnesses in the traditional sense.<sup>9</sup>

The New Testament indicates the earliest Christians experienced various levels of persecution from the Jews; however, persecution by the Romans did not begin until 64, when Nero blamed Christians for a fire in Rome.<sup>10</sup> Persecution by the Romans waxed and waned throughout the second century, but the absence or presence of persecution often depended on political realities that had very little to do with religion. The state's focus was less on punishing

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<sup>7</sup>Rev 1:9; 3:14.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 22:20. καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύννετο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρος σου, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤμην ἐφεστῶς καὶ συνευδοκῶν καὶ φυλάσσων τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρούντων αὐτόν.

<sup>9</sup>Of course Luke could possibly have envisioned this link between witness and death since he also wrote that God told Ananias, "I will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). Bowersock argues that all of these New Testament passages should not be interpreted as having any sense of martyrdom because of the frequency with the Biblical authors used the term to mean merely "witness." G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12–16. Frend, however, uses a more nuanced approach with the New Testament texts. He argues for a development of the term μάρτυς within the canon, and he believes that Johannine literature moves μάρτυς closest to the later meaning of "martyr." W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: a Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 58–76.

<sup>10</sup>Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.

Christians than on the need to force Christians to abandon their beliefs in an attempt to promote political stability. For the most part, local authorities had the right to suppress or ignore Christian communities as they saw fit.<sup>11</sup> During this second century of sporadic persecutions, this word μάρτυς came to have its present definition.

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom is the earliest unquestionable evidence of μάρτυς being used to mean martyr.<sup>12</sup> Around 150, Polycarp, the elderly bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, went into hiding because his church in Smyrna was suffering persecution. After his second hiding place was discovered, Polycarp decided that his execution must be God's will. The governor told Polycarp that he could go free if only he would curse Christ. Polycarp answered, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my king and saviour?"<sup>13</sup> According to the text, Polycarp was both burned and stabbed with a dagger before he died. Polycarp's martyrdom became the archetypical martyr tale for early Christianity, and many later martyr accounts follow the style and structure of this account.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the text, Polycarp and the others who died in Smyrna are referred to as martyrs. Once Christians had fused the idea of witnessing with dying violently for the faith, the concept of martyrdom became a powerful force for building the identity of these Christian communities, and the concept itself continued to develop.

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<sup>11</sup>De Ste. Croix provides an interesting analysis of the legality of the persecutions. He argues that in the provinces it was at the provincial authority's discretion whether and how they would deal with the Christians. G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26–38.

<sup>12</sup>Tradition has it that Polycarp was a disciple of John the Evangelist.

<sup>13</sup>*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3. Ὁγδοήκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτη δουλεύω αὐτῷ καὶ οὐδέν με ἠδίκησεν. κιά πῶς δύναμαι βλασφημῆσαι τὸν βασιλέα μου τὸν σώσαντά με.

<sup>14</sup>Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 222–223.

During Christianity's first two hundred years, persecution by the Roman government remained sporadic. Martyrdom texts from this period tend to lack reasons for the arrests, and the Roman government had no clear policy on dealing with the Christians.<sup>15</sup> Magistrates seemed to be somewhat suspicious of the name Christian, and though no policy was in place, coercions aimed at undermining the Christian's belief in exclusivity became the accidental test.<sup>16</sup> These persecutions, however, merely reinscribed in early Christianity the New Testament idea that Christians will suffer. The apostle Paul used his beatings and imprisonment as testimony to both his veracity and authority. By the mid-third century, the sporadic reality of martyrdom had been imputed to the passages about suffering in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

In 250 the first widespread and concerted persecution of Christian communities began. Emperor Decius required all residents of the empire to offer sacrifice to the traditional gods in an attempt to promote religious cohesion in a fractious empire. Though many people abandoned Christianity or compromised, many others chose death over sacrificing.<sup>18</sup> Intense centralized persecution would occur two more times under Valerian and Diocletian, and both emperors were motivated by concerns similar to those of Decius.<sup>19</sup> The damage to the Christian communities

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<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 42–43.

<sup>16</sup>Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), lvii–lxii.

<sup>17</sup>Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 35–36.

<sup>18</sup>J. B. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 135–154. Cf. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 300–308.

<sup>19</sup>For Valerian's persecution, see Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 317–318. For Diocletian's Great Persecution, see Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 364–ff.

wrought by Diocletian's decrees became known as the Great Persecution, which ended when Constantine declared in 312 that Christianity would enjoy a favored status.

This martyrdom phenomenon contains many facets. Naturally Roman persecutors and Christian communities had differing understandings of the situation and what was at stake, though the Romans often paid little notice at all to the Christians they persecuted.<sup>20</sup> While the Romans viewed the Christians as terminally stubborn, the Christians viewed their struggles as cosmic warfare, but even Christians did not all explain that struggle in the same terms. As noted above, the foundational concept of martyrdom was witnessing, but as Christians began to associate the word with violent death, other ideas became attached to it. The most important of these ideas is the notion that martyrdom can be some kind of sacrifice. Sacrifice was an already familiar concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and attaching it to martyrdom was an easy theological step in a context where voicing religious conviction could occasionally lead to death. Though other minor ideas appear in ancient writings about martyrs and martyrdom, witness and sacrifice become consistent threads throughout the literature, even though the understanding of what it means to witness and sacrifice occasionally shifts.

This language of martyrdom, which mixed sacrifice with witness bearing, had a long history of use in Christian communities, and the letters of Ignatius provide an early instance of this blending. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, is the earliest example outside the New Testament of a Christian who died for his faith. He was sent to Rome for execution at the turn of the second century, and on his journey he penned seven letters. These letters provide insight into

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<sup>20</sup>Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) paints an interesting picture of how little many Roman elites cared to learn about the growing Christian faith.

early Christianity and illuminate how Ignatius viewed his coming execution in Rome.<sup>21</sup> Ignatius does not use the word μάρτυς to describe his impending death; rather, he uses language reminiscent of sacrifice. Regardless of whether Ignatius viewed his death as a μαρτύριον, subsequent Christian generations did. Ignatius’s use of sacrificial language, therefore, served to strengthen that sacrificial-death strand in the churches’ conceptions of martyrdom. In his letter to the church in Rome, he tells them not to try to stop his execution by the authorities. Rather, Ignatius desired “to be poured out as an offering to God while there is still an altar ready.”<sup>22</sup> In the letter, Ignatius explains his hope that wild beasts might devour him, and he asks the Roman church, “Pray to the Lord on my behalf, that through these instruments [the beasts] I might prove to be a sacrifice to God.”<sup>23</sup> While Ignatius talked about his death as a sacrifice to God, he also acknowledged its witness bearing aspect. Through his martyrdom, Ignatius expected to become a “word of God.”<sup>24</sup> He does not use the word “martyr,” but Ignatius’s letter to the Romans testifies to the dual purpose that early Christians expected their deaths to serve: witness and sacrifice.

Similarly, the record of Polycarp’s martyrdom, which took place a few decades after Ignatius’s, reveals this same mixture of sacrifice and witness bearing. The author of Polycarp’s martyrdom compares Polycarp to “a splendid ram” (κριὸς ἐπίσημος) and “a whole burnt-offering” (ὄλοκαύτωμα),<sup>25</sup> but Polycarp’s recorded words do not indicate that he saw his death

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<sup>21</sup>Presumably, Ignatius did actually arrive in Rome and suffer execution. No evidence exists, however, beyond his seven letters.

<sup>22</sup>Ignatius *Ad Romanos* 2.2. πλέον δέ μοι μὴ παράσχησθε τοῦ σπονδισθῆναι θεῷ, ὡς ἔτι θυσιαστήριον ἔτοιμόν ἐστιν.

<sup>23</sup>Ignatius *Rom.* 4.2. λιτανεύσατε τὸν Κύριον ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ, ἵνα διὰ τῶν ὀργάνων τούτων θεοῦ θυσία εὔρεθῶ.

<sup>24</sup>Ignatius *Rom.* 2.1. ἐγὼ λόγος θεοῦ

<sup>25</sup>*Mart. Pol.* 14.1.



as containing any aspect of atonement. Instead, he provides the testimonial aspect of martyrdom by engaging in praise to God. Before the lighting of the fires, Polycarp prays, “For this and regarding everything, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom to you with him and the Holy Spirit be glory now and into the future eternity.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the chronicler viewed Polycarp’s death as a sacrifice of praise.

Ignatius and Polycarp both led churches in the East, but Christians in the western part of the empire suffered early on as well. In 177 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, persecution broke out against the church in Lyons in the province of Gaul. Popular prejudice facilitated persecution of the Christians, many of whom were immigrants from Asia Minor. These Christians brought the twin ideas of the martyrdom as sacrifice and witness bearing with them. In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, the writer acknowledges the role of witness bearing by relating that the martyrs “completed with all readiness a confession of their testimony.”<sup>27</sup> He also views them as sacrifices, saying, “Attalus was placed on an iron chair and scorched, while the sacrificial odor arose from his body.”<sup>28</sup> Of Blandina, he writes:

After being sufficiently thrown about by the animal [bull], she no longer understood what was happening because of the hope and retention of the things in which she believed and

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<sup>26</sup>*Mart. Pol.* 14.3. διὰ τοῦτο καὶ περὶ πάντων σὲ αἰνῶ, σὲ εὐλογῶ, σὲ δοξάζω διὰ τοῦ αἰωνίου καὶ ἐπουρανίου ἀρχιερέως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ σου παιδός, δι’ οὗ σοὶ σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ πνεύματι ἁγίῳ δόξα καὶ νῦν καὶ εἰς τοὺς μέλλοντας αἰῶνας. ἀμήν (my translation).

<sup>27</sup>*Martyrs of Lyons* 1.11. οἱ καὶ μετὰ πάσης προθυμίας ἀνεπλήρουν τὴν ὁμολογίαν τῆς μαρτυρίας (my translation).

<sup>28</sup>*Mart. Lyons* 1.52. ὁ δὲ Ἄτταλος, ὅποτε ἐπὶ τῆς σιδηρᾶς ἐπετέθη καθέδρας καὶ περιεκαίετο, ἠνίκα ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος κνῖσα ἀνεφέρετο (my translation).

because of her communion with Christ. So she was sacrificed, while the people agreed that never yet has a woman suffered so much in such a manner.<sup>29</sup>

The Christian community in Lyons recognized harmony between a martyrdom's testimony and its sacrificial nature.

Early in the fourth century, Eusebius wrote the *Martyrs of Palestine*, which chronicles the persecution that Eusebius witnessed under Diocletian. Eusebius continues in the same tradition found in those earlier martyr tales. He recognizes both a strand of sacrifice and a strand of witness bearing as being components of martyrdom. In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius calls his martyred friend Apphianus “the blessed and truly innocent lamb,” seemingly an allusion to martyrdom as sacrifice. At the same time, however, he reiterates the martyrs’ purpose as witnesses by claiming that Apphianus achieved his martyrdom by “boldness in confessing God.”<sup>30</sup>

Martyrdom became an intrinsic aspect of the Christian narratives. By the end of the apostolic era, Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire combined notions of sacrifice with witness bearing in order to make sense of their persecution, and these two aspects do not seem to be held in tension but embraced equally. Christianity in the empire, however, was not monolithic, and these notions, as well as others, were held with varying emphases. This variety of ideas imputed to martyrdom helps explain why modern-day historians rarely agree on the phenomenon’s meaning.

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<sup>29</sup>*Mart. Lyons* 1.56. καὶ ἰκανῶς ἀναβληθεῖσα πρὸς τοῦ ζώου μηδὲ αἰσθησιν ἔτι τῶν συμβαινόντων ἔχουσα διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐποχὴν τῶν πεπιστευμένων καὶ ὁμιλίαν πρὸς Χριστόν, ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ αὐτῶν ὁμολογούντων τῶν ἐθνῶν ὅτι μηδεπώποτε παρ’ αὐτοῖς γυνὴ τοιαῦτα καὶ τοσαῦτα ἔπαθεν (my translation).

<sup>30</sup>Eusebius *De martyribus Palaestinae* 4. παρρησίας τῆς εἰς Θεὸν ὁμολογίας, τοῦ μακαρίου καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀμνοῦ ἀκάκου.

Since the martyr texts indicate that martyrdom comprised various strands of thought, these multiple strands incline historians of martyrdom to locate martyrdom's source in a variety of places. In 1967, W. H. C. Frend published the influential *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, in which he emphasizes the Judaic roots of martyrdom. He writes, "Without Maccabees and without Daniel a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been thinkable."<sup>31</sup> Frend demonstrates an enviable command of the source material, but he often seems to posit a certain uniformity to the experiences of Christian communities throughout the empire.

In *Martyrdom and Rome*, Glen Bowersock scathingly criticizes Frend and other scholars who "have practiced a kind of crude and antiquated literary criticism to emphasize banal coincidences in various narratives of resistance to authority and heroic self-sacrifice as if every such episode constituted martyrdom."<sup>32</sup> Instead of positing Jewish roots for martyrdom, Bowersock believes that this experience of martyrdom would not have been possible apart from Roman culture. Rome provided the context for martyrdom and the ideal of a noble death, which Bowersock believes is its kernel.<sup>33</sup> Bowersock denies any continuity between the Maccabean martyrs and those of the early Christian communities. Bowersock's criticism overlooks, however, the fact that many Christians around the Mediterranean eventually integrated fully the Maccabean texts into their meta-narrative. This integration complicates Bowersock's thesis

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<sup>31</sup>Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 54.

<sup>32</sup>Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 26–27.

<sup>33</sup>Bowersock also claims that the use of written records is more evidence of the Roman foundation of martyrdom. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 23–39. Interestingly, Momigliano claims that a use of written records was unique to ecclesiastical historians in the Roman world and was founded in the Jewish historical tradition of Ezra. Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

because whatever the source of martyrdom, many early Christians believed that it partly derived from Judaism, which brings up questions of perception versus reality.

In his book on martyrdom in late antiquity, *Dying for God*, Daniel Boyarin critiques the approaches of both Frend and Bowersock, and he investigates the discourse of martyrdom between Christians and Jews in late antiquity.<sup>34</sup> Boyarin's model allows for a dynamic Christianity and Judaism, with each of these two related groups using martyrdom to define both itself and the other. Viewing martyrdom as a discourse instead of an event helps in accounting for the multiple meanings that the Christian communities imputed to martyrdom. Boyarin particularly attacks Frend's analysis because he believes Frend's view of Judaism is too static.<sup>35</sup> He takes issue with Bowersock as well, claiming, "By posing the issue the way he does, Bowersock is reinscribing a phenomenological boundary between Jews and Christians, a sort of pure Christianity, pure Judaism, and indeed pure Greco-Romanness."<sup>36</sup> Focusing on the "discourse" allows the historian to understand the evolving conception of martyrdom in early Christianity, an evolution with multiple emphases expounded by a multitude of voices, which cannot be neatly traced back to one fount.

Two more recent books examine this discourse, not through the lens of Jewish-Christian relations but through the prism that Christian communities used martyrdom to construct their own identity. Elizabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* examines the relationship between the martyrs themselves and the communities who embraced them. According to Castelli, execution for religious conviction does not make a martyr, but rather the

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<sup>34</sup>Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup>Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 127–130.

<sup>36</sup>Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 96.

community creates the martyr through interpreting that death.<sup>37</sup> Castelli's approach is theory laden, and her emphasis differs greatly from that of Frend or Bowersock because she feels that what "really" happened is less important than "what meanings" are produced.<sup>38</sup> Another book with similar aims is Lucy Grig's *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*.<sup>39</sup> Grig's book contains less theory than Castelli's and more literary analysis, and Grig attempts to explain how fourth- and fifth-century Latin communities represented the martyrs in both text and art. This discourse being carried on by Christian communities becomes even more varied when, to the significance of martyrdom itself, one adds the meanings that later Christians attached to the cult of martyrs.

### **Development and Spread of the Cult of Martyrs**

Evidence exists that some Christian communities began honoring the remains of their martyrs as early as the second century. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the persecutors did not want to give Polycarp's body to the Christians because they were afraid that they would make it a focus for worship. The church wished to provide Polycarp with a Christian burial, but this interference led the Roman centurion to cremate the body. Afterwards, the Christians gathered the remaining bones and ash, and buried them in a "fitting spot." Memorializing Polycarp's martyrdom became an annual observance for this congregation: "Gathering here, so far as we can, in joy and gladness, we will be allowed by the Lord to celebrate the anniversary day of his martyrdom, both as a memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for

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<sup>37</sup>Castelli's book is somewhat idiosyncratic because she tries to relate Christian memory-making of martyrs to American evangelicalism's response to the Columbine massacres, an interesting approach that attempts to find relevancy.

<sup>38</sup>Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 29.

<sup>39</sup>Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004).

the training and preparation of those who will do so one day.”<sup>40</sup> The cult that grew up around Polycarp’s grave rooted the Christian community’s future in its persecuted past. For the next hundred and fifty years, Polycarp could serve his community as a locus of resistance to a capricious government whose response to the Christians ranged from benign neglect to violent hostility.

For Christians, the grave was a special place. Romans had long been acquainted with the benefits of burial societies who would fellowship with their members in life and care for their bodies in death, but Christians attached more significance to their dead.<sup>41</sup> Christians founded their cemeteries outside the limits of the city according to Roman custom and law, which viewed dead bodies as pollutants. Christians, however, imputed spiritual importance to the graves of their dead because these cemeteries were not final resting places. The grave was only temporary, and Christians looked forward to a bodily resurrection of their brothers and sisters. Visiting the grave testified to this belief in the resurrection, and gathering at the tombs of dead Christians allowed those members of the church who still lived to include the dead in their celebrations. The importance of these gatherings has led Peter Brown to speculate that the holy grave allowed the church to “envisage that one day the barriers of the universe would be broken.”<sup>42</sup> Heaven and earth could be joined, in a sense, when the Christian community gathered at the graves of those who had gone before to worship the God who would one day reunite them.

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<sup>40</sup>*Mart. Pol.* 18.3. ἔνθα ὡς δυνατὸν ἡμῖν συναγομένοις ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει καὶ χαρᾷ παρέξει ὁ κύριος ἐπιτελεῖν τὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ ἡμέραν γενέθλιον εἰς τε τὴν τῶν προηθληκότων μνήμην καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ἄσκησιν τε καὶ ἐτοιμασίαν.

<sup>41</sup>Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 31–47.

<sup>42</sup>Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 2.

Scholars of an earlier era suggested that Christian celebration at the graves evidenced a substrate of popular religious fervor that reflected vestiges of pagan superstition, but Brown speculates that the clergy promoted enthusiasm for the growing cult of saints in order to maintain the congregation's unity.<sup>43</sup> Informal honoring of the dead could lead to the privatization of holiness, so bishops might have assumed control of these celebrations, keeping all pious expression under the same ecclesiastical umbrella. The Christian church who met within the city at the altar was the same church who met outside the gates at the cemetery. This cult honoring the martyrs helped Christian communities fashion an identity. Annual gatherings to honor martyrs like Polycarp provided local communities with a reminder of their Christian heritage. As with everything else in the empire, Constantine's rise to power altered the relationship those honored martyrs had with their devotees. With newfound favor and freedoms, Christian communities began to Christianize aspects of Roman society, and the cult of martyrs expanded and moved beyond separate, local observances during the fourth century.

R. A. Markus suggests that the cult of martyrs played an integral part in creating a holy temporality for Christianity.<sup>44</sup> The Christian calendar contained a unique rhythm, and during the fourth century, festivals honoring the martyrs, along with other Christian observances like Easter, began to sacralize time. The Christian calendar became a continuous rehearsal of the theological doctrines of renewal and resurrection. On the yearly cycle, Easter reminded Christians of Christ's resurrection from the dead, but Christians reminded themselves of the cycle on a weekly basis as well because every Sunday morning was a chance to proclaim the

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<sup>43</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 23–49.

<sup>44</sup>R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 97–108.

resurrection. Functioning in the same way, festivals honoring the martyrs could testify to the same belief in resurrection. Originally, these celebrations were highly localized, with each city honoring its own martyrs, its own heroes of the faith. Of course, these observances were uneven throughout the empire because not all towns had produced martyrs and some martyr shrines were located in rural areas not overseen by any ecclesiastical authority. Conversely, some important cities, like Rome, influenced the festivals in neighboring towns. By the time Constantine gained power, the church in Rome, a city with an unrivaled martyr tradition, celebrated about thirty anniversaries of the martyrs.<sup>45</sup> This number would explode over the course of the fourth century as bishops engaged in the task of Christianizing the calendar.

The rapid expansion of the cult of martyrs during the fourth century had some practical foundations. Diocletian's persecution at the beginning of the century created a fresh group of martyrs whose memory demanded to be honored. Only the most famous martyrs from the earliest years of persecution were remembered by name, but by 303 when the Great Persecution broke out, Christian communities knew how important it was to keep track of those who had died for the faith. Eusebius's *Martyrs of Palestine* catalogues many tales of persecution from this age. Not only did the persecution create new martyrs, but also it brought persecution to territories that had previously not experienced martyrdom, while reinforcing deep traditions in places like North Africa that already possessed a vibrant culture of honoring the martyrs.

But the cult did not expand merely because there were more martyrs. Constantine provided the Christian communities with a problem perhaps as challenging as Diocletian's persecutions. Being the recipients of Constantine's favor, the Christians needed to consider whether they were the same Church as that of the third century. Regarding the cult, Markus

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<sup>45</sup>Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 98.



writes, “The emphasis was subtly shifted in the fourth century: to honour the dead, especially the martyr, remained a duty, but its discharge was now the satisfaction of a new need. This was the need to be able to see the post-Constantinian Church as the heir of the Church of the martyrs.”<sup>46</sup> As the bishops Christianized the calendar, the feasts of martyrs proliferated both temporally and geographically attempting to tie the disparate congregations of the empire into one Church rooted in a historical past.

This appropriation of the past could even reach back farther than the time of Christ. During this expansion of the cult of martyrs in the fourth century, bishops began venerating the Maccabeans who died in the Seleucid persecutions of the 160s BC. The various books of Maccabees describe the deaths of faithful Jews at the hands of Seleucid oppressors because of their refusal to abandon the Torah. These stories contain many of the same elements that later characterized Christian martyrologies: trials designed to cause apostasy, tortures and promises given by the magistrate, and a confession of continued faith in God. In light of these commonalities, it is surprising that Christian communities did not adopt these Jewish saints earlier. The earliest extant evidence of Christians honoring the Maccabean martyrs is Gregory of Nazianzus’s Homily 15, *On the Maccabees*.<sup>47</sup> Gregory probably preached this sermon in 362, during the reign of Julian the Apostate.<sup>48</sup> He used the Maccabean situation to criticize in a veiled

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<sup>46</sup>Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 99.

<sup>47</sup>Martha Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15 and the Genesis of the Christian Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs,” *Byzantion* 64 (1994): 166–192. Vinson notes earlier Christian references to the Maccabees, demonstrating that they are largely brief passing comments of a purely historical nature (171–177).

<sup>48</sup>Vinson argues that Gregory’s homily provides important historical information about the relationship between Christians, Pagans, and Jews during Julian’s rule (Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15”). Also see Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 33–35.

manner the anti-Christian policies of the emperor. In the sermon, he explicitly says that very few Christian communities honor these martyrs because their deaths predated Christ.<sup>49</sup> Gregory, however, found their cult useful for promoting Christianization, and this sermon acts as a turning point for the Maccabees. Martha Vinson writes, “Before this sermon, the Maccabees are merely faces in a crowd of Old Testament exempla ... while after it, as the homiletic literature from the last decades from the fourth century attests, they have been singled out from the pack as the sole beneficiaries not only of encomia but of a well-established cult.”<sup>50</sup> By the year 400, the Maccabees were being honored as Christian martyrs by preachers around the Mediterranean.

Within twenty years of Gregory’s sermon, the Christian community in Antioch had a thriving cult of the Maccabean martyrs to rival the older cult of the same martyrs operated by the Jews. There is some debate about whether the Christian community in Antioch formed its own cult at the end of the fourth century or whether it merely absorbed the Jewish cult. For example, Robert L. Wilken assumes that the Christians “were able to take possession of the synagogue and made it into a Christian martyrion.”<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Martha Vinson gives two reasons why the Christians must have created their own cult. First, Christian bishops tended towards differentiation rather than assimilation at this time, and second, the Jewish population of Antioch was too large and influential to make Christian seizure of property easy.<sup>52</sup> But this cult did not

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<sup>49</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus *Or.* 15.1 (PG 35:912).

<sup>50</sup>Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15,” 176.

<sup>51</sup>Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 88.

<sup>52</sup>Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15,” 185–186.

merely find new life in Antioch. By the end of the fourth century, many bishops, like Ambrose in Milan and Augustine in Hippo, had accepted the validity of the Maccabean cult.<sup>53</sup>

Another reason for the expansion of the cult of martyrs during the fourth century was the increase in infrastructure. With Constantine's rule, Christian structures began to be built at an unprecedented rate. Local congregations began building new basilicas for worship and new martyr shrines in the cemeteries. Not only did the martyrs' cults sacralize time, but also they sacralized space through the construction of these buildings.<sup>54</sup> Moving the remains of relics of the martyrs into these new buildings made the space holy.<sup>55</sup>

### **Veneration and Praxis**

Much of this dissertation examines the multiplicity of emphases in theology and meaning that bishops around the Mediterranean attached to the cult of the martyrs, but there are some common features to how Christians honored the martyrs. The feast days of the martyrs were viewed as times of celebration in the community. Evidence from a variety of locales in the Roman Empire attests to these celebrations often beginning, and sometimes ending, with processions.<sup>56</sup> Though processions were broadly applied to many events in the life of the church, on a martyr's festival the Christians of the community often marched together to the shrines or cemeteries to begin their observance. Usually, the events surrounding the martyr's death would be recounted, or the acts of the martyr would be read, if a text existed. These martyr texts, which

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<sup>53</sup>E.g., Ambrose *De Jacob et vita beata* 2.12; Augustine *Sermones* 300.

<sup>54</sup>For Markus's discussion of the creation of holy spaces, see Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 137–ff.

<sup>55</sup>The moving of martyr relics is called "translation." These translations became relatively common at this time, and we will look at some notable translations in the last four chapters.

<sup>56</sup>Johan Leemans et al., *"Let Us Die that We May Live:" Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450)* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.

preserved the deeds of the martyrs, were the creations of local congregations and were written and rewritten as churches fashioned their identities.<sup>57</sup> In addition to reading these texts, the bishop or a presbyter often gave a sermon followed by the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>58</sup> In some locales, the day would include picnics or feasting, a practice that may have been the earliest form of veneration at the shrines.<sup>59</sup> Bishops often viewed the martyrs' feast days as occasions of solemn joy.

The North African churches observed the martyrs' feast days with exuberance. Christians celebrated the victorious martyrs with feasting, drinking, and dancing, and the festivities often continued late into the night. These celebrations usually took place at the graves of the martyrs, but often other locations sufficed for the memorial. Carthage had two shrines for Cyprian, one for his grave and one for the place of his execution. North Africans preferred their homegrown saints, such as Cyprian and Perpetua, who even received more attention than the martyred apostles did.<sup>60</sup>

During her time in Milan, Augustine's African mother, Monica, discovered that not all churches practiced these customs. Augustine wrote that she "brought to certain oratories, erected in the memory of the saints, offerings of porridge, bread, and wine—as had been her custom in

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<sup>57</sup>See the introduction in Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, and Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*. Grig investigates art as well as textual representations of the martyrs.

<sup>58</sup>Leemans et al., *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 16. Though honoring the martyrs predominantly took place within the context of their feast at the grave, late antique Christians invented other ways of honoring the martyrs as well. Asterius of Amasea claims that some Mediterranean sailors kept an empty seat for the martyr Phocas at mealtime. Everyday a different sailor would buy Phocas's portion of the meal, and when they put into port, the money would be given to the poor. Asterius of Amasea *Phocas* 11.1.

<sup>59</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 37–39.

<sup>60</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 298.1.1.

Africa—and she was forbidden to do so by the doorkeeper.”<sup>61</sup> Augustine described his mother as a very temperate woman who only drank one cup of diluted wine, no matter how many saints she needed to honor. Even so, Bishop Ambrose convinced her to abandon her native customs. Augustine relates that Ambrose had two reasons for forbidding the practice: “It might be an occasion of gluttony for those who were already drunken and also because these funereal memorials were very much like some of the superstitious practices of the pagans.”<sup>62</sup> Augustine took the example of Ambrose to heart, and upon his return to North Africa, he worked with other like-minded bishops to change the popular perception of the purpose of the feast day.

Augustine filled his sermons on the martyrs with denunciations of what he saw as excesses in the popular celebrations. In a sermon delivered in 401 in Carthage, Augustine compares those people who attend the martyr feasts for the purpose of drinking wine to their forebears who persecuted the martyrs.<sup>63</sup> Augustine frequently condemns the drunkenness that attended feast days, and his association of bishops attempted to curtail some of the revelry that accompanied these holy days.

Augustine preached to a somewhat rowdy crowd in Carthage on January 23, 404, the day after he sulkily refused to preach because of too much disturbance.<sup>64</sup> In this sermon, he lauds the reforms that Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, had instituted concerning the celebration of feast days. Augustine tells those gathered, “We all know what a harmful mixing between males

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<sup>61</sup>Augustine *Confessiones* 6.2. Itaque cum ad memorias sanctorum, sicut in Africa solebat, pultes et panem et merum attulisset atque ab ostiario prohiberetur.

<sup>62</sup>Augustine *Conf.* 6.2. Ista non fieri nec ab eis qui sobrie facerent, ne ulla occasio se ingurgitandi daretur ebriosis, et quia illa quasi parentalia superstitioni gentilium essent simillima.

<sup>63</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 305A.4.

<sup>64</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 359B.3.

and females took place here, because we also were part of that stain in previous days.”<sup>65</sup> Since the days of Augustine’s youth, Aurelius had instituted a segregation of the sexes in order to minimize opportunity for immoral behavior. Augustine sees this step as positive because he knows that not everyone who attended a feast was primarily interested in contemplating the martyr’s victory over Satan. He confesses to his audience, “When I went to vigils as a student in this city, I spent the night rubbing up beside women, along with other boys anxious to make an impression on the girls, and where, who knows, the opportunity might present itself to have a love-affair with them.”<sup>66</sup> He encourages these Carthaginian Christians to keep up the good work by exclaiming, “Now how respectably vigils are kept, how chaste, how holy!”<sup>67</sup> He claims that Aurelius’s reforms are so obviously beneficial that even those who wish to engage in dubious activities at the feasts of the martyrs will not be able to complain against them.<sup>68</sup>

Instead of providing a day of worldly pleasure, a feast day should encourage Christians to imitate the martyrs’ virtues. At the feast of some unidentified martyr, Augustine exhorted his congregation to have self-control. He tells them, “So this is what it means to love the martyrs, this is what celebrating the feast day of the martyrs with devotion and piety really

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<sup>65</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Quae hic enim antea fuerit dissolutio et confusio feminarum et masculorum, omnes novimus, quia et nos in praeterita aetate huius labis pars fuimus.

<sup>66</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Ego puer vigilans cum studerem in hac civitate, sic vigilavi feminis permixtis improbitatibus masculorum, ubi forte et castitatem temptabat occasio (trans. Brown, *Augustine*, 456–457).

<sup>67</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Quam nunc honeste vigilatur, quam caste, quam sancte!

<sup>68</sup>Augustine seems here to be telling his hearers how beneficial the reforms are precisely because many people were complaining about them.

means—not drowning yourself in wine, but imitating their faith and endurance.”<sup>69</sup> Often the veneration meant imitation, and the martyrs would dispense virtue on their visitors.

Participants in the cult of martyrs expected that some form of benefit would come to them because of the honor they showed the martyrs, and they did not expect that this benefit would be merely spiritual. Often people came to the cult, hoping to be healed from physical infirmity. In the last book of his *City of God*, which he finished in 427, Augustine of Hippo recorded a number of healings that he attributed to the martyrs’ powers, or as he more accurately insists by God’s power through the martyrs.<sup>70</sup> In one of his sermons on the forty martyrs of Sabaste delivered in 373, Basil of Caesarea claimed that everyone could benefit from the martyrs, if they would only go see them. Christians in difficult straits would get relief from the martyrs, and the martyrs would also protect the prosperity of those who were satisfied with their lives.<sup>71</sup>

Even in death, many people wanted to be associated with the cult of the martyrs. Burial *ad sanctos*, being interred near a martyr, was quite popular with Christian communities in both the Latin and Greek halves of the empire. People believed that spiritual benefits would be gained from lying so near the martyrs. Since the martyrs were close to God, being buried near them would perhaps bring the average Christian a little closer to God. Also, the idea existed that at the resurrection, awakening near martyrs would be meritorious. Besides these spiritual benefits there may have been the very practical concern that a tomb near a powerful martyr might be less

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<sup>69</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Hoc est ergo martyres amare, hoc est dies martyrum devota pietate celebrare, non vino ingurgitari sed illorum fidem et patientiam imitari (trans. Hill).

<sup>70</sup>Augustine *De civitate Dei* 22.8–10.

<sup>71</sup>Basil of Caesarea *In sanctos quadraginta martyres* 8. It is somewhat curious that Basil would promise his hearers that the martyrs would protect their prosperity since, when one reflects on the martyrs’ violent deaths, it seems they were not able to protect their own prosperity.

susceptible to desecration by grave robbers. Many notable bishops and their families were buried in the vicinity of martyrs; for example, both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus buried their parents and siblings near martyrs.<sup>72</sup> Paulinus of Nola approved of this practice, but it seems that he did not feel adequate in justifying it so he sent a letter to Augustine asking for his opinion on the matter.<sup>73</sup> In his reply, Augustine allowed burial *ad sanctos*, but he indicated that this allowance is mostly a compassionate concession to grieving families. He believed that spiritual benefit for the dead could come from extra prayers said on their behalf. Christians would offer these prayers because the deceased's propinquity to the martyrs would remind them to pray. Augustine, however, claimed that there was no spiritual benefit to burial *ad sanctos* unless the person had lived a life consistent with the faith.<sup>74</sup>

As Peter Brown notes in his groundbreaking work on the cult, “Scholars of every and of no denomination still find themselves united in a common reticence and incomprehension when faced with this phenomenon.”<sup>75</sup> Late antique Christianity’s interest in relics and martyr cults struck eighteenth-century writers, like Hume and Gibbon, as a vulgar manifestation of pagan polytheism. These ideas of the eighteenth century colored the scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth, which proposed that late antique Christianity comprised two tiers, elite bishops and their uneducated congregations. Brown questions this model, and he criticizes the notion that “popular” religion was a monolithic polytheism and that educated elites allowed residual pagan

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<sup>72</sup>Leemans et al., *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 13. On burial *ad sanctos* also see Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 30–35.

<sup>73</sup>Augustine *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 1.1.

<sup>74</sup>Augustine *Cur.* 18.22.

<sup>75</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 12–13.



practices to keep their congregations happy.<sup>76</sup> Brown argues that the cult of the martyrs did not arise directly from pre-Christian religion but that the cult of martyrs filled the role that patronage had in Roman society.<sup>77</sup>

Even so, some cross-pollination with polytheism occurred. Incubation, for example, was a relatively common practice at the shrines to the martyrs. Christians who needed healing from the martyrs, as well as other favors, would sleep at their shrines in hopes of experiencing a miracle. This practice was a common feature in the cult of the god of healing, Asclepius. Often when devotees were healed, they would bring offerings to the shrine in the form of the body part that had been healed.<sup>78</sup> Even though Brown attempts to disassociate the cult with polytheism, some late antique Christians did not hesitate to draw parallels. In his sermon on the martyr Phocas, Asterius of Amasea explains that the benefits that polytheists seek in many gods are all dispensed by a single martyr, Phocas.<sup>79</sup> Jerome admits that some forms of martyr veneration are residual polytheistic practices, but this fact does not bother him since it is done with a good conscience.<sup>80</sup> These manifestations of the martyrs' cults demonstrate the limitations of Brown's groundbreaking work. While he manages to dispel the scholarly embarrassment surrounding the cult, he looks for too much uniformity in a phenomenon that had different meanings and uses for the various churches.

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<sup>76</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 12–22.

<sup>77</sup>For Brown's discussion on the relationship between Roman hero cults and Christianity, see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 5–7. For his discussion on the saint as patron, 50–68.

<sup>78</sup>Leemans et al., *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 12–13.

<sup>79</sup>Asterius of Amasea *Phocas* 13.1.

<sup>80</sup>Jerome *Adversus Vigilantius* 4.

The remainder of this work investigates a variety of roles that the martyrs through their cults filled for Christians at the turn of the fifth century. This narrative falls within the larger story of the empire's Christianization, but while various churches attempted to use martyrs to "baptize" the Rome that they had inherited, they do not all use them in the same way. The churches around the Mediterranean, indeed individual Christians, all applied different meanings to the cult and expected different benefits from observing it.

## CHAPTER 2

### VOLUNTARY MARTYRDOM AND THE CULT OF MARTYRS

As Christian communities attempted to explain the purpose of this growing cult of the martyrs, one question they had to revisit was that of the legitimacy of voluntary martyrdom. Voluntary martyrdom, when martyrs precipitated their own deaths, was a significant aspect of the martyr phenomenon. From the beginning, Christian thinkers pondered whether these actions were appropriate, and by the turn of the fifth century, consensus still eluded the churches, but some patterns had emerged. A bishop's position on this question indicated the value that he placed on the traditional beliefs and practices of the community. Those bishops who invested the martyrdom tradition with spiritual authority were more willing to accept these martyrs, while other bishops, notably Augustine, felt this phenomenon was contrary to revealed religion.

#### **Background to the Question**

In the early church, voluntary martyrdom comprised three types, each with varying levels of approval.<sup>1</sup> First, the most controversial form of voluntary martyrdom included those martyrs who were so overcome by events that they caused their own deaths. For example, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Agathonike became so excited while watching Carpus and Papyrus die martyrs' deaths that she believed she should join them on the pyre. The crowd tried to

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<sup>1</sup>Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, 153–200. Ste. Croix examines the martyrdom phenomenon with an extraordinary amount of skepticism, but his analysis and classification of the various types of martyrdom are very helpful. In Ste. Croix's estimation, any martyr could be classified a voluntary martyr because escaping persecution should not have been difficult.

dissuade her after she announced her intentions, reminding her that her son needed her. She replied that God would take care of him, at which point she disrobed and threw herself on the fire.<sup>2</sup> In the Latin recension of the text, however, Agathonike is arrested with the other two martyrs, which leads Musurillo to suggest, “The Latin redactor was attempting to colour the facts for a later age.”<sup>3</sup> In the fourth century, the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius records similar martyrdoms. An elderly woman in Alexandria named Apollonia had all her teeth broken out in a time of persecution, and her persecutors threatened to burn her. They wanted her to join in their “impious cries,” but they released her when she begged. After her release, however, she “leaped eagerly into the fire and was consumed.”<sup>4</sup> Eusebius also describes mass voluntary martyrdom in Nicomedia, when persecution broke out there. He writes, “It is reported that with a certain divine and indescribable eagerness men and women rushed into the fire.”<sup>5</sup> This hysteria for martyrdom elicited concern from many bishops, most notably Clement of Alexandria, but the texts that preserve these tales of self-sacrifice speak of these voluntary martyrs with warm approbation. Eusebius and the other recorders of their martyrdoms viewed these martyrs as heroes. Their sacrifices demonstrated their strength of character.

The second type of voluntary martyrs accomplished their goals by forcing the authorities to execute them. In 304 in the city of Catania on the island of Sicily, the deacon

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<sup>2</sup>*Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike* 44.

<sup>3</sup>Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xvi.

<sup>4</sup>Eusebius *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.41 (PG 20:605–607). Ἄλλὰ καὶ τὴν θαυμασιωτάτην τότε παρθένον πρεσβύτιν Ἀπολλωνίαν διαλαβόντες, τοὺς μὲν ὀδόντας, κόπτοντες τὰς σιαγόνας, ἐξήλασαν· πυρὰν δὲ νήσαντες πρὸ τῆς πόλεως, ζῶσαν ἠπέιλουν κατακαῦσαι, εἰ μὴ συνεκφωνήσειεν αὐτοῖς τὰ τῆς ἀσεβείας κηρύγματα. Ἡ δὲ ὑποπαραιτησαμένη βραχὺ καὶ ἀνεθεῖσα, συντόνωσ ἐπεπήδησεν εἰς τὸ πῦρ, καὶ καταπέφλεκται.

<sup>5</sup>Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 8.6 (PG 20:753). Ὅτε λόγος ἔχει, προθυμια θεία τινὶ καὶ ἀρρήτῳ, ἄνδρας ἅμα γυναῖξιν ἐπὶ τὴν πυρὰν καθάλλεσθαι.

Euplius approached the Roman prefect's chamber yelling, "I am a Christian, and I desire to die for the name of Christ."<sup>6</sup> He even brought copies of the gospels with him in order to prove how worthy he was of martyrdom. The writer of this martyrology obviously admires Euplius for his rash willingness, and he also emphasizes the sacrificial nature of martyrdom in Euplius's story. When the governor tells Euplius that he can go free if only he would sacrifice, Euplius replies, "I only sacrifice myself to Christ my God."<sup>7</sup> As with many texts, the strands of martyrdom and sacrifice are bound closely together, strengthening the legitimacy of the voluntary martyr.

Eusebius also strengthens these bonds when he writes about the martyrdom of his friend, Apphianus, the one he calls "innocent lamb." Apphianus lived with Eusebius at the time of his martyrdom, and in his *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius recollects that Apphianus attacked the governor of Palestine in order to keep the governor from offering libations to the pagan gods and that this rash action precipitated his martyrdom. Eusebius indicates that the governor and his entourage did not care for Apphianus's disruption: "Thereupon, he of whom we are speaking [Apphianus], and that instantly, as might have been expected after so bold a deed, was torn by the governor and those who were with him as if by wild beasts."<sup>8</sup> Through his boldness and self-sacrifice, Apphianus gained his prize in heaven and immortality in Eusebius's book.

While both the direct and indirect forms of voluntary martyrdom had a number of critics, many Christians approved of the third type of voluntary martyrdom. They viewed Christian women who wanted to protect their virtue as justified in taking their own lives.

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<sup>6</sup>*Acta Eupli* 1.1 Christianus sum, et pro Christi nomine mori desidero.

<sup>7</sup>*Acta Eupli* 2.6. Calvisianus praefectus dixit: Sacrifica, si vis liberari. Euplius dixit: Sacrifico modo Christo Deo me.

<sup>8</sup>Eusebius *Mart. Pal.* 4.10 (PG 20:1476). Ἐπὶ τούτοις ὁ περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος, παραχρῆμα μὲν, ὅσα εἰκός αὐτὸν, ὡς ἂν ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ τολμήματι θηρῶν δίκην ἀγρίων πρὸς τῶν ἀμφὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα διασπαρχθεῖς.

Eusebius tells of a woman who believed that soldiers would rape her and her two daughters. The mother convinced her daughters that their only escape was to flee to Christ. The three made an excuse to get some privacy and killed themselves by jumping into a river that was flowing by.<sup>9</sup>

Eusebius also tells the story of a prefect's wife in Rome, who committed suicide after her husband consented to allow Maxentius, Constantine's rival, access to her.

Having requested a little time for adorning her body, she entered her chamber and being alone, stabbed herself with a sword. Dying immediately, she left her corpse to those who had come for her. And by her deeds, more powerfully than by any words, she has shown to all men now and hereafter that the virtue which prevails among Christians is the only invincible and indestructible possession.<sup>10</sup>

These women willingly died as a testimony to the importance Christians placed on sexual purity. There are interesting parallels in this passage with the Roman story of Lucretia, but it is surprising that a Greek speaker from Palestine is transmitting this trope of defending matronly virtue. Though there is probably some literary echo of Roman values, it was the idea of sacrifice that charged the imaginations of Christians like Eusebius.

This idea of the martyrs seeking to be a willing sacrifice was so compelling that martyrologies often depict martyrs who did not necessarily offer themselves up as sharing the same qualities as voluntary martyrs.<sup>11</sup> In these martyr texts, Christians who were not voluntarily

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<sup>9</sup>Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 8.12.

<sup>10</sup>Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 8.14 (PG 20:785–788). ἐς βραχὺν ὑποπαραιτησαμένη ὡς ἂν ἦδη κατακοσμηθεῖ τὸ σῶμα, εἴσεισιν ἐπὶ τοῦ ταμείου, καὶ μονωθεῖσα, ξίφος καθ' ἑαυτῆς πήγνυσι. θανούσά τε παραχρήμα, τὸν μὲν νεκρὸν τοῖς προαγωγοῖς καταλιμπάνει, ἔργοις δ' αὐτοῖς ἀπάσης φωνῆς γεγωνότεροις, ὅτι μόνον χρημάτων ἀήττητόν τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον ἢ παρὰ Χριστιανοῖς ἀρετὴ πέφυκεν, εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους τοὺς τε νῦν ὄντας καὶ τοὺς μετὰ ταῦτα γενησομένους ἐξέφηνε.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor think this trope of willingness appropriate because they believe that all martyrs should be viewed as voluntary martyrs. They claim that the requirements the authorities placed on the Christians were minimal, so no Christian would have died against his or her will. See Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1992), 133. Droge writes with the agenda to

seeking death are portrayed as willingly embracing it. The chronicler of Polycarp's martyrdom explicitly states, "We do not approve of those who come forward of themselves;"<sup>12</sup> however, just before this statement of reticence, the same author lauds a certain Germanicus for his perseverance in martyrdom because "he drew the beast to himself by force, planning to depart more quickly this unjust and lawless life."<sup>13</sup> From the context, the author makes it clear that the reason voluntary martyrdom is discouraged is because the martyr might not be truly ready and fail his or her test. Germanicus, on the other hand, was ready, and the chronicler emphasizes his willing embrace of death. Even though Germanicus is not a voluntary martyr, he is cast as one. Similarly, Perpetua's passion, which equates martyrdom with sacrifice and a second baptism, depicts Perpetua as a voluntary martyr, even though she did not offer herself to the authorities. Her martyrology reads, "She howled as she was struck to the bone, and she moved the uncertain hand of the young gladiator to her throat. Perhaps so great a woman, who was feared by the unclean spirit, could not be killed otherwise unless she herself were willing."<sup>14</sup> For some authors of martyr texts, the martyrs seem to have had to be willing in order for their deaths to be martyrdoms.

Some scholars suppose that Roman ideas regarding suicide helped influence the martyr phenomenon. Most notably, Glen Bowersock advocates the primacy of Rome's role in

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remove any stigma from suicide, and casting all martyrdom as suicide is an attempt to further that agenda. More will be said on some of Droge's more questionable claims later in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup>*Mart. Pol.* 4. διὰ τοῦτο οὖν, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἐπαινοῦμεν τοὺς προσιόντας ἑαυτοῖς.

<sup>13</sup>*Mart. Pol.* 3. ἐαυτῷ ἐπεσπάσατο τὸ θηρίον προσβιασάμενος, τάχιον τοῦ ἀδίκου καὶ ἀνόμου βίου αὐτῶν ἀπαλλαγῆναι βουλόμενος (my translation).

<sup>14</sup>*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 21.9–10. Perpetua autem [...] inter ossa conpuncta exululavit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit. fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab inmundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa voluisset (my translation).

the creation of martyrdom. He writes, “Without the glorification of suicide in the Roman tradition, the development of martyrdom in the second and third centuries would have been unthinkable. The hordes of voluntary martyrs would never have existed. Both Greek and Jewish traditions stood against them.”<sup>15</sup> Roman culture on the whole approved of suicide because the act conveyed dignity and strength of character in the Roman milieu. Romans viewed suicide as justifying the moral position of the one performing it.<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, the earliest of the Latin fathers, explicitly incorporates this Roman view of self-death into his theology of martyrdom. In a passage reminiscent of the “cloud of witnesses” in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, Tertullian lauds the Greco-Roman notables who died by their own hands.

Let the spirit set clearly before both itself and the flesh, how these things, though exceedingly painful, have yet been calmly endured by many, and, have even been eagerly desired for the sake of fame and glory; and this not only in the case of men, but of women too, that you, O holy women, may be worthy of your sex. It would take me too long to enumerate one by one the men who at their own self-impulse have put an end to themselves. As to women, there is a famous case at hand: the violated Lucretia, in the presence of her kinsfolk, plunged the knife into herself, that she might have glory for her chastity. Mucius burned his right hand on an altar, that this deed of his might dwell in fame. The philosophers have been out-stripped, for instance Heraclitus, who, smeared with cowdung, burned himself; and Empedocles, who leapt down into the fires of Aetna; and Peregrinus, who not long ago threw himself on the funeral pile. For women even have despised the flames. Dido did so, lest, after the death of a husband very dear to her, she should be compelled to marry again; and so did the wife of Hasdrubal, who, Carthage being on fire, that she might not behold her husband suppliant at Scipio’s feet, rushed with her children into the conflagration, in which her native city was destroyed. [... and Regulus, ... and Cleopatra, ... and the Athenian courtesan, ... and the Spartan youths ...]<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 72. Bowersock’s thesis is a bit reductionistic and does not account for some of the evidence of volunteering found in the eastern traditions. Bowersock does, however, emphasize a single strand that no doubt made up some of the tapestry of martyrdom.

<sup>16</sup>See Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), for an overview of Roman attitudes towards a variety of kinds of death.

<sup>17</sup>Tertullian *Ad martyras*. 4.3–8. Sed spiritus contra ponat sibi et carni: acerba licet ista, a multis tamen aequo animo excepta, immo et ultro appetita, famae et gloriae causa; nec a viris tantum, sed etiam a feminis, ut vos quoque, benedictae, sexui vestro respondeatis. Longum est, si enumerem singulos, qui se gladio confecerint, animo suo ducti. De feminis ad manum est Lucretia, quae vim stupri passa



He admonishes Christians that if pagans could die well for the lesser causes of fame and glory, Christians should have even greater motivation to do likewise in order to “obtain a celestial glory and a divine reward.”<sup>18</sup>

Bowersock believes that ideas about Roman noble death allowed many Christians to approve of voluntary martyrdom, but he also notes that a strong element within the Christian community condemned the practice.<sup>19</sup> Plato and his followers had disapproved of suicide, and some Christians influenced by Platonic philosophy carried the same prejudices. Tertullian’s contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, was one such Christian Platonist.

While Tertullian in North Africa wrote an apology for and an encouragement to martyrdom, Clement explicated a theology of martyrdom that attempted to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, Clement faced a gnostic sect that claimed any martyr was “a self-murderer and a suicide who makes confession by death;” on the other hand, he attempted to dissuade Christians from becoming voluntary martyrs, who “banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly.”<sup>20</sup> The gnostics suggested that “true martyrdom” consisted merely of possessing knowledge of the one true God. In promoting this internal, spiritualized version of martyrdom, the gnostics denigrated actual martyrdom. Clement accuses them of impiety and cowardice, denying them the name Christian. Likewise,

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cultrum sibi adegit in conspectu propinquorum, ut gloriam castitati suae pareret. Mucius dexteram suam in ara cremavit, ut hoc factum eius fama haberet. Nec minus fecerunt philosophi: Heraclitus, qui se bubulo stercore oblitum excussit; item Empedocles, qui in ignes Aetnaei montis desilivit; et Peregrinus, qui non olim se rogo immisit, cum feminae quoque contempserint ignes: Dido, ne post virum delictissimum nubere cogeretur; item Asdrubalis uxor, quae iam ardente Carthagine, ne maritum suum supplicem Scipionis videret, cum filiis suis in incendium patriae devolavit.

<sup>18</sup>Tertullian *Mart.* 4.9. ad consecutionem gloriae caelestis et divinae mercedis

<sup>19</sup>Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 64–71.

<sup>20</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 4.4.

Clement questions the faithfulness of those who cause their own destruction in order to die a martyr's death, comparing them to the Indian gymnosophists who died "vain deaths in useless fire."

Faced with these twin dangers, Clement explicates his theology of martyrdom in much the same way that Augustine would two hundred years later when the bishop of Hippo was faced with his own dangerous sects. Clement defines martyrdom in biblical terms instead of within the framework of Christian experience and tradition. Clement makes the "witnessing" aspect of martyrdom the only aspect, an argument later made by Augustine.<sup>21</sup> He writes, "If the confession to God is martyrdom, each soul which has lived purely in the knowledge of God, which has obeyed the commandments, is a witness [martyr] both by life and word, in whatever way it may be released from the body."<sup>22</sup> This etymological argument becomes the cornerstone for rebuking his opponents. Contrary to the gnostics, Clement says that Christians cannot lie with their lips to avoid death, while confessing in their hearts. Even so, he clearly minimizes the importance of actual death, undercutting the position of the advocates for voluntary martyrdom. This teaching, Clement claims, comes directly from the Christ. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God."<sup>23</sup> Even though Jesus does not use the word μαρτύς, Clement claims that this text explicitly

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<sup>21</sup>Augustine's theology of martyrdom will be discussed at length in chapter six.

<sup>22</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 4.4 (PG 8:1228). Εἰ τοίνυν ἡ πρὸς Θεὸν ὁμολογία μαρτυρία ἐστὶ, πᾶσα ἡ καθαρῶς πολιτευσαμένη ψυχὴ μετ' ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἡ ταῖς ἐντολαῖς ἐπακηκουῖα, μάρτυς ἐστὶ καὶ βίῳ καὶ λόγῳ, ὅπως ποτὲ τοῦ σώματος ἀπαλλάττεται.

<sup>23</sup>Luke 12:8–9.

demonstrates Jesus' views on martyrdom.<sup>24</sup> True martyrdom hinges on “acknowledgment” or “confession.” This confession manifests both a love for God and man. According to Clement, the gnostics might think they love God, but they cannot claim to love man if they fail to confess Christ in the face of persecution. Clement believes that giving the Christian witness to Christ's enemies demonstrates love for those enemies.

Of course, love would also keep Christians from seeking martyrdom, and Clement suggests that they flee persecution when possible, a concept that would have baffled Tertullian. Christians must not engage in suicide martyrdom because, according to Clement, any man who kills a godly person sins against God, even if that man is himself.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Christians ought to flee whenever possible because voluntarily presenting themselves for judgment makes them partially guilty of their own deaths. Fleeing is the loving thing to do, and provoking martyrdom is unloving because voluntary martyrs cause the magistrates to be more guilty than they otherwise would have been. The Christian's love for his fellow man ought to keep him from stirring up the authorities and causing them to blaspheme the name of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to citing the Bible in his explanation of martyrdom, Clement freely quotes from Plato, as well as other philosophers, but marshals his quotes from Plato as a supplement to the biblical text. Clement does not seem to impute to Plato authority, but rather he uses Plato as a word of common sense. Clement warns his readers not to be led astray; both the Christian texts and the Greek philosophers agree that violence against oneself is criminal. Clement's argumentation closely binds Christianity and Platonism, but discerning which one affects the

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<sup>24</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 4.9.

<sup>25</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 4.10.

<sup>26</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 4.10.

other more is impossible. Does Clement use Plato because his philosophy is consistent with the biblical text, or is Clement's interpretation of the scriptures colored by his Platonic worldview?

Bowersock views Clement's Platonism as the opposite of Tertullian's Roman traditionalism.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this dichotomy represents the differing views third-century Christians held with reference to voluntary martyrdom, but by the turn of the fifth century the situation had shifted considerably. In almost two hundred years of Christian growth, persecution, and political triumph, Christian communities still had not settled this question regarding the validity of voluntary martyrdom. If anything, the tangled Christian traditions make evaluating it more difficult. Bowersock moves seamlessly from Clement of Alexandria to Augustine of Hippo, who vigorously denounced voluntary martyrdom. Other bishops contemporary with Augustine, however, had their own ideas about the subject. Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom both approved of voluntary martyrdom in certain circumstances, but neither fit into the neat dichotomy exemplified by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria.

#### **Fourth Century Approval for Suicide Virgins**

Since Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, martyrdom, and consequently voluntary martyrdom, had ended in most parts of the Roman Empire. With this waning, enthusiasm and approval for voluntary martyrdom began to fade by the turn of the fifth century. Suicide, even in pursuit of martyrdom, was almost universally discouraged by the various Christian communities around the Mediterranean. However, many Christians still approved of the idea that a woman could gain a martyr's crown through suicide when her chastity was threatened. Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom were two bishops with different backgrounds who held this common view.

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<sup>27</sup>Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 64–65.

As bishop in Milan, Ambrose promoted interest in Platonic philosophy, without explicitly approving of it. In a number of sermons and other writings, Ambrose clearly alludes to the ideas of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, but since Ambrose habitually hid his sources, scholars have much work left to do in analyzing his relationship to Platonic thought.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in Ambrose's Milan, the young Augustine came into contact with the Platonists.<sup>29</sup>

Ambrose's treatise on death, *De bono mortis*, exhibits much reliance on the Platonists, and in the work, Ambrose explicitly refers to Plato three times and alludes to his writings frequently. Additionally, he freely uses Plotinus and actually structured parts of the book on Plotinus's *Enneads*.<sup>30</sup> As any good Platonist, Ambrose rejects the idea of suicide, seemingly turning his back on the traditional Roman idea of noble death that Tertullian held so dear. Ambrose argues that God has placed humans in this world for a purpose and that they ought to fulfill that purpose, rather than hurrying into the next world.

Christ is our king, and what a king commands we cannot reject or despise. How many men there are whom the emperor of this land orders to stay in remote regions because of their office or for some other duty. Can those men depart without the emperor's leave? And how much greater thing it is to obey God than man! For the saintly man, then, *to live is Christ and to die is gain*. As a servant he does not flee the service of this life.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1994, 240–242; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new edition with epilogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 486.

<sup>29</sup>Brown, *Augustine*, 75–110; also see Brown's reassessment of the Platonism encountered by Augustine in Milan, 485–486.

<sup>30</sup>William Theodore Wiesner, *S. Ambrosii de Bono Mortis* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 46–54.

<sup>31</sup>Ambrose *De bono mortis* 2.7. Christus enim rex noster est: ideo quod rex iubet deserere non possumus et contemnere. quantos imperator terrae huius in peregrinis locis aut honoris specie aut muneris alicuius causa iubet degere! numquid hi inconsulto imperatore discedunt? et quanto amplius est divinis parere quam humanis! *vivere ergo sancto Christus est et mori lucrum*. quasi servus enim non refugit vitae obsequium.

Just as a soldier cannot leave his post until relieved of his duty, so also a Christian must not exit life prematurely. According to Ambrose, self-destruction in the hopes of a martyr's crown was not an option.

Though Ambrose disapproved of suicide in general, he embraced the idea that women who committed suicide to protect their virginity received the martyr's crown. In his ascetical treatise, *De virginibus*, Ambrose addresses this specific question posed by his sister. *De virginibus* promotes the ideal of virginity as being the best Christian lifestyle, and he begins the work by lauding the virginal martyr Agnes. He ends the work by explaining to his sister that suicide is preferable to losing one's virginity. He admits, however, that as a general rule "divine Scripture forbids the Christian to use violence against himself," but he does not actually supply any biblical warrant for that claim.<sup>32</sup>

He tells his sister that she can be confident suicide is permissible when protecting chastity because the Church has examples of martyrs who did that very thing. He then proceeds to tell the story of a teenager named Pelagia who lived in Antioch. She threw herself off a building to avoid lecherous pursuers. Ambrose even has her rationalizing her plans in his retelling. Ambrose's Pelagia says, "God is not offended by the remedy [avoiding rape], and faith mitigates the misdeed [of suicide]."<sup>33</sup> Though still a "misdeed," Ambrose clearly views it as the lesser of two evils when a woman's virginity is at stake. Fitting with Ambrose's idea that virginity is marriage to Christ, Pelagia dons wedding attire before casting herself down. Finding

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<sup>32</sup>Ambrose *De virginibus* 7.32. Ambrose's ideas about the relationship between asceticism, including virginity, and martyrdom will be more thoroughly discussed in chapter four.

<sup>33</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 7.33.

themselves thwarted, her pursuers then try to catch Pelagia's mother and sisters, but they drown themselves in a river.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of his Platonic sympathies, Ambrose unreservedly approves these voluntary martyrdoms. His support does not reflect Tertullian's approval of Roman noble death. Instead, Ambrose uses the importance of virginity and Christian tradition as his reasons for approving it. His position is similar to another bishop living in the East, John Chrysostom.

John Chrysostom's stance regarding suicide and martyrdom is relatively close to Ambrose's. John condemns suicide, believing it to be against God's will, and claims that real martyrs do not commit suicide. Even though they do not kill themselves, John believed they must face death willingly. However, like Ambrose, Chrysostom accepts suicide for women who are attempting to protect their purity.

In his commentary on Galatians, which was probably composed in Antioch before 392, John clearly gives his views on suicide. In a refutation of the Manicheans, he proves that the world itself is not evil, otherwise suicide would be a good thing. Since society obviously does not consider suicide a good thing, the world cannot be all bad. In explaining his case, John writes, "God punishes such men [suicides] more than murderers, and we all regard them with horror, and justly; for if it is base to destroy others, much more is it to destroy one's self."<sup>35</sup> He provocatively continues, claiming that if suicide were acceptable then murderers should get a

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<sup>34</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 7.34–35.

<sup>35</sup>John Chrysostom *Homiliae in epistulam ad Galatas commentarius* 1.4 (PG 61:618). Νῦν δὲ καὶ ὁ Θεὸς τοὺς τοιοῦτους κολάζει τῶν ἀνδροφόνων μᾶλλον, καὶ πάντες βδελυττόμεθα, καὶ εἰκότως. Εἰ γὰρ ἑτέρους ἀνελεῖν οὐ καλόν, πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἑαυτόν. Εἰ δὲ πονηρόνῃ παροῦσα ζωῇ, τοὺς ἀνδροφόνους στεφανοῦν ἔδει, ὅτι τῆς πονηρίας ἡμᾶς ἀπαλλάττουσι. In this passage, John mentions στέφανος, the crown of martyrdom, which is the same word for an athletic prize. The next chapter will further examine the connection between martyrdom and Greco-Roman athletics.

crown instead of punishment since they rescue people from this evil life. On this count, John reflects the tradition of most Christian communities.

He carries this injunction against self-violence into his theology of martyrdom. When governmental authorities killed martyrs for their faith, God granted a victory to the church. John did not feel that shortcutting this system through voluntary martyrdom was acceptable. In his sermon on the martyr Julian delivered in Antioch, John describes the tortures and torments that the martyr suffered. According to John, Julian's trials and beatings lasted an entire year while the magistrate attempted to persuade him to recant. John claims that these things were necessary to show God's power, and that the martyrs could not attempt to hasten the process through suicide. He preaches, "My point is that the death of martyrs who kill [themselves] is an obvious defeat, yet of those who are murdered, a splendid victory."<sup>36</sup> Of course this prohibition against self-violence only negates the most extreme forms of voluntary martyrdom, in which the martyrs destroy themselves. He does not necessarily condemn the practice of provoking the authorities, and he certainly admires and approves of the martyrs' willingness to die. He actually claims that this willingness is necessary for true martyrdom.

In his homilies on 1 Corinthians, John contrasts the Christian martyrs with the prototypical pagan martyr, Socrates. For every Socrates who died for the sake of his convictions, John claims that he can produce ten thousand Christian martyrs, so the Christians win based on numbers. Moreover, John is not impressed by Socrates' consumption of hemlock because he "drank when he was not at liberty to drink or not to drink."<sup>37</sup> This death is the death of all

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<sup>36</sup>John Chrysostom *In sanctum Julianum martyrem* 3. θάνατος γὰρ μαρτύρων τῶν μὲν ἀποκτινύντων ἦττα σαφῆς, τῶν δὲ ἀναιρουμένων νίκη λαμπρά.

<sup>37</sup>John Chrysostom *Homiliae in epistulam i ad Corinthios* 4.7.



condemned criminals. The martyrs, on the other hand, were “at liberty not to suffer.” John indicates that since they were not really criminals then there was no reason for them to suffer the penalties assigned them; they could have avoided their fates. John’s argumentation at this point, however, is a bit shaky. He merely asserts a difference between Socrates being compelled and the martyrs being willing, without actually demonstrating the difference between executing an innocent pagan and an innocent Christian. John probably sensed that his argument was weak, so he ends his discussion of Socrates by reminding his hearers that they need not admire the philosopher’s fortitude because drinking hemlock is a pleasant way to die.<sup>38</sup> John’s main point in this passage, however, is that all martyrs are voluntary martyrs because they suffered and died of their own free will.

In this homily on 1 Corinthians, John ties the martyrs’ contempt for death directly to the virtues of self-denial and fortitude.<sup>39</sup> This understanding is very much in keeping with John’s ascetical bent that he promotes in much of this preaching, and this asceticism will be discussed more fully in chapter five. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, John, like many of his contemporaries, highly prized virginity, and when he considered the importance of sexual purity, John rationalized behaviors that would otherwise be condemnable. Specifically, John advocated suicide for women when necessary to protect their chastity. In his sermon on Julian cited above, suicide is a defeat, though John probably had men in mind while preaching that sermon. In his sermon on Pelagia, suicide is victory over the enemies of God and over the Devil himself.

This Pelagia is the same martyr that Ambrose used as an example when explaining suicide-martyr virgins to his sister. Pelagia was an Antiochene martyr, and John probably

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<sup>38</sup>John Chrysostom *Hom. 1 Cor.* 4.7.

<sup>39</sup>John Chrysostom *Hom. 1 Cor.* 4.6.

preached the surviving sermon about her early in his career there.<sup>40</sup> He claims that she was prepared for torture and punishment but that she did not want to risk losing her virginity to her captors. Rape would have been shameful so she “snatched herself away.” John notes that none of the male martyrs attempted similar acts, but “women, by nature vulnerable to harm, conceived for themselves this manner of death.”<sup>41</sup> Men display fortitude by suffering, while women display fortitude by abstaining from sex. He continues, “Were it possible both to preserve one’s virginity and attain martyrdom’s crowns, she wouldn’t have refused to go to court.”<sup>42</sup> He claims that Pelagia was owed two crowns, and by throwing herself off her roof, she ensured that she would not die “half-crowned.” Of course in addition to suicide John also excuses her of her “deception.” She had to deceive her guards in order to be alone long enough to jump from the roof. John actually marvels that the deception worked because he claims that female martyrs were doing this sort of thing all the time.<sup>43</sup> The guards should have known better than to let a Christian woman anywhere near a roof or a river. John demonstrates that the number of examples and the importance of virginity allow Christian women to engage in behaviors that would otherwise be taboo.

In another sermon John preached at Antioch about local female martyrs, he discusses the importance of voluntary martyrdom to preserve virginity, and even hints at something darker. Domnina, with her two daughters Bernike and Prosdoke, fled Antioch during Diocletian’s

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<sup>40</sup>Johan Leemans et al., *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 148.

<sup>41</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancta Pelagia virgine et martyre* 1 (PG 50:579). γυναίκες δὲ διὰ τὸ τῆς φύσεως εὐεπηρέαστον, τοῦτον ἐπενόησαν ἑαυταῖς τὸν τρόπον τῆς τελευτῆς.

<sup>42</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.* 1 (PG 50:579). Εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν καὶ τὴν παρθενίαν διασωσασθαι, καὶ τῶν τοῦ μαρτυρίου στεφάνων ἐπιτυχεῖν, οὐχ ἂν παρητήσατο τὴν εἰς τὸ δικαστήριον εἴσοδον.

<sup>43</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.* 2.

persecutions in 302.<sup>44</sup> Soldiers caught them in Edessa, and John claims that Domnina’s husband was with them. The three women deceive the soldiers and rush into the river. In John’s sermon probably preached in the 390s in Antioch, the story takes an interesting turn. The women do not just kill themselves; John suggests that the mother actually drowns her daughters. He preaches, “And so, the mother entered in the middle [of the river], restraining her daughters on either side.” Once in the river, John says, “That blessed woman [Domnina] ... lowered them down into the waters, and in this way they drowned.”<sup>45</sup> Domnina then drowns herself to claim her martyr’s crown. Astonishingly, in this sermon, the protection of virginity not only justifies self-murder, but also John uses it to justify murdering one’s children. He actually esteems Domnina because he claims that drowning her own daughters was an exceedingly painful form of martyrdom. Domnina could have suffered at the court, but then she would not have been able to ensure her daughters’ purity.

She endured far greater tortures in the river [than she would have at court]. My point, as I started saying, is that it was truly far more cruel and painful than to see flesh scourged, to drown her own innards, I mean her daughters, by her own hand, and to see them suffocating, and it required far greater philosophy than to endure tortures for her to have the capacity to restrain her children’s right hands and to drag them along with her into the river’s currents. For it was not the same in terms of pain to see [her daughters] suffering badly at the hands of others and to herself act as death’s servant, to herself promote their end, to herself stand against her daughters in place of an executioner.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Mayer ed., *The Cult of the Saints: Select Homilies and Letters* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 155–156. Many scholars speculate that these three women are the martyrs that Ambrose claimed were from Pelagia’s family. Both Pelagia and this trio lived in Antioch and supposedly died about the same time. Probably Ambrose or his source conflated two separate martyr stories. Quite possibly these are also the same martyrs that Eusebius cites in *Hist. eccl.* 8.12.

<sup>45</sup>John Chrysostom *De sanctis Bernice et Prosdoce* 6 (PG 50:638).

<sup>46</sup>John Chrysostom *Bern.* 7 (PG 50:639–640). Πολλῶ μείζους βασάνους ὑπέμεινεν ἐν τῷ ποταμῷ. καὶ γὰρ τοῦ σάρκα καταξαινομένην ὄραν πολλῶ χαλεπώτερον καὶ ὀδυνηρότερον, καθάπερ ἔφθην εἰπών, τὰ οἰκεία σπλάγγνα, τὰς θυγατέρας λέγω, διὰ τῆς οἰκείας καταδύσαι χειρὸς, καὶ αποπνιγομένας ἰδεῖν, καὶ τοῦ τὰς βασάνους ἐνεγκεῖν πολλῶ μείζονος ἔδει τῆς φιλοσοφίας αὐτῆ, ὥστε δυνηθῆναι κατασχεῖν τὰς δεξιὰς τῶν παιδίων, καὶ συνεφελκυσασθαι μεθ’ ἑαυτῆς πρὸς τὰ ρεύματα τοῦ ποταμοῦ. Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἴσον εἰς ὀδύνης λόγον ὑφ’ ἑτέρων

John imputes extraordinary suffering to a mother who kills her young daughters, and he not only excuses the killing but also lauds it because she did it to preserve virginity. John commends these martyrs as prime examples for mothers and daughters in his congregation. No doubt, this sermon worried not a few daughters whose reputations were at risk.<sup>47</sup>

Ambrose and John Chrysostom complicate Bowersock's thesis that the Roman point of view supported voluntary martyrdom and the Greek one rejected it. Ambrose is an old Roman with a healthy dose of Greek Platonism, and his attitude concerning female voluntary martyrs reflects this mixture. John, being very Greek, exhibits little influence from Roman ideas, but he embraces voluntary martyrdom even more warmly than Ambrose. Both bishops, however, took tradition seriously. By the turn of the fifth century, Christian communities had begun to honor these traditional voluntary martyrs, so they must really be martyrs. Christianity also had developed this tradition of sexual asceticism.<sup>48</sup> These ideas influenced the attitudes towards the cult of martyrs in many locales in the fourth and fifth centuries. Not all bishops, however,

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κακῶς πασχούσας ὄρᾶν, καὶ αὐτὴν διακονεῖσθαι τῷ θανάτῳ, αὐτὴν ὑπουργὸν γενέσθαι τῆς τελευτῆς, αὐτὴν ἀντὶ δημίου καταστῆναι ταῖς θυγατράσιν. In the next line, John makes a pun telling the mothers in the crowd "you will bear witness" (μαρτυρήσετέ) to the fortitude demonstrated by Domnina in killing her own children.

<sup>47</sup>Basil of Caesarea, in his sermon on the forty martyrs, relates a somewhat similar situation of a mother "facilitating" her child's martyrdom. In Basil's tale, one of the martyrs was merely wounded so the executioners did not put him on the wagon that brought the corpses to the fire. The boy's mother picked him up and threw him on the wagon so that he could be burned with his friends. Basil of Caesarea *Quad. mart.* 8 (PG 31:524). The story in 2 Maccabees 7 of the mother and her seven sons may have inspired stories like this one and that of Domnina and her daughters.

<sup>48</sup>The classic work on sexual asceticism is Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). In this book Brown attempts to trace Christian preoccupation with virginity to its sources, and he examines the traditions of both the eastern and western halves of the empire. A more recent book that makes an important contribution to this topic is David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: the Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Hunter examines the controversy surrounding Jovinian, a monk who questioned the spiritual benefits of virginity. The reactions to Jovinian's ideas, which were contemporary with the events discussed in this work, solidified Christianity's trajectory towards valuing virginity.

imbued these traditions with as much authority. Augustine of Hippo considered these traditions, but in his attempt to form a theology of martyrdom for his context, he gave more weight to the rational evaluation of the biblical texts.

### **Augustine: A Minority Report**

Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose had many things in common, a traditional Roman education, an interest in Platonic philosophy, and the authority of a Christian bishop, but the two men held differing views on voluntary martyrdom. Like Ambrose, Augustine condemned suicide, but Augustine expands that definition to include those women who killed themselves to protect their chastity. Augustine applies the rule equally to all.

Augustine's magnum opus, *City of God*, contains his classic condemnation of suicide. Augustine argues that suicide is a sin because it is self-murder and that it is never right to commit a sin even if trying to avoid another sin or someone else's sin. He claims, "Indeed, he who kills himself is a murderer. He is the more guilty when he kills himself, the more innocent he is of the reason for which he considered himself needing death."<sup>49</sup> Martyrs of course were innocent of wrongdoing; therefore, Augustine rejects the appropriateness of voluntary martyrdom. According to Augustine, the voluntary martyrs place themselves in a catch-22. They are either justly guilty of the crime or justly guilty of murder. Augustine acknowledges that many Christians did indeed engage in voluntary martyrdom, but he claims that they should not be emulated. He writes, "We are not merely asking whether it has been done, but whether it ought to have been done. Certainly sound reason should be preferred to examples."<sup>50</sup> This idea is

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<sup>49</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 1.17. profecto etiam qui se ipsum occidit homicida est, et tanto fit nocentior, cum se occiderit, quanto innocentior in ea causa fuit, qua se occidendum putavit (my translation).

<sup>50</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 1.22. Non modo quaerimus utrum sit factum, sed utrum fuerit faciendum. Sana quippe ratio etiam exemplis anteponeunda est (my translation).

directly contrary to Ambrose and John who accepted voluntary martyrdoms for chaste women merely because examples existed.

When Augustine attacks self-destruction to protect chastity, the one form of voluntary martyrdom with enduring support, he hesitates to break totally with tradition by condemning those women whom the churches venerated for protecting their virtue.

But, they say, in the time of persecution some holy women escaped those who menaced them with outrage, by casting themselves into rivers which they knew would drown them; and having died in this manner, they are venerated in the Catholic Church as martyrs. Of such persons I do not presume to speak rashly. I cannot tell whether there may not have been vouchsafed to the Church some divine authority, proved by trustworthy evidences, for so honoring their memory: it may be that it is so. It may be they were not deceived by human judgment, but prompted by divine wisdom, to their act of self-destruction. We know that this was the case with Samson.<sup>51</sup>

Augustine teaches that destroying oneself for any reason is always immoral, unless God specifically tells the Christian to do so. Samson experienced this situation when he brought down a building on himself and some Philistines, but Augustine's language indicates his grave doubts that anyone else would receive such a word from God.

Augustine believed that a proper view of martyrdom trumped the endorsement of sexual renunciation promoted by some bishops.<sup>52</sup> Augustine explicitly claims that Christian women should not hold Tertullian's beloved Lucretia as a proper example. Though Tarquin's son violated her, she remained chaste because of her unwillingness; therefore, as the innocent party,

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<sup>51</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 1.26. Sed quaedam, inquit, sanctae feminae tempore persecutionis, ut insectatores suae pudicitiae deitarent, in rapturum atque necaturum se fluuium proiecerunt eoque modo defunctae sunt earumque martyria in catholica ecclesia ueneratione celeberrima frequentantur. De his nihil temere audeo iudicare. Vtrum enim ecclesiae aliquibus fide dignis testificationibus, ut earum memoriam sic honoret, diuina persuaserit auctoritas, nescio; et fieri potest ut ita sit. Quid si enim hoc fecerunt, non humanitus deceptae, sed diuinitus iussae, nec errantes, sed oboedientes? sicut de Samsone aliud nobis fas non est credere.

<sup>52</sup>For more on Augustine's views on sexual renunciation and martyrdom see Brown, *Body and Society*, 397.

she should not have killed herself.<sup>53</sup> Augustine claims that chastity is a matter of the heart and does not hinge on any sexual violence perpetrated by others.<sup>54</sup> Christian communities should view women who were sexually assaulted as innocent victims, not as those who must atone for their shame by suicide. Indeed, Augustine believed, they had no shame.

Obviously Augustine's theology of martyrdom differs from John Chrysostom's on this point, but the differences run even deeper. This theology of voluntary death and its relationship questions that idea of willingness that John lauded. According to Augustine, martyrdom really was something to be endured. He thought, contrary to John, that true martyrs manifest a certain unwillingness to give up life, while a theology of voluntary martyrdom hinged on the "willingness" of the martyr. Most martyr texts, however, highlighted the willingness of the martyrs to face their own deaths. Even the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which probably dates to the early second century, claims that Christians who embrace martyrdom willingly will enjoy greater heavenly rewards than those who faithfully suffer after trying to avoid it.<sup>55</sup> Tertullian at one point goes so far as to say that Christians must not flee from martyrdom. They are obliged to face persecution and death.<sup>56</sup>

Most Christian communities, even in Tertullian's North Africa, understood that limits existed to Christian willingness to die. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, was executed in 258, but before his martyrdom he fled from the persecution in order to preserve leadership for his flock.

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<sup>53</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 1.19.

<sup>54</sup>Indeed, Augustine seems to indicate that chastity is a matter of the heart in all circumstances, whether sexual activity is consensual or not. In his sermons on Perpetua and Felicity, he never shies away from their non-virginal status as wives and mothers, e.g., *Serm.* 281.2,3; 282.2. Even so, he describes Perpetua as "chaste" in *Serm.* 280.1.

<sup>55</sup>*Shepherd of Hermas* 9.105.4–5.

<sup>56</sup>Tertullian *Scorpiace* 8.

Even when confronted by the proconsul Paternus, Cyprian claimed, “Our way of life forbids that anyone voluntarily offer himself.”<sup>57</sup> Other evidence in Cyprian’s martyr text, however, tempers this statement of reticence for martyrdom: “After his [Cyprian’s] sentence, his supporters said, ‘Let us be beheaded with him too!’”<sup>58</sup> Augustine follows the example of Cyprian rather than that of Cyprian’s supporters. He often quotes Cyprian’s words when celebrating his feast day.<sup>59</sup>

The emphasis Augustine placed on the martyrs’ testimony makes their willingness to die less important. In spite of what many martyr texts claim, Augustine taught his flock that the martyrs did not long for death at all; rather, they longed for life. In a sermon on the feast of Peter and Paul in 418, Augustine claims, “Death cannot be loved; it can be borne.”<sup>60</sup> After all, Augustine continues, if death were enjoyable for the martyrs then their feats of faith would be commonplace: “If we saw them delighting themselves at banquets, would we call them great men? would call them courageous men?”<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to note that this reflects Augustine’s complaint that the martyrs’ feast days became times of partying rather than times of pious reflection. Augustine teaches his congregation that the martyrs unwillingly submitted to death because they loved life so much. Temporal death gave way to eternal life. Indeed, this is why Christians called the martyrs’ death days their birthdays. Their martyrdom was their birth into eternal life.

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<sup>57</sup>*Acta Cypriani* 1.5 disciplina prohibeat nostra ne quis se ultro offerat (my translation).

<sup>58</sup>*Acta Cypriani* 5.1. Post eius sententiam populus fratrum dicebat: Et nos cum eo decollemur (my translation).

<sup>59</sup>E.g., Augustine *Serm.* 313E.5.

<sup>60</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299.8 (PL 38:1373). Amari mors non potest, tolerari potest.

<sup>61</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299.8 (PL 38:1373). Nam si amatur, nihil magnum fecerunt qui eam pro fide susceperunt. Numquid se eos laetari videremus in conviviis, diceremus magnos viros, diceremus fortes viros? (my translation)



Augustine did not form his condemnation of voluntary martyrdom merely for theoretical purposes. The issue was still current in his day. North Africa was home to two rival communions of churches; the Catholics had imperial support, but the Donatists were in the majority in many areas of North Africa. This situation led to the Donatists suffering persecution and sometimes martyrdom at the hands of the Catholics.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the Donatists of North Africa embraced the tradition of voluntary martyrdom, and they engaged in all three types discussed above. Donatists did not find the idea of voluntary martyrdom repugnant; rather, they viewed an active struggle against oppression as noble. They had precedents for their views on voluntary martyrdom in Tertullian and many martyr texts. In many ways, they preserved a distinctly North African tradition of martyrdom that had been passed down from pre-Constantinian Christianity.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>This schism between Catholics and Donatists will be examined at length in chapter six. The conflict influenced Augustine's thinking on a number of subjects, including the cult of martyrs. In spite of Brent Shaw's indictment of lazy historians who refer to the two parties as "Donatist" and "Catholic," I will use the traditional nomenclature. Shaw notes that both factions viewed themselves merely as Christians and refers to the Donatists as "African Christians" to distinguish them from the "Catholic Christians." See Brent D. Shaw, "African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and 'Donatists,'" in M. R. Greenshields and T. A. Robinson, eds, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 4–34. James O'Donnell, on the other hand, favors calling these factions "Donatist" and "Caecilianist" after the rival bishops who began the schism; James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: a New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2005). These novelties in labeling carry their own limitations, and the benefits derived from them do not outweigh the lack of clarity they bring about. It seems best, in most cases, to maintain the labels found in the sources even if those sources exhibit bias. W. H. C. Frend's *The Donatist Church: a Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) remains the standard work on the schism. Frend tends to overemphasize the economic and nationalistic elements of the schism, but as an introduction to the controversy, his work is indispensable. For an example of recent scholarship that emphasizes the religious aspects of the schism, see Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: the Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>63</sup>See the work of W. H. C. Frend, especially *The Donatist Church*, as well as the last chapter of *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

Donatist sources indicate that sometimes these North African Christians precipitated their own deaths, much like Eusebius's friend Apphianus. In the Donatist *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, Maximian instigates the events that would lead to his martyrdom. The writer claims:

With the speed not of feet but of a well-prepared mind, [Maximian] quickly sprang up on his own to incite this contest. He scattered the dismal little pieces [of the imperial edict] with his rapid hands just as if he were tearing the devil limb from limb. Immediately he was taken up to the tribunal.<sup>64</sup>

In the Donatist literature, women also embrace martyrdom in order to protect their virginity. In the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, Victoria throws herself off a cliff in order to avoid an unwanted marriage.<sup>65</sup> In *The Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, Secunda similarly jumps from her window in order to avoid marriage and joins some passing Christians on their way to their deaths.<sup>66</sup> The Circumcellions, a group portrayed by Augustine as Donatist extremists, had reputations for dying by their own hands in their pursuit of martyrdom.<sup>67</sup> Evidence suggests that these Circumcellions were loosely organized and operated outside the Donatist hierarchy, but Donatist bishops occasionally used them to attack Catholic buildings and holy sites. The Circumcellions harassed magistrates asking for martyrdom, and they sometimes committed suicide if the magistrates refused to give them the death penalty.<sup>68</sup> Circumcellions

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<sup>64</sup>*Passio Maximiani and Isaac* (PL 8:769a). Sed quid pluribus callidae mentis celeritate nec pedum protinus fore certamen ultro provocaturus ascendit, et funestos apices tamquam diaboli ibi membra discerperet, manu rapida dissipavit. Inde confestim raptus ad tribunal (trans. Tilley).

<sup>65</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 14. The fall does not harm Victoria, but her intention was death.

<sup>66</sup>*Passio Maximae Secundae et Donatillae* 22.

<sup>67</sup>Scholars debate how deserved this reputation may be. I believe that there must be at least a kernel of truth to Augustine's claims, or else his congregation would not have viewed his attacks on them as credible.

<sup>68</sup>Freund, "Donatus 'paene totam Africam decepit'. How?," *JEH* 48 (1997): 616. Also, see Peter Iver Kaufman, "Donatism Revisited: Moderates and Militants in Late Antique North Africa," *JLAnt* 2 (2009): 131–142, for a fresh evaluation of the relationship between the Circumcellions and the Donatist hierarchy.

also had a proclivity for jumping off cliffs in their pursuit of martyrdom.<sup>69</sup> Even though this group operated on the fringe of Donatist life, in his sermons, Augustine attacks them when speaking on the Donatist toleration of voluntary martyrdom.

In his sermon delivered on Cyprian's feast day September 4, 410, Augustine embarks on a sustained assault on his Donatist enemies that focuses on their conception of martyrdom. In this sermon, Augustine tells his listeners that voluntary martyrs, like the Circumcellions, are not martyrs at all because they do not heed the proper examples. Augustine sharply criticizes his opponents, saying, "The Donatists, who falsely boast that they belong to Cyprian, [...] if they paid attention to his martyrdom, they wouldn't cast themselves [off cliffs]." <sup>70</sup> Augustine maintains that true martyrs would follow the example of Cyprian who waited for his persecutors to come to him. In doing this, he imitated Christ, who waited for the guards to seize Him in the garden.<sup>71</sup> By following this line of argument, Augustine claims that the Donatists are failing to follow the example of both the founder of Christianity and the supposed founder of their sect. Furthermore, Augustine attacks the Donatist "jumping" motif directly, claiming that it is not an avenue to martyrdom but that its origin is demonic. He reminds his hearers of the story of Satan's tempting Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. Satan encourages Jesus to hurl himself down so that the angels will save him, an act that would prove Jesus' status as the Son of God. Jesus refuses, telling Satan that it is not proper to test God. Augustine believes that Donatists who jump to their deaths fall for this same temptation. He claims, "For the devil is also

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<sup>69</sup>For the jumping motif in Donatist sources, see Victoria and Secunda above and *The Martyrdom of Marculus* in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories* (though Marculus was pushed).

<sup>70</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 313E.2 (PLS 2:616). Donatistae, qui se ad Cyprianum falso iactant pertinere, [...] si martyrium [eius attenderent], non se praecipitent (my translation).

<sup>71</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 313E.4. It is interesting to note Augustine's use of Jesus as a prototypical martyr in this and other sermons.

suggesting to the Donatists, saying, ‘Cast yourselves down, the angels will catch you; with such a death you do not go to punishment, but you proceed to a crown.’”<sup>72</sup> Thus, Augustine claims that these so-called martyrs are not even Christians because in jumping from cliffs they listen to the devil. The harshness of Augustine’s critique evinces the sense of urgency he felt. His audience needed to understand the dangers of aligning with a shadow church.

Not only do these voluntary martyrs follow the wrong examples, but according to Augustine they also lack patience, the Christian virtue necessary for avoiding suicide. Patience allowed the martyrs to endure the ills and hardships inflicted on them. Augustine contrasts this patience with impatience, which is an unwillingness to endure hardship.<sup>73</sup> Augustine accuses Donatist voluntary martyrs of demonstrating their impatience by preferring to end their lives rather than endure the hardships of governmental oppression or marriage.

Arthur Droge, however, disapproves of Augustine’s condemnation of suicide, believing that Augustine’s dismissal of voluntary martyrdom rests solely on Platonic influences.<sup>74</sup> Augustine bases his disapproval of suicide, however, on his belief that suicide is sin, a belief absent in pagan Platonists.<sup>75</sup> Augustine grounds his conclusions regarding the inappropriateness of voluntary martyrdom on the Bible, but Droge claims that Augustine’s

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<sup>72</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 313E.4 (PLS 2:618). Hoc enim et Donatistis diabolus suggerit dicens: Praecipitate vos, angeli vos suscipiunt; tali morte non itis ad poenam, sed pergitis ad coronam (my translation).

<sup>73</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 283.1 (Dolbeau 15). Etenim ut mala omnia pro fide martyres tolerarent, virtus eorum patientia nominatur.

<sup>74</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 175.

<sup>75</sup>P. W. van der Horst, “A Pagan Platonist and a Christian Platonist on Suicide,” *VC* 25 (1971): 282–288.

exegesis is dishonest: “On occasion he [Augustine] reads into the text ideas that are not present; at other times he denies what the text explicitly says.”<sup>76</sup>

Droge’s own interpretations, however, leave much to be desired. Droge lists eight examples of biblical figures who took their own lives. He claims that Augustine did not address these texts when teaching that the Bible provides no support for voluntary martyrdom. Droge asks, “What happened to Saul, Zimri, and Razis? All three killed themselves in order to avoid falling into the hands of their enemies. For obvious reasons Augustine consigns them to silence.”<sup>77</sup> Augustine does mention Razis, the elder of Jerusalem, who in 2 Maccabees turns his sword against himself after being cornered by five hundred soldiers. Augustine thinks it significant that Razis had no escape available to him, but he also claims that the text merely narrates Razis’s suicide without praising it.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Augustine points out that 2 Maccabees does not carry the same level of canonicity as the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>79</sup>

In the above quotation, Droge implies that Augustine ignores the tales of Saul and Zimri because they would refute his thesis. Actually the “obvious reason” he ignores them is because no Christian would consider imitating them. Saul and Zimri were kings who did not walk in the ways of God. Droge’s other examples prove equally compelling. Saul’s armor-bearer fell on his own sword; Abimelech, who had murdered his seventy brothers, asks his armor-bearer to kill him after suffering a fatal head wound from a woman; and Judas hung himself after

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<sup>76</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 171.

<sup>77</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 176.

<sup>78</sup>Augustine *Contra Gaudentius* 37. The author of 2 Macc obviously admires Razis. Augustine may be cutting his exegesis too fine when he points out that Razis was not specifically praised for his death.

<sup>79</sup>Augustine *Contra Gaud.* 38.

betraying Jesus. Why would Droge think that Augustine or his flock would consider these examples as biblical support for voluntary death? Besides Razis, whose authority Augustine questioned, Samson alone is a biblical hero who takes his own life. Augustine notes, however, that he is an exception because he had a divine imperative to do so. Regarding all these examples, Droge writes, “Despite Augustine’s claim to the contrary, these individuals killed themselves *in order to avoid shame and dishonor*.”<sup>80</sup> Augustine, however, believed that eternal shame came from avoiding temporal shame and dishonor. According to Augustine, by enduring the shame and dishonor, martyrs manifested the humility that warranted their position of honor in the church. This martyrdom of endurance proposed by Augustine is consistent with his ideas about a martyr’s unwillingness. Martyrdom was a necessary tragedy that God turned into victory.

Augustine explicated his opposition to voluntary martyrdom in diplomatic terms. He freely condemns the Donatists, but he does not overtly attack Catholic traditions. He merely expresses some grave doubts. He focuses on returning to the biblical material, while bishops like Ambrose and John Chrysostom cite Christian tradition as sufficient for faith and praxis in this matter. Of course the contexts of these three bishops were very different, which certainly colored the way in which each viewed the cult of the martyrs. Ambrose and John did not have contemporary suicide martyrs to deal with. Augustine did not form his stance on suicide solely in opposition to Donatists, but perhaps their presence caused him to ask some questions and think about matters that did not occur to other bishops around the Mediterranean.

Not all bishops dealt with schism (though the Donatists were hardly the only schismatics), but all the bishops in the empire had to reckon with the popularity of the Roman games. The next chapter will discuss how bishops shaped their theology of martyrdom and the

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<sup>80</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 175—italics in the original.

cult of martyrs into an alternative to traditional Roman entertainments. Even though the games were ubiquitous, like questions over suicide, Christian bishops came to different conclusions about how the cult of martyrs could function as spectacle.

## CHAPTER 3

### *SANCTUM SPECTACULUM:* MARTYR CULTS AND ROMAN SPECTACLES

In the popular imagination, martyrdom took place within the context of the Roman games. The painting by nineteenth-century French artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Christian Martyr's Last Prayer* exemplifies this idea. The setting of the painting is a Roman arena with chariot tracks from the races from earlier in the day still in the dirt. The perimeter of the arena's floor is circled by crucified Christians, some of whom are on fire. In the foreground, a massive lion slowly contemplates a group of men, women, and children huddled in the middle ground. All these soon-to-be martyrs pray on their knees, except for one old, emaciated man dressed in white, who stands with hands splayed and calls out to both God and the throng of onlookers. In the arena, Christian piety intersected pagan brutality.

Of course, this popular conception has its root in historical reality. Some Christians did die in the amphitheater as part of the Roman games, but Christianity's relationship to Roman spectacles goes beyond the old man praying on the arena floor. Roman society had a rich tradition of public entertainments and spectacles, which usually did not require the death of pious Christians. Both during and after the age of persecution, Christian communities in the empire had to define how they would relate to traditional forms of Roman entertainment, and the language of martyrdom and the cult of the martyrs provided those communities with the interpretive key they needed for both rejection and assimilation of traditional Roman spectacle.



## Context of Roman Spectacles

Spectacles played an integral part within the society of the Roman Empire, and entertainments as diverse as theatrical performances, chariot races, and gladiatorial combats all fell under this umbrella of *spectaculum*. During the days of the Roman Republic, public games marked the major religious festivals, but as Rome moved towards its imperial era, the number of religious holidays that required games increased, while the spectacles themselves grew in magnitude and duration.<sup>1</sup> In this context of the growth of spectacles, the Christian movement experienced its own initial growth and had to define its relationship to the entertainments of a society it often viewed as its antithesis.

Theatrical performances made up the vast majority of the spectacles provided for the Roman people, and many ancient and late-antique thinkers believed that civilization without a theater was not civilized at all.<sup>2</sup> The Romans adopted the Greek forms of drama during the republican era but quickly began to develop their own theatrical conventions. Roman theater, just as its Greek forerunner, usually dealt with themes from Greco-Roman mythology. As was somewhat fitting for the religious festivals that they commemorated, the plays usually depicted stories about Rome's traditional gods and heroes. In *City of God*, Augustine famously noted the irony that most of the plays performed in honor of the gods depicted them behaving badly.<sup>3</sup> Mythology and adultery seemed to be the favorite themes of Roman theatergoers.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard C. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2–3.

<sup>2</sup>Timothy D. Barnes, "Religion and Society in the Age of Theodosius," in *Grace, Politics and Desire: Essays on Augustine*, ed. H. A. Meynell (Calgary, Can: University of Calgary Press, 1990), 161; Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments*, 2.

<sup>3</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 2.8.

Early Roman theater followed the forms of Greek tragedy and comedy, but the Romans also developed other forms of drama. Many Roman intellectuals considered innovation vulgar and attempted to maintain the traditional genres, but professional playwrights invented new forms that continued to delight their audiences, while still nodding to Greek models. Though scholars debate the subject because of sparse evidence, most likely, the classics were performed alongside the new styles throughout the imperial period. By the late empire, the most popular dramatic forms were the mime and the pantomime, both of which almost always reflected mythological themes. In the pantomime, actors silently danced the plot, in a sort of ballet, as a chorus sang an accompaniment. These actors, who were usually men, would play up to five male or female roles, wearing a different close-mouthed mask for each role. The mime, which was even more popular, was a comic genre in which unmasked actors, both male and female, participated, acting out bawdy scenes that caricatured the gods.<sup>4</sup>

Equal to the theater in both popularity and antiquity were the races. Chariot racing, as well as other athletic competitions, provided the foundation for the Greek games. Homer himself supplies the first literary evidence for the sport in the Greco-Roman world, when the Greeks honor Patroclus at his funeral by racing their chariots to a stump and back.<sup>5</sup> John Humphrey notes that Homer's description contains the basic elements that would characterize chariot racing through the end of the Roman Empire: drawing lots to determine position, racing down a long straightaway, and turning counterclockwise around a post of some kind.<sup>6</sup> Though the mechanics

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<sup>4</sup>Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 13–36; Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments*, 4–11.

<sup>5</sup>Homer *Iliad* 23.

<sup>6</sup>John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 5.

changed little, the Romans developed further how these races would be organized. By the first century BC, the four circus factions had emerged to oversee the process: Reds, Whites, Blues, and Greens. Races ran with competitors in multiples of four, with twelve teams total being favored by the Romans. By the late Roman Empire, the Blues and Greens dominated the sport and won for themselves ardent supporters around the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup>

Competing toe to toe with the circus in sheer heart pounding excitement was the amphitheater, the home of the gladiatorial games, a place with strong connections to Christian martyrdom. Usually called *munera* (gifts), gladiatorial spectacles were relative latecomers to Rome. In 264 BC, the sons of Junius Brutus Pera supplied a gladiatorial show as part of the funeral games held in honor of their father.<sup>8</sup> During the late republic, gladiatorial *munera* were sporadic, but memorable, aspects of aristocratic funerals in which two men would fight with weapons before a crowd, sometimes to the death. Julius Caesar and the emperors who were spawned by his politics moved gladiatorial combat from the realm of a funeral donation by an aristocrat to a gift from the state.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the imperial era, these spectacles became more lavish and more expensive. Combat between a pair of gladiators or a series of pairs provided the emperor with the adulation he needed. The emperor Augustus claimed to have provided eight gladiatorial shows for the people of Rome in which ten thousand men fought.<sup>10</sup> Many of these men, however, were probably condemned criminals or captives of war. In the amphitheater, the

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<sup>7</sup>Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 45–73. Cameron convincingly argues that the Blues and Greens had always, since the earliest days of the Principate, enjoyed greater popularity and success.

<sup>8</sup>Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 47; citing Valerius Maximus 2.4.7.

<sup>9</sup>Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 51–52; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 48.

<sup>10</sup>Augustus *Res Gestae* 22.

emperor could combine justice, conquest, and entertainment for the benefit of the Senate and the people of Rome.

These entertainments, however, were not merely for entertainment. Spectacles had political dimensions because they provided Romans from every stratum with a place to see each other as well as the show. Increasingly during the imperial period, the Romans looked to the emperor to provide the spectacles by which he would demonstrate both his authority and his benevolence. At the same time, the people could use the spectacle as a political tool. In the theater, circus, or the amphitheater, crowds demonstrated loyalty to the government by appreciating the entertainments of the emperor. Conversely, a dissatisfied populace often felt the freedom to voice its disquietude in the safety that a spectacle's crowd afforded. Circus factions frequently got out of hand on race days.<sup>11</sup> In AD 387 the theatrical *claque*, a paid organization who applauded dramas and could be hired to show approval at other state functions, provoked riots in Antioch, which began with street violence and shouting and ended with the mob destroying official images of Emperor Theodosius. The punishment fit the crime; the emperor closed all Antioch's theaters and suspended the races, a burden that the city claimed was unbearable.<sup>12</sup> Rarely did emperors resort to so drastic a punishment because even though spectacles often led to this kind of trouble, they alleviated the dreariness of life for so many people.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Cameron argues that, contrary to traditional scholarship on the circus factions, the factional unrest did not have clear political goals. He actually speculates that factional violence often alleviated political tensions, rather than fostering political change. Cameron, *Circus Factions*, 293–296.

<sup>12</sup>Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria: from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 426–432.

<sup>13</sup>Cameron, *Circus Factions*, 294–295.

Even so, spectacles occupied a sort of ambiguous area in Roman society. Though the Roman people attached social and political importance to the spectacles, they viewed those participants in the spectacle as being of low social standing. Romans often thought of actors and dancers as occupying the same social realm as prostitutes. Professional charioteers could gain great fame, but high social standing usually eluded them because they were performers. In the amphitheater, most people who died were *noxii*, condemned criminals and captives with no social standing whatsoever, but the trained gladiators did not rate much higher. The combatants of the arena floor were socially untouchable.<sup>14</sup>

The amphitheater's spectacles often became a day's worth of entertainment for the crowds.<sup>15</sup> The morning would begin with *venationes* (hunts), in which gladiators would kill exotic beasts for the crowd's amusement. Around noon, the *meridiani*, which were public executions of criminals or war captives, would begin. Often these executions were staged in order to entertain the spectators. The condemned sometimes were forced to fight each other until they were all dead, or at other times they fought against trained gladiators, whom they had no chance of defeating. Josephus claims that Titus celebrated his brother's birthday in Caesarea by providing bloody spectacles in the theaters. According to Josephus, over 2,500 Jewish captives died as they were thrown to wild beasts and forced to fight each other.<sup>16</sup> Occasionally, as in the *Passion of Perpetua*, spectacles collided, and the condemned were dressed in costumes and forced to act out mythological scenes in which the characters died.<sup>17</sup> During these "midday

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<sup>14</sup>Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 108; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 49–51; Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 76–95.

<sup>15</sup>See Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 51, for the expansion of the gladiatorial games.

<sup>16</sup>Josephus *Bellum judaicum* 7.37–40.

<sup>17</sup>*Passio Perp.* 18.

games,” martyrdom first met Roman spectacle. In the afternoon came the main event, in which trained gladiators would fight singly or in groups against one another, not always to the death, but always with that possibility.

Understandably, modern scholars recoil from the popularity of the *munera* and try to explain the fascination that gladiatorial spectacles held for the Romans. Some scholars have attempted to equate *munera* with religious human sacrifice, drawing analogies with the Aztecs and Incas in fifteenth-century Central America.<sup>18</sup> Others have highlighted the socio-political motivation, claiming that arena deaths were a means to restore broken routine and a guard against the threat of disorder.<sup>19</sup> The gladiatorial games began as ritualized killing, not purely secular but also not a sacred element of Roman religion, which gives them a different meaning than human sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> Even so, these games disturbed some Romans. In one of his letters written around AD 63, Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, condemns gladiatorial combat because of its effect on the populace.

But nothing is so damaging to good character as the habit lounging at the games; for then it is that vice steals subtly upon one through the avenue of pleasure. What do you think I mean? I mean that I come home more greedy, more ambitious, more voluptuous, and even more cruel and inhuman,—because I have been among human beings. By chance I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation,—an exhibition at which men’s eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain. Many persons prefer this programme to the usual pairs and to the bouts “by request.” Of course they do; there is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? These mean delaying death. In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the

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<sup>18</sup>For *munera* as human sacrifice see Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: the Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup>Paul Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Wisconsin Studies in Classics. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Plass emphasizes the combat as a social remedy and draws an interesting parallel between the *munera* and political suicide.

<sup>20</sup>Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 36–40.

spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty. You may retort: "But he was a highway robber; he killed a man!" And what of it? Granted that, as a murderer, he deserved this punishment, what crime have you committed, poor fellow, that you should deserve to sit and see this show? In the morning they cried "Kill him! Lash him! Burn him! Why does he meet the sword in so cowardly a way? Why does he strike so feebly? Why doesn't he die game? Whip him to meet his wounds! Let them receive blow for blow, with chests bare and exposed to the stroke!" And when the games stop for the intermission, they announce: "A little throat-cutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!"<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Seneca describes witnessing the execution of *noxii*. He does not suggest that the victims deserved to live; he merely notes that watching their deaths coarsened the morals of the crowd.

Sentiments like those of Seneca and the growth of Christianity led to the gladiatorial shows being the first form of Roman spectacle to pass away. When Constantine became emperor in 312, he began issuing laws he thought consistent with the Christian faith; for example, he outlawed crucifixion and disfiguring the faces of criminals.<sup>22</sup> Naturally, Christian persecution in the amphitheater ceased, but his opposition to gladiatorial shows as a whole took some time to

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<sup>21</sup>Seneca *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 7.2–5. Nihil vero tam damnosum bonis moribus quam in aliquo spectaculo desidere. Tunc enim per voluptatem facilius vitia subrepunt. Quid me existimas dicere? Avarior redeo, ambitiosior, luxuriosior, immo vero crudelior et inhumanior, quia inter homines fui. Casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi lusus expectans et sales aliquid laxamenti, quo hominum oculi ab humano cruore adquiescunt; contra est. Quicquid ante pugnatum est, misericordia fuit. Nunc omissis nugis mera homicidia sunt. Nihil habent quo tegantur, ad ictum totis corporibus espositi numquam frustra manum mittunt. Hoc plerique ordinariis paribus et postulaticis praeferunt. Quidni praeferant? Non galea, non scuto repellitur ferrum. Quo muni menta? Quo artes? Omnia ista mortis morae sunt. Mane leonibus et ursis homines, meridie spectatoribus suis obiciuntur. Interfectores interfecturis iubent obici et victorem in aliam detinet caedem. Exitus pugnantium mores est; ferro et igne res geritur. Haec fiunt, dum vacat harena. "Sed latrocinium fecit aliquis, occidit hominem." Quid ergo? Quia occidit ille, meruit ut hoc pateretur; tu quid meruisti miser, ut hoc spectes? "Occide, verbera, ure! Quare tam timide incurrit in ferrum? Quare parum audacter occidit? Quare parum libenter moritur? Plagis agatur in vulnera, mutuos ictus nudis et obviis pectoribus excipiant." Intermissum est spectaculum: "interim iugulentur homines, ne nihil agatur."

<sup>22</sup>See Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 51, for a discussion of Constantine's shifting attitude towards *munera*.

develop. In 315 Constantine declared that slaves and freedmen who were convicted of kidnapping should be thrown to the beasts and that freeborn men convicted of the same crime should be sent to a gladiatorial school and cut down without being taught how to defend themselves. By 325, however, Constantine seems to have outlawed gladiatorial combat completely, but *munera* persisted in some places, most notably Rome, in spite of the new law.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Augustine tells how his dear friend Alypius, while living in Rome in the 380s, was dragged to a gladiatorial show by a group of friends. Even though Alypius planned to show his disapproval by not watching, the excitement of the crowd got the better of him. Augustine records, “For, upon the fall of one in the fight, a mighty cry from the whole audience stirring him strongly, he, overcome by curiosity, and prepared as it were to despise and rise superior to it, no matter what it were, opened his eyes, and was struck with a deeper wound in his soul than the other, whom he desired to see, was in his body.”<sup>24</sup> Becoming enamored with the violence, he returned many times. A decade or so after Augustine and Alypius returned to North Africa, Honorius, the western emperor, attempted to outlaw the *munera* again. The church historian Theodoret records the circumstances for Honorius’s newest law prohibiting gladiatorial combat.

A certain man of the name of Telemachus had embraced the ascetic life. He had set out from the East and for this reason had repaired to Rome. There, when the abominable spectacle was being exhibited, he went himself into the stadium, and stepping down into the arena, endeavoured to stop the men who were wielding their weapons against one another. The spectators of the slaughter were indignant, and inspired by the mad fury of the demon who delights in those bloody deeds, stoned the peacemaker to death.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 53. See *Codex Theodosianus* 15.12.1 and Eusebius *Vita Constantini* 4.25.1.

<sup>24</sup>Augustine *Conf.* 6.8.13 (PL 32:726). Nam quodam pugnae casu, cum clamor ingens totius populi vehementer eum pulsasset, curiositate victus et quasi paratus quidquid illud esset, etiam visum contemnere et vincere, aperuit oculos; et percussus est graviore vulnere in anima, quam illi in corpore.

<sup>25</sup>Theodoret *Hist. eccl.* 5.26 (PG 82:1236). Τηλέμαχος τις ἦν τὸν ἀσκητικὸν ἀσπαζόμενος βίον. Οὗτος ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑώας ἀπάρας, καὶ τούτου χάριν τὴν Ῥώμην καταλαβὼν, τῆς μυσαρῶς



When Honorius heard about Telemachus's death, he proclaimed the monk a martyr and once again tried to end the violent spectacles in Rome. Long after governmental persecution had ended, the amphitheater still managed to produce some Christian martyrs.

The purpose of Roman spectacle, however, was never to persecute Christians or to undermine their faith and values. The theater was licentious, the hippodrome was distracting, and the amphitheater was brutal. But these spectacles were meant to entertain. Some Christians, however, were not amused by such entertainments.

### **Christian Attitudes about Spectacles**

For the most part, Romans viewed their spectacular entertainments as an essential, though perhaps morally ambiguous, necessity for civilization. Christian bishops living within the empire, however, tended to take a rather different stance. Most bishops expressed disapproval of the games, but the frequency with which they attended this topic demonstrates that their congregations often ignored their protests. Throughout the history of Christianity, the laity often failed to meet clerical expectations.

Writing at the turn of the third century, Tertullian condemned spectacles in his book *De spectaculis*. With characteristic straightforwardness, he claims that the pleasures of public shows are sins forbidden to Christians. His opposition to them rests on two points. Naturally, Tertullian disapproved of spectacles because the shows were dedicated to the traditional gods; therefore, attending would be tantamount to idolatry. He also condemned the shows because too many unbelievers attended spectacles. Tertullian suspected that no good would come from being

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ἐκείνης ἐπιτελουμένης θέας, εἰσελήλυθε καὶ αὐτός εἰς τὸ στάδιον, καὶ καταβὰς παύειν ἐπειρᾶτο τοὺς κατ' ἀλλήλων κεχρημένους τοῖς ὅπλοις. Τῆς δὲ μαιφονίας οἱ θεαταὶ χαλεπήναντες, καὶ τοῦ τοῖς αἵμασιν ἐκείνοις ἐπιτερομένου δαίμονος εἰσδεξάμενος τὴν βακχεῖαν, κατέλευσαν τῆς εἰρήνης τὸν πρύτανιν.

associated with “so vast a gathering of heathens.”<sup>26</sup> His rhetoric at this point evokes Seneca’s warnings about associating with the crowd gathered at the arena. Tertullian countenances no form of spectacle. The theater is idolatrous and full of immorality, the amphitheater is demonic and cruel, and the circus is plainly too much fun for pious Christians. Tertullian claims, “Since, then, all passionate excitement is forbidden us, we are debarred from every kind of spectacle, and especially from the circus.”<sup>27</sup> Lest any Christians be tempted by these impious spectacles, he warns that Christians who attend the theater risk demon possession and death.<sup>28</sup> However, Tertullian comforted his readers with the fact that they would enjoy the greatest spectacle of all, when Christ returns to judge the world: “But what a spectacle is that fast-approaching advent of our Lord!”<sup>29</sup> Tertullian joyfully hopes for the day when Christ will throw all the actors, charioteers, and wrestlers into the flames, writing:

I shall have a better opportunity than of hearing the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity; of viewing the play-actors, much more “dissolute” in the dissolving flame; of looking upon the charioteer, all glowing in his chariot of fire; of beholding the wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows.<sup>30</sup>

This spectacle would truly be worthy of the Christian’s attention. Indeed, these prejudices against spectacles colored the Christian experience long after Tertullian’s death.

Two hundred years after Tertullian, most bishops still took a dim view of the shows. In Antioch, John Chrysostom condemned the shows on a number of counts. He felt that they

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<sup>26</sup>Tertullian *De spectaculis* 1–5.

<sup>27</sup>Tertullian *Spect.* 16.1. Cum ergo furor interdicitur nobis, ab omni spectaculo auferimur, etiam a circo.

<sup>28</sup>Tertullian *Spect.* 26.

<sup>29</sup>Tertullian *Spect.* 30. Quale autem spectaculum in proximo est aduentus Domini ... !

<sup>30</sup>Tertullian *Spect.* 30. Tunc magis tragoedi audiendi, magis scilicet uocales in sua propria calamitate; tunc histriones cognoscendi, solutiores multo per ignem; tunc spectandus auriga in flammea rota totus ruber; tunc xystici contemplandi, non in gymnasiis, sed igne iaculati.

were licentious and coarse and that they caused men to become dissatisfied with their family life.<sup>31</sup> Of course the mime was particularly dangerous because of the female performers. John referred to these shows as harlotry on the stage.<sup>32</sup> In fact, John tried to comfort his congregation during the calamity following the riots in 387 by telling them that the closing of Antioch's shows was a blessing. He was pleased that imperial displeasure caused citizens of Antioch to flee into the churches rather than attend the hippodrome.<sup>33</sup> After his promotion to archbishop of Constantinople, his views on spectacles did not become any softer. If anything, with the proximity of the hippodrome to the great church, his preaching against games and shows became even harsher. In a sermon given in 399 specifically against the games and theater, John takes his congregation's attendance at spectacles personally. He professes not to understand how someone can listen to his scriptural teachings and then head to the hippodrome. He claims to be even more displeased when, after the excitements of the hippodrome, Christians head to the theater the next day. In this sermon John seems to have reached the limit of his patience and threatens to excommunicate anyone who attends these spectacles.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of apparent consistency regarding some Christian attitudes towards Roman spectacles, the religious landscape had altered considerably since Tertullian's day, and during the fourth century, spectacle experienced many changes because of the growth of Christianity around the Mediterranean. As noted above, gladiatorial spectacles diminished considerably because of Christian disapproval of the violence. Also, the theatrical shows became separated

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<sup>31</sup>Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 444.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., John Chrysostom *Homiliae in Joannem* 60.5.

<sup>33</sup>John Chrysostom *Ad populum Antiochenum de statutis*. 15.1.

<sup>34</sup>John Chrysostom *Homilia contra ludos et theatra*.

from traditional cult practices, moving them from the quasi-religious realm to a wholly secular realm.<sup>35</sup> With these modifications, it seems that most Christians were more than happy to attend spectacles, in spite of their bishops' condemnations. In fact John Chrysostom assumed that his hearers frequented the shows, alluding to spectacles and using them as illustrations in his homilies. In his sermons concerning the riots of 387 in Antioch, John favorably compares Job to a gladiator because Job had to be stripped of his wealth so that the world could see how strong he was. He preaches:

For just as in the contests of the outer world, the combatants that are vigorous, and in high condition of body are not so well discerned, when they are enwrapt all around with the garment soaked in oil; but when casting this aside, they are brought forward unclothed into the arena; then above all they strike the spectators on every side with astonishment at the proportion of their limbs, there being no longer anything to conceal them; so also was it with Job.<sup>36</sup>

The thing to note in this passage is that John assumes his hearers are familiar with the contests, and this theme of the Christian life as athletic combat recurs in John's preaching when he wants to emphasize patience and perseverance.<sup>37</sup> His admiring language may belie a personal interest in the city's entertainments. Some other clergymen did not voice the same harsh stance that John took. In fact, one of John's enemies, Porphyrius who became bishop of Antioch in 404, not only enjoyed theatrical performances and horse racing but also associated with the performers.<sup>38</sup> Jerome, no lover of frivolity, relates a story in which a Christian holy man influenced the

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<sup>35</sup>Timothy D. Barnes, "Christians and the Theater," in *Roman Theater and Society: E. Togo Salmon Papers I* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 173–174.

<sup>36</sup>John Chrysostom *Stat.* 1.18 (PG 49:26). Καθάπερ γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν ἔξωθεν ἀγῶνων οἱ σφριγῶντες τὰ σώματα καὶ εὐεκτοῦντες τῶν ἀθλητῶν οὐχ οὕτω φαίνονται, ἐπειδὴν τὸ διάβροχον ἐλαίῳ πάντοθεν ἱμάτιον ὥσι περιβεβλημένοι, ἀλλ' ὅταν αὐτὸ ρίψαντες γυνοσὶ πρὸς τὰ σκάμματα ἔλκωνται, τότε μάλιστα τοὺς θεατὰς τῇ τῶν μελῶν ἀναλογία πάντοθεν ἐκπλήττουσιν, οὐδενὸς αὐτὴν ἐπισκιάσαι δυναμένου λοιπόν· οὕτω καὶ ὁ Ἰὼβ.

<sup>37</sup>E.g., John Chrysostom *Homiliae in epistulam ad Hebraeos* 21.3; 23.3.

<sup>38</sup>Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 445.

outcome of a chariot race in Gaza by having some holy water sprinkled on the horses. He claims that the crowd viewed the race as a contest between Christianity and the old religion and that, when the holy man's team won, the people believed that Christ had won. Jerome approvingly notes that this race, along with successive victories for "team Jesus," caused many people to convert to Christianity.<sup>39</sup> In spite of horse racing's evangelistic potential, most bishops still disapproved of their congregants spending so much time at the circuses.

Martyrdom originally had a close connection with spectacles through the execution of Christians as *noxii* in the amphitheater, and by the turn of the early fifth century this connection had been reestablished through the cult of the martyrs. Roman Christians wanted spectacles and entertainment, just as their pagan forebears had. Augustine, who feared the distractions of the circus, proposed that the martyrs' feasts could replace the traditional spectacles provided by Roman culture. In a sermon probably preached on September 14, 401, Augustine rails against the traditional games and offers the martyrdom of Cyprian as a suitable substitute.

What evils vulgar, shameless curiosity is the cause of, the lust of the eyes, the avid craving for frivolous shows and spectacles, the madness of the stadiums, the fighting of contests for no reward! The charioteers compete for some prize; for what prize do the crowds fight over the charioteers? But the charioteer delights them, the hunter delights them, the player delights them. Is this the way it is, then, that vile baseness delights the decent man? You can also change your consuming addiction to shows and spectacles; the Church is offering your mind more honest and venerable spectacles. Just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was being read. We were listening with our ears, observing it all with our minds; we could see him competing, somehow or other we felt afraid for him in his deadly peril, but we were hoping God would help him.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Jerome *Vita S. Hilarionis eremita*e 20.

<sup>40</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 313A.3 (MA 1:68). Quae mala facit turpis curiositas, concupiscentia vana oculorum, aviditas nugacium spectaculorum, insania stadiorum, nullo praemio conflictus certaminum! Certant aurigae aliquo praemio: litigant pro aurigis populi quo praemio? Sed delectat auriga, delectat venator, delectat scenicus. Itane honestum delectat turpitudine? Muta etiam cupiditatem spectaculorum: exhibet ecclesia menti tuae honorabiliora et veneranda spectacula. Modo legebatur passio beati Cypriani: aure audiebamus, mente spectabamus, certantem videbamus, periclitanti quodammodo timebamus, sed dei adiutorium sperabamus.

Augustine preached this sermon at one of Cyprian's shrines in Carthage, a city that provided a number of distractions for those so inclined. Augustine knew the allure that Carthage's traditional spectacles could have because his own friend Alypius had fallen prey to them. Before Alypius went to Rome, where as noted above he became enamored with gladiatorial combat, he frequented the circuses of Carthage. Only a passing rebuke from Augustine could cure him of his circensian madness.<sup>41</sup>

Augustine admits that the shows compel, but he attacks their baseness and frivolity. As a substitute, Augustine offers that the recounting of Cyprian's martyrdom is equally compelling. The story instructs the church spiritually, but it also elicits an emotional response from the hearer. Augustine continues this sermon from 401 by offering proof that the holy spectacles are more worthy than the secular spectacles of the city.

Anyway, do you want to know, in a word, what the difference is between our shows and spectacles and those of the theaters? We, to the extent that we are of sound and healthy mind, would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching; we, I repeat, would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching. Decent spectator, when you are watching a show in the theater, you're off your head if you have the audacity to imitate the performer you love.<sup>42</sup>

As noted above, gladiators and actors had dubious reputations, even among the pagan Romans. Christians, however, could be thrilled by the martyrs' victories, esteem them as most honored in the kingdom of heaven, and imitate their holy lives.

When considering the deaths of his fellow North Africans Perpetua and Felicity, Augustine exclaims to his congregation, "What could be sweeter than this spectacle? What more

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<sup>41</sup>Augustine *Conf.* 6.7.11–12.

<sup>42</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 313A.3 (MA 1:68-69). Denique vultis nosse cito, quid intersit inter spectacula nostra et theatra? Nos, quantum in nobis viget sana mens, martyres, quos spectamus, cupimus imitari; nos, inquam, sanctos martyres, quos certantes spectamus, cupimus imitari. Honesti spectator, in theatris cum spectas, insanis, si audes imitari quem diligis.

courageous than this contest? What more glorious than this victory?”<sup>43</sup> When the church read aloud the *Passion of Perpetua*, the invisible struggle of faith that every believer experiences suddenly burst forth into the visible realm. As a crowd cheering the victorious gladiator, the congregation honored the martyrs who conquered death. When these martyrs died, North Africans cheered for ignoble purposes. Augustine notes, however, with a sense of irony that now more North Africans cheer their deaths in order to honor them than cheered their deaths to mock them: “Neither then was the theater of cruelty filled with as great a crowd to kill them, as the one that now fills the church of piety to honor them.”<sup>44</sup> The spectacle provided by the Roman persecutors failed to have the desired effect. While providing some transitory entertainment for a few “gentiles,” it should have slowed the growth of Christianity. The opposite occurred. Augustine believes that the spectacle was orchestrated by God in order to teach the North Africans and grow the Church.

Although the accounts of struggle and death made good stories and gave real pleasure at their recounting, according to Augustine, God did not give this holy spectacle merely for entertainment. Augustine emphasized the didactic element of the spectacle. After the reading of Saint Vincent’s passion on January 22, 411, Augustine says, “Our spirits have just taken in a great and very marvelous spectacle; it was not a wholly vain and pernicious pleasure that we derived from it, such as is usual in the theaters with all their tinsel triviality, but plainly a most

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<sup>43</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 280.2 (PL 38:1281). Quid hoc spectaculo suavius? quid hoc certamine fortius? quid hac victoria gloriosius? (my translation)

<sup>44</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 280.2 (PL 38:1281). Neque tunc tanto concursu hominum ad eos occidendos cavea crudelitatis impleta est, quanto nunc ad eos honorandos ecclesia pietatis impletur (my translation).

useful and fruitful pleasure that we drank in with our inner eyes.”<sup>45</sup> The martyrologies taught the congregation the necessary virtues such as patience, and they reiterated Christianity’s central theme of conquering death.

This attempt to cast martyr feasts as holy spectacles seems to have been a common idea at the turn of the fifth century. In a sermon delivered in Antioch, John Chrysostom exhorts his congregation to be as insatiable for the martyrs’ feasts as the ungodly are for what he calls “unnatural spectacles.” He presents the feast as a holy spectacle and wonders why anyone would wish to watch “devilish pageantry” or see “horses simply running for no good reason.”<sup>46</sup> God, as the president of the games, has given humans something infinitely more spectacular to witness. The cult of the martyrs reminded Christians about the ultimate triumph of good over evil, a spectacle more exciting than watching stories of false gods or competitions between teams of horses.

By presenting the martyrs’ feasts as spectacles, bishops resurrected the excitement of the *munus*, the gladiatorial show, for their congregations. As noted above, gladiatorial spectacles were becoming increasingly infrequent during the fourth century; however, some of their appeal remained in the popular imagination. Augustine especially taps into the violence, the excitement, and the courage of the amphitheater as he attempts to provide an alternative to the remaining traditional Roman spectacles. Since the arena had all but died out completely and since it had a real connection to martyrdom from the beginning, bishops like Augustine and John Chrysostom could cognitively revive the event and apply it in a spiritual and educational manner to their

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<sup>45</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 275.1 (PL 38:1254). *Magnum et multum mirandum spectaculum noster animus cepit: nec inanissimam et perniciosissimam, sicut solet in theatris quarumque nugarum, sed plane utilissimam et fructuosissimam voluptatem oculis interioribus hausimus.*

<sup>46</sup>John Chrysostom *De sanctis martyribus* 1 (PG 50:645).



congregations. What Christians once viewed as the most hated of the Roman spectacles could now be used to compete with the frivolity of the remaining ones.

### **Gendering Spectacles**

Martyrdom's connection with spectacle reinforced traditional Christian ideas about the similarities between the spiritual life and the athletic contest. Viewing the spectacle of martyrdom allowed early Christians to see their martyrs as athletes engaged in a competition that transgressed the boundary between the spiritual and earthly realms. From the beginning, Christians viewed faith in terms of an athletic contest. The apostle Paul wrote, "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men."<sup>47</sup> Paul used frequently this metaphor of the athletic contest for the interior life of faith. The motif of the athlete in a spectacle also worked well for Christians who found themselves engaged in exterior struggles. In Roman society, however, all athletes were men. Martyrdom, which knew no preference of gender, included both men and women. The men became athletes. The women made the same shift, taking on Roman virtues of manliness.

The martyrs went into the arena as criminals (*noxii*), but once there, they played the part of the trained athlete or gladiator.<sup>48</sup> Not only did Christians view their martyrs in this light, but also the martyrs themselves often viewed their struggle as some sort of athletic competition.

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<sup>47</sup>1 Cor 4:9. δοκῶ γάρ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους, ὅτι θεάτρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

<sup>48</sup>By the late-imperial era, semantic overlap existed between the athlete and the gladiator, and Christian usage tends to lean towards the athlete side of the spectrum, presumably to avoid any negative connotations associated with the idea of gladiator since Greeks did not hold prejudicial views against athletes.

Before her martyrdom, Perpetua had a vision in which she sees her coming death in terms of a gladiatorial struggle.<sup>49</sup>

My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvelous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.<sup>50</sup>

After her vision, Perpetua claims, “I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil.”<sup>51</sup> This vision provides insight into the way some martyrs viewed their deaths. Perpetua saw herself as a trained fighter; in the vision she becomes a man in order to win the contest. Her adversary was the devil, symbolized by the Egyptian. Significantly, God himself, who makes his appearance as the giver of the contest, orchestrated the martyrdom.

In her vision, God gives Perpetua a branch when she overcomes the Egyptian.<sup>52</sup>

Christians commonly referred to the reward of martyrdom as a crown, the kind of prize an athlete received after winning his competition. Thus as martyrs move from being criminals to athletes, the martyrdom itself moves from being punishment to an opportunity. Augustine tells

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<sup>49</sup>Possibly the fashioning of Perpetua as a manly athlete is due entirely to the redactor of her passion. I believe, along with most scholars, that much of the text preserves the actual sentiments of Perpetua and that this fashioning is a self-fashioning.

<sup>50</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.7–8. Et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus; et coeperunt me favisores mei oleo defricare, quomodo solent in agone. Et illum contra Aegyptium video in afa volutantem. Et exivit vir quidam mirae magnitudinis ut etiam excederet fastigium amphitheatri, discinctatus, purpuram inter duos clauos per medium pectus habens, et galliculas multiformes ex auro et argento factas, et ferens virgam quasi lanista, et ramum viridem in quo erant mala aurea.

<sup>51</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.14. Et intellexi me non ad bestias, sed contra diabolum esse pugnaturam.

<sup>52</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.13.

his congregation, “He [God] instructed his athlete what to do, and set before him what he would receive.”<sup>53</sup> God did not send martyrdom as punishment, but as a chance to gain reward.

If both God and the martyr view the martyrdom as an athletic contest, Christians ought to use the metaphor as well. In his writings, Tertullian uses this language frequently. Since he himself was no martyr, he cast himself in the role of a spectator cheering for his favorite. In his *Ad martyras*, Tertullian compares his exhortations to the encouragement the crowd gives a performer.

Not that I am specially entitled to exhort you, yet not only the trainers and overseers, but even the unskilled, nay, all who choose, without the slightest need for it, are wont to animate from afar by their cries the most accomplished gladiators, and from the mere throng of onlookers useful suggestions have sometimes come.<sup>54</sup>

These cries of exhortation were meant to spur the martyrs on towards greater “manliness” in the face of their trials. The martyrs earned their crowns with virtues that Roman society viewed as masculine. Endurance, strength, activity, agency, these traits belonged to the athlete. These traits gave victory to a competitor. Though these traits were masculine, not all martyrs were men. Perpetua “became” a man. Likewise, Tertullian believed that women martyrs had to act like men.<sup>55</sup>

Writing a century after Tertullian and in a much different context, Eusebius of Caesarea advocates this same need for manliness in martyrdom. He depicts the martyrs as bold in action, conflating manliness of spirit with manliness in the body. He speaks unreservedly of his

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<sup>53</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 277A.2 (PLS 2:418). *Athletae suo ita praecipit quid faciat, et proponit quid accipiat, ut etiam ne deficiat subvenit.*

<sup>54</sup>Tertullian *Mart.* 1.2. *Nec tantus ego sum, ut vos alloquar; verumtamen et gladiatores perfectissimos non tantum magistri et praepositi sui, sed etiam idiotae et supervacui quique adhortantur de longinquo, ut saepe de ipso populo dictata suggesta profuerint.*

<sup>55</sup>Tertullian *Mart.* 4.

friend Apphianus who seized the governor and physically stopped him from offering sacrifices. Eusebius asks, “Who, that hears of it, would not justly admire his courage, boldness, constancy, and even more than these the daring deed itself, which evidenced a zeal for religion and a spirit truly superhuman?”<sup>56</sup> In another vignette, Eusebius records the daring of the Nicomedian who publicly shredded an anti-Christian edict.<sup>57</sup> Eusebius’ text evidences a deep admiration for those martyrs who successfully played the man in both spirit and bodily action.

This Christian preoccupation with playing the man undergirded one of their strongest critiques of Greco-Roman theatrical spectacles. At the theater gender roles blurred and bent, leaving moralists, both Christian and pagan, uncomfortable. The plays themselves, usually depicting bawdy situations, often relied on unexpected gender reversals to provoke laughter from the spectators. In a tradition reaching back to *Lysistrata*, comedies used gender bending to delight the audiences.<sup>58</sup> Though Christians viewed the subject matter itself as questionable, the manner in which the actors performed offended many Christians. In the classical dramas and the pantomime, men played all the parts. When playing a female role, the actor would alter his voice and adopt effeminate gestures. For a man to portray a woman was doubly immoral because acting inherently involved falsehood and acting as a woman transgressed gender boundaries.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Eusebius *Mart. Pal.* 4 (PG 20:1476). τίς ὁ αὐθις ἀκοῇ παραλαβὼν, οὐχ ἄν ἐνδίκως θαυμάσειε τὸ θάρσος, τὴν παρρησίαν, τὴν ἐνστασιν, καὶ, πρό γε τούτων, τὴν τόλμαν καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐγξείρημα, ζήλου θεοσεβείας καὶ πνεύματος ὡς ἀληθῶς ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων παρίχοντα τεκμήρια.

<sup>57</sup>Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 8.5.

<sup>58</sup>Audiences have yet to tire of this comedic device. One need only think of recent Hollywood films, including *Mr. Mom*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Junior*, and *Shakespeare in Love*. The irony is that even though films in this genre have been criticized for upsetting traditional gender roles, they actually reinforce tradition by portraying the reversal as absurd.

<sup>59</sup>Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 125–126; Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 72.

To make matters worse, not only did men act like women, but women inappropriately acted like men by their brazen appearance in the mime.<sup>60</sup>

Though gender confusion in the theatrical spectacle was condemned by some Christian thinkers, it was praised in the holy spectacle of martyrdom. In her passion, Perpetua “became” a man, and other female martyrs are similarly described as possessing the manly virtues. When preaching on those suicide virgins described in the previous chapter, John Chrysostom often imputed to them qualities he considered masculine, like courage and strength. When describing Domnina and her daughters, John says, “if, that is, one must call them women; for although in a female body, they display a male mind but exceeded even nature itself and clashed with the bodiless powers.”<sup>61</sup> Their fortitude makes John hesitant to even call them women. Similarly, when discussing Pelagia he lauds her for courage and noble resolve.<sup>62</sup> In his sermon on the female martyr Drosis, who was thrown on a pyre, John claims that he especially loves female martyrs because when the women strip off their clothes for the contest of martyrdom they reveal manly strength that puts the soft men in his congregation to shame.<sup>63</sup>

Augustine, however, taught that these masculine virtues were located not in the martyrs, whether they be male or female, but the virtues were possessions of Christ. In stark contrast with most other bishops, Augustine admires the passivity and feminine qualities of the martyrs. Though some of his language may be merely rhetorical overstatement befitting the

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<sup>60</sup>Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 72–73.

<sup>61</sup>John Chrysostom *Bern.* 4 (PG 50:635). καὶ γὰρ ἐν γυναικίῳ σώματι ἀνδρῶν ἐπεδείξαντο φρόνημα, μᾶλλον δὲ οὐχ ἀνδρῶν ἐπεδείξαντο φρόνημα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴν ὑπερέβησαν τὴν φύσιν, καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἀσωμάτους δυνάμεις τὴν ἀμιλλαν ἔθεντο.

<sup>62</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.* 1.

<sup>63</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancta Droside martyre* 3.

occasion, when preaching on Perpetua and Felicity's feast day, Augustine indicates that these women epitomized the martyr spirit. He preaches, "What, after all, could be more glorious than these women, whom men can more easily admire than imitate?"<sup>64</sup> At another time he calls their martyrdoms a "greater miracle" than those of the men who died with them.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Augustine does not gloss over the frailty of the women or congratulate them on playing the man (even though, as noted above, Perpetua herself emphasizes this aspect). In fact, he savors their feminine weakness, even as he exalts them as the preeminent martyrs. Augustine dwells on the tears that Perpetua shed when her father was beaten because of her adherence to Christianity. He tells his congregation, "In fact that pain in no way undermined the strength of her resolve, and also added to the renown of her sufferings."<sup>66</sup> Augustine believed that Perpetua's frailty was her greatest strength. In the same sermon, Augustine says, "For there is a more glorious crown for the weaker sex, because clearly a manly spirit has done more in women."<sup>67</sup> This "manly spirit" is not something that the martyrs work up on their own. Augustine speaks of the spirit of Christ working through the martyrs.

According to Augustine, the true martyrs did not work their marvelous feats of endurance by their own fortitude, a point other bishops do not make, presumably because it might lead to congregational laxity. Rather, Christ worked in the martyrs to produce the patience necessary for martyrdom. In a sermon on the Scillitan Saints probably preached in Carthage

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<sup>64</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 280.1 (PL 38:1281). Quid enim gloriosius his feminis, quas viri mirantur facilius, quam imitantur?

<sup>65</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 282.3 (PL 38:1286). miraculo maiore

<sup>66</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 281.2 (PL 38:1284). Proinde et dolor ille nihil retraxit robori fortitudinis, et aliquid addidit laudibus passionis.

<sup>67</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 281.1 (PL 38:1284). Nam ibi est corona gloriosior, ubi sexus infirmior. Quia profecto virilis animus in feminas maius aliquid fecit (my translation).

early in his career, Augustine says, “The strength of Christ’s martyrs, both men and women, is Christ.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Augustine supposed martyrdom should not be attempted apart from this indwelling of Christ’s strength. In 250 during Decius’s persecution, Castus and Aemilius failed during their first encounter with martyrdom and burned the incense required by the imperial cult. At a later date, however, they remained faithful and were martyred.<sup>69</sup> Preaching on their feast day in 397, Augustine says, “Perhaps they too, to begin with, relied presumptuously on their own powers, and that’s why they fell away. He showed them who they really were, in themselves, and who he really was.”<sup>70</sup> The power and strength for martyrdom dwell within the martyrs but originate outside them.

This strength is best viewed through the martyr’s personal weakness. The weaker the martyr, the greater the martyrdom. Embracing this weakness was in itself an imitation of Christ. Augustine taught his people, “The one who had made himself weak for them was shown to be undefeated in them.”<sup>71</sup> While men from Tertullian to John Chrysostom encouraged women to act like men, Augustine encouraged his hearers to embrace the qualities that society thought of as feminine. Passivity and frailty belonged to the martyr; activity and strength belonged to Christ. The martyr could be perfected only by “witnessing” to the manly virtues of Christ.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299E.1 (PLS 2:625). *Martyrum Christi virorum et feminarum fortitudo Christus* (my translation).

<sup>69</sup>Cyprian *De lapsis* 13.

<sup>70</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 285.4 (PL 38:1295). *Fortasse et ipsi de suis viribus antea praesumpserunt, et ideo defecerunt. Ostendit eis qui essent ipsi, qui ipse.*

<sup>71</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 281.1 (PL 38:1284). *Ille in eis apparuit invictus, qui pro eis factus est infirmus.*

<sup>72</sup>Brent Shaw provides an alternative explanation for Augustine’s reinterpretation of Perpetua’s passion in Brent Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 3–45. Shaw believes that Augustine reinforces traditional patriarchal gender roles in his preaching because of the threatening feminism in Perpetua’s passion. Shaw misreads Augustine’s intent, which I contend is much

This shift in thinking relates to Augustine's concern that Christians view martyrdom in light of New Testament witness bearing, which will be examined closely in chapter six. Exalting the weakness or passivity of the martyrs also bears directly on the questions surrounding voluntary martyrdom, which were examined in the previous chapter. When Augustine claims that the active element in martyrdom is the spirit of Christ, he is emphasizing that martyrdom first and foremost is about the witness bearing. The martyrs were the athletes of the Church, but Augustine shifts the attention from the martyr-athlete to the Christ-athlete in the martyr. This shift takes attention off the sufferings of the martyr in the holy spectacle and highlights the message of Christ behind the sufferings, giving Augustine's persecution-free congregation a more spiritual form of imitation. Of course, this teaching cannot be divorced from his North African context because Augustine's new emphasis allowed him to question the sufferings that his Donatist neighbors experienced at the hands of Catholic magistrates. Suffering was no longer enough because a Christian must suffer for the cause of Christ.

John Chrysostom's more traditional ideas about manliness and martyrdom are consistent with his own pastoral agenda. John believed that the Christian life entailed hard work and that Christians ought to strive for asceticism. Through hard work and manliness the Christian could achieve the ideal life by mastering the body and its passions. As a moralist, John concerned himself with communicating to his hearers what they could do to please God on their Christian journey. Augustine, with his famously dim view of human ability, emphasizes that

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more subversive in that he advocates the "feminine" virtues for all Christians. Shaw's analysis goes awry on two counts. (1) Shaw totally neglects Augustine's emphasis that Christ's masculinity, not their own, empowers the martyrs. (2) Shaw bases his argument on some dubious translation, rendering *hominis* as "man" in the masculine sense.



screwing up the will is counterproductive and that Christians need to trust that Christ will work things out.

For both these bishops, however, viewing the martyr cult as spectacle aided in the Christianization of those people within the Church. Their emphases differ: John Chrysostom sought to transform the civic culture by co-opting traditional virtues of manliness, while Augustine seemed more interested in supplying an alternative to Rome's enticements by subversively advocating a realignment of "virtue" to the feminine. The cult became a key component in building a Christian culture. Even though bishops around the Mediterranean found the cult useful, its context was never the same, and the next few chapters highlight the diverse ways in which honoring the martyrs could be applied to a variety of situations.

## CHAPTER 4

### AMBROSE OF MILAN: GIVING NEW LIFE TO MARTYRS

Perhaps no one in the fourth century did more to promote the cult of the martyrs than Ambrose of Milan. Ambrose's *inventio*, or "finding," of two previously unknown martyrs and his translation of their relics, moving them from one place to another, became prototypical of the cult of martyrs in the western Roman Empire. Many scholars have interpreted his actions as having political motivations because of his often stormy relationship with the imperial court, but he is also the product of his late antique religious context.<sup>1</sup> During Ambrose's time as bishop, the Arian controversy still divided the churches around the Mediterranean, and this controversy was especially contentious in Ambrose's Milan.

Early in the fourth century, Arius, a priest in Alexandria, began teaching the doctrine that Christ was subordinate in every way to God the Father.<sup>2</sup> Arius believed that his explanation of the Christian faith accorded with Origenist theology, but many bishops disagreed, most

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<sup>1</sup>For a thorough analysis of Ambrose's political relationships, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). For a more pious rendering of Ambrose, see the introduction of Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the Arian controversy see Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: from Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 195–294; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 172–225. Chadwick views the controversy from a more historical point of view, noting the ecclesiastical politics that often entered the debates, while Pelikan's book examines more of the theological questions surrounding the controversy.

notably, Athanasius of Alexandria. Emperor Constantine called together bishops from around the empire to the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle this question, and the council condemned Arius's teachings, promoting the doctrine that God the Father and God the Son were of the same substance. The council's debates, however, did not settle the question because many bishops felt the Nicene Council's theological formulation too extreme. These bishops proposed a *via media* in which they described Jesus as *homoiousios*—being “like” the Father, but remaining silent on whether he was of the “same” substance. In the generation after the Council of Nicaea, this homoean position, which attempted compromise, gained momentum, due in no small part to Constantine's son, Constantius, who favored it over the Nicene formulation.

When Ambrose became bishop of Milan in 374, his congregation was divided between Nicene and homoean factions. His predecessor had been a vocal supporter of the homoean faction, and when he died, the church argued over which faction would supply the next bishop. The people of Milan forced Ambrose, who was the governor at the time, to be their new bishop, probably in hopes that he would be impartial.<sup>3</sup> It quickly became clear, however, that Ambrose favored Nicene Christianity. In this context of theological conflict, Ambrose formed his ideas about asceticism and martyrdom, becoming a key individual in the growth of the cult of martyrs.

### **Death: Asceticism and Martyrdom**

In order to understand Ambrose's views on martyrdom's relationship to his theological battles with the homoean party, it is beneficial to first investigate his general theology on martyrdom. This task, however, is complicated by the fact that Ambrose, though intimately connected to the martyrs, did not produce any systematic treatises on the subject. Though he must have preached sermons on martyr's feasts, none have survived, so gleanings

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<sup>3</sup>Concerning Ambrose's election as bishop, see McLynn, *Ambrose*, 1–52.

from other works must provide clues to Ambrose's attitudes towards martyrdom. Ambrose viewed martyrdom and asceticism as twin manifestations of death, which he claimed should be embraced rather than feared. To understand his theology of the death of martyrdom, we will first examine his ideas about the death of asceticism.

Ambrose practiced asceticism broadly, but he is most closely identified with his promotion of virginity. Ambrose, the youngest of three children, was born into a relatively affluent Christian family, and contrary to societal norms, neither Ambrose nor his two older siblings married. During his life he wrote at least four treatises on the subject of virginity, his most notable being *De virginibus*, which was written in 377 just a few years after he became bishop of Milan. Ambrose addressed the work to his sister, Marcellina, who lived in Rome as a consecrated virgin.<sup>4</sup> This treatise attempts to demonstrate the superiority of virginity to married life and promotes the idea of the virgin as being wedded to Christ himself. Ambrose also provides examples of pious virgins, Mary being the most notable, and addresses practical issues about how virgins should organize their lives.<sup>5</sup> Roman society understood the roles of married people, but those wishing to remain unmarried needed guidance regarding the roles and responsibilities they would fulfill in relationship to both the church and the broader society.<sup>6</sup>

Ambrose begins *De virginibus* by praising Agnes, the virgin martyr, and he asks for the martyr's aid in composing his work, like Homer invoking the muse.<sup>7</sup> He marvels at her

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<sup>4</sup>For a complete, annotated list of Ambrose's writings, along with those considered spurious, see Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 55–68.

<sup>5</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* (PL 16:187–232).

<sup>6</sup>For an examination of the social tensions that arose from Ambrose's teachings on virginity, see McLynn, *Ambrose*, 61–65. Also, Brown, *Body and Society*, 259–284; 341–365.

<sup>7</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 1.6 (PL 16:190). Appellabo martyrem, praedicabo virginem.

ability to suffer martyrdom at the tender age of twelve, pointing out that most girls her age are fearful of their parents' angry looks. He uses language laden with sacrificial imagery as he commends her ability to teach the church in spite of her youth.<sup>8</sup> Her dedication to virginity and her willingness to be a martyr proclaim to the church that a new era has dawned. Life for Christians is not like it was before. In fact the Christian life is in a real sense unnatural. Ambrose admits that it is not normal for young girls to forswear marriage, and in the same way, young girls do not stare down death. Ambrose writes, "That which is beyond nature is from the author of nature."<sup>9</sup> Here Ambrose suggests that this natural world, which he views suspiciously, cannot understand these prodigious events, demonstrating that women like Agnes were inspired by God himself. Ambrose blends and blurs the ideas of virginity and martyrdom, seeing them both as manifestations of fleshly mortification, and this mortification is made possible by the incarnation.

At Christ's coming, Ambrose believed that Heaven started to infuse itself into the earthly realm, repairing the effects of sin. He claims,

But, after the Lord entered into this body and joined the Deity to a body without any stain of confusion, this custom characteristic of the heavenly life [virginity] spread throughout the world and implanted itself in human bodies. It is this that the angels who minister upon the earth declared would come to be, which would offer to the Lord the obedient service of an unsullied body. This is that heavenly army which the host of praising angels prophesied would exist on earth.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 1.7 (PL 16:190). vel si ad aras invita raperetur, tendere Christo inter ignes manus, atque in ipsis sacrilegis focis tropaeum Domini signare victoris.

<sup>9</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 1.8 (PL 16:191). Quia quod ultra naturam est, de auctore naturae est.

<sup>10</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 1.13. (PL 16:192) At vero posteaquam Dominus in corpus hoc veniens, contubernium divinitatis et corporis sine ulla concretae confusionis labe sociavit, tunc toto orbe diffusus corporibus humanis vitae coelestis usus inolevit. Hoc illud est quod ministrantes in terris angeli declararunt futurum genus, quod ministerium Domino immaculati corporis obsequiis exhiberet. Haec est coelestis illa militia, quam laudantium exercitus angelorum promittebat in terris.

Virginity, and martyrdom along with it, was evidence of Christianity's truth because the earthly world was passing away. Before Christ's advent, the "natural" life characterized human relations, but now self-mortification, whether it be martyrdom or virginity, characterized God's people. In spite of the fact that not all martyrs were virgins, Ambrose intertwines the two, intimating that sexual renunciation is the foundation for martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> Practicing death in the body opened Christians up to the heavenly virtues, allowing Christians to live like angels who exist in a perpetual state of glorious chastity.

It is important to remember the context in which Ambrose wrote *De virginibus*. In 377 Ambrose was still trying to heal the rifts in the divided Milanese church. Though this writing mainly addresses behavior, he peppers the work with subtle endorsements of Nicene theology. For example, in the quotation above, Ambrose says, "the Lord entered into this body and joined the Deity to a body without any stain of confusion," casting the incarnation in decidedly Nicene terms. According to Ambrose, martyrdom and virginity did not witness to just any form of Christianity, but rather exclusively to Trinitarian Christianity in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are all of the same substance.

In the years after Ambrose wrote *De virginibus*, Ambrose's promotion of Nicene Christianity became more complicated by the presence of the imperial court in Milan. Due to the court's frequent stops in Milan and the emperor Gratian's interest in promoting ecclesiastical unity, Ambrose found himself the standard-bearer for Nicene Christianity in the Latin-speaking part of the empire. In 380 Ambrose produced his first two volumes of *De fide* for Gratian, in

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<sup>11</sup>Ambrose *Virg.* 1.10 (PL 16:191). Invitat nunc integritatis amor, et tu, soror sancta, vel mutis tacita moribus, ut aliquid de virginitate dicamus; ne veluti transitu quodam perstricta videatur, quae principalis est virtus. Non enim ideo laudabilis virginitas, quia et in martyribus reperitur, sed quia ipsa martyres faciat.

which Ambrose launched a detailed attack on Arianism in all its various forms, and he supplemented this work with three more volumes the next year.<sup>12</sup> In *De fide*, Ambrose enlists the martyrs as witnesses to his version of Christianity.<sup>13</sup> The martyrs shine, giving light to the world by reflecting the light of truth coming from Christ himself. The Jesus for whom the martyrs died is the Jesus who is of the same substance as the Father.

Ambrose enjoyed a brief period of success against the enemies of his church during the rule of Gratian, but after Gratian's death in 383, life became more difficult for the bishop of Milan. Valentinian succeeded Gratian, and Valentinian favored the homoean faction, putting Ambrose on the defensive. In the midst of his struggle with a resurgent homoean faction, Ambrose wrote *De bono mortis*, *On the Good of Death*, which provides insight to his theology of martyrdom since death was the most visible prerequisite for martyrdom. Various scholars date *De bono mortis* anytime between 386 and 391, and during these years Ambrose was still in the midst of his fiercest conflicts with the homoean party in Milan.<sup>14</sup> *De bono mortis*, a treatise that probably began as at least two sermons, explores the nature of death, and Ambrose claims in this work that there are three types of death. First, sin is death, and this death is evil because it causes separation from God. The second type of death that Ambrose recognizes he calls "mystical

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<sup>12</sup>Here I follow McLynn's dating of *De fide*. He dates the first two volumes to 380 and the next three to the following year (McLynn, *Ambrose*, 102). The traditional date, (followed by Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 61) places the first two books in 378 and the next three in 380. The difference hinges on whether Ambrose alludes to Valens's heterodoxy in book two. McLynn convincingly suggests that Ambrose is referring to heterodoxy within Gratian's Illyricum.

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Ambrose *De fide* 2.24 (PL 16:564–565). Hic sine non bonus, qui nobis coelum fecit esse, quod terra est; ut sicut in coelo, quasi in speculo quodam, stellarum lucentium refulgerent globi; ita etiam apostolorum et martyrum et sacerdotum, vice stellarum fulgentium, toto illucescerent chori mundo? Cf. *Fid.* 3.128, in which Ambrose contrasts the martyrs with his enemies who deny the Nicene formulation.

<sup>14</sup>For arguments regarding dating, see Wiesner, *S. Ambrosii De Bono Mortis*, 10–14. Wiesner views 387–389 as being the most likely period.

death,” *mors mystica*. This death is good because it is the death by which the Christian “dies to sin and lives to God.” He equates this death with baptism, which symbolizes the Christian’s burial with Christ.<sup>15</sup> Most of the treatise, however, examines the third type of death, natural death. In this death, the soul is separated from the body, and Ambrose suggests that Christians should view this death as an unalloyed good. Merging Platonic theories with passages from the apostle Paul, Ambrose claims that the body is the locus of sins and earthly delights. Death cannot be evil since it frees the immortal soul from these burdens. Using syllogism, Ambrose claims, “If this life, then, is full of burdens, surely the end of life is a consolation. But consolation is a good, and the end of life is death. Therefore, death is a good.”<sup>16</sup> He continues by claiming that the soul of a dying man frees itself from its body as a prisoner frees himself from his chains. Death allows the immortal soul to free itself from worldly burdens that drag it down.

This free soul achieves purity in death, and the soul can only truly please God after death. Ambrose claims that once the bonds of sin and worldly pleasure have been broken the soul can bring a “sacrifice of praise.”<sup>17</sup> Ambrose uses King David as his model for this passage, claiming that David exposed himself to death and appeased God’s wrath by offering to give his own life on behalf of the people. Believers themselves will be this sacrifice of praise to Christ at their deaths if they, like David, live with perseverance. He writes, “No praise is perfect before death; no one in this life can be lauded with definitive praise, because his later actions are

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<sup>15</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 2.3. *alia mors mystica, quando quis peccato moritur et deo vivit, de qua ait item apostolus: consepulti enim sumus cum illo per baptismum in mortem.*

<sup>16</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 2.5. *itaque si plena oneris vita, utique finis eius adlevamento est. adlevamentum autem bonum, mors autem finis: mors igitur est bonum.*

<sup>17</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 3.8. *tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis.*



uncertain.”<sup>18</sup> Death is the moment of cleansing that enables the Christian to become a sacrifice to Christ, and Ambrose believes that nothing could be more excellent than this.<sup>19</sup> Ambrose’s readers would naturally see allusions to martyrdom throughout this passage that depicts death as a purifying sacrifice.

Part of Ambrose’s goal in *De bono mortis* is to ease Christians’ fear of death in light of its being a good. One way that Ambrose suggests removing the fear of death is by conforming oneself to death during life. He writes, “He conforms himself to death who divests himself of pleasures, raises himself from earthly delights, and lifts his mind and places it in that heavenly home where St. Paul dwelled while he still lived here below.”<sup>20</sup> Here Ambrose suggests that asceticism provides a path to preparing for the goodness of death before the time of death, demonstrating a consistency with his theology of virginity explicated the decade before. The body is the locus of sin and evil, and the soul is immortal and pure. Therefore, asceticism, which attempts to lessen the body’s influence on the soul through discipline and denial, is a foreshadowing of the goodness of death, which can usher some of the blessed virtues of the eternal state into the temporal one.

The above considerations demonstrate some important ideas about how Ambrose viewed his struggles against the homoean faction in Milan. Ambrose was a stalwart supporter of Nicene Christianity, and one of the proofs that he uses to support his position is that the martyrs

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<sup>18</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 3.8. non ‘sacrifico’ [David] inquit, sed ‘sacrificabo’ significans illud perfectum esse sacrificium, quando unusquisque domino corporis huius vinculis absolutus adsisteret et offeret se hostiam laudis, quia ante mortem nulla est perfecta laudatio neque quisquam in hac vita possit definito praeconio praedicari, cum posteriora eius incerta sint.

<sup>19</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 3.8. quid enim praestantius quam fieri Christi hostiam?

<sup>20</sup>Ambrose *Bon. mort.* 3.10. imitatur ille qui se voluptatibus exuit et a terrenis delectationibus adtollit atque adlevat et in illo caelesti habitaculo locat, in quo Paulus, cum adhuc viveret, conversabatur.

testify to his version of the truth. Of course this enlistment of the martyrs to his cause was mere assertion. All the martyrs he speaks of died before the Arian controversy erupted. But the implied syllogism in his rhetoric was powerful. The martyrs would only sacrifice themselves for God; they sacrificed themselves for Christ; therefore, Christ must be God. Ambrose was also very much concerned with the promotion of virginity and asceticism. He believed that his virginity, along with his other ascetic practices, gave him a living death, which prepared him for the goodness of natural death that would separate his pure soul from his corrupt body. Given these attitudes, it is unsurprising that Ambrose hoped to provide Milan with a local martyr who would insure the triumph of the Nicene faction in the city over the homoeans.

### **Seeking Martyrdom in the Easter Crisis**

Ambrose's battle with the homoean faction approached the point of crisis in 385. Emperor Gratian, who had supported Nicene Christianity more often than not, died during a rebellion in 383, and his half-brother, Valentinian II, assumed control of the western half of the empire, housing his imperial court in Ambrose's Milan. Valentinian, however, was still just a child when he donned the purple and was guided by his mother Justina until her death in 388. Justina, like her late husband, favored the homoean version of Christianity, and through her son, supported that faction in Milan. Ambrose, Augustine, and Paulinus of Milan all reserve their harshest criticisms for Justina, though Neil McLynn credits the young Valentinian with taking an active part in the ensuing religious struggle.<sup>21</sup>

In the spring of 385, Valentinian summoned Ambrose to his court to discuss imperial use of a basilica located just outside Milan, presumably for organizing a homoean worship

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<sup>21</sup>McLynn, *Ambrose*, 171–172. Cf. Paulinus of Milan *Vita Ambrosii* 13; Augustine *Conf.* 9.7.15; Ambrose *Sermo contra Auxentium de basilicas* 17.

service for Easter. Ambrose, realizing he would be unable to block this move, organized a creative response. While he met with the imperial officials, an unruly crowd gathered to protest the “handing over” of a basilica to the emperor.<sup>22</sup> In a sermon describing this event a year later, Ambrose suggests that he was timid until the people gathered to support him, and he casts the mob as martyrs ready to defend God’s truth. He says, “Do they not remember that the people, when they knew I had gone to the palace, made such a rush that they could not resist its force; and all offered themselves to death for the faith of Christ as a military officer came out with some light troops to disperse the crowd?”<sup>23</sup> The mob cowed the imperial court, who then asked Ambrose to smooth things over with the people. His condition was that the emperor give up his claim to the basilica. A year later, however, the imperial court would make another attempt to secure a basilica for itself.

The fourth century saw the construction of numerous basilicas in Milan. S. Thecla, also known as the new cathedral, stood in the center of late-antique Milan, and this building existed by at least 355 and was perhaps started between 345 and 350.<sup>24</sup> The new cathedral served as the center for the Milanese church. Ambrose delivered most of his sermons and celebrated the Eucharist almost daily in this building, as did his homoean predecessor before him. This cathedral, however, was not the basilica that Valentinian and Justina aimed to use. The sources refer to the building desired by Valentinian as the Portian Basilica, a suburban basilica with no

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<sup>22</sup>Often when discussing this showdown, Ambrose would use the Latin verb “trado” which had a loaded meaning within the context of religious struggle.

<sup>23</sup>Ambrose *Aux.* 29 (PL 16:1016). Nonne meminerunt quod ubi me cognovit populos palatium petisse, ita irruit, ut vim ejus ferre non possent; quando comiti militari cum expeditis ad fugandam multitudinem egresso obtulerunt omnes se neci pro fide Christi?

<sup>24</sup>Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 76–77.

attached martyr relics. The imperial court seems to have believed it had certain prerogatives concerning this particular building, and perhaps the basilica was originally built in the mid 370s to give the homoean faction a place of worship.<sup>25</sup> This basilica's exact location is unknown, but most scholars agree that the Portian Basilica is likely the same building as S. Lorenzo in Milan today. S. Lorenzo is an elegant building that would have suited imperial use, and as a new basilica, outside the city walls and lacking theological associations, it would be an ideal meeting place for a group viewed as heretics.

Naturally the emperor would not have attempted to use the other suburban basilicas, which had strong associations to Ambrose personally. During his tenure as bishop, Ambrose oversaw the construction of three more basilicas built in cemeteries in the suburbs of Milan, two of which were completed during 386 in the midst of conflict with the court. His goal was to turn Milan into a Christian capital on par with Rome and Constantinople, so he planned to ring Milan with martyr shrines in imitation of Rome. The first building project planned was probably the Basilica Ambrosiana, which Ambrose named after himself and planned to use as his own burial place. The second building he planned, though it was completed a short time before the Ambrosiana, was the Basilica Apostolorum, now known as S. Nazaro. Ambrose likely used Constantine's Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople as a model for this building; no other western churches of this kind predate it. It was laid out in a cruciform plan, with the wings being shorter than the nave. The basilica housed relics of some apostles that were translated to Milan. The sources do not explicitly say which apostles were the original inhabitants of the basilica, nor is it known where the relics came from. Krautheimer believes that the relics were donations from Theodosius in Constantinople of Andrew, John, and Thomas, while McLynn

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<sup>25</sup>Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*, 91.

suggests that they were contact relics, pieces of cloth that had touched a martyr's remains, of Peter and Paul from Rome.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, eventually relics from all these apostles came to dwell in the Basilica Apostolorum.

Ambrose's Basilica Apostolorum not only increased the prestige of the city, but also it sent a message regarding the city's theological views. Ambrose used the burgeoning cult of martyrs to support his Nicene theology through the construction of this basilica. The name and cruciform blueprint of the Basilica Apostolorum recreate a landmark of Constantinople within the city of Milan. While the basilica was under construction, Ambrose was dealing with a Milanese imperial court sympathetic to homoean theology. The religious climate in Constantinople, however, was decidedly different. Constantinople had been a hotbed of Arian theology, but by 385 Emperor Theodosius, along with the city's unofficial bishop Gregory of Nazianzus, had made Constantinople a stronghold for Nicene Christianity.<sup>27</sup> By founding the Basilica Apostolorum, Ambrose proclaimed that Milan too was a Nicene city with no patience for Arianism of any sort. Not only was he proclaiming this message to the broader Christian Church, but also he was specifically letting both emperors, Valentinian and Theodosius, know with whom the church in Milan stood.

On January 23, 386, Valentinian fired the first salvo in his second attempt to secure a basilica for himself and his partisans. He issued a law granting freedom of assembly to the homoean party and declared that anyone interfering with this right would be guilty of treason

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<sup>26</sup>Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*, 80; McLynn, *Ambrose*, 230–231. McLynn tells the story of Charles Borromeo who in 1578 found in the basilica scraps of cloth in a silver reliquary covered in iconography depicting Christ, Peter, and Paul.

<sup>27</sup>Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 14–25, provides a summary of Gregory's exceedingly brief ministry at Constantinople.

against the emperor.<sup>28</sup> The week before Easter, the emperor demanded that Ambrose allow him the use of the New Cathedral and that Ambrose ensure “that the people should make no disturbance;” Ambrose naturally declined.<sup>29</sup> This demand was only an opening bid, and the court quickly began preparing the Portian Basilica for their Easter observances.<sup>30</sup> The people of Milan reacted by seizing the Portian Basilica themselves, refusing to leave even though the emperor surrounded the building with his soldiers, many of whom were Arian Germans. Augustine of Hippo testifies to the city’s precarious situation during the standoff, noting that his own mother, Monica, was one of the Nicene faithful holding the basilica.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, the emperor backed down, relinquishing his claim to the Portian Basilica.

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<sup>28</sup>Cod. theod. 16.1.4. Imppp. Valentinianus, Theodosius et Arcadius aaa. ad Eusignium praefectum praetorio. Damus copiam colligendi his, qui secundum ea sentiunt, quae temporibus divae memoriae Constanti sacerdotibus convocatis ex omni orbe Romano expositaque fide ab his ipsis, qui dissentire noscuntur, Ariminensi concilio, Constantinopolitano etiam confirmata in aeternum mansura decreta sunt. Conveniendi etiam quibus iussimus patescat arbitrium, scituris his, qui sibi tantum existimant colligendi copiam contributam, quod, si turbulentum quippiam contra nostrae tranquillitatis praeceptum faciendum esse temptaverint, ut seditiois auctores pacisque turbatae ecclesiae, etiam maiestatis capite ac sanguine sint supplicia luituri, manente nihilo minus eos supplicio, qui contra hanc dispositionem nostram obreptive aut clanculo supplicare temptaverint. Dat. X kal. feb. Mediolano Honorio nob. p. et Evodio cons. (386 ian. 23). McLynn suggests that the law managed to survive in the code because the compliers confused Constantius’s Arian council with Theodosius’s Council of Constantinople in 381. McLynn, *Ambrose*, 181 n.84.

<sup>29</sup>Ambrose *Epistulae* 20.1–3 (PL 16:994–995). Convenerunt me primo principes virtutum viri, comites consistoriani, ut et basilicam traderem, et procurarem, ne quid populus turbarum moveret. Respondi quod erat ordinis, templum Dei a sacerdote tradi non posse. McLynn provides a detailed analysis of this episode. McLynn, *Ambrose*, 187–219.

<sup>30</sup>Marcia L. Colish hypothesizes that the Arians wanted to use the Portian Basilica on Easter because it was the only church building, besides the New Cathedral, with a baptistery, and Easter was the appropriate day for baptizing new converts. Marcia L. Colish, “Why the Portiana? Reflections on the Milanese Basilica Crisis of 386,” *JECS* 10 (2002): 361–372.

<sup>31</sup>Augustine *Conf.* 9.7.15. Ambrose, Augustine, and Paulinus of Milan all depict the people of Milan as standing firmly with their bishop against the imperial court’s heterodoxy. It is impossible to tell how much of the city’s population was Nicene and how much was Arian, but it seems that the rifts that had led to Ambrose’s election had mostly healed. My conjecture is that ten years of sermons on Nicene doctrine had had a significant impact on the city’s theology and that the bulk of Milan’s full-time residents were orthodox by 386.

Many scholars note the confidence, skill, and luck that Ambrose possessed, traits that saw him safely through this ordeal, getting him the desired outcome of causing the emperor and his homoean party to abandon their plans for establishing a rival liturgy in Milan. Ambrose's goals, however, might have been quite different in this situation, and he may have, in a very real sense, been disappointed with the outcome. It seems likely that Ambrose did not expect to survive this encounter with Valentinian and Justina. Given his ideas about the goodness of death and preparing oneself for death through asceticism, Ambrose probably expected, and wished, to die a martyr's death.

In a letter to his sister in which he chronicles the events of that week in 386, Ambrose repeatedly indicates that he was ready to die at the hands of the imperial court. When the situation first began to unravel, magistrates came to Ambrose demanding that he force the people to abandon the Portian Basilica. He tells Marcellina that he told them, "If my patrimony is required, enter upon it, if my body, I will go at once. Do you wish to cast me into chains, or to give me to death? it will be a pleasure to me. I will not defend myself with throngs of people, nor will I cling to the altars and entreat for my life, but will more gladly be slain myself for the altars."<sup>32</sup> In this letter, Ambrose is not posturing for his sister; he admits that he was afraid. However, he was more afraid for his parishioners, and he claims to have been offering himself as a sacrifice on their behalf.<sup>33</sup> He then tells his sister that he went to his own home so the soldiers would know where to find him when the time came.<sup>34</sup> Ambrose writes that the next day he gave

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<sup>32</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.8 (PL 16:997). Si patrimonium petitur, invidite: si corpus, occurram. Vultis in vincula rapere? vultis in mortem? voluptati est mihi. Non ego vallabor circumfusione populorum, nec altaria tenebo vitam obsecrans, sed pro altaribus gratius immolabor.

<sup>33</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.9 (PL 16:997). Detestabar invidiam fundendi cruoris, offerebam jugulum meum.

<sup>34</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.10.

a sermon on Job in which he tells those gathered that Christians must not give up faith and truth in the face of “danger of death.” In the sermon, a disappointed Ambrose laments over the fact that “the Lord God knows that I am weak.” Ambrose declares that even though he was willing, God has withheld martyrdom from him because God judged him as not ready for the struggle of martyrdom.<sup>35</sup>

As soon as the soldiers removed the emperor’s colors from the Portian Basilica, Ambrose sent some priests to those congregants inside. Valentinian looked upon this aid as the treachery specifically addressed in the law of January 23, and he sent an envoy accusing Ambrose of treason and warning dire consequences. McLynn suggests that by sending the priests “Ambrose had at last declared his hand,” and that he had been premature in assuming victory, an act which once again almost cost him his life.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps, however, this reaction from the emperor was exactly what Ambrose had hoped for. Upon seeing the first signs that the emperor was backing down, Ambrose might have sent the priests as an intentional, personal provocation, hoping to gain the martyr’s crown at the very last. In his letter to Marcellina, Ambrose writes that he explained his innocence to the envoy, but he asked why Valentinian does not execute him if he really considered Ambrose to be a usurper (*tyrannus*).<sup>37</sup> At the end of the letter, which was written shortly after the events it describes, Ambrose still seems hopeful that he might yet die as a martyr. He tells Marcellina that the emperor is still referring to him as a usurper and that threats have been made on his life. He closes by writing,

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<sup>35</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.15 (PL 16:998). Et fortasse quia infirmiore me Dominus Deus novit, adhuc in corpus meum non dedit potestatem. Etsi ipse cupiam, etsi offeram, adhuc me fortasse huic certamini imparem iudicat, et diversis exercet laboribus.

<sup>36</sup>McLynn, *Ambrose*, 194.

<sup>37</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.23 (PL 16:1001). Quid moraretur ferire, si tyrannum putaret?



Lastly, too, Calligonus, the chief chamberlain, ventured to address me in peculiar language. Do you, said he, whilst I am alive treat Valentinian with contempt? I will take your head from you. My reply was, God grant you to fulfil your threat; for then I shall suffer as bishops do, you will act as do eunuchs. Would that God might turn them away from the Church, let them direct all their weapons against me, let them satisfy their thirst with my blood.<sup>38</sup>

Ambrose's actions have been interpreted as confidence in his position with the Milanese people, but perhaps he sought martyrdom by the hand of those he considered to be heretics. By offering himself for martyrdom, he would be giving Milan a precious gift.

In 386, Milan had no local martyrs; all of the city's relics had been imported from other areas. Ambrose was preparing himself to fulfill that role for the city. He would be Milan's local martyr, its protecting spirit. He believed his death would be the end of the crisis and that in death he would act as patron to the Milanese Nicene Christians. The very existence of the Basilica Ambrosiana confirms this interpretation. Ambrose had planned to be buried under the altar of the basilica. This exalted place for a grave was novel for a bishop, but for a martyr it would have been the perfect place.<sup>39</sup> Ambrose wanted to give Milan a local martyr cult. He attacked the heretics, provoked the emperor, and prepared his own martyrdom, but his desire for death at the hands of the imperial authorities went unfulfilled.

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<sup>38</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 20.28 (PL 16:1002). Denique etiam speciali expressione Calligonus, praepositus cubiculi, mandare mihi ausus est: Me vivo, tu contemnis Valentinianum? Caput tibi tollo. Respondi: Deus permittat tibi, ut impleas quod minaris; ego enim patiar quod episcopi, tu facies quod spadones. Atque utinam Deus avertat eos ab Ecclesia, in me omnia sua tela convertant, meo sanguine sitim suam expleant!

<sup>39</sup>This interpretation is complicated by the fact that the Basilica Ambrosiana was probably planned as early as 379, a year when Ambrose would have thought his own martyrdom unlikely. However, we do not know that he always intended to be buried under the altar there. This idea might have occurred later. I think the fact that the Basilica Apostolorum was started later and finished earlier could be significant. Perhaps Ambrose began the Ambrosiana as to house relics, and then got the idea to mimic the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Construction on the Ambrosiana was halted, until the Apostolorum was completed. In the meantime, the homoean faction resurged, relations with the emperor soured, and Ambrose saw an opportunity to fill his first basilica with relics from his own martyrdom.

## Seeking Martyrs for the Church in Milan

After the Easter crisis, Ambrose continued to flout the emperor's authority, refusing to appear before the court and debate a homoean bishop. He cast his situation in martyrological language and suggested to his people that he was willing to head to his death.<sup>40</sup> McLynn views this episode as Ambrose masterfully manipulating the populace to ensure that he would not have to fulfill Valentinian's request.<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, however, probably hoped that the emperor would at last carry out his threats, when faced with another adamant refusal to cooperate with secular authority. Once again, the emperor gave up, but the situation remained tense.

By June 386, the time had come to dedicate the Basilica Ambrosiana, and Ambrose perhaps was surprised that he had lived to dedicate the building instead of having his remains installed in it. Writing to his sister Marcellina, Ambrose describes the remarkable turn of events that began at that dedication. He tells her that during the dedication, the people demanded, "Consecrate this [Basilica Ambrosiana] as you did the Roman basilica [Basilica Apostolorum]." That basilica had martyr relics, and the people wanted this new one to possess relics as well. Ambrose replied that he would oblige them if he could find some. Undoubtedly, those in attendance believed he would procure some from Rome or some other relic-rich city, but Ambrose had a different idea. He tells his sister that at that moment he felt a "prophetic ardour."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ambrose *Aux.*

<sup>41</sup>McLynn, *Ambrose*, 196–208.

<sup>42</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.1 (PL 16:1019). Nam cum ego basilicam dedicassem multi tamquam uno ore interpellare coeperunt dicentes: Sicut Romanam basilicam dedices. Respondi: Faciam, si martyrum reliquias invenero. Statimque subiit veluti cujusdam ardor praesagii.

On the next day, Ambrose went in search of his martyrs, and Augustine claims that Ambrose was aided in this task by a dream.<sup>43</sup> Ambrose and his clergy began digging in a cemetery near the shrine to Felix and Nabor, a pair of imported martyrs. They did not dig in known graves, rather Ambrose claims to have looked for promising signs, and Paulinus of Milan claims that they dug up the path on the way to the shrine.<sup>44</sup> After a bit of digging, Ambrose and his clerics found two complete, giant skeletons along with “much blood.”<sup>45</sup> Their status as martyrs was confirmed by exorcisms, and Ambrose began to call the two skeletons Gervasius and Protasius.<sup>46</sup>

The following day, Ambrose introduced his martyrs to the people of Milan and preached a sermon on Psalm 19. The psalm says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” and in his sermon Ambrose claims that those “heavens” are actually these relics that he found. The grace of God has raised these martyrs to the skies, and from there they bear witness to God’s truth in a perilous world.<sup>47</sup> He then notes that God uses the lowly things of the earth for his glory, and therefore, Christians should esteem the martyrs as “princes of the people.” He declares triumphantly that at last God has provided Milan with its own martyrs.<sup>48</sup> His wording reminds

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<sup>43</sup>Augustine *Conf.* 9.7.16.

<sup>44</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.2; Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 14.

<sup>45</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.2 (PL 16:1020). Invenimus mirae magnitudinis viros duos, ut prisca aetas ferebat. Ossa omnia integra, sanguine plurimum.

<sup>46</sup>McLynn speculates that the tortured demons provided the names for the martyrs, though the sources are vague on this count. McLynn, *Ambrose*, 212.

<sup>47</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.4.

<sup>48</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.7 (PL 16:1021). Principes populi quos alios nisi sanctos martyres aestimare debemus, quorum jam in numerum diu ante ignorati Protasius Gervasiusque praeferuntur, qui sterilem martyribus Ecclesiam Mediolanensem, jam plurimorum matrem filiorum laetari passionis propriae fecerint et titulis et exemplis?

the reader of the context of crisis in Milan. Because of the homoean imperial court, Christians in Milan faced persecution and lived in a perilous world, and Ambrose proclaims that Protasius and Gervasius are the true “princes of the people,” an implicit denial of Valentinian’s authority.

A miracle had occurred, and Ambrose mentions that many people were calling this “the resurrection of the martyrs.”<sup>49</sup> According to Ambrose, the martyrs effected numerous healings to prove their authenticity. Merely touching the robe of the martyrs or falling in their shadow could cure sickness, and Ambrose excitedly told of how the people were pressing handkerchiefs and clothing to the relics and then using those pieces of cloth as healing relics in their own right.<sup>50</sup> Protasius and Gervasius had recreated the apostolic age described in the book of Acts. However, these martyrs had not merely come to Milan to bring physical healing, but rather they had been revealed during the Nicene community’s great need: Protasius and Gervasius had come to protect the church from its enemies. Ambrose says, “Thanks be to Thee, Lord Jesus, that at this time Thou hast stirred up for us the spirits of the holy martyrs, when Thy Church needs greater protection. Let all know what sort of champions I desire, who are able to defend, but desire not to attack. These have I gained for you, O holy people, such as may help all and injure none.”<sup>51</sup> Ambrose’s communion could rejoice now in the confidence that God had not abandoned them to the heretics. Moreover, Ambrose attributes their previous success in resisting

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<sup>49</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.9 (PL 16:1022). Non immerito autem plerique hanc martyrum resurrectionem appellant.

<sup>50</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.9 (PL16:1022). reparata vetusti temporis miracula, quo se per adventum Domini Jesu gratia terris major infuderat, umbra quadam sanctorum corporum plerosque sanatos cernitis. Quanta oraria jactitantur! quanta indumenta super reliquias sacratissimas et tactu ipso medicabilia reposcuntur! Gaudet omnes extrema linea contingere; et qui contingerit, salvus erit.

<sup>51</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.10 (PL 16:1022). Gratias tibi, Domine Jesu, quod hoc tempore tales nobis sanctorum martyrum spiritus excitasti, quo Ecclesia tua praesidia majora desiderat. Cognoscant omnes quales ego propugnatores requiram, qui propugnare possint, impugnare non soleant. Hos ego acquisivi tibi, plebs sancta, qui prosint omnibus, nemini noceant.

imperial authority to these martyrs. He claims that even though the church did not know of the existence of Protasius and Gervasius, the martyrs had been protecting them invisibly all along.<sup>52</sup> He ends the sermon by announcing that he will install these martyrs in the altar of the Basilica Ambrosiana. Perhaps with some regret, Ambrose tells the crowd, “Since I myself am not worthy to be a martyr, I have obtained these martyrs for you.”<sup>53</sup> At last Milan had its own local martyrs, and Ambrose yielded his place of honor to these newfound saints.

The next day, the people deposited the relics at the basilica, and Ambrose preached again, directly addressing the religious and political climate of Milan. Justina and other members of the homoean faction had been mocking Ambrose’s *inventio* of Protasius and Gervasius and questioning the truthfulness of the miracles that attended it.<sup>54</sup> Ambrose took the opportunity to attack the homoeans, explaining that their lack of enthusiasm for the martyrs proves that they are not Christians at all.<sup>55</sup> In the sermon he claims that because of the martyrs, the demons were testifying to the truth of the Nicene formulation and saying,

That no one can be saved unless he believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; that he is dead and buried who denies the Holy Spirit, and believes not the almighty power of the Trinity. The devil confesses this, but the Arians refuse to do so. The devil says: Let him who denies the Godhead of the Holy Spirit be so tormented as himself was tormented by the martyrs.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.11 (PL 16:1022). *Aperuit oculos nostros Dominus; vidimus auxilia, quibus sumus saepe defensi.*

<sup>53</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.12 (PL 16:1023). *Et quia ipse martyr esse non mereor, hos vobis martyres acquisivit.*

<sup>54</sup>Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 15.

<sup>55</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.20 (PL 16:1025). *ostendunt alterius fidei fuisse martyres, quam ipsi credunt.*

<sup>56</sup>Ambrose *Ep.* 22.21 (PL 16:1025). *Audivimus hodie dicentes eos, quibus manus imponebatur, neminem posse esse salvum, nisi qui in Patrem et Filium et Spiritum sanctum credidisset: illum mortuum, illum funereum, qui Spiritum sactum negaret, qui Trinitatis omnipotentem virtutem non crederet. Confitetur hoc diabolus, sed Ariani nolunt fateri. Dicit diabolus: Sic torqueatur, quemadmodum ipse a martyribus torquebatur, qui Spiritus sancti deitatem negaret.*

Through the martyrs, Ambrose accuses the homoian party as being worse than devils. Devils acknowledge the truth about the Trinity and confirm the validity of Protasius and Gervasius. The Arians at the imperial court deny both.

Ambrose deposited the relics in his own tomb in the Basilica Ambrosiana and vigorously promoted the cult of Protasius and Gervasius. Here, at last, was the tool he needed to silence his theological enemies; martyrdom brought unity to the church in Milan. By the end of 386, Ambrose and Valentinian had reconciled, but Valentinian's imperial authority never fully recovered from his conflict with Ambrose. As McLynn says, "The bishop had gambled, and won."<sup>57</sup> But perhaps Ambrose viewed all outcomes in which he resisted compromise as winning; if he weathered the storm, then the church would be stronger because of his leadership, but if he died, the church would be stronger because it would have a local martyr to protect it from heterodoxy. In a way, he achieved both.

Though Protasius and Gervasius protected the Milanese church, these martyrs were Ambrose's martyrs. He found them, he placed them in his own tomb, and he promoted their cult. Both his enemies and supporters identified the martyrs so closely with the bishop that they seemed to become an extension of his person.<sup>58</sup> As such, he could use them as he best saw fit, and Ambrose exported relics of Protasius and Gervasius to various locations throughout the empire. Dismembering human remains, however, even those of martyrs, and moving them about had been made illegal in early 386.<sup>59</sup> Ambrose probably knew of this law, but he disregarded it

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<sup>57</sup>McLynn, *Ambrose*, 217.

<sup>58</sup>E.g., Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 15.

<sup>59</sup>*Cod. theod.* 9.17.7. Cynegio praefecto praetorio. Humatum corpus nemo ad alterum locum transferat; nemo martyrem distrahat, nemo mercetur. Habeant vero in potestate, si quolibet in loco sanctorum est aliquis conditus, pro eius veneratione quod martyrium vocandum sit addant quod voluerint fabricarum.

since he had already demonstrated that the throne had no claim to regulate the church's property. Ambrose sent bits of his martyrs far and wide—from Rouen in northern Gaul to Hippo in the province of Africa. Augustine, who was in Milan during this crisis of 386, possessed relics of Protasius and Gervasius at a shrine near his see by the 420s.<sup>60</sup> In 396, Victricius of Rouen presided over the arrival of relics from Ambrose and preached a sermon, which he sent to Ambrose for approval, justifying the translation of martyr relics.<sup>61</sup> Through dispersing his relics, Ambrose could promote his brand of theology and give the Christian communities in the western empire tangible evidence of an ethereal catholicism.

As his career as bishop of Milan continued, Ambrose gained a reputation for martyr relics flocking to him. In 393, the bishop of Bologna had a dream that previously unknown martyrs lay in a local Jewish graveyard. This bishop enlisted Ambrose's help in finding the martyrs, and the two men sifted through Jewish bodies until they "found" the martyrs. The excavators found bits of wood and nails, which they took as evidence of crucifixion. The bishop of Bologna took the bodies, and Ambrose got to keep the nails and wood.<sup>62</sup> Back in Milan in 395, Ambrose found another martyr for the Milanese church in a private garden. This one Ambrose named Nazarius, and Paulinus of Milan notes that, other than his being a martyr, no one knew anything about him. His status as a martyr, however, was unquestionable because he

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<sup>60</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 286.4.

<sup>61</sup>Victricius of Rouen *De laude sanctorum* (PL 20:43–58). Gillian Clark, "Victricius of Rouen: Praising the Saints," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 365–399, provides an introduction and a fresh translation to this sermon.

<sup>62</sup>Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 29; Ambrose *Exhortatio virginitatis* 2.8. McLynn, *Ambrose*, 347–350.

was found to be well preserved with his blood still being fresh and, though decapitated, his appearance kempt.<sup>63</sup>

On Holy Saturday 397, Ambrose, who had advocated cultivating death through ascetic practices, died at the age of 57 or 58. Though he did not die as a martyr, the people of Milan honored him as such, and he was placed in the same tomb as his alter egos, Protasius and Gervasius. Paulinus of Milan reports that even the Jews and pagans came to pay their respects and that Ambrose's death and funeral sparked miracles throughout the region.<sup>64</sup> Ambrose played a key role in the triumph of what would become orthodox theology and the spread of the cult of martyrs, and in many ways, he ensured that the two would be seen as inseparable. His people honored him for his achievement, and as he lay in the Basilica Ambrosiana on Easter Sunday, faithful men and women wept and pressed handkerchiefs to Ambrose's body.<sup>65</sup>

Ambrose was not the only bishop in an imperial capital who used the cult of the martyrs to further his agenda. To the east, John Chrysostom promoted the cult during his brief ministry in Constantinople and also earlier when he was presbyter in Antioch. As with Ambrose, John Chrysostom used martyrdom and the living death of asceticism to promote his vision of Christian living and to combat ideas that he felt were dangerous to the churches.

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<sup>63</sup>Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 32 (PL 14:38). Quo in tempore sancti Nazarii martyris corpus, quod erat in horto positum extra civitatem, levatum ad basilicam Apostolorum quae est in Romana, transtulit. Vidimus autem in sepulcro, quo jacebat corpus martyris (qui quando sit passus, usque in hodiernum scire non possumus) sanguinem martyris ita recentem, quasi eodem die fuisset effuses. Caput etiam ipsius, quod ab impiis fuerat ab-cissum, ita integrum atque incorruptum cum capillis capitis atque barba, ut nobis videretur eodem tempore quo lavabatur, lotum atque compositum in sepulcro.

<sup>64</sup>Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 48.

<sup>65</sup>Paulinus of Milan *Vit. Amb.* 48.



## CHAPTER 5

### JOHN CHRYSOSTOM AND THE CULT OF MARTYRS IN ANTIOCH AND CONSTANTINOPLE

John Chrysostom was perhaps the most famous preacher of the end of the fourth century, and his ministry provides a unique view of the cult of martyrs in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. In 386, the same year that Augustine experienced his conversion in a Milanese garden, John was ordained as a presbyter in Antioch in Syria. Twelve years later, John was summoned to serve as bishop of Constantinople, the imperial capital of the relatively young emperor Arcadius. During his career in these two prominent, yet very different, eastern cities, John helped to develop the growing cult of the martyrs so that the martyrs could be useful agents in promoting pious change in the empire. John's relationship to the martyr cults is a story about one bishop's attempt to Christianize this Christian empire.

By John Chrysostom's day, Antioch was already an ancient and important city.<sup>1</sup> Even before the Hellenistic kingdom of the Seleucids turned Antioch into one of its capitals at the end of the fourth century before Christ, the city was probably a thriving center of trade.<sup>2</sup> After the Romans incorporated the city into their expanding empire, Antioch continued in its role as the premiere city in the eastern Mediterranean, being favored by various generals, officials, and

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<sup>1</sup>See Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria: from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) for the standard work on Antioch's history.

<sup>2</sup>The city acquired the name "Antioch" from Alexander's successor Seleucus I Nicator who probably named the city after his father, Antiochus, though his son had the same name. Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 68, 581–582.

emperors. Not only was the city important politically and commercially, but also Antioch had a rich religious history. Its cults to the Greek gods were so numerous and ancient that the emperor Julian planned to use the city as the center for his pagan revival in AD 362.<sup>3</sup> The city also had a long history as a Jewish population center. According to Josephus, Antioch was home to the largest concentration of Jews outside the Jewish homeland.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Greek and Jewish religions, Antioch could claim to have one of the earliest Christian churches planted by the apostles themselves. Both Paul and Peter spent time ministering in Antioch, and in Antioch the Jesus movement received the name Christians.<sup>5</sup> In fact, over the centuries a tradition developed that Peter was the first bishop of Antioch, a claim that allowed the church at Antioch to see itself as equal or superior to the church at Rome.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, sometimes Antioch's strong political traditions and its rich religious background clashed. Because of this situation, the city of Antioch was home to many martyrs and martyr shrines. As mentioned in chapter one, one of the earliest bishops of the Antiochene church, Ignatius, was sent to Rome in the early second century to die a martyr's death, and over the next two hundred years many citizens of the city followed his example. By John Chrysostom's time, Christians in Antioch celebrated the lives and deaths of many homegrown martyrs as part of their liturgical calendar. Most of these martyrs were buried locally in a cemetery outside the city walls on the way to Antioch's upscale suburb of Daphne because Roman custom forbid the presence of corpses, deemed impure, within the city limits. Even

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<sup>3</sup>Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 380–385.

<sup>4</sup>Josephus *B.J.* 7.43.

<sup>5</sup>Acts 11:19–26; Gal 2:11.

<sup>6</sup>See Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 583–586, for an analysis of the evidence tying Peter to Antioch.

Ignatius himself found a resting place near his old episcopal see, his relics translated from Rome to Antioch at some point before John's ministry.<sup>7</sup> John's sermons from Antioch reflect this deep martyr tradition, but at the same time they demonstrate an agenda of Christianization and ecclesiastical identity building. In Antioch the cult of martyrs was a tool to combat traditional Greek religion and to differentiate Christians from Jews, who happened to have their own popular cult in Antioch dedicated to venerating the Maccabean martyrs.<sup>8</sup>

In 397, however, John's world changed when he was suddenly chosen to be the bishop of Constantinople. Interestingly, imperial agents snatched him from Antioch at a martyr's shrine outside the city.<sup>9</sup> Constantinople, though politically important, did not have the same ancient history that Antioch had. A new city, it had been founded by Constantine in 324 to be a new imperial capital but did not become the permanent home to emperors until the 370s.<sup>10</sup> With its newfound political prestige, came new religious clout too. From the beginning, in planning this new city, church buildings and other religious sites were to be an integral part of civic life. When John Chrysostom became the bishop of Constantinople, the city was growing into its role as the

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<sup>7</sup>John Chrysostom *In sanctum Ignatium martyrem* 5 (PG 50:594). Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 293; citing Jerome *De viris illustribus* 16. Wendy Mayer notes that in the fifth century Ignatius was once again moved, this time within the walls of the city to a church built for the purpose of housing him. Wendy Mayer, *The Cult of the Saints: Select Homilies and Letters* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 101.

<sup>8</sup>For the complicated relationship between Antiochene Jews and Christians in the fourth century, see Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, and Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: the Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 104.

<sup>10</sup>Constantinople was built on the site of the already ancient city of Byzantium, but Constantine's enlargement and alterations were so significant that it is appropriate for Krautheimer to write, "he would lay out a new capital from scratch." For a discussion on the city's founding, as well as Constantine's motives for choosing it, see Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*, 41–46.

leading bishopric of the eastern Mediterranean, but as a new religious center Constantinople was disadvantaged because of its lack of local martyrs.

The city did have a few local martyrs, but the most notable, like the city itself, was of recent vintage. During the Arian controversy, Paul, a Nicene bishop, was expelled from the city around 350, then strangled, and Theodosius I brought his remains back to the city in 381 to establish his cult.<sup>11</sup> The importation of relics became standard practice for the city of Constantinople. The new political center of the East needed enough relics to rival the other religious centers in the Mediterranean. John Chrysostom himself oversaw the translation of at least two important martyrs into Constantinople during his short tenure as bishop.<sup>12</sup> Unlike in Antioch, these martyrs' remains usually resided within the city in specially built churches and shrines. By John's episcopacy, two emperors, Constantine and Theodosius, were interred in Constantine's Church of the Holy Apostles, along with relics from the apostles Luke, Andrew, and Timothy.<sup>13</sup> The old Roman prejudice against corpses no longer applied to men and women who maintained their holiness and purity even in death.

In this context, John, a preacher with a moralizing bent, used the cult of the martyrs as a means of Christianization. The martyrs provided John with spiritual models that he could apply to his congregation for the purposes of behavior modification with the promise of spiritual benefit. The cult also provided more tangible benefits in protecting Christians, and John used the martyrs to attack those that he considered enemies of the church. Undergirding this use of the

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<sup>11</sup>Mayer, *Cult of the Saints*, 22.

<sup>12</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancto hieromartyre Phoca; Homilia dicta postquam reliquiae martyrum*.

<sup>13</sup>Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.

cult for Christianization was John's theology of martyrdom, a theology consistent with earlier traditions because it recognized various meanings in the martyrs' experiences.

### **Meanings of Martyrdom**

As noted in chapter one, notions of sacrifice quickly attached themselves to the Christian communities' ideas about martyrdom. Martyrs die for their faith, and giving up one's life is the ultimate sacrifice for God. John Chrysostom embraces this sacrificial aspect in his theology of martyrdom, seeing it as an imitation of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> In his sermon on the Antiochene proto-martyr Ignatius, John claims that Peter, Paul, and Ignatius were all sacrificed in the city of Rome.<sup>15</sup> John uses the verb ἐτύθησαν, from θύω, a common sacrificial word that could be applied to pagan cult sacrifices, the Jewish Passover, and the crucifixion of Christ. Peter's, Paul's, and Ignatius's deaths in Rome reaffirmed and actualized the sacrifice that Christ had made on behalf of that city. According to Chrysostom, all these sacrifices of the martyrs were imitations of that ur-sacrifice made by Christ. His death was a "common sacrifice" with global implications that cleansed the soul, canceled sin, and made a path to heaven, restoring hope.<sup>16</sup> Christ was the sacrifice that the Jewish cult pointed forward to and that the martyrs' sacrifice pointed back to.

Though John Chrysostom viewed a martyr's death as sacrifice, he imputed a number of meanings to that sacrifice. In his sermon on Ignatius, he claims that the sacrifices of Peter,

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<sup>14</sup> Gus George Cristo, *Martyrdom According to John Chrysostom: to Live Is Christ, to Die Is Gain* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen University Press, 1997), 35–37. Cristo's book is currently the only work dedicated to John's theology of martyrdom. His work is helpful, on the whole, but somewhat ahistorical.

<sup>15</sup> John Chrysostom *Ign.* 4 (PG 50:593).

<sup>16</sup> John Chrysostom *Adversus Judaeos* 7.2 (PG 48:918–919). τὴν κοινὴν ὑπὲρ τῆς οἰκουμένης γενομένην θυσίαν, ἢ τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν ἐξεκάθηρε, καὶ τὰς ἀμαρτίας κατέλυσε, καὶ τὸν θάνατον ἔσβεσε, καὶ τοὺς οὐρανοὺς ἀνέψξε, καὶ πολλὰς καὶ μεγάλας ἡμῖν ἐλπίδας ὑπέδειξε, καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάντα κατεσκεύασεν.

Paul, and Ignatius were sacrifices of purification and that at their deaths “they might purify with their own blood the city stained with the blood of idols.”<sup>17</sup> This theme of sacrifice as purification is also found in his sermon on another Antiochene martyr, Drosis. John tells his hearers that Drosis’s executors burned her on a pyre and that the smoke from her body was like a cleansing sacrifice that purified the air of all its idolatrous smoke.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, martyrdom, according to John, could be a sacrificial act of purification, which combated idolatry and paved the way for Christianization.

According to John, in addition to purification, the death of a martyr could benefit the community in other ways. In many of his sermons on the martyrs, John endorses the idea that the death of a martyr could have atoning or expiating value. While a presbyter in Antioch, John preached on the local martyrs Juventinus and Maximinus, emphasizing the idea that their deaths in some way covered the sins of the city. Juventinus and Maximinus were relatively recent martyrs, executed during Julian’s stay at Antioch from 361 to 363. They were shield bearers in the military and devout Christians who did not appreciate Julian’s Greek revivalism and were bold enough to say so in “warm language.”<sup>19</sup> When Julian orders their execution for insolence, they look upon it as an opportunity for martyrdom. In John’s sermon, the two faithful soldiers claim that their impending death will atone for the sins of their fellow soldiers who compromised. They claim that since God loves humankind, he will pardon their fellows’ lapses because of their sacrifice. At this point John has his martyrs break out into the song of the three Hebrew children whom Nebuchadnezzar threw into the fiery furnace. In this song, found in the

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<sup>17</sup>John Chrysostom *Ign.* 4 (PG 50:593). ἵνα μολυνθεῖσαν τὴν πόλιν τοῖς τῶν εἰδώλων αἵμασι, τοῖς οἰκείοις αἵμασιν ἐκκαθάρωσι.

<sup>18</sup>John Chrysostom *Dros.* 4 (PG 50:689).

<sup>19</sup>Theodoret *Hist. eccl.* 3.11.

third chapter of the Septuagint's version of Daniel, the three children pray that God would consider their deaths as a substitution for the deaths of bulls and rams and that he would show mercy to the people because of their humble sacrifice. In the same way, Juventinus and Maximinus atoned for some of the evil Julian caused in the city of Antioch. Of course that atonement did not extend to the evil emperor himself, but merely applied to the suffering people.<sup>20</sup>

Because it is a purifying and atoning sacrifice, John Chrysostom indicated that martyrdom produced horizontal blessing in that the benefits of the martyr applied to the people. However, according to John, this horizontal aspect is merely a collateral blessing from martyrdom's primary vertical purpose, which is directed towards God. John explicates this situation in a sermon on the martyr Julian (not to be confused with the evil emperor), which he preached in Antioch, perhaps late in his tenure there. Julian was a Cilician bishop who was martyred at sea and whose relics seem to have found their way to Antioch where he warranted a two-day annual celebration.<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the crowds that had gathered for the festival, John tells his hearers that even though they flock to honor the martyrs, the martyrs did not die for them, but for Christ, and that Christ is indebted to them.

After all, he's [Christ's] a generous giver and loves humankind. Yet it's not for just this reason that great honours await them [the martyrs], but because he is also in their debt. The martyrs weren't butchered for our sake and yet we rush together to honour them. If we, for whose sake they weren't butchered, rush together, what won't Christ do, for whose sake they lost their heads? If Christ has given such great blessings to those to whom he owed nothing, with what valuable gifts won't he repay those to whom he's in debt?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>John Chrysostom *In Juventinum et Maximum martyres* 2 (PG 50:575).

<sup>21</sup>Johan Leemans et al., *Let Us Die that We May Live*, 127–128.

<sup>22</sup>John Chrysostom *Jul.* 1 (PG 50:667). Καὶ γὰρ μεγαλόδωρός ἐστι καὶ φιλόανθρωπος· ἀλλ' οὐ δι' αὐτὸ τοῦτο μένουσιν αὐτοὺς μεγάλαί αἱ τιμαί, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ ὀφειλέτης ἐστὶν αὐτῶν. Οὐκ ἐσφάγησαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν οἱ μάρτυρες, καὶ ὅμως συντρέχομεν εἰς τὴν ἐκείνων τιμὴν.

This language adds a startling dimension to the theology of martyrdom. No longer do the martyrs owe themselves to God. They have not even paid back what Christ did for them at the crucifixion. Rather, according to John, by spilling their blood for the faith, the martyrs have put Christ in the position of debtor. Not only do they receive eternal life, which all Christians get, but also they are owed more blessing and special attention from Christ. John seems to be turning grace on its head in this passage because God is under obligation to the martyrs, when traditionally Christians viewed themselves as obliged to God. In John's preaching, however, expounding grace usually ranks a distant second behind moralizing about proper behavior. His first concern is generally the Christianization of society. Regardless, John is very clearly indicating that the primary meaning of martyrdom is this sacrificial aspect. The act of martyrdom is aimed at God, and this act is a supererogation that makes God the martyr's debtor. Tied up in this primary meaning of sacrifice is a secondary one of suffering.

The suffering of the martyrs enhances sacrificial death, and the more suffering experienced by the martyr the greater the rewards. In this same sermon, on the Cilician bishop Julian, John Chrysostom dwells at length on the sufferings of the martyr. John claims that Julian's martyrdom was special in that he suffered not one contest but many because the magistrate continually brought him to court for a whole year before finally having him executed. During that year Julian was interrogated, tempted, and shamefully put on display. His perseverance during this time makes his martyrdom all the sweeter. In fact, in the course of the

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Εἰ δὲ ἡμεῖς, ὑπὲρ ὧν οὐχ ἐσφάγησαν, συντρέχομεν, ὁ Χριστὸς, ὑπὲρ οὗ τὰς κεφαλὰς ἀπέθεντο, τί οὐ ποιήσει; εἰ οἷς μηδὲν ὄφειλε, τοσαῦτα ἔδωκεν ἀγαθὰ, τούτους, οἷς ὀφειλέτης ἐστὶ, πόσαις οὐχ ἀμείψεται δωρεαῖς;



sermon, John compares Julian to one of his fellow Cilicians, the apostle Paul who also suffered much during his Christian ministry.<sup>23</sup>

Paul was John's favorite apostle,<sup>24</sup> and he frequently casts Paul in the role of a martyr when preaching on Paul's life. In contrast to the other martyrs that John preaches about, John rarely references the traditions about Paul's death in Rome, even though he was clearly familiar with them. Perhaps John was skeptical of the stories about Paul's martyrdom, or perhaps he was disappointed that a clean beheading robbed him of the opportunity for rhetorically embellishing an excruciating death, which was his habit with other martyrs.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the reason, John focuses instead on Paul's letters, emphasizing his place as a martyr-apostle through the suffering he experienced during his ministry. In one homily on the life of Paul, John claims that Paul made a sacrifice far superior to the sacrifice of Abel. Paul's sacrifice was his sufferings on behalf of Christ. John points to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:31 in which he claims, "I die every day!" as proof that Paul did not experience the sacrifice of martyrdom once, but daily he was a martyr for Christ. Immediately after this statement, John refers to 2 Corinthians 4:10 in which Paul, after listing forms of suffering, claims to be "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus."<sup>26</sup> In another sermon on Paul's life, John explains why this suffering has a salvific component. Paul's sufferings were an imitation of Christ's sufferings for humanity.<sup>27</sup> This

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<sup>23</sup>John Chrysostom *Jul.* 2 (PG 50:668–669).

<sup>24</sup>Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>25</sup>Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet*, 364–374.

<sup>26</sup>John Chrysostom *De laudibus sancti Pauli* 1 (PG 50:473).

<sup>27</sup>John Chrysostom *Laud. Paul.* 7 (PG 50:510).

imitation of Christ's suffering, dying daily, entitles the Christian to the martyr's crown, and according to John can be a further example for the congregation's imitation.

John presents this suffering, however, as one that is not onerous for the martyr. The martyrs endure these sufferings joyfully because they have their eyes fixed on eternity. In a sermon on some unspecified martyrs preached in Antioch, John tells his listeners that the tortures were real but only lasted a "brief flash of time" when compared to the future blessings. He then mentions Stephen the proto-martyr who, he claims, did not notice the stones that were raining on him because he was busy counting up his prizes.<sup>28</sup>

In another sermon, which seems to have been to honor a large group of martyrs, John discusses this idea of the martyrs' sufferings. He goes into great detail about the torments and tortures experienced by the martyrs, particularly explaining how some were stretched over iron ladders and then laid across burning coals. According to John, these martyrs viewed the flesh melting off their bodies with great joy, and instead of feeling as though they were on a grill they considered the coals to be a bed of roses. Always ready with moral application, John chastises his congregation for whining like "little children" when they experience a fever, while these martyrs stayed joyful in the midst of real flames. He ties their sufferings and deaths back to the idea of atoning sacrifice by claiming that the martyrs' deaths imitated Christ's sacrifice. John claims that the blood of these martyrs was "saving blood, holy blood, blood worthy of heaven" (αἷμα σωτήριον, αἷμα ἅγιον, αἷμα τῶν οὐρανῶν ἄξιον). Not only did this blood wash away sins, but it also made the Devil himself tremble.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>John Chrysostom *De sanctis martyribus sermo* 1–2 (PG 50:647–648).

<sup>29</sup>John Chrysostom *De sanctis martyribus* 1–2 (PG 50:708–709).

This idea of cleansing blood causes John Chrysostom to view martyrdom as another baptism. He most clearly argues this point in his sermon on Lucian, which was probably preached in Antioch, and John must have had baptism on his mind because he claims to have preached on Jesus' water baptism the day before. He calls Lucian's martyrdom a baptism in blood and even tells his congregation not to be astonished that he uses such language. According to John, when martyrs are washed in their own blood, "an obliteration of sins takes place."<sup>30</sup> Martyrdom washes away the sins of the martyr, and sometimes John implies the sins of the community as well, since a martyr would not have too many sins to atone for. This idea of martyrdom as baptism is a reoccurring one in John's preaching. In his sermon on Bernike, Prosdoke, and Domnina, the three suicide martyrs who drowned themselves in chapter two, John clearly draws connections between their deaths and baptism, even referring to Domnina as the "priest" who performed the ritual. But of course, this baptism does not depend on the river's water because John compares the women with James the son of Zebedee whose baptism came when Herod Agrippa ordered his beheading.<sup>31</sup> John also found baptism as a fruitful metaphor for martyrs who were burned to death. As the gospels of Mathew and Luke record, John the Baptist claimed that Jesus would baptize with fire. According to John Chrysostom, the martyr Drosis, mentioned above, who was burned on a pyre, experienced a personal baptism during her martyrdom. John says, "Christ himself held the martyr's holy head in his invisible hand and baptized her in fire as if in water."<sup>32</sup> Interestingly baptism by water and fire mix in one of John's homilies on the Maccabean martyrs. John claims that the youngest of the seven brothers

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<sup>30</sup>John Chrysostom *In sanctum Lucianum martyrem* 2 (PG 50:522).

<sup>31</sup>John Chrysostom *Bern.* 6 (PG 50:638–639).

<sup>32</sup>John Chrysostom *Dros.* 4 (PG 50:689). αὐτοῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀοράτῳ χειρὶ τὴν ἀγίαν τῆς μάρτυρος κατέχοντος κεφαλὴν, καὶ καθάπερ ἐν ὕδατι βαπτίζοντος αὐτὴν τῷ πυρὶ.

martyred by Antiochus Epiphanes threw himself into boiling cauldrons, so as not to escape martyrdom, pretending that they were a cool spring, “considering them a divine washing and baptism.”<sup>33</sup> Thus for John, the sacrificial aspect of martyrdom, supported by a baptism of suffering, is the primary meaning of martyrdom, but he does not totally neglect the other strand that makes up a theology of martyrdom.

Even though the idea of giving testimony or witness is the etymological foundation for the word μάρτυς, this notion is subsidiary in John Chrysostom’s theology of martyrdom. The martyrs, however, do have a message or testimony to give, but John is sometimes hazy regarding what they are actually witnessing to. In his sermon on the martyrdom of Ignatius, John comes closest to affirming the original witnessing function of martyrdom. John explains to his hearers that part of Ignatius’s martyrdom was his long journey from Antioch to Rome. During this journey he was a witness to the cities that he passed through. Everyone in these cities understood that Ignatius was heading towards his death, but through his attitude Ignatius was able to testify to the fact that he was not headed for death but rather for a heavenly translation into eternal life.<sup>34</sup> In this sermon, Ignatius fulfills the classic model of witnessing to faith in Christ and the resurrection from the dead.

Some of John’s other sermons, however, take the idea of the martyrs’ witness in new directions. Eusebius records the death of a certain Romanus, a clergyman from Caesarea who died in Antioch during Diocletian’s persecution. Before his death, however, the magistrates cut out his tongue, presumably to preclude him from manifesting a verbal testimony in his

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<sup>33</sup>John Chrysostom *De Maccabeis* 2.2 (PG 50:625). λουτρὸν αὐτοῦς θεῖον καὶ βάπτισμα

<sup>34</sup>John Chrysostom *Ign.* 4 (PG 50:592).

martyrdom, but Eusebius declares that his courage was testimony enough.<sup>35</sup> In his sermon on Romanus's feast day, John claims that after the Devil cut out Romanus's tongue, God gave him a spiritual tongue with which he could edify the church. John is not speaking metaphorically; he clearly explains to his hearers that God performed a miracle for the martyr to thwart the Devil's schemes. Through this miracle, John suggests that God confirmed the witness of martyrdom because just as Romanus's "voice both died and rose again," so too the Christian can hope in the resurrection of the body.<sup>36</sup> Death is still central to this story of martyrdom because John ties witnessing to the dying voice. Eventually, in spite of the miracle, Romanus dies in both John Chrysostom's and Eusebius's accounts.

As John focuses on the sacrifices and the exciting deaths, the witnessing purpose of the martyr seems to recede in his narratives. Often the testimony does not even have to come at the martyr's death; it can come afterwards, as in the case of Juventinus and Maximinus. John claims that their spilled blood had a voice that could only be heard with the conscience, although he leaves it somewhat ambiguous as to whether this voice exhorts the church or condemns its enemies.<sup>37</sup> According to John, the martyrs could actively witness long after death. Perhaps the most famous of the local Antiochene martyrs was Babylas, a bishop killed in 250 during the persecutions of Decius. Babylas was buried in a cemetery outside Antioch, and about a hundred years later, his relics were moved to a shrine in the suburb of Daphne. This shrine was next to the temple that housed an oracle of Apollo, and Babylas's presence kept the oracle from functioning. In 361 Julian the Apostate wanted to restore the oracle, so he had Babylas disinterred and moved

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<sup>35</sup>Eusebius *Mart. Pal.* 2; for background on his cult see Mayer, *Cult of the Saints*, 227.

<sup>36</sup>John Chrysostom *In sanctum Romanum martyrem* 3–4 (PG 50:610–611).

<sup>37</sup>John Chrysostom *Juv.* 3 (PG 50:576).

back to his original resting place. The martyred bishop, not appreciating being moved against his will, burned down the temple of Apollo in retaliation and perhaps had something to do with Julian's ill-fated campaign in Persia.<sup>38</sup> By the 380s, when John Chrysostom probably preached his sermon on Babylas's feast day, the martyr had been moved again into a new church building built in his honor. In his sermon, John notes that Babylas had been quite active in the 130 years since his death. Admitting that this might be somewhat unusual, he says, "For an ordinary person couldn't accomplish achievements after death. But a martyr could accomplish numerous achievements of substance." He continues, saying that these actions of the dead martyr are done with the purpose of demonstrating to the unbeliever that "death is not death." The martyrs "confess to all about the resurrection."<sup>39</sup> The witnessing of the martyr does not necessarily come from the act of the martyrdom. The act of the martyrdom, for John, is primarily about sacrifice and imitation of Christ, and then that sacrifice gives a martyr the ability to witness by means of the martyr's cult long after the actual martyrdom.

But, according to John, this witnessing need not merely be a traditional testimony to faith in Christ and hope in the resurrection. Through the cult, the martyrs could be used to witness to a variety of things and provide the congregation with a variety of messages. When preaching on the Cilician bishop Julian, whom we discussed above, John claims that God left to the church the martyrs' "holy bones as a constant reminder of virtue."<sup>40</sup> The witness of martyrdom became much more elastic in John's theology because he was a preacher focused on

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<sup>38</sup>Downey, *Antioch in Syria*, 364, 387–388.

<sup>39</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancto hieromartyre Babyla* 1 (PG 50:529). Ἀνθρώπου μὲν γὰρ ἀπλῶς οὐχ ἂν γένοιτο κατορθώματα μετὰ τελευτήν· μάρτυρος δὲ γένοιτ' ἂν πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα, οὐχ ἵνα ἐκεῖνος λαμπρότερος γένηται (οὐδὲν γὰρ αὐτῷ δεῖ τῆς παρὰ τῶν πολλῶν δόξης), ἀλλ' ἵνα σὺ μάθῃς ὁ ἄπιστος, ὅτι θάνατος μαρτύρων οὐχ ἔστι θάνατος.

<sup>40</sup>John Chrysostom *Jul.* 4 (PG 50:672).

morality and proper behavior. The martyrs wanted to tell the church in Antioch, as well as Constantinople, how the Christian life should be lived. The early Church might have sprung from the blood of the martyrs, but John lived in a different context. The Church had spread; he needed his martyrs to oversee the Christianization of the Roman Empire's culture. And for that they needed a new message.

### **Living Martyrdom**

In his preaching on martyrdom, John Chrysostom emphasizes his hearers' need to imitate the martyrs as best they could. Imitation is the truest form of veneration. However, John's context lacked the opportunities for Christian persecution and death that earlier Christians enjoyed. Therefore, John spins the message of the martyrs to suit his purpose of moralizing. In John's sermons, the martyrs testify less to faith in Christ's conquest of death and more to the necessity of behaving like a Christian.

In a sermon on the martyr Barlaam delivered probably in Antioch, John explains to his listeners how imitation of the martyrs is the proper way to honor them. He begins by asserting that the martyrs know when they are honored and that they feel most honored when Christians imitate their actions.<sup>41</sup> The most notable aspect of Barlaam's martyrdom was that he allowed his hand to be burned without flinching rather than offer a sacrifice, but John does not actually expect his listeners to follow suit. He poses the hypothetical question, "How is it possible for us to imitate martyrs now? After all, it isn't a time of persecution."<sup>42</sup> John answers that though persecution is over, martyrdom is not because demons still pursue even if humans persecutors do

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<sup>41</sup>John Chrysostom *In sanctum Barlaam martyrem* 1.

<sup>42</sup>John Chrysostom *Barl.* 1 (PG 50:677). Καὶ πῶς δυνατὸν, φησὶ, μιμήσασθαι μάρτυρας νῦν; οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶ διωγμοῦ καιρὸς. Οἶδα καὶ γὰρ διωγμοῦ μὲν καιρὸς οὐχ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ μαρτυρίου καιρὸς ἐστὶ παλαισμάτων τοιούτων οὐχ ἔστι καιρὸς, ἀλλὰ στεφάνων καιρὸς ἐστὶ.

not. John explains to his congregation that the fires of persecution that withered Barlaam's hand are no more real than the fires of desire that inhabit the soul. Imitation of the martyrs means modifying behavior through the extinguishing of desire "by pious thoughts."<sup>43</sup> At the end of the sermon, John indicates that pious thoughts are thoughts centered on the martyrs themselves. He says, "When worldly concerns attack and are about to dim your mind, wipe it clean through the memory of the martyrs. For if you keep this memory in your soul, you will not admire wealth, will not weep over being poor, will not praise glory and power, and in general of human affairs you will suppose that nothing joyous is great and nothing grievous unbearable."<sup>44</sup> When Christians dwell on the martyrs, those martyrs live again in the Christians, allowing Christians to eschew the luxuries that a city like Antioch could provide.

The martyrs provided John with ample means for condemning behaviors of which he disapproved. In his sermon on Lucian, John reminds his hearers that Lucian went on a hunger strike before his martyrdom because his captors would only offer him food that had been sacrificed to idols. John claims that starvation is one of the cruelest forms of torment and death. From Lucian's story, John draws a helpful moral for his hearers: don't overeat.<sup>45</sup> In a sermon on some martyrs from Egypt, the moral is do not be lazy.<sup>46</sup> John believed that Christians should be a

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<sup>43</sup>John Chrysostom *Barl.* 1.

<sup>44</sup>John Chrysostom *Barl.* 4 (PG 50:682). ἐπειδὴν εἰσιούσαι βιωτικαὶ φροντίδες ἀμαυρώσωσι τὴν διάνοιάν σου, ἀπόσμηξον διὰ τῆς τῶν μαρτύρων μνήμης. Ἐὰν γὰρ ταύτην ἔχῃς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ σου τὴν μνήμην, οὐ θαυμάσεις πλοῦτον, οὐ πενίαν δακρύσεις, οὐχ ἐπαινέσεις δόξαν καὶ δυναστείαν, οὐδὲν ὅλως τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων, οὐ τῶν φαιδρῶν μέγα τι ὑπολάβῃς εἶναι, οὐ τῶν λυπηρῶν ἀφόρητον.

<sup>45</sup>John Chrysostom *Lucian.* 3 (PG 50:525).

<sup>46</sup>John Chrysostom *In martyres Aegyptios* 2 (PG 50:697).



serious, disciplined people, and the martyrs exemplified seriousness and indicated how Christians should live their lives.

Though Antioch was a city with a rich and varied religious past, John Chrysostom did not appreciate much of that history. In his sermon on Julian the martyr, John indicates that on the following day one of the traditional festivals would be taking place in the suburb of Daphne. He notes that this festival features picnicking and watching male dancers and that under no circumstance should any of his listeners attend. He says that being in the martyr's presence today will do them no good if they head to the suburb tomorrow, emphasizing that imitating the martyr keeps them from evil. Julian provides them with spiritual food and holy theater, which are much better than the worldly pleasures of Daphne. Besides, he tells them, they can go to Daphne to have a pleasant picnic another day. Since the next day is associated with a pagan festival he wants to see them all back in church with a friend.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps, one might think that the move from Antioch to Constantinople might reduce the moralizing tone in John's sermons on the martyrs. After all, Constantinople was founded with the purpose of being an exemplary Christian city, while Antioch, containing sizable pagan and Jewish populations, was still in the process of Christianization. The citizens of Constantinople, however, needed to imitate the martyrs just as much as those in Antioch did. Constantinople was a Christian city, but the luxury in which some citizens of the capital indulged shocked John's sensibilities. In a martyr sermon given in Constantinople, John returns to his familiar territory about behavior modification. He claims that in an age lacking in frequent miracles, a changed life indicates that Christianity is true. Christians need to give up their

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<sup>47</sup>John Chrysostom *Jul.* 4–5 (PG 50:673). Here John refers to the martyr's cult as τοῦ θεάτρου τοῦ πνευματικοῦ.

luxuries of clothing, food, drink, and theater and become “harder than iron.” Only through changing their own lives will Christians see the world become a better place.<sup>48</sup>

Imitation of the martyrs could hold great rewards. For example, John says, “Imitating the virtue of these saints here, we may be able to share their crowns too there.”<sup>49</sup> In a sense, anyone could become a martyr through hard work, perseverance, and self-denial. In fact, in his sermon on Babylas, John suggests that Antioch’s former bishop Meletius should properly be called a martyr. Meletius had died in 381, while visiting Constantinople, but his body had been moved to the church in Antioch that he had built in the 370s to house the relics of Babylas.<sup>50</sup> Even though he had died of natural causes, John claims that Meletius, who was much beloved, had achieved the rank of martyr. Partially, this is due to Meletius’s actively cultivating the cult of martyrs in Antioch by building shrines and increasing the number of feasts. John emphasizes, however, that the most important aspect of Meletius’s life that entitles him to the name martyr is his imitation of martyrs like Babylas. John preaches:

He copied their life, he was an enthusiast of their courage, through every action, in so far as he could, he preserved in himself the martyrs’ image. Consider! They gave up their bodies to slaughter. He mortified the components of his flesh that are on earth. They stood firm against fire’s flame, he quenched the flame of his will. They fought against the teeth of wild animals, but he quelled even the most savage of the passions in us—rage.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>John Chrysostom *On All the Martyrs* 15–16.

<sup>49</sup>John Chrysostom *Macc.* 1.3 (PG 50:622). ἵνα ἐνταῦθα μιμησάμενοι τὴν ἀρετὴν τῶν ἁγίων τούτων, καὶ κεῖ τῶν στεφάνων δυνηθῶμεν αὐτοῖς κοινωνῆσαι.

<sup>50</sup>Mayer, *Cult of the Saints*, 39–40.

<sup>51</sup>John Chrysostom *Bab.* 3 (PG 50:534). Μιμεῖται τὸν βίον αὐτῶν, ζηλοῖ τὴν ἀνδρείαν, διὰ πάντων κατὰ δύναμιν τὴν εἰκόνα διασώζει τῶν μαρτύρων ἐν ἑαυτῷ· ὅρα γάρ· Ἐπέδωκαν ἐκεῖνοι τὰ σώματα τῇ σφαγῇ· ἐνέκρωσεν οὗτος τὰ μέλη τῆς σαρκός τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς· ἔστησαν ἐκεῖνοι πρὸς φλόγα πυρός, ἔσβεσεν οὗτος τῆς ἐπιθυμίας τὴν φλόγα· ἐμαχίσαντο πρὸς ὀδόντας θηρίων ἐκεῖνοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ οὗτος τὸ χαλεπώτατον τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν παθῶν, τὴν ὀργὴν ἐκοίμισεν.

The key to Meletius's "martyrdom" was his asceticism. Martyrdom, for John, means death and sacrifice. In a world that lacked persecution of Christians, martyrdom could come through sacrificing the comforts of this world and mortifying the flesh.

John Chrysostom had a long association with asceticism. After finishing his rhetorical studies under Libanius in 367, John became increasingly interested in the issues surrounding the formation of a uniquely Christian lifestyle. He underwent baptism, and then spent some time studying in an ascetic school in Antioch.<sup>52</sup> This school was not necessarily a monastery, being perhaps merely an organization of young men who agreed to renounce certain comforts of civic life. In 372, however, John left Antioch for Mt. Silpius where many holy men lived in semi-seclusion. For four years, John's lifestyle could be described as "communal hermitage." The monks spent most of their time alone but did cooperate with one another for provision, worship, and spiritual guidance. At the end of these four years, John began a series of more rigorous attempts at asceticism in which he left the community of hermits and lived in a cave for perhaps two years. During this time of intense solitude, John cultivated traditional Syrian ascetical practices, such as sleep deprivation, uninterrupted standing, and long-term fasting. According to his biographer Palladius, John's health never recovered from the self-inflicted mortification of these two years.<sup>53</sup> After his sojourn in the mountains, John returned to Antioch where he was consecrated as a deacon and later a priest, but he never gave up his ascetic ideals. One of his goals in returning was to provide Christians of the city with the tools for embracing asceticism as well.

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<sup>52</sup>Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 14–18.

<sup>53</sup>Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 30–33.

The growing cult of martyrs provided Chrysostom with excellent opportunity to cast his vision of the Christian life as asceticism. As noted above, John cultivated a theology of martyrdom as sacrifice and suffering, which allowed him to tie this martyrdom directly to asceticism. In a homily on the book of Acts, John tells his hearers that if they want the reward of the martyrs, then they must live like the monks. He notes that martyrdom has passed but that demons continue to persecute. John's ideas about the continuing persecution by demons are reminiscent of C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. When once the church was persecuted with swords and fire, now, warns John, it is persecuted with "ease." According to John, "ease" is a far worse persecution than what the church faced before because "it induces sleep in the soul, an excessive yawning and drowsiness, it stirs up the passions on every side, it arms pride, it arms pleasure, it arms anger, envy, vainglory, jealousy."<sup>54</sup> He calls his hearers to live as though they still faced the kinds of persecutions the martyrs experienced. In a sermon on the epistle to the Hebrews, John explains that martyrdom and asceticism are both sacrifices to God. He encourages all his hearers to live in voluntary poverty for the sake of God and their fellow Christians.<sup>55</sup> God will count this sacrifice as martyrdom.

In one of his martyr homilies, John uses his rhetorical skill to paint a portrait for his hearers about how they can achieve martyrdom. He preaches, "They [the martyrs] despised life. You, despise luxury! They threw their bodies on the fire. You, now throw money in the hands of

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<sup>54</sup>John Chrysostom *Homiliae in Acta apostolorum* 24.3 (PG 60:188). "Υπνον καταχέει τῆ ψυχῆ, χάσμην πολλὴν καὶ ῥαθυμίαν ἐμποιεῖ, τὰ πάθη διεγείρει πάντοθεν, ὀπλίζει τῦφον, ὀπλίζει ἡδονὴν, ὀπλίζει θυμὸν, βασκανίαν, κενοδοξίαν, ζῆλον.

<sup>55</sup>John Chrysostom *Hom. Heb.* 11.3 (PG 63:93). It is worth noting that the ascetic sacrifice of poverty is voluntary. The Christian should actively and freely distribute his or her wealth to feed the poor. However, as we saw in chapter two, John discouraged voluntary martyrdom in the traditional sense unless it was to defend chastity, an ascetic virtue. It seems renunciation was closer to his heart than actual martyrdom.

the poor! They trampled on the burning coals. You, extinguish the flame of desire!”<sup>56</sup> He goes on to say that in addition to poverty, the best way to achieve martyrdom is through the traditional ascetic practices of fasting and sleep deprivation. He chides his congregation for their laziness: “So, you’re tossing and turning, lying on a soft mattress, and can’t bear the thought of getting up? Reflect on the martyrs lying today on the iron ladder, not with a mattress lying underneath, but live coals strewn under it.”<sup>57</sup> The message is clear; the martyrs would have been ascetics had they lived in a time of peace, and Christians should do likewise.

Related to the idea of asceticism is John’s exaltation of virginity. Advocating virginity provided John with a powerful tool in his quest to transform the late-antique city into a spiritual community, because ideas about marriage, family, and sexuality were at the heart of civic life. By refusing marriage and procreation, Christians could subvert the traditional values of their city and replace them with an expectation of the imminent heavenly kingdom.<sup>58</sup> While John viewed asceticism proper as a form of martyrdom, it seems that he probably viewed virginity in a like manner because of the necessity to mortify the temptation for marriage, temptations stemming both from sexual desires and social pressures.<sup>59</sup> He does not explicitly equate virginity with martyrdom but does imply it on a number of occasions. In his homily on the virgin martyr

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<sup>56</sup>John Chrysostom *Mart.* 2 (PG 50:710). Κατεφρόνησαν ἐκεῖνοι ζωῆς· καταφρόνησον σὺ τρυφῆς· ἔρριψαν ἐκεῖνοι τὰ σώματα τῷ πυρὶ· ῥίψον σὺ χρήματα νῦν ἐν ταῖς χερσὶ τῶν πενήτων· κατεπάτησαν ἐκεῖνοι τοὺς ἄνθρακας· ἀβέσον σὺ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας τὴν φλόγα.

<sup>57</sup>John Chrysostom *Mart.* 3 (PG 50:711). Ἄλλὰ περιστρέφη κείμενος ἐπὶ μαλακῆς στρωμνῆς, καὶ ὀκνεῖς διαναστῆναι; Ἐνόησον τοὺς ἐπὶ τῆς σιδηρᾶς κλίμακος κειμένους σήμερον μάρτυρας, οὐχὶ στρωμνῆς ὑποκειμένης, ἀλλ’ ἀνθρώκων ὑπεστρωμένων.

<sup>58</sup>See Brown, *Body and Society*, 306–322, for John’s theological conception of virginity.

<sup>59</sup>Christo, *Martyrdom According to John Chrysostom*, 179–184. Christo believes that John Chrysostom viewed virginity as a subset of martyrdom and surveys the appropriate texts. However, the text most explicitly making this claim is *De sancta Thecla martyre* (PG 50:745–748), which most scholars consider spurious. Christo uses this text as the basis for his argument, but he provides no rationale for classifying it as authentic.

Pelagia, John calls her virginity a “crown,” the metaphor commonly applied to martyrdom, and he refers to her dead virginal body as “the purest gold.” Throughout the homily he refers to her “double crown” and admonishes his hearer to imitate her as best they can.<sup>60</sup>

This imitation is a crucial component in John’s preaching. John’s purpose is to produce action on the part of his hearers. God desires his people to have strong wills and actively engage in holiness. The martyrs present the examples for this idea. God helps his people, but according to John, God’s people need to first behave in a Christian manner if they expect God to save them. In his sermon on Pelagia, John states, “He [Jesus] didn’t do these things [give help to Pelagia] at random, but because the martyr had made herself worthy of his help.”<sup>61</sup> According to John, God helps those who help themselves.

### **Role of the Cult of Relics**

Through the martyrs, John attempted to normalize his vision for Christian morality, and he focused this agenda around the cult of the martyrs’ relics. He expounded his theology of martyrdom and imitation during the feasts of the martyrs, which had become more elaborate and organized in Antioch during the episcopacy of Meletius, and usually these sermons took place in the presence of the relics. The martyrs were not merely present with the congregation through the retelling of their narratives, but rather John claimed that they were still, in some way, present in their relics.<sup>62</sup> The martyrs were reigning with Christ, but they were also still attached to their bones, dwelling in the spiritual and earthly realms simultaneously. John Chrysostom would have affirmed Peter Brown’s suggestion that the cult of the martyrs was about the “joining of Heaven

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<sup>60</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.*

<sup>61</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.* 1 (PG 50:580). Ταῦτα δὲ οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἐποίει, ἀλλ’ ἐπειδὴ πρότερον ἑαυτὴν ἀξίαν παρεσκεύασε τῆς ἐκείνου βοήθειας ἢ μάρτυς.

<sup>62</sup>E.g., John Chrysostom *Ign.* 5 (PG 50:594).

and Earth.”<sup>63</sup> The relics provided the church with great power that it could tap for spiritual blessing and protection from the enemies of God.

According to John Chrysostom, the relics of the martyrs held miraculous power, which made them invaluable. In his sermon on Drosis, he claims that the dust and ash that remain from Drosis’s body are more valuable than any gold, perfume, or gemstone. Those things were valuable in an earthly sense, but John notes that they have no power. On the other hand, the martyrs’ relics can raise the dead and cure disease, though John admits that it has been a while since they have raised the dead.<sup>64</sup> However, John emphasizes the spiritual blessings of these relics more than he does the tangible miracles associated with them.

When preaching in the presence of relics, John often refers to them as a “warehouse” of spiritual goods that can never be emptied. In his sermon on Ignatius, John claims that this warehouse provides those in attendance with perpetual blessings, confidence, good thoughts, and courage.<sup>65</sup> As noted above, John claimed that Christians ought to imitate the martyrs, but this imitation is founded upon participation in the cult. Christians approach the relics, remembering the martyrs, and this contact enables the imitation that John advocates. In another sermon, after referring to the relics as a warehouse, John uses another metaphor, calling the martyrs’ relics a “safe harbor.” John tells his hearers, “Indeed, just as harbours render safe the ships they receive swamped by numerous waves, so too do the martyrs’ coffins render our souls quite calm and safe when they receive them swamped by day-to-day affairs.”<sup>66</sup> The martyr relics dispense blessings

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<sup>63</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 1.

<sup>64</sup>John Chrysostom *Dros.* 4 (PG 50:689).

<sup>65</sup>John Chrysostom *Ign.* 5 (PG 50:594–595).

<sup>66</sup>John Chrysostom *Mart.* 2 (PG 50:649). Καὶ καθάπερ οἱ λιμένες ὑποδεχόμενοι τὰ πλοῖα πολλοῖς κύμασι περιαντληθέντα ἐν ἀσφαλείᾳ καθιστῶσιν, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τῶν μαρτύρων

to the church, but also provide protection. John knew that the cares of civic life could distract a Christian from the path towards asceticism. He suggested that his flock regularly visit the martyrs so as to have their minds focused on righteous behavior. Through constant contact with the martyrs' relics, the Christian would receive the blessings necessary to please God and be protected from outside distractions.

In John Chrysostom's mind, the martyrs really do fill a sort of mediating role between God and his church by virtue of their sacrifice. The martyrs dispense the blessings needed by the church, and they do this when Christians honor them through visitation and imitation. In one of his sermons on the Maccabean martyrs, John compares those gathered to the widow who gave two pennies (Lk 21:2–4). The gift of honor that the church gives the martyrs is small and unworthy, but it still reaps a huge spiritual blessing. The martyrs do not mind repaying those gathered with superabundance, since God has blessed them so generously in light of their gift to him.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, John suggests that the martyrs can act as mediators with God and provide whatever the church needs because of their close relationship with him. In his sermon on Juventius and Maximinus, those soldiers condemned by their evil emperor for treachery, John compares the relationship between God and the martyrs to that of an emperor to his loyal soldiers. He says, "For just as soldiers, showing off the wounds which they received in battle, boldly converse with the emperor, so too these [martyrs], by brandishing in their hand the heads which were cut off and putting them on public display, are able easily to procure everything we

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αἱ θῆκαι ὑποδεξάμεναι τὰς ἡμετέρας ψυχὰς βιωτικοῖς πράγμασι περιαντλουμένας ἐν πολλῇ καθιστῶσι γαλήνην καὶ ἀσφαλείαν.

<sup>67</sup>John Chrysostom *Macc.* 2.1 (PG 50:623).



wish from the King of heaven.”<sup>68</sup> The martyrs, inhabiting their relics, stand between God and the church, as channels of blessing from heaven that can be accessed when Christians indicate their needs. Approaching the saint’s coffin could even be compared to approaching the throne of God.<sup>69</sup> In this way, John could use the cult of the martyrs to define for his people their identity in relation to God, but he also used the cult to define the enemies of God and provide protection from them.

During his ministry in Antioch, John complained bitterly about the influence the Jewish population had on his congregation.<sup>70</sup> Many Christians participated in the Jewish festivals, blurring the lines between the two communities. One matter complicating the situation was the Christians’ relatively recent adoption of the Jewish cult of the Maccabees, which was centered in Antioch.<sup>71</sup> At the time of John’s ministry in Antioch, many people in the city viewed the line between Christianity and Judaism as fairly blurry. John’s verbal attacks on the Jews are infamous, but of interest is how he enlists the martyrs in his camp. His sermon *Adversus Judaeos* 6 was delivered on a martyr’s feast day, but John tells his listeners that he will be explaining the evils of Judaism instead of giving a proper martyr homily. He claims that the martyrs would rather hear him criticize the Jews than hear him laud their martyrdoms.<sup>72</sup> He even goes so far as to claim that the martyrs have a special hatred for the Jews since the Jews crucified Jesus whom

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<sup>68</sup>John Chrysostom *Juv.* 3 (PG 50:576). οὕτω καὶ οὗτοι τὰς κεφαλὰς ὡς ἀπετμήθησαν ἐπὶ τῶν χειρῶν βαστάζοντες, καὶ εἰς μέσον παράγοντες, εὐκόλως ἅπαντα, ὅσα ἂν θέλωσι, παρὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνύειν δύνανται.

<sup>69</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancto Meletio Antiocheno* 3 (PG 50:520).

<sup>70</sup>See Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*; especially 123–127 in which Wilken describes John’s “rhetoric of abuse.”

<sup>71</sup>See chapter one for a discussion of this adoption.

<sup>72</sup>John Chrysostom *Adv. Jud.* 6.1 (PG 48:904).

they love.<sup>73</sup> In other sermons, as he differentiates his Christian hearers from his Jewish enemies, John incorporates the martyrs as examples of why Christians should reject Jewish traditions. John notes that yes, both Christians and Jews fast, but he says that the two disciplines do not both produce spiritual benefit. He notes that both martyrs and criminals were put to death, but only the martyrs received a crown, while the criminals received condemnation. In the same way, Christian fasting, a form of self-mortification, feeds the soul, but Jewish fasting merely increases their guilt.<sup>74</sup> In another sermon, he claims that Jews cannot be considered holy merely because they possess the Scriptures. John says that during the days of persecution, the magistrates handled the holy martyrs but their dealings with the martyrs did not make them holy by association. The magistrates violated holy martyrs to their own condemnation, and the Jews violate the Scriptures, through misinterpretation, to judgment.<sup>75</sup>

Once he became the bishop of Constantinople, however, the Jewish threat was not as urgent as it had been in Antioch. In addition to the threat of luxury that existed in the capital, John also had to contend against lingering sympathies with the Arian heresy. While bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom used the cult of the martyrs provided as another way by which he could denounce Arianism. In his homily preached in honor of the martyr Phocas, John uses most of his time to refute the heretics. The second half of the sermon has little to do with the martyr, and John explains to his hearers why the father and son are equal in spite of their differing titles. Interestingly, he uses the athlete trope, which is so common when speaking about

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<sup>73</sup>John Chrysostom *Adv. Jud.* 6.1 (PG 48:905).

<sup>74</sup>John Chrysostom *Adv. Jud.* 4.3 (PG 48:874).

<sup>75</sup>John Chrysostom *Adv. Jud.* 1.5 (PG 48:850–851).

the martyrs, to describe himself as he prepares to wrestle with the heretics in his sermon.<sup>76</sup> In a way, he seems to assimilate himself to the martyrs with this metaphor. Even though he rebukes the Arian teaching, John is quite charitable towards the Arians themselves in this sermon. He explicitly states that he loves the heretics and wants to do them no harm; he merely wishes to destroy their false beliefs and enlighten them to the truth.<sup>77</sup> His gentle approach with the remaining Arians leads one to wonder if he saw them as less of a threat to the church than Jews and luxury or if he was courting particular Arians in the crowd that day.

The greatest enemy of God and his church, whether in Antioch or Constantinople, was the Devil and his demons. Often, John would associate the demons with traditional Greco-Roman religion, but he considered their influence to be much broader. John believed that he lived in a world with a spiritual dimension more real and powerful than the physical one that he experienced with his senses. John believed that demons still persecuted his church, and he cited the martyrs as being critical in defending against them because demons are impotent against the power of the martyrs' sacrifice. While he preaches on the virgin martyr Pelagia, who threw herself from a rooftop, John compares her falling body to a thunderbolt. He says, "Her body, brighter than any flash of lightning, tumbled down and struck the Devil's vision. A thunderbolt released from the heavens isn't as frightening to us as the martyr's body (more severe than any thunderbolt) put terror into the ranks of the demons."<sup>78</sup> The demons cannot bear the presence of

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<sup>76</sup>John Chrysostom *De sancto hieromartyre Phoca* 2 (PG 50:702). Cf. *Adv. Jud.* 2 and *Adv. Jud* 6, in which he uses the same metaphor to describe his battles with the Jews.

<sup>77</sup>John Chrysostom *Phoc.* 2 (PG 50:701).

<sup>78</sup>John Chrysostom *Pelag.* 2 (PG 50:581–582). καὶ κατεφέρετο τὸ σῶμα λοιπὸν, πάσης ἀστραπῆς φωτεινότερον, πλήττον τοῦ διαβόλου τὰς ὄψεις. Οὐχ οὕτω γὰρ ἡμῖν κεραυνὸς ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀφιέμενός ἐστι φοβερός, ὡς τὸ σῶμα τῆς μάρτυρος κεραυνοῦ παντός χαλεπώτερον ἐφόβει τῶν δαιμόνων τὰς φάλαγγας.

the martyrs' moral purity. Similarly, John compares the smoke rising from Drosis's burning corpse to purifying incense that drove away the demons of the realm of the air.<sup>79</sup>

According to John, the martyrs kept these demon-thwarting powers long after the event of their martyrdoms. In Antioch, he tells his listeners that demons continue to flee before the dust that remains from Drosis's burned corpse.<sup>80</sup> In Constantinople, as he oversees the translation of some relics in the presence of the empress, John proclaims that the martyrs' relics release flashes of light brighter than the sun. He says, "After all, demons experience no adverse effects when they look at the rays of the sun. But, unable to bear the brilliance that bursts forth from here, they're blinded and flee and take refuge at a considerable distance."<sup>81</sup> Cultivating a strong cult of the martyrs was essential in defending the church from its most powerful enemies, and a multiplicity of shrines and reliquaries could act as a protective hedge around a city.

John viewed the bodies of the martyrs as weapons wielded by Christ himself, weapons too powerful for either angels to use or demons to resist.<sup>82</sup> These weapons protected the church, but also they could be used offensively to attack the various enemies of God. But the manner in which they accomplished these things hinged on their ability to act as mediators between God and living Christians. They channeled divine power in the form of spiritual blessings to the church, and this ability hinged on their sacrifice given to God.

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<sup>79</sup>John Chrysostom *Dros.* 4 (PG 50:689). One wonders why the demons kept instigating these martyrdoms if they could not stand the outcomes.

<sup>80</sup>John Chrysostom *Dros.* 3 (PG 50:687).

<sup>81</sup>John Chrysostom *Homilia dicta postquam reliquiae martyrum* 1 (PG 63:469). Ἄκτινα μὲν γὰρ βλέποντες ἡλιακὴν, οὐδὲν πάσχουσι δαίμονες· τὴν δὲ ἐντεῦθεν ἐκπηδῶσαν λαμπηδόνα μὴ φέροντες, ἀποτυφλοῦνται καὶ δραπετεύουσι καὶ ἐκ πολλοῦ φεύγουσι τοῦ διαστήματος.

<sup>82</sup>John Chrysostom *Macc.* 1.1 (PG 50:618).

John believed that the relics of the martyrs would be the weapons with which the battle of the empire's Christianization would be won. Christianity's enemies were legion, but Christ would win the victory through wielding his martyrs. In fact, in his letter to the presbyter Rufinus, John seems to view the possession of relics as a prerequisite for missionary endeavor and Christianization. Rufinus was trying to plant a church in a rural area, and John sent him a letter of encouragement, telling him that he's earning many crowns for his work. John closed the letter by telling Rufinus of a friend who will send him some relics. John says, "For he has relics that are indisputable and numerous and inside of a few days we shall send them to you in Phoenicia."<sup>83</sup> John indicates that all Christian communities needed their protective relics.

As he oversaw the translation of relics into the city of Constantinople, John must have felt that he was making great progress in his quest to create a Christian society. Around the year 401, John paraded new relics into the city, and the sermon he delivered that day attests that he was in high spirits. The world was at peace, demons were fleeing, and even the empress herself was walking humbly beside the martyr. Eudoxia, the wife of Emperor Arcadius and elevated recently to the status of *augusta*, had spent the whole night waiting on the martyr and walking beside the relics as they processed through Constantinople. On that day John preached, "I mean that she [Eudoxia] alone among empresses has escorted martyrs with such great honour, with such great zeal and piety, mingling with the crowd, dispensing with her entire retinue, and banishing virtually the entire inequality of her lifestyle to a high degree."<sup>84</sup> John probably felt

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<sup>83</sup> John Chrysostom *Epistulae* 126 (PG 52:687). Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἔχει καὶ ἀναμφισβήτητα, καὶ πολλὰ, καὶ εἴσω ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν ἀποστελοῦμέν σοι ταῦτα εἰς τὴν Φοινίκην.

<sup>84</sup> John Chrysostom *Reliq. mart.* (PG 63:471). Μάρτυρας γὰρ μόνη βασιλίδων αὕτη μετὰ τοσαύτης πρέπεμψε τιμῆς, μετὰ τοσαύτης σπουδῆς καὶ εὐλαβείας, ἀναμιγνυμένη τῷ πλήθει, καὶ τὴν δορυφορίαν ἅπασαν περικόψασσα, καὶ τὴν ἀνωμαλίαν τοῦ βιοῦ ὅλην σχεδὸν μετὰ πολλῆς ἀπελάσασσα τῆς ὑπερβολῆς.

that his years of moralizing had started to bear fruit. The mightiest woman in the empire was embracing renunciation because of her love for the martyrs. Only a couple of years later, John and Eudoxia became disenchanted with one another. He grew bitter because in spite of his moralizing she continued to live ostentatiously, and she became angry with him because she perceived his homiletical attacks on ostentatious women as personal affronts.<sup>85</sup> Because he was out of favor at court, John's ecclesiastical enemies succeeded in removing him from the bishopric of Constantinople in 403, and he died in exile in 407.

John's theology of martyrdom and the cult of martyrs, which he linked closely to his views on asceticism and sacrifice, did not die with him. His moralizing and his desire for Christianization continued in both the East and West. Not every bishop, however, subscribed to these views. Augustine of Hippo formed a strikingly different theology of martyrdom within the context of the Donatist conflict, and it is to his North Africa which we turn.

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<sup>85</sup>For the strained relationship between John and Eudoxia, see Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 70–76.

## CHAPTER 6

### AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, DONATISM, AND THE CULT OF MARTYRS

In Carthage, Maximian and Isaac became martyrs for their North African church. The account of their sufferings and deaths indicates that the authorities brutally tortured the two before killing them.

Thus a war was waged between his [Maximian's] body and the torturers, between sacrilegious people and a devout man, between strength of soul and butchers, between a soldier of Christ and soldiers of the devil, between an enduring person and his judge. One miserable man was enough to fight so gloriously against so much torture and against such a multitude of the enemy that in this one contest, the enemy could not report a single victory. [...] These very servants of sacrilege hardly had their fill with one victim before handing over another [Isaac] to be sacrificed at their hands in the same way so that they might openly surpass the standards of their ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

After their deaths, the authorities dumped Maximian's and Isaac's bodies in the sea so that their supporters could not honor the martyrs' remains. God provided a miracle, however, causing the martyrs' bodies to wash up on the shore. Rejoicing, their community of faith recovered the bodies and provided them with the proper rites of burial.

This tale of martyrdom contains the hallmarks of its genre: faithful Christians, evil and cruel government officials, torture, death, and God's seal of approval on the actions of his

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<sup>1</sup>*Passio Maximiani et Isaac* (PL 8:769–770). Sic illic bellum gestum est inter corpus et poenas, inter sacrilegos et devotum, inter animi vires et laniantes, inter militem Christi et milites diaboli, inter patientem et judicem, et unus sufficit afflictus contra tantam dimicare suppliciorum hostiumque gloriosius multitudinem, ut in certamine non unam victoriam reportasset. [...] ex quibus statim ministri ipsi sacrilegi de uno minime satiati, et alterum tradiderunt propriis manibus similiter victimari; ut patrum illorum mensura super illos manifestius posset impleri.

people. The *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, however, is not as typical as it might first seem. Maximian and Isaac died on August 15, 347, decades after Constantine claimed Christianity as his most favored religion.<sup>2</sup> When the text refers to “soldiers of the devil,” it refers to other Christians. In North Africa at the beginning of the fourth century, two rival associations of churches emerged. One gained the support of the Roman emperor; the other suffered his wrath. The two groups shared the same liturgy, but each had its own hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

When Augustine began his preaching career as bishop of Hippo in 395, he found himself in a rather unenviable position. His communion was the persecutor in the above scenario, but he still needed to preach about martyrdom to his congregation because the celebration of feast days for the martyrs was an integral part of church life. Augustine had to convince his hearers that the traditions of martyrdom lay with his communion, not his rivals’. This was a tough sell considering that those Christians in Augustine’s communion had been free of persecution for almost a century, while the rival congregations, the Donatists, recently had experienced persecution at the hands of those aligned with Augustine.

The roots of this North African schism began early in the fourth century, when the emperor Diocletian instituted a systematic persecution of Christian congregations throughout the empire that did not end until Constantine gained power and began favoring Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Many Christian communities suffered during Diocletian’s reign, but in North Africa the persecution incited rifts between Christians that would never fully heal. Many North African Christians,

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<sup>2</sup>For dating, see Maureen A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 61.

<sup>3</sup>Brown, *Augustine*, 207–221.

<sup>4</sup>Barnes claims that Galerius, not Diocletian, was the driving force behind this persecution. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 15–27.



even bishops, abandoned the faith, and North African Christians viewed the unfaithfulness of these bishops as especially egregious because often they surrendered the Scriptures to the Romans. Those who stayed faithful labeled these bishops *traditores*, i.e., “those who had handed over.” When the persecution ended, much acrimony existed within and among the North African congregations. Many of those who had succumbed under persecution wanted to reunite with their congregations, but the return of lapsed bishops posed a special problem. North African Christians argued over whether they should allow these bishops to return to their posts, and whether the sacraments they performed had any value.

The schism of North African Christianity officially began when Caecilian was consecrated as bishop of Carthage in 311.<sup>5</sup> The more rigorous elements in North African Christianity objected to Caecilian’s election because they claimed that one of the bishops who consecrated him had been a *traditor*, which invalidated the consecration. They even suggested that Caecilian obstructed aid that was meant for some Christian prisoners awaiting martyrdom during Diocletian’s persecution.<sup>6</sup> Quickly Caecilian’s opponents elected a rival bishop for Carthage, Majorinus. Neither bishop surrendered his claim, and separate hierarchies emerged. Majorinus’s successor, Donatus, lends his name to this rival faction, which came to be called the Donatists. Both factions appealed to Constantine for support.<sup>7</sup> When Constantine and the bishops he consulted decided that the Christians in communion with Caecilian were the Catholics, the Donatists decided that the new Roman administration was reprobate. Rome confirmed their

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<sup>5</sup>Tilley rightly points out that this event was “merely a symptom of a cleavage that began years before.” Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: the Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 10. Caecilian’s election, however, does represent a parting of the ways instead of division within a self-identifying group.

<sup>6</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20 (PL 8:689–703).

<sup>7</sup>Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 56–61.

suspensions when it attempted to unify the churches through force. Occasionally, Roman magistrates arrested Donatist bishops and seized Donatist congregations' property. This new stance towards Christianity was merely the old persecution in a new disguise.

When Augustine began preaching on the martyrs, he had to deal with North Africa's strong tradition of martyrdom, exemplified in the turn of the third-century writings of Tertullian, and apply it to Christians who found themselves at peace with the government. Simultaneously, he had to explain why the Donatist congregations had no claim to this same tradition, even though they seemed to embody it. The North African congregations were a battleground in which bishops waged war through their sermons. The spoils of war were the souls of men and women. Every sermon that Augustine delivered on a martyr's feast day either explicitly or implicitly explained why those in attendance ought to be in his communion.

Augustine's approach in this situation was to redefine martyrdom for his congregation, restoring to it a more primitive meaning. Since the second century, martyrdom had carried connotations of religious sacrifice interwoven with its purpose of bearing witness. This sacrificial tradition was especially strong in North Africa, where the Donatists claimed to be the only true Church because of their faithfulness in suffering and sacrificing themselves in order to protect the Scriptures. Augustine, however, preaches to his congregation only the witness bearing aspect of martyrdom, ignoring the sacrificial aspect, in spite of the churches' traditional language that unified witnessing with sacrifice.

### **Testimony of Martyrdom**

Augustine communicated to his congregation a new tradition of martyrdom, free of the notion of martyrs as sacrifices. Augustine based his conclusions about martyrdom in the New Testament, in which *μάρτυς* primarily means "witness." Thus, Augustine reconceived the Christian experience of martyrdom solely in light of New Testament witness bearing. Even

though the connotations of sacrifice were strong in Christian martyrdom, Augustine tended to avoid sacrificial language when talking about martyrdom to his congregation. He had theological justification for truncating the martyrdom tradition. The apostle Paul taught that Christ's passion had made full atonement for the sins of his people.<sup>8</sup> Christian suffering was not another sacrifice, but it was a sign of the eschaton.<sup>9</sup> Augustine, therefore, tried to persuade his listeners that witness bearing constitutes the whole of martyrdom. This was no mean feat since on a martyr's feast day the martyr texts, laden with sacrificial language, were read directly before Augustine delivered his sermon. Augustine used all his skill as a preacher and rhetorician to direct his listeners' attention to the strand of the tale he thought most profitable for their lives as Christians. In his sermons he describes what and how the martyrs confessed, and he even recasts the martyr texts most clearly leaning towards atoning sacrifice as primarily martyrdoms of confession.

Martyrdom, according to Augustine, did not perform any redemptive work for the martyr, as the North African tradition of martyrdom being a second baptism indicated.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Augustine maintained that a clear distinction existed between the blood of Christ and the blood of the martyrs. In 425, Augustine preached a sermon to dedicate the relics of Stephen that had recently been brought to Hippo. In this sermon, Augustine tells those North Africans who had gathered for the dedication, "Those who poured out their blood for their redeemer, they were redeemed by his blood. He poured out his in order to buy their salvation; they poured out theirs

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<sup>8</sup>Rom 3:23–25.

<sup>9</sup>Col 1:24; cf. Mark 13:20.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Tertullian *De Baptismo* 16.2; *Passio Perp.* 18.3; 21.2.

in order to spread his gospel.”<sup>11</sup> Only the blood of Christ redeems the Christian; the Christian’s blood provides the testimony by which the Church grows.

Augustine taught his people that the martyrs were martyrs because they bore witness, not because they offered themselves in sacrifice. One year, on the feast day of the Scillitan martyrs, a group of North Africa’s earliest martyrs, Augustine opened his sermon as he typically did by defining martyrdom. He says, “This solemn feast day is calling for something about the martyrs of Christ, that is about the witnesses of Christ, who were not ashamed to confess his name before men.”<sup>12</sup> In this same sermon, Augustine continues to define martyrdom and detail its importance.

“Martyrs,” the word is Greek, are called “witnesses” [*testes*] in Latin. Therefore the holy martyrs, not false witnesses but true ones, brought forward a witness with their blood that there is another life preferable to this life, because they bravely scorned the passing one. You heard the confessions of the martyrs whose feast is celebrated today, when they were recited.<sup>13</sup>

This definition of martyrdom, characteristic of Augustine, contains no hint of sacrificial language. The martyrs died, but that death was a witness in blood to “another life preferable to this life.” Again and again, Augustine emphasized this confessional aspect of martyrdom to his congregation.

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<sup>11</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 318.1 (PL 38:1438). Redempti sunt sanguine, qui sanguinem pro Redemptore fuderunt. Ille fudit, ut eorum salus redimeretur: illi fuderunt, ut Evangelium eius diffamaretur (my translation).

<sup>12</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299F.1 (PLS 2:788). De martyribus Christi, hoc est de testibus Christi, qui non sunt confusi confiteri nomen eius coram hominibus, dies huius sollemnitatis hortatur.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299F.1 (PLS 2:789). Martyres, graecum nomen est, latine testes dicuntur. Martyres ergo sancti, testes non falsi sed veri, esse aliam vitam huic vitae praeponendam sanguine suo testimonium perhibuerunt, quia istam transeuntem fortiter contempserunt. Confessiones martyrum quorum hodie sollemnitatis celebratur, cum recitarentur, audistis (my translation).

Augustine believed that God himself provided this message in the martyrdom; this was no mere testimony of the martyrs themselves. This being the case, Augustine naturally gives a testimony of God preeminence over any supposed sacrifice of a martyr. Augustine claims that the Spirit of God inspired the verbal witness of the martyrs. On Vincent's feast day in 412, Augustine preached:

For in the gospel Christ promised this too to his witnesses, when he was preparing them for this kind of contest. For thus he said: "Do not consider beforehand how or what you should say. For you are not the one who speaks, but the Spirit of your Father is the one who speaks in you." Therefore the flesh was suffering, and the Spirit was speaking.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine teaches the view that the Spirit spoke through the martyrs because if the martyrs spoke under their own power, then their testimony would be flawed since all humans are flawed. According to Augustine, the Spirit not only provided this verbal testimony but also the dramatic witness in deed that testified to the Christian's eternal life. In Augustine's thinking, martyrdom is almost a divine, didactic drama in which the martyrs' deaths remind people that earthly life is secondary to a future, eternal life. Augustine says, "And so by believing they seized life, and by speaking they found death, but a death in which the body is sown perishable and reaped imperishable."<sup>15</sup> Just as in any morality play, the message is more important than the drama itself.

In a sermon delivered in Carthage on the North African martyrs Marian and James, Augustine explains that God inspired the patience to bear a martyr's death, just as he inspired the

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<sup>14</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 276.2 (PL 38:1256). Promisit enim et hoc testibus suis Christus in Evangelio, quos ad huiusmodi certamina praeparabat. Sic enim ait: *Nolite praemeditari quomodo aut quid loquamini. Non enim vos estis qui loquimini, sed Spiritus Patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis.* Caro ergo patiebatur, et Spiritus loquebatur (my translation).

<sup>15</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 306D.1 (PLS 2:785). Credendo itaque adprehenderunt vitam et loquendo invenerunt mortem, sed mortem in qua corpus corruptibile seminaretur et incorruptio meteretur (my translation).

words the martyrs spoke. He explains, “Patience descends from the unchangeable fount into changeable human minds, to make them unchangeable also. From where can humans gain the ability to please God, except from God?”<sup>16</sup> Augustine gives the witnessing aspect of martyrdom preeminence over the sacrificial aspect because it is the part of martyrdom that God does. The divine message, whether explicit in word or implied in deed, is perfect, and Augustine gives it primacy by ignoring the human contribution to the equation.

As in the case of Marian and James, the martyr texts often allude to the sacrificial nature of the martyrs’ deaths. In his sermons, however, Augustine conspicuously ignores this point. His sermons on the Maccabean martyrs make an interesting case study. Augustine’s treatment of these texts is both typical and extreme—typical because he employs the avoidance tactic that he uses in many of his martyr sermons, extreme because the language in the Maccabean text is so laden with sacrificial language.

The Maccabean martyrs died during persecution of the Jews by the Seleucid Antiochus IV from 167 to 164 BC. The Jewish communities responsible for the composition and transmission of the Maccabean texts viewed the deaths of these martyrs as sacrifices of atonement. Throughout the text, the Jews are bemoaning God’s judgment that has fallen on them and are using language of atonement to describe their coming deaths. In 2 Maccabees, Antiochus attempts to force seven brothers to eat pork, and they all embrace death rather than violate their Law. These martyrs located the cause of their misery in God’s wrath. God had abandoned his people because they had abandoned his Law. The seventh brother tells Antiochus, “I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon

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<sup>16</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 284.1 (PL 38:1288). Ad humanas mentes mutabiles de fonte immutabili descendit patientia, quae et ipsas faciat immutabiles. Unde homini placere Deo, nisi a Deo (my translation)?

to our nation [...] and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation.”<sup>17</sup> The author of 4 Maccabees even more explicitly emphasizes the atoning nature of a Jewish martyr’s death. In 4 Maccabees, Eleazar says, “Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs.”<sup>18</sup> Summing up the entire persecution, the narrator claims, “And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted.”<sup>19</sup> The text explicitly communicates that these deaths served as atoning sacrifices to God.

In order to avoid this sacrificial laden language, Augustine could have avoided the Maccabean martyrs entirely, claiming that Jewish martyrs were not properly Christian. However, as noted in chapter one, the Maccabean cult was expanding rapidly at this time. Perhaps the cult had already reached North Africa by the time Augustine began preaching and Augustine did not want to break tradition. Equally likely, Augustine introduced the cult in order to bring his North African communion in line with the other churches around the Mediterranean in an attempt to maintain their status as “Catholic.” Regardless, instead of neglecting this new tradition, Augustine redefined the tradition of the Maccabees to suit his purposes. Sounding much like Gregory of Nazianzus justifying the cult a generation earlier, Augustine plainly states, “They were Christians; but with their deeds they anticipated the name Christian that was publicized

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<sup>17</sup>2 Maccabees 7:37–38. ἐγὼ δέ, καθάπερ οἱ ἀδελφοί, καὶ σῶμα καὶ ψυξὴν προδίδωμι περὶ τῶν πατρίων νόμων ἐπικαλούμενος τὸν θεὸν ἵλεως ταχὺ τῷ ἔθνει γενέσθαι καὶ [...] ἐν ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου στήσαι τὴν τοῦ παντοκράτορος ὀργὴν τὴν ἐπὶ τὸ σύμπαν ἡμῶν γένος δικαίως ἐπηγμένην.

<sup>18</sup>4 Maccabees 6:29. καθάρσιον αὐτῶν ποιήσον τὸ ἐμὸν αἷμα καὶ ἀντίψυχον αὐτῶν λαβὲ τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν.

<sup>19</sup>4 Maccabees 17:22. καὶ διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν εὐσεβῶν ἐκείνων καὶ τοῦ ἰλαστηρίου τοῦ θανάτου αὐτῶν ἡ θεία πρόνοια τὸν Ἰσραὴλ προκακωθέντα διέσωσεν.

much later on.”<sup>20</sup> As in his sermons on other martyrs, Augustine ignores the sacrificial language in the text that describes their martyrdoms. Instead, he emphasizes the witness bearing aspect of their martyrdoms. According to Augustine, even though these Jewish martyrs could not explicitly witness to Christ, since he had not been born yet, they implicitly witnessed to him. By witnessing to the Law of Moses, the Maccabean martyrs witnessed to Christ. Augustine believed that the Old Testament spoke the same truth as the New Testament, but behind a veil.<sup>21</sup> Augustine, therefore, accords the Maccabean martyrs the same honor as their Christian counterparts: “The [Christian] martyrs confessed plainly the same one whom the Maccabees at that time confessed secretly. The former died for Christ unveiled in the gospel; the latter died for the name of Christ veiled in the Law. Christ held both, Christ aided both as they struggled, Christ crowned both.”<sup>22</sup> Augustine teaches his parishioners that these proto-Christian martyrs bore the same defining features as their later brethren. They bore witness for Christ in their words and action, and on this witness bearing their status as martyrs hinged.

In Augustine’s preaching, he conspicuously ignores the sacrifice of the martyrs and emphasizes their testimony. This testimony of the martyrs, which witnessed to eternal life, was the message from God. Augustine gives no evidence that he sees the shedding of a Christian’s blood as having any expiating value. In fact, he notes, “God does not delight in the shedding of

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<sup>20</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 300.2 (PL 38:1377). Christiani fuerunt: sed nomen Christianorum postea divulgatum factis antecesserunt.

<sup>21</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 300.3 (PL 38:1377). Testamentum enim vetus velatio est novi Testamenti, et Testamentum novum revelatio est veteris Testamenti.

<sup>22</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 300.5 (PL 38:1379). Ipsum martyres in manifesto confessi sunt, quem tunc Machabaei in occulto confessi sunt: mortui sunt isti pro Christo in Evangelio revelato; mortui sunt illi pro Christi nomine in lege velato. Christus habet utrosque, Christus pugnantes adiuvit utrosque, Christus coronavit utrosque (my translation).



blood.”<sup>23</sup> This idea runs contrary to the notion that martyrdom had to involve blood sacrifice, and contradicts traditional Roman ideas, which can be exemplified in a Stoic like Seneca, who believed that the gods gladly look upon the deaths of good men.<sup>24</sup> Augustine truncates the received traditions of martyrdom to a vision of witness bearing that he believes is faithful to the New Testament and useful for his congregation.

In his sermons, Augustine breaks with the previous traditions concerning martyrdom. While the martyr texts indicate a multiplicity of functions and meanings for martyrdom, Augustine forsakes all meanings except that of New Testament testifying. This is no mere theological quibble. It provides Augustine with the means to reinvent the martyrdom experience for his North African congregation, who had little experience with persecution in the post-Constantinian age. On the other hand it also allowed him to distinguish his communion from that of the Donatists, who derived their foundational narrative from the martyrs and who often found themselves experiencing various levels of persecution because of their refusal to recognize the Catholic hierarchy. Since martyrdom is not sacrifice, the physicality of the punishment becomes less important to this new theology of martyrdom. Witness bearing, according to Augustine, is the most important aspect of martyrdom, but the martyr must bear witness to the correct cause. Not all testimonies are equal.

Occasionally, however, Augustine did use sacrificial language, and it would be disingenuous not to note those instances and explain their significance. When preaching on the feast day of Peter and Paul on June 29, 404, Augustine could not avoid the sacrificial language since he was preaching from inspired Scripture instead of a martyr text. Quoting 2 Timothy 4:6,

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<sup>23</sup>E.g. Augustine *Serm.* 306E.6.

<sup>24</sup>Seneca *De providentia* 2.9–12.

“For I am already on the point of being sacrificed [*immolor*],” Augustine admits, “[Paul] knew that his suffering [*passionem*] would be a sacrifice to God.” At first glance this use of sacrificial language seems out of character for Augustine. Augustine makes, however, an unexpected point with this text. Emphasizing the passive voice of the verb *immolor*, Augustine claims that Paul did not willingly offer himself but that he was offered by someone else. He says, “Those who killed him did not offer such sacrifice to the Father, but it was that high priest who had said, ‘Do not fear those who slay the body.’”<sup>25</sup> Augustine claims that Paul did not make a willing sacrifice but that Jesus willingly sacrificed Paul.

Preaching on this same text about fifteen years later, Augustine notes that though martyrdom is a sacrifice, technically the martyr sacrifices nothing since he did not have anything good to give but what God had already provided. Embracing a view of God that will make some modern readers uncomfortable, Augustine preaches, “So he [God] made the sacrificial victims for himself, he himself devoted the sacrifices to himself, he himself filled the martyrs with the Spirit, he himself equipped the confessors with strength. Certainly it was to them he said, ‘For you are not the one who speaks.’”<sup>26</sup> In this way, Augustine takes on the language of the martyrs’ sacrifice and bends it until it is no sacrifice of the martyrs’ at all. Instead he turns it squarely back to martyrdom as bearing witness to the divine work of Christ in the martyrs’ lives.

In his last years, however, Augustine may have begun to accommodate his language to reflect some of that sacrificial tradition of martyrdom. In 428, just a couple of years before his

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<sup>25</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299A.4 (Dolbeau 4). Audite quid dicat idem apostolus : *Ego enim iam immolor, vel libor* — aliqui codices *libor* habent, aliqui *immolor* : libari et immolari ad sacrificium pertinet — : *passionem suam sacrificium esse nouerat deo. Non illi qui occidebant, sed ille offerebat patri tale sacrificium sacerdos qui dixerat: Ne timueritis eos qui corpus occidunt* (my translation).

<sup>26</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299.3 (PL 38:1368). Ipse ergo sibi victimas fecit, ipse sibi sacrificia dicavit, ipse implevit Spiritu martyres, ipse virtute instruxit confessores. Eis quippe dixit, *Non enim vos estis qui loquimini* (my translation).

death, a weary and disappointed Augustine complains about the turn out for Peter and Paul's feast.

Really, we should have been celebrating the feast of such great martyrs, that is of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, with a much bigger crowd than this. After all, if we flock in big crowds to the celebration of the birthdays of lambs, how much more should we do so for those of the rams?<sup>27</sup>

Here Augustine calls the apostles "rams" and the other martyrs "lambs," the animals most closely identified with sacrifice. Perhaps in his old age, Augustine had softened to notions of sacrifice in martyrdom. The religious landscape had shifted since Augustine's days as a young bishop, and by 428 the Donatist threat was receding, so perhaps Augustine did not feel that he had to be as guarded when speaking of the martyrs. Perhaps, though, this reference to sheep does not indicate sacrificial language.<sup>28</sup>

Augustine often alludes to sheep and lambs in sermons on Peter and Paul. When speaking of Peter, Augustine often quotes the words of Jesus to Peter: "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15–17).<sup>29</sup> When speaking of Paul, Augustine calls Ananias, the man to whom God sent Paul after his conversion, a sheep. Augustine enjoys this metaphor because he claims Saul the "wolf" had to visit Ananias the "sheep" for healing.<sup>30</sup> Though Augustine uses neither of these examples

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<sup>27</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 298.1 (PL 38:1365). *Debuimus quidem tantorum martyrum diem, hoc est, sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli maiore frequentia celebrare. Si enim celebramus frequentissime natalitia agnorum, quanto magis debemus arietum?*

<sup>28</sup>Of course it is impossible to reconstruct the secret thoughts of any person, but I ask the reader to humor me in this harmless speculation.

<sup>29</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 295.4,5; 296.1; 299.7; 299A.3; 299B.2.

<sup>30</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 175.8; 279.2; 295.6; 299C.3. In three of these sermons, Augustine actually claims that the name Ananias is derived from the Hebrew for sheep. This, however, is a false etymology. Edmund Hill wonders why Jerome never "corrected Augustine's fantasy." He goes on to say, "The suspicion begins to cross my mind that he [Augustine] quite brazenly invented this 'meaning' of the name Ananias, in order to be able to talk of the wolf ... being brought to the sheep for healing and transformation." Hill, *Sermons (273–305A)*, 69, n.8.

in his sermon in 428, these favored illustrations possibly influenced his speech due to familiarity. Perhaps Augustine was not using sacrificial language but was incorporating the martyrs into the “flock,” that is the Church. In a sermon on Cyprian in 405, Augustine preaches, “The blessed apostles, the first rams of the holy flock, saw the Lord Jesus himself hanging [on the cross].”<sup>31</sup> The apostles were the “rams” because they were first in authority in the “flock,” certainly not because they were first to be sacrificial martyrs. In 428 Augustine notes this fact when he explains that Stephen, martyred before Peter, was dependent on Peter.<sup>32</sup>

### **Suffering Does Not a Martyr Make**

In his sermons, Augustine exalted the martyrs’ cause over the martyrs’ sufferings in order to define the boundaries of martyrdom for his flock, boundaries that would exclude the schismatic Donatists. He says, “Let us love in them [the martyrs], not their sufferings, but the causes of their suffering. For if we loved only their sufferings, we are going to find many who suffered worse things in bad causes.”<sup>33</sup> When preaching on the martyrs and martyrdom, Augustine frequently cites Psalm 43:1, in which the persecuted psalmist asks God to “distinguish my cause.” After citing this passage Augustine often says, “The punishment does not make the martyr, but the cause does.”<sup>34</sup> Augustine freely admits that Donatists suffered, but their suffering was not martyrdom because their cause was outside the Catholic communion. He illustrates this point by reminding his hearers that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Though all three

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<sup>31</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 311.2 (PL 38.1414). Primi beati Apostoli arietes gregis sancti, ipsum Dominum Iesum viderunt pendentem (my translation).

<sup>32</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 298.1.

<sup>33</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 335.2 (PL 38:1471). Amemus in eis, non passiones, sed causas passionum. Nam si amaverimus passiones tantum, multos inventuri sumus qui peiora patiuntur in causis malis.

<sup>34</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 327.1 (PL 38:1451). Non facit martyrem poena, sed causa. Cf. *Sermons* 274, 283, 285, 325, 335, 335G, and 359B.

men received the same punishment, only Jesus' suffering had a just cause; the other two men suffered for their own iniquity.<sup>35</sup> In another sermon, Augustine provocatively asserts that if suffering makes the martyr, then even the Devil could claim the name.

If suffering is what is to be boasted about, then the devil himself can also do some boasting. Notice how much he is suffering, with his temples everywhere being pulled down, his idols everywhere being smashed, his priests and soothsayers everywhere being beaten. Can he say, do you suppose, "I too am a martyr, because I am enduring such great sufferings"?"<sup>36</sup>

As in the case of the Devil, Donatists did not suffer unjustly, but reaped the consequences of their choices.

Likewise, many Donatist martyrs suffered at the hands of Catholic magistrates. Nonetheless, Augustine teaches that they did not exhibit patience, which was a God-given virtue that enabled the martyr's perseverance. Instead, they succumbed to patience's shadow vice, stubbornness. Augustine says, "Endurance in the form of a vice is stubbornness. For stubbornness imitates patience, but it is not patience."<sup>37</sup> Augustine compares the Donatist martyrs to a criminal who receives his punishment with defiance instead of repentance. He tells his hearers, "He is prepared to be tortured for Donatus. Neither does he conceal this with a denial, but he confesses, nor is he ashamed, he boasts of his iniquity."<sup>38</sup> According to Augustine, Donatist martyrs did not receive a martyr's crown; instead, they only compounded their guilt by holding to their schism in the face of persecution.

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<sup>35</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 327.2. N.B. Jesus as proto-martyr.

<sup>36</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 328.4 (PL 38:1453). Si de passione gloriandum est; potest et ipse diabolus gloriari. Videte quanta patitur, cuius ubique templa evertuntur, cuius ubique idola franguntur, cuius ubique sacerdotes et arreptitii caeduntur. Numquid potest dicere: Et ego martyr sum, quia tanta patior!

<sup>37</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 283.7 (Dolbeau 15). Tolerantia in vitio duritia. Duritia enim imitatur patientiam, sed non est patientia (my translation).

<sup>38</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 283.7 (Dolbeau 15). Pro Donato torqueri paratus est, neque hoc negando tegit, sed confitetur, nec erubescit: iactat se de iniquitate (my translation).

The Donatist movement was one of separation, not just from the Catholics, but also from society as a whole. Donatists felt that their identity was constantly being threatened by persecution and compromise and that as a group they existed to maintain and defend an alternative to Roman North African society.<sup>39</sup> Donatists wrote their martyr tales to provide foundations for supporting this alternative to society. The *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* tells the Donatist version of the North African schism's antecedents. Augustine's criticism that Donatist martyrs died for a different cause seems applicable in this case. The martyrs in this text exhort their hearers to schism.

But already near to the Lord by their merits and their confession, they [the martyrs] directed those who succeeded them, the renewed progeny of the Christian name [those who would become Donatists], to be separated from all filth and communion with traitors by this warning: "If anyone communicates with the traitors, that person will have no part with us in the heavenly kingdom."<sup>40</sup>

Maureen Tilley rightly notes, "In this martyr story the biblical message is not the comforting theme of unity and peace but the strident call for condemnation and division. Not reconciliation but separation and excommunication is the cry of these martyrs."<sup>41</sup> The Donatist movement quickly came to view itself as a new Israel, separated from the godless nations, separated from both the Catholics and the pagans residing both inside and outside North Africa. They rooted this conception of themselves in the tales of the martyrs who died preserving the scriptures, like the

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<sup>39</sup>Brown, *Augustine*, 209.

<sup>40</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 18. Sed meritis iam Domino et confessione vicini direxerunt in posteros salutem, quae communem christiani nominis progeniem ab omni recidiva communione traditorum secerneret, tali sub comminatione: *Si quis traditoribus communicaverit, nobiscum partem in regnis caelestibus non habebit.*

<sup>41</sup>Maureen A. Tilley, "Scripture as an Element of Social Control: Two Martyr Stories of Christian North Africa," *HTR* 83 (1990): 395.

Maccabees who died for the Law.<sup>42</sup> Augustine seeks to undermine this image of the divisive martyr with his sermons.

True martyrdom required union with the Church. The Church belonged to God, not the bishops, and it could not be divided. Augustine makes his point explicit in 404 when preaching on the feast of Peter and Paul, the preeminent apostles of the early church. Claiming that the Donatists stole part of God's flock and fed "their own sheep," Augustine says, "Peter's merit, because he fed God's sheep, would never have been crowned with true martyrdom, if he had fed his own sheep."<sup>43</sup> For a martyrdom to be true martyrdom, it had to take place in God's Church, not Donatus's. Thus the cause of the martyrs was the same cause as that of Augustine's persecution-free congregation. In a sermon on the martyrs Castus and Aemilius, Augustine tells his hearers that since they are united in the Church they share a common purpose with the martyrs and can honor the martyrs through imitation and unity.

And so let us honor the martyrs inside, in the tabernacle of the shepherd, in the members of the shepherd, ones marked by grace, not audacity; by piety, not temerity; as steadfast, not obstinate; as gathering together, not dividing and scattering. In a word, if you wish to imitate true martyrs, choose yourselves a cause, so that you can say to the Lord, *Judge me, O Lord, and distinguish my cause from an unholy nation* (Ps 43:1). Distinguish, not my pain and punishment, because an unholy nation has that too; but my cause, which only a holy nation has. So choose yourselves a cause, hold onto a good and just cause, and with the Lord's help have no fear of any pain or punishment.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Maureen A. Tilley, "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: from the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert," *J ECS* 5 (1997): 29.

<sup>43</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299A.2 (Dolbeau 4). Meritum Petri, quod pavit oves dei, numquam esset vero martyrio coronatum, si oves suas pavisset. Augustine seemed to be particularly fond of this image of the Donatists as stolen sheep. Cf. *Serm.* 295.5.

<sup>44</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 285.7 (PL 38:1297). Martyres itaque intus honoremus in tabernaculo pastoris, in membris pastoris, habentes gratiam, non audaciam; pietatem, non temeritatem; constantiam, non pertinaciam; collectionem, non divisionem. Proinde si vultis martyres veros imitari, causam vobis eligite, ut dicatis Domino: *Iudica me, Domine, et discerne causam meam a gente non sancta* (*Psal.* XLII, 1). Discerne, non poenam meam; nam habet hanc et gens non sancta; sed causam meam, quam non habet

The Donatists, however, viewed the Catholics' version of unity as a specious one, because the devil had corrupted the Catholics.

The Donatists believed that they possessed a unity of the pure and that Catholic calls for unity were ploys of Satan to destroy the true church, the Donatist church. In a Donatist sermon given between 317 and 321, the preacher, perhaps Donatus himself, says:

Nevertheless, this rapacious robber was frustrated that he did not control everyone by this ruse. So the enemy of salvation concocted a more subtle conceit to violate the purity of faith. "Christ," he said, "is the lover of unity. Therefore, let there be unity." Those people who were already fawning on him and were deserted by God came to be called "Catholics." By prejudice in favor of the name, those who refused to communicate with them were called "heretics."<sup>45</sup>

Later he goes on to say, "Therefore, the one who corrupts holy discipline could violate the chastity of faith under the by-word of unity, i.e., by compelling unity with himself, not with God."<sup>46</sup> Augustine claimed that Christians did not have unity with God apart from the Catholic communion; the Donatists claimed that Christians could not have unity with God in the Catholic communion.

In order to support his own position, Augustine grounded his version of unity in the universal nature of Catholicism, a universality that posed problems for Donatists who were suspicious of the churches outside North Africa. Augustine viewed the Church as a people on the offensive, a people who would change the society that was its antithesis. Peter Brown writes,

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nisi gens sancta. Causam ergo vobis eligite, causam bonam et iustam tenete, et in adiutorio Domini nullam poenam timeate.

<sup>45</sup>*Sermo de Passione Advocati et Donati* 3 (PL 8:754). Tamen insatiabilis praedo moleste ferens quod non omnes hac arte possederit, subtilius argumentum ad violandum fidei sinceritatem invenit salutis inimicus. Christus, inquit, amator unitatis est, unitas igitur fiat: ante plebem nimis sibi semper obsecutam, ideoque a Deo desertam, Catholicam vocans ut de praeiudicio nominis, qui communicare noluerunt, haeretici dicerentur.

<sup>46</sup>*Passio Donati* 5. Poterat igitur disciplinae salutaris eversor castitatem fidei unitatis vocabulo violare, id est, unitatem ipsam sibi non Deo cogere.



“The Catholicism of Augustine [...] reflects the attitude of a group confident in its power to absorb the world without losing its identity.”<sup>47</sup> In the sermon on Peter and Paul from 404, Augustine cites Psalm 19:4, in which the knowledge of God goes out to all the earth. He claims that God spreads this knowledge through these apostles’ martyrdoms, but Augustine does not pass up an opportunity to attack the schismatics. “I imagine that they too are celebrating the birthday of the apostles today; they pretend, indeed, to celebrate this day, but they certainly daren’t sing this psalm.”<sup>48</sup> Augustine believed that Donatists could not sing this psalm because some Donatist bishops taught that the church was only found in North Africa. Augustine viewed the universal aspect of the church as foundational, and this universality entailed unity. If a martyr was outside Catholicism then he was not a martyr at all. In another sermon, Augustine cites Luke 24:46, which is another passage that implies the universality of the gospel, and then adds, “This is the Church you must acknowledge if you are a martyr, the Church expressly named by Christ’s own lips, foretold by the prophets, his heralds, this the one you must hold onto; shed your blood in this Church and for this Church.”<sup>49</sup> No matter how dramatic the spectacle, and the Donatists capitalized on drama, attempts at martyrdom outside the communion of the Catholic churches earned no crowns.

The notions of sacrifice and sufferings in martyrdom might have elicited emotional responses from North African Christians, but Augustine tried to redirect his hearers’ attention to the Christian cause that the martyrs witnessed to. Donatists had something that looked similar to

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<sup>47</sup>Brown, *Augustine*, 209. Also see 220–21.

<sup>48</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 299A.9 (Dolbeau 4). Puto quia et ipsi hodie celebrant natalem apostolorum; adfectant quidem istum diem celebrare, sed non audent istum psalmum cantare.

<sup>49</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 359B.19 (Dolbeau 2). Hanc ecclesiam ore Christi expressam, prophetarum praeconio praeunntiatam, hanc agnosce, si martyr es, hanc tene; in hac et pro hac sanguinem funde.

martyrdom, but it was a perverse shadow of what the Catholics possessed because the real martyrs taught unity, not divisiveness. Augustine ends one of his sermons on Perpetua, “At least we are all in attendance upon the same Lord, all following the same teacher, accompanying the same leader, joined to the same head, tending our way to the same Jerusalem, pursuing the same charity, and embracing the same unity.”<sup>50</sup> Here Augustine makes no statement of therapeutic reconciliation. This statement is one of solidarity. When Augustine says “we all,” he refers not merely to the listening congregation; rather, he includes Perpetua and Felicity as well. The martyrs stand with Augustine and his flock, condemning the Donatists and their schism.

### **Relating to the Martyrs**

Of course theologically distancing his congregation from the Donatists through the martyr cult was only a first step. This theological distinction worked itself into a practical difference in how the two groups viewed their relationship to the martyrs. The Donatists and Catholics in North Africa viewed their relationships with the martyrs differently, partly because of the possibility for continued persecution of the Donatists by the Catholics. Just like other Christian churches around the Mediterranean, Donatists wrote their martyr texts to provide a link to their past. The author of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* writes, “These [records] were inscribed in the indispensable archives of memory lest both the glory of the martyrs and the condemnation of the traitors fade with the passing of the ages.”<sup>51</sup> The Donatists used the cult of the martyrs to remind themselves why they were separate from the Catholics, and it provided them with direction for continued resistance through imitation. When considering how to imitate

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<sup>50</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 280.6 (PL 38:1283–1284). Omnes tamen eidem Domino paremus, eundem magistrum sequimur, eundem principem comitamur, eidem capiti subiungimur, ad eandem Ierusalem tendimus, eandem sectamur charitatem, eandemque amplectimur unitatem.

<sup>51</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 1. [Acta martyrum] necessario in archivo memoriae conscripta sunt, ne saeculis transeuntibus obsolesceret gloria martyrum et damnatio traditorum.

the martyrs, the most obvious way is to suffer and perhaps even die at the hands of persecutors. Though little evidence survives from the Donatists themselves, this call to imitate their martyrs' sufferings was still relevant since they were still experiencing sporadic and varying levels of persecution from the Catholics. A Donatist sermon from the first years of repression gives the clear message that the faithful need to prepare themselves to resist the persecutions of their false brothers.<sup>52</sup> The Donatist congregations could also follow the martyrs' example by maintaining their distance from the Catholics. The author of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* instructed his readers to "flee and curse the whole corrupt congregation of all the polluted people and all must seek the glorious lineage of the blessed martyrs, which is the one, holy and true Church, from which the martyrs arise and whose divine mysteries the martyrs observe."<sup>53</sup>

Donatist Christians continued to heed these admonitions during Augustine's time. In 420, the tribune ordered Gaudentius, the Donatist bishop of Thamugadi, to surrender his cathedral to the Catholics. Gaudentius refused, his congregation rallied to his cause, and he promised an extreme reaction if the authorities resorted to force. He threatened to burn the cathedral down with himself and the congregation inside.<sup>54</sup> The result of the situation is unknown, but clearly the Donatists were willing to die in order to preserve their separation.

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<sup>52</sup>*Passio Donati* 14.

<sup>53</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20. Fugienda est ergo et execranda pollutorum omnium congregatio vitiosa, et appetenda omnibus beatissimorum martyrum successio gloriosa, quae est Ecclesia sancta, una et vera catholica, ex qua martyres profecti sunt, et a quibus divina testamenta servata sunt. N.B. Tilley believes that the best reading is *mysteria* referring to sacraments, rather than *testamenta*, which is found in PL. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 48.

<sup>54</sup>Augustine *Contra Gaud.* 1. See Fend, *Donatist Church*, 296. We see here in North Africa themes similar to those noted in earlier chapters: suicide martyrdom in chapter two and episcopal resistance to government in chapter four.

While the Donatists could imitate the martyrs in action, the Catholics, whose persecution had ended a century earlier, did not have the same opportunity. Even so, Augustine attempts to preserve that element of imitation by exhorting his listeners to imitate the spiritual qualities of the martyrs. After all, since the cause of martyrdom, which witnesses to Christians' unity in Christ, outshone the sufferings and sacrifices of martyrdom, spiritual imitation trumped physical imitation. In one of his sermons on Perpetua and Felicity, Augustine preaches, "If we are not capable of following them in action, let us follow in affection; if not in glory, then certainly in joy and gladness; if not in merit, then in desire; if not in suffering, then in fellow feeling; if not in excellence, then in our close relationship with them."<sup>55</sup> According to Augustine, the martyrs related to Christians as examples for imitating Christ.

All Christians were meant to follow that narrow way leading to salvation. In a sermon preached in 410 on Peter and Paul, Augustine encourages his congregation, telling them that they do not walk that narrow path by themselves. He claims that even though it is a "thorny" (*spinosa*) and "difficult" (*dura*) path, it has become "smooth" (*lenis*) because so many faithful have gone before. He preaches, "The Lord himself went along it first, the apostles went along it fearlessly; after them the martyrs, boys, women, girls."<sup>56</sup> When Christians imitate the martyrs, they actually imitate Christ. In a sermon preached in 408, Augustine claims that churches celebrate the feast days in order to promote this imitation. He explains, "So this is why these feasts have been instituted in the Church of Christ; it's so that by them the congregation of

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<sup>55</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 280.6 (PL 38:1283). Si eos sequi non valemus actu, sequamur affectu: si non gloria, certe laetitia: si non meritis, votis: si non passione, compassione: si non excellentia, connexione.

<sup>56</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 295.8 (PL 38:1352). Transiit ipse prior Dominus, transierunt Apostoli intrepidi, postea martyres, pueri, mulieres, puellae.

Christ's members may be admonished to imitate Christ's martyrs. That's absolutely the only value of this festivity, there isn't any other at all."<sup>57</sup> While promoting what Augustine sees as the true value of the martyrs' relationship to the congregation, this statement simultaneously reminds Augustine's hearers of his disapproval of the revelry mentioned in chapter three that so often attended these feasts. Augustine continues, saying that God gave the church the martyrs' example to preclude human frailty from inventing excuses as to why it could not imitate Christ: "So therefore, it was to deny our weakness and our lack of faith all such excuses that the martyrs built for us a paved road. It was to be built of paving stones, on which we could walk without a qualm."<sup>58</sup> He says, "If you're reluctant to imitate the Lord, imitate your fellow servant."<sup>59</sup>

Not only did Augustine use the martyrs as examples for the Christian life, but also he used the Donatists and their supposed martyrs as counterexamples, placing more distance between the two groups. Cyprian was the hero of all North African Christians, Catholics and Donatists alike, but in Augustine's preaching, Cyprian stands at odds with those Donatists who venerate him and claim that he is the spiritual founder of their movement. In a sermon preached in Carthage on Cyprian's feast day in 405, Augustine states, "To celebrate in honor of a martyr is easy; to imitate the martyr's faith and patience is great."<sup>60</sup> Augustine warns his congregation that just because their two celebrations may be similar outwardly, his hearers should not assume that

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<sup>57</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1447). Ad hoc ergo istae festivitates in Ecclesia constitutae sunt Christi, ut per eas congregatio membrorum Christi admoneatur imitari martyres Christi. Haec est omnino huius festivitatis utilitas, alia non est.

<sup>58</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1448). Ad tollendas igitur omnes excusationes infidelis infirmitatis, martyres nobis stratam construxerunt. Lapideis enim tabulis construenda erat, qui securi ambularemus. Hill notes, "It was to be, in fact, a good Roman road." Hill, *Sermons*, vol. 9, 325 n.2.

<sup>59</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1448). Si piget imitari Dominum, imitare conservum.

<sup>60</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 311.1 (PL 38:1414). Facile est honorem martyris celebrari: magnum est fidem atque patientiam martyris imitari (my translation).

the Donatists are attempting to imitate Cyprian's faith and patience. In this sermon Augustine makes a dig against the schismatics, claiming that Cyprian's faith and patience allowed him to overcome the "errors and terrors" of his day. In a clear allusion to the Donatists, Augustine warns, "In this age, errors and terrors abound."<sup>61</sup> According to Augustine, Catholics needed protection from the errors of schism taught by the Donatist bishops. Additionally, he felt his congregation might need protection from the terrors of the Circumcellions, those Donatist religious fanatics who sometimes vandalized Catholic property and sought out martyrdom for themselves. Following Cyprian meant avoiding those other Christians who claimed him as their founder.

Along with this patience exhibited by Cyprian, Augustine viewed *caritas*, a giving love, as the fundamental virtue of the martyrs. By extolling the martyrs' *caritas*, he wished to help his flock avoid *caritas*'s opposite quality, pride, which he suggested motivated the Donatist movement. Preaching on the martyrs of Maxula in 397, he says, "Therefore, the spirit of God is a spirit of love [*caritas*], the spirit of this world a spirit of exaltation. Those who have the spirit of this world are proud and ungrateful to God."<sup>62</sup> In this passage, Augustine refers to the Donatist martyrs when he says "those who have the spirit of this world." *Caritas* is the foundational characteristic of the Christian, and *caritas* is exactly what Augustine accused the Donatists of lacking. In another sermon on Cyprian, which Augustine may have preached during one of the more tense periods between the factions, he claims the Donatist martyrs were proud, and thus not Christian martyrs. Some of the Donatist martyrs caused their own deaths, and the evidence

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<sup>61</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 311.1 (PL 38:1414). Abundant in isto saeculo errores et terrores.

<sup>62</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 283.8 (Dolbeau 15). Ergo spiritus dei spiritus est caritatis; spiritus huius mundi spiritus est elationis. Qui habent spiritum huius mundi, superbi sunt, ingrati sunt deo.

(albeit biased) suggests that they had a propensity to do this by jumping from cliffs. Augustine speculates that pride drove some of the Donatist cliff-jumpers to suicide in order to found martyr cults for themselves.<sup>63</sup> Since the Donatist church lacked *caritas*, it merely paid lip service to the true martyrs. Augustine claims that the Donatists abandoned their spiritual founder Cyprian because the Christian qualities that Cyprian possessed were found with the Catholics, not the Donatists. In preaching on the martyrs, Augustine encouraged his flock towards love, patience, and other virtues of the martyrs, while simultaneously reiterating the divide between the Catholics and the Donatists.

In spite of Augustine's teaching that God gave the martyrs for imitative purposes, many North African Catholics must have persisted in some level of confusion regarding their relationship to the martyrs. Was celebrating a martyr's feast day a form of worship? How should North African Christians understand their relationship with the martyrs in light of the miracles attributed to them? Did the martyrs function as mediators between God and his people? In his sermons, Augustine went to great pains to explain that Christians do not worship the martyrs on their feast days. In 396, early in his preaching career, Augustine explains to those gathered:

We don't provide [the martyrs] with temples, with altars, with sacrifices. Priests don't make offerings to them; perish the thought! These things are provided for God; or rather these things are offered to God, by whom all things are provided for us. Even when we make the offering at the shrines of the holy martyrs, don't we offer it to God? The holy martyrs have their place of honor. Notice, please; in the recitation of names at the altar of Christ, their names are recited in the most honored place; but for all that, they are not worshiped instead of Christ.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Augustine *Serm.* 313E.5.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine *Serm.* 273.7 (PL 38:1251). Non eis templa, non eis altaria, non sacrificia exhibemus. Non eis sacerdotes offerunt: absit. Deo praestantur. Imo Deo ista offeruntur, a quo nobis cuncta praestantur. Etiam apud memorias sanctorum martyrum cum offerimus, nonne Deo offerimus? Habent honorabilem locum martyres sancti. Advertite: in recitatione ad altare Christi loco meliore recitantur; non tamen pro Christo adorantur.

When Augustine speaks of making “the offering at the shrines of the holy martyrs,” he probably means the Eucharist. Augustine tries to correct any misunderstanding of either his congregation or those watching from the outside that Christians worship the martyrs. He explicitly names Christ as the object of worship because the location of the congregation’s worship, the martyrs’ shrines, could lead to confusion.

In the same sermon, Augustine cites the fourteenth chapter of Acts, in which the residents of Lystra confuse Paul and Barnabas with Hermes and Zeus. He notes that at the time the apostles were horrified at being worshiped, and he claims that even after their deaths they would still be horrified if worshiped.<sup>65</sup> He uses the opportunity to preach restraint in celebration to his listeners.

The martyrs hate your flagons, the martyrs hate your roasting pans, the martyrs hate your drunken revels. I am saying this without wishing to insult those who are not that sort; those who do such things can apply what I’m saying to themselves. The martyrs hate these things, they don’t love those who go in for them. But they hate it much more if they are themselves worshiped.<sup>66</sup>

As we saw in chapter one, Augustine was very concerned with bringing some gravitas to the martyr cult. No doubt, he believed that if he could change North Africa’s traditional celebrations, then much of the confusion surrounding whether the martyrs were worshiped or not would be alleviated.

The miracles attributed to the martyrs complicated the question of their relationship to the congregation. Some scholars have noticed a development in Augustine’s acceptance of the miraculous. Many people note his lukewarm reception of miracles early in his career and his

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<sup>65</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 273.8.

<sup>66</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 273.8 (PL 38:1251–1252). Oderunt martyres lagenas vestras, oderunt martyres sartagine vestras, oderunt martyres ebrietates vestras. Sine iniuria eorum dico, qui tales non sunt: illi ad se referant, qui talia faciunt: oderunt ista martyres, non amant talia facientes. Sed multo plus oderunt, si colantur.



emphatic publishing of them later.<sup>67</sup> Though his enthusiasm for the miraculous seems to have increased after the establishment of the cult of Stephen in North Africa during the final years of his life, Augustine never denied the possibility of miracles done at the martyrs' shrines. In a sermon on Lawrence's feast day in 400, long before Stephen reached Hippo, Augustine tells his people:

Is there anyone who doesn't know about the powerful merits of this particular martyr? Did anybody ever pray there, and not obtain the favor asked for? To how many of the weaker brethren have his merits granted even the temporal benefits which he himself scorned! They were conceded, you see, not so that those who prayed for them might remain in their weakness, but so that by being granted inferior benefits, their love might be stimulated to seek the better ones.<sup>68</sup>

He emphasizes in this sermon that any miracles granted to the people should lead to their imitation of the higher virtues of the martyrs. Needless to say, Augustine denied the existence of miracles among the Donatists and claimed that their supposed miracles caused them to worship their martyrs.<sup>69</sup>

In Augustine's last days, however, Hippo became awash in the miraculous. In 416, Orosius brought some recently discovered relics of Stephen to North Africa. The relics had been discovered in 415 outside Jerusalem by using the techniques pioneered by Ambrose and were translated throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>70</sup> Many shrines to Stephen were established throughout the countryside of North Africa, and eventually, in 425, the cult arrived in Hippo. At this point,

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<sup>67</sup>See Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 320; Brown, *Augustine*, 419.

<sup>68</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 302.1 (PL 38:1385). Cuius autem meriti sit memoratus Martyr, quis ignorat? Quis ibi oravit, et non impetravit? Quam multis infirmis meritum eius etiam temporalia beneficia praestitit, quae ille contempsit. Concessa sunt enim, non ut precantium permaneret infirmitas; sed ut deterioribus concessis, amor fieret ad appetenda melior.

<sup>69</sup>See Brown, *Augustine*, 417.

<sup>70</sup>They caused quite a stir when they arrived in Constantinople and seem to have enhanced Empress Pulcheria's authority. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 103–109.

Augustine became an enthusiast for the miraculous.<sup>71</sup> In *City of God*, Augustine catalogues many of the miracles that he had either witnessed or heard from credible sources. Many of these miracles are healings, but the martyrs were also known to buy a man a new coat.<sup>72</sup>

Even though material benefits derived from a close association with the martyrs, Augustine, even in his most enthusiastic period, maintained that the martyrs' main function remained the same. At their death and in their miracles, the martyrs never stopped bearing witness. Just a couple of years before his death, Augustine preached a sermon at the feast of Protasius and Gervasius, those martyrs, whose *inventio* by Ambrose helped start the cult of the martyrs in western Christianity.

God never stops bearing witness; and he knows the right way to bring his miracles to our notice. He knows how to act, so that they may be famous; he knows how to act, so that they don't become commonplace. He doesn't grant health to everyone through the martyrs; but to all who imitate the martyrs, he does promise immortality. What he doesn't give to everyone should not be sought by anyone he doesn't give it to; and those he doesn't give it to must take care not to grumble against him, so that he may give them what he does promise at the end. After all, even those people too who are now cured, die sooner or later; those who rise again at the end will live with Christ forever.<sup>73</sup>

Even though Augustine gives the impression that miracles were happening left and right, obviously not everyone who sought them found their needs fulfilled. Augustine had to repeat that miracles' main purpose was to bear witness to eternal life in Christ.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>See Brown, *Augustine*, 416–419.

<sup>72</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 22.8–9.

<sup>73</sup>Augustine *Sermon* 286.5 (PL 38:1299). Non cessat Deus attestari: et novit quomodo ipsa miracula sua debeat commendare. Novit agere, ut magnificentur: novit agere, ne vilescent. Non omnibus donat per martyres sanitatem: sed omnibus promittit imitatoribus martyrum immortalitatem. Quod non omnibus dat, non quaerat cui non dat: nec murmuret adversus eum quia non dat, ut det quod in fine promisit. Nam et qui modo sanantur, post paululum aliquando moriuntur: qui in fine resurgunt, eum Christo vivent.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Augustine *Civ.* 22.9.

This focus on the cult of martyrs has led Peter Brown to conclude that during these later years, Augustine was “redefining the nature of the true intermediaries between God and men.”<sup>75</sup> Brown believes that for North African Christians the martyrs began to serve as intermediaries.

Unlike the rebel angels, these beings [the martyrs] would link men to God by being equally his servants, and so committed to forwarding his will among men as their fellow servants. The cult of the martyrs, therefore, presented a paradox that enabled Augustine to invert the traditional hierarchy of the universe. Men who had shown themselves, as martyrs, to be true servants of God, could bind their fellow men even closer to God than could the angels. [...] Only the martyrs, heavy with the humility of human death, could bridge that fault.<sup>76</sup>

Brown believes that late antique Christians, including Augustine, viewed the martyrs as playing the role that patrons formerly played.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps Augustine’s congregation dismissed their bishop’s teaching and embraced their martyrs as intermediaries, but no evidence exists that Augustine did. To support his thesis, Brown cites *City of God* 8.27 and 10.1, 3, 7, and 20. These passages, however, do not support his thesis. Augustine explicitly writes in *City of God* that the only intermediary between God and humans is Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup> Angels are not the go betweens, but neither are the martyrs.

Here again, Augustine breaks with the older Christian tradition in North Africa, which viewed the martyrs as mediators in some ways. Tertullian wrote, “Some, not able to find this peace in the

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<sup>75</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 60.

<sup>76</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 60–61.

<sup>77</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 61; Cf. Brown, *Augustine*, 417, “In the Late Roman towns, men had come to need and to expect the protection of powerful men: S. Stephen settled in Uzalis as the spiritual equivalent of such earthly patrons.” Raymond Van Dam poses some helpful critiques of this scheme of Brown’s. Van Dam does not believe that Christians neatly assimilated the system of patronage to their relationships with the saints. Rather, Van Dam argues that in many ways the bishop acted as the patron of the dead saint, as well as vice versa. Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6, 50–81.

<sup>78</sup>Augustine *Civ.* 9.15; 10.20.

Church, have been used to seek it from the imprisoned martyrs.<sup>79</sup> The Donatists probably continued in this tradition of Tertullian. Indeed their telling of the schism's foundation emphasizes this issue. The Donatists condemned Mensurius and Caecilian for refusing to allow the faithful to bring gifts to the martyrs in prison.<sup>80</sup>

Instead of viewing the martyrs as intermediaries, Augustine sought to incorporate them into the Catholic Church. Though Peter Brown's thesis that Augustine viewed the martyrs as patrons is problematic, his idea that Heaven and Earth were joined at the grave of the martyr has merit.<sup>81</sup> In his preaching, Augustine sought to tear down the barriers between the living and the dead, incorporating all Christians into one holy congregation.<sup>82</sup> He makes this development in the theology of martyrdom in two ways: he makes the martyrs more accessible for his hearers, and he offered the crown of martyrdom to any faithful member of his congregation.

First, Augustine dismisses any perceived hierarchy of the martyrs being above the members of the congregation. He preaches, "It isn't, after all, the case that you are human beings and they weren't; not, after all, the case that you were born, and they were born quite differently; I mean, they didn't carry around flesh of a different kind from what you do. We are all from Adam, we are all trying to be in Christ."<sup>83</sup> Augustine tells his flock that they share the same

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<sup>79</sup>Tertullian *Mart.* 1.6. Quam pacem quidam in ecclesia non habentes a martyribus in carcere exorare consueverunt.

<sup>80</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20.

<sup>81</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 1–22.

<sup>82</sup>This is consonant with his program in *City of God*, where he envisions the church as a city comprising all saints, living and dead.

<sup>83</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 273.9 (PL 38:1252). Non enim homines estis, et illi homines non fuerunt: non enim nati estis, et illi aliunde nati sunt: non enim alterius generis carnem portaverunt, quam vos portatis. Ex Adam omnes sumus, in Christo omnes esse conamur.

fallen condition as the martyrs and they share the same goal of attaining Christ. He implies that what the martyrs accomplished they also could do.

Augustine did believe that the martyrs were advocates with God for Christians. He taught that they prayed for the Christians still living.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Augustine committed himself to their prayers: “May the prayers of the martyrs assist me, as I set out to speak about the glory of the martyrs, and to state briefly the just cause of their martyrdom.”<sup>85</sup> Their prayers for Christians, however, did not place them above the congregation; it placed them within it. Preaching before bishops and laity in Carthage, Augustine claims that while the bishops pray for their people, the bishops also need prayers from the laity on their behalf.<sup>86</sup> The martyrs after death continue in the same role as everyone else in the congregation. Everyone in the church, dead or alive, should pray for the continuation of Christ’s witness through that universal Church. Instead of a hierarchy of patronage, Augustine viewed the church as a family of brothers and sisters. Members, living or dead, clergy or laity, had different gifts and roles, but they all had the same Father.

Second, Augustine expanded the crown of martyrdom to all Christians within the true Church. At the turn of the fifth century, a North African Catholic no longer expected to die a martyr’s death. In spite of a lack of opportunity to die for the faith, Augustine kept martyrdom within reach for each member of his congregation. Emphasizing the martyrs’ cause and downplaying their sufferings excluded the Donatists from the definition of martyrdom, while simultaneously expanding the definition to include all those Catholics who remained true to the

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<sup>84</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 285.5.

<sup>85</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1447). De gloria martyrum locuturos, breviter iustam causam martyrum locuturos, adiuvant nos orationes martyrum.

<sup>86</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 305A.10.

faith. Augustine tells his people, “What’s required is the spirit of the martyr, because God, after all, does not delight in the shedding of blood. He has many hidden martyrs.”<sup>87</sup> Any faithful Catholic could consider himself a “hidden martyr” as long as he had the right spirit. Augustine argues that the three Hebrew boys whom Nebuchadnezzar threw in the fire received the crown of martyrdom because they had firm faith, even though they did not suffer.<sup>88</sup> This firm faith should be coupled with endurance. Of course, faith and endurance should manifest the witnessing aspect of martyrdom. Augustine, therefore, advises, “Everyone who preaches where he can, he is also a martyr.”<sup>89</sup>

Even though the persecutions had stopped, Christians still faced subtler hardships. In a sermon preached in the first decade of the fifth century, Augustine says, “Trials do not cease; fight them, and your crown is ready.”<sup>90</sup> Augustine must have believed that his congregation would find this teaching shocking, so he continues the sermon by posing the disbelieving question “when?” and then answers it. He tells those gathered that the faithful can only receive their martyrs’ crowns at death. He uses the sickbed as his illustration and claims that illness provides great opportunity for martyrdom. According to Augustine’s sermons, charms and magical remedies for illness were still ubiquitous in North Africa at this time. By resisting the temptation to use these charms, Christians resisted the devil and bore witness to their faith in

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<sup>87</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 306E.6 (Dolbeau 18). Ipse animus esse debet martyris, non enim deus fuso sanguine delectatur: multos habet martyres in occulto.

<sup>88</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 296.5.

<sup>89</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 260E.2 (PLS 2:588). Quisque ubi potest praedicet, et martyr est (my translation).

<sup>90</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Non cessant tentationes. Pugna et corona parata est (my translation).

Christ.<sup>91</sup> In offering martyrdom to every Christian, Augustine moves the emphasis back to Paul's idea of internal struggle. The cosmic battle between God and the devil returned from the arena floor to inside the Christian's heart.

We can't see this adversary of ours, and we can defeat him. Why can't we see him? Because it is inside us that we experience and check what he wishes to defeat us with. You can't see your enemy the devil, but you experience your avarice in yourself. You can't see your enemy the devil, but you experience your lust in yourself. You can't see your enemy the devil, but you experience your anger in yourself. Defeat what you experience inside you, and those who are stalking you outside are already defeated.<sup>92</sup>

Anyone can be a hidden martyr and receive the martyr's crown as long as he or she heeds the example of the martyrs by resisting the devil. Augustine says, "If you overcome not a man but the devil, [...] don't count yourself as not being a martyr. Your feast day is not indeed in the calendar, but your crown is ready waiting for you."<sup>93</sup> According to Augustine, the martyrs served as examples for pious Christians, but they were not qualitatively different. A witness of faith earned a crown, and that witness could manifest itself in numerous ways.

Though he eagerly published the miracles performed at the shrines, overall, Augustine has a rather sober view of his flock's relationship to the martyrs. The martyrs do not mediate between God and his people; rather, they exemplified the Christian virtues. Though the persecution had ceased, any Christian could claim these virtues by looking to the same one who had bestowed them on the martyrs. In his preaching, Augustine incorporates the martyrs into the

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<sup>91</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 328.8. Cf. *Serm.* 286.7; 306E.7–8.

<sup>92</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Et non videmus ipsum adversarium nostrum et vincimus. Quare eum non videmus? Quia unde nos vult vincere intus sentimus et domamus. Non vides inimicum tuum diabolum sed sentis in te avaritiam tuam. Non vides diabolum inimicum tuum sed sentis in te libidinem tuam. Non vides diabolum inimicum tuum sed sentis iracundiam tuam. Vince quae intus sentis et vincuntur qui insidiantur foris.

<sup>93</sup>Augustine *Serm.* 306E.8 (Dolbeau 18). Si viceris non hominem, sed diabolum, [...] noli te existimare non martyrem. Non quidem celebratur sollemnitas tua, sed parata est corona tua.

Catholic community and offers the crown of martyrdom to faithful Catholics. In the eyes of his flock, the Donatist churches lose their claim to be the Church of the Martyrs. Augustine reconstructed the tradition of martyrdom in North Africa so that his congregation would view the persecuted Donatists as outside the traditions of the Church. The cult of the martyrs became a useful weapon in Augustine's arsenal as he waged war against the Donatist bishops. Augustine's teachings on both martyrdom and the congregation's relationship to the martyrs was one of reclaiming the martyrs for the true Church. Augustine enlisted the martyrs to continue in their original purpose of witnessing to God's truth, but he assigned them the additional task of witnessing to the dangers of the Donatist schism.



## CHAPTER 7

### GALLIC CHRISTIANITY AND THE MARTYRS: INNOVATION AND RESISTANCE

Not all Christians found the cult of the martyrs useful. The province Gaul provides an interesting case study because it contained both those who embraced the cult and those who denied its place in Christianity. In spite of being able to boast about having some of the earliest martyrs, the martyrs of Lyons, the Gallic churches lagged behind other congregations around the Mediterranean in developing the cult of martyrs. During the reigns of Decius and Diocletian, persecution had been much fiercer in the eastern half of the empire. While the phenomenon of martyrdom was at its height, large portions of Gaul remained unconverted, a situation that would rob future generations of local cults. Additionally, during Diocletian's Great Persecution, Constantine's father, Constantius, governed Gaul, and he opted not to execute Christians on the basis of their convictions.<sup>1</sup> Without a strong tradition of local martyr cults, the cults' proliferation around the turn of the fifth century was somewhat slower than in other parts of the empire. Even so, some Gallic cities began importing relics and creating new cults, mimicking those to the east.

The most consequential of these new cults was the cult of Martin of Tours. Martin's cult actually began before he died because of his reputation as a miracle worker, and Gallic Christians began saving bits of his clothing and other personal effects.<sup>2</sup> Martin served as the

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<sup>1</sup>Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 23, 28. Though as Barnes points out, Constantius did destroy some church property in accordance with Diocletian's edict.

<sup>2</sup>Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*, 13.

bishop of Tours, but he was also a monk who labored to promote the ascetic ideal among the Gallic churches. In furthering this goal, Martin networked with other bishops who had similar aims, men like Ambrose of Milan. Besides promoting asceticism, Martin developed the martyr cult in Tours and received relics of Protasius and Gervasius from Ambrose.<sup>3</sup> Both Ambrose and Martin died in 397, and as with Ambrose, Martin became an honorary martyr with his own cult. His association with the martyrs, along with the “living martyrdom” of his asceticism, led to his cult being instituted immediately at his death, and it continued to develop throughout the fifth century.<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone in Gaul rejoiced over this new cult. While monks and pious aristocrats venerated Martin, the other bishops of Gaul were reluctant. Sulpicius Severus attributed this reluctance to their embarrassment over Martin’s superior holiness.<sup>5</sup> However, what Sulpicius refers to as the bishops’ “vices” probably should be understood as a general condemnation of asceticism. A new brand of Christianity was creeping westward, and while some bishops like Martin embraced the new measures, many Gallic bishops resisted, attempting to maintain their comfortable distance from powerful ecclesiastical centers like Rome, Constantinople, and Antioch. They did not wish to substitute what they viewed as ancient Christianity with asceticism and martyr cults. In looking at this ecclesiastical struggle, we will examine Victricius of Rouen who embraced the martyrs and Vigilantius of Calagurris who did not.

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<sup>3</sup>Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 66.

<sup>4</sup>Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*, 13–28.

<sup>5</sup>Sulpicius Severus *Dialogi* 1.26; see Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*, 14.

## Victricius of Rouen

Bishop Victricius of Rouen in northern Gaul, a partisan of Martin of Tours, gives evidence to one way in which Gallic bishops and Christian communities could embrace newly popular martyrs and connect themselves to the growing cult of saints. Based on the letters of Paulinus of Nola, some scholars have portrayed Victricius as a missionary bishop in a frontier town, but Paulinus probably based his preconceptions about Rouen more on Caesar's writings than on contemporary witnesses. Though the rural areas surrounding Rouen perhaps needed conversion, the city itself had a long Christian history, and Victricius was its seventh bishop.<sup>6</sup> Victricius was personally acquainted with many of the leading figures who promoted both the cult of the martyrs and a renewed emphasis on asceticism: Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, Martin of Tours, and Pope Innocent I.

Around the year 398, Paulinus of Nola wrote a flattering letter to Victricius, praising him for his ministry in Rouen. According to Paulinus, Rouen "is meriting God's praise and being counted amongst cities notable for consecrated places," thanks to the tireless work of Victricius.<sup>7</sup> Paulinus compares Victricius's Rouen to Jerusalem because Victricius had imported relics of the apostles and convinced many virgins and widows, as well as married couples, to remain chaste. Paulinus, however, seems most in awe of Victricius's personal holiness, because Victricius was

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<sup>6</sup>Gillian Clark, "Victricius of Rouen: *Praising the Saints*," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 373–374. For an example of viewing Rouen as a border town plagued by "barbarians and pirates," see Peter Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 95–96.

<sup>7</sup>Paulinus of Nola *Epistulae* 18.5 (PL 61:239). Denique nunc Rotomagnum et vicinis ante regionibus tenui nomine pervulgatum, in longinquis etiam provinciis nominari venerabiliter audimus, et inter urbes sacratis locis nobiles cum divina laude numerari.

beaten when he left his career as a soldier to become a professional Christian. Paulinus refers to Victricius as a “living martyr.”<sup>8</sup>

This living martyr’s own theology of martyrdom is preserved in his sermon *De laude sanctorum*, which he delivered in 396 to celebrate the arrival of martyr relics gifted by Ambrose. Victricius casts the arrival of the martyr relics in terms of an imperial *adventus*, the celebratory procession that signaled the emperor’s arrival into a city. As a former soldier, he had certainly witnessed the real thing.<sup>9</sup> In this celebration of the relics’ arrival in Rouen Victricius proposed some interesting and different interpretations of martyrdom as he attempted to promote and justify the cult. Unity is a central issue in this theology, and Victricius used the martyrs as a lynchpin holding God and his people together.

Victricius, like many of his contemporaries, based his conception of martyrdom on the notion that the martyr is a sacrifice. In *De laude sanctorum*, he describes the martyrs as *hostiae*, explaining that through their deaths they gained victory and immortality.<sup>10</sup> He suggests that the martyrs’ sacrifice is one of atonement that can remove the sins of Rouen’s people through the presence of their relics.<sup>11</sup> This sermon betrays no indication that the martyrs’ deaths act as some kind of testimony; instead, the sacrifice forges a link between the people and the divine. While this idea of martyrdom as a type of sacrifice had very deep roots in Christian tradition, Victricius used this idea to promote a novel theology of martyrdom as he tried to express how martyrs

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<sup>8</sup>Paulinus of Nola *Ep.* 18.9 (PL 61:242). *martyrem vivum*. In some ways Victricius’s personal story resembles that of Martin of Tours who was also an ex-soldier, ascetic, and bishop.

<sup>9</sup>David G. Hunter, “Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: Ascetics, Relics, and Clerics in Late Roman Gaul,” *JECS* 7 (1999): 424.

<sup>10</sup>Victricius *De laude sanctorum* 7 (PL 20:449).

<sup>11</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 1 (PL 20:443). *Unde, charissimi, haec nostra sit apud sanctos prima petitio, ut peccata nostra pia miseratione advocacionis excusent, non animo iudicantis inquirant.*

could relate to the church. As noted above, Victricius belonged to a circle of Christian bishops who believed that authentic Christianity included asceticism, the cult of the saints, and Nicene creedalism. When he celebrated the arrival of Ambrose's gift, Victricius attempted to tie all these ideas together.

In the sermon, he explains that these martyrs dispense mercy from the God who is three in one. He preaches that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all of one substance, all of equal perfection, and all of eternal existence.<sup>12</sup> The unity of the Godhead then becomes the theme by which he can explain his theology of martyrdom. He claims that the relationship between human beings is similar to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity because all humans come from Adam's body. Since we all come from the same body, we are all of the same "substance." He preaches, "So, most holy brothers, we must first know this: people differ from each other not in nature, but in time and place and action and thought."<sup>13</sup> Being of the same substance, all humans are actually of one body, "widely diffused without loss to itself." The martyrs then become the bond between the substances of deity and humanity. According to Victricius, through their sacrifice they are bonded to the cross and granted immortality. Since immortality is located in the divine, the martyrs must have acquired divinity. He suggests, "Apart from acquired divinity, there is nothing which separates the Trinity from the offering of the

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<sup>12</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 4 (PL 20:446). Unum dixit; quia ex uno sicut Filius de Patre, ita Pater in Filio; sanctus Spiritus vero de Patre et Filio. Ita et Pater et Filius in Spiritu sancto. Una Deitas, una substantia, quia unum principium, et una perpetuitas, sive ante omnia, verus Deus de Deo vero; quia ut alius de alio, ita alius in alio, vivus a vivo... Victricius continues in this manner for quite some time. It is interesting to note that his *sanctus Spiritus vero de Patre et Filio* predates Augustine's *De Trinitate* yet seems to express the Augustinian idea of the relationship between divine persons that laid the seeds of the Filioque Controversy, which began in the sixth century.

<sup>13</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 7 (PL 20:449). Ergo, sanctissimi fratres, primum id scire debemus, homines inter se non natura, sed loco et tempore, et opere, et cogitatione distare. Gillian Clark notes that Victricius is not the only late antique person to claim that since all humans share one nature, all humans must also be ontologically one; Gillian Clark, "Victricius of Rouen," 368.

saints, because it was the very truth of the Trinity which produced them.”<sup>14</sup> Due to their martyrdoms the martyrs become part of God himself. He claims that the blood of the martyrs is divine and that God can diffuse himself without loss in this manner, just as humanity is diffused in individual humans without loss. Obviously aware of his idea’s novelty, Victricius says, “Perhaps, at this point, someone will cry out in protest ‘Is the martyr, then the same as the highest power and the absolute and ineffable substance of godhead?’”<sup>15</sup> Victricius’s somewhat surprising answer to this hypothetical question is “yes.” He points out, however, that the martyrs are God by adoption rather than nature, but he indicates that this is not terribly important since both the giver and the receiver of divinity are divine without suffering any loss.

According to Victricius, these relics that he is welcoming into the city are God. As a unity, God is wholly present wherever he is, so each of the relics contains the totality of the martyr and the totality of God himself. Augustine of Hippo went to great pains to avoid language that would suggest that the martyrs functioned as mediators between God and humans because he saw mediation as a threat to the preeminent role reserved for Christ in the New Testament. Many bishops, like John Chrysostom, allowed for more than one form of mediation and found the martyrs as an aid to the development of Christian theology and praxis. Victricius’s idea, however, develops this theology to an entirely new level. The martyrs are not merely mediators between God and his Church; they are God to his church. Since the martyrs’ relics are God, Victricius does not blush at the idea that they would be worshiped. While Augustine protested that Christians could never worship their martyrs, in his sermon Victricius encourages the people

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<sup>14</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 8 (PL 20:450). Post indeptam divinitatem, nihil esse, quod Trinitatem a sanctorum oblatione secernat; quoniam ipsa eos veritas edidit Trinitatis.

<sup>15</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 8 (PL 20:450). Forsitan hoc loco quispiam exclamet, et dicat, Ergo hoc martyr, quod prima virtus, et absoluta, inenarrabilisque, substantia Deitatis?

of Rouen to worship these martyr relics because they protect their worshipers from danger and disease.<sup>16</sup> He tells his congregants to pray to the martyrs and confess their sins because the martyrs will judge them. Towards the end of the sermon, Victricius invokes the martyrs, praying, “Strengthen your worshipers, then, o saints, strengthen your worshipers, and establish our hearts on the cornerstone.”<sup>17</sup> Being the very substance of God, the relics would become de facto the center of Christian religious practice in Rouen.

While Victricius’s theological reasoning has broad implications, in his sermon he seems most concerned with justifying the translation itself. As noted earlier, the dismemberment and translation of martyrs’ bodies was officially against the law, but Victricius’s sermon gives his theological justification for ignoring this law. His theology of the martyrs emphasizes unity, and he claims that this unity allows for the dissecting and dispersing of the martyrs.<sup>18</sup> No matter how small the speck of martyr, according to Victricius, all the divine power remains intact; therefore, sharing healing and spiritual power through the distribution of relics must be licit.<sup>19</sup> Given Victricius’s Gallic context, this justification for translation makes sense, because Gaul lacked the numerous local martyrs possessed by other areas of the empire. Bishops like Victricius depended on the goodwill of bishops like Ambrose for providing relics for the cult. In fact, Victricius’s *De laude sanctorum* was preserved in Ambrose’s personal papers. Victricius probably sent his sermon to Ambrose as a token of thanks for the gift of relics, and perhaps he

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<sup>16</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 11.

<sup>17</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 12 (PL 20:455). Firmate igitur, Sancti, vestros firmate cultores, ac petra augulari nostrum pectus instruite.

<sup>18</sup>Clark, “Victricius of Rouen,” 369; Hunter, “Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen,” 424.

<sup>19</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 9.

hoped that Ambrose would find his theological justification for dispersing martyrs' remains helpful as Ambrose served as the most important relic-distribution point in the West.<sup>20</sup>

Prima facie, Victricius's praxis of honoring the martyrs bears similarities to other late antique bishops, in spite of his novel theology. According to Victricius, his hearers should focus on imitating the virtues of the martyrs. This imitation is based on the fact that the martyrs themselves imitated Christ: "What else is a martyr, beloved ones, but an imitator of Christ, a tamer of rabid pleasure, a trampler on ambition ambitious for death, a despiser of riches, a represser of lust, a persecutor of intemperance?"<sup>21</sup> Victricius believed that since the martyrs imitated Christ in holiness and sacrifice, late fourth-century Christians should evidence great moral restraint. He warns his people about greed and anger, and he seems especially concerned to promote sexual renunciation. Of the crowd who greeted the martyrs' arrival, the virgins and chaste widows hold a place of honor. In addition to these chaste women, married women whose husbands still live but refuse to have sex with their husbands receive special attention from Victricius because they are "seduced by the promise of eternity" and condemn "intercourse with revulsion and shame."<sup>22</sup> As with Ambrose, Victricius promoted both virginity and the cult of the saint in order to conform ancient Christianity to new ideals. In addition to worshiping the saints, Victricius also served as one of Pope Innocent's agents to promote clerical celibacy in Gaul.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Clark, "Victricius of Rouen," 368–369.

<sup>21</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 6 (PL 20:447). Quid est enim aliud, charissimi, Martyr, nisi Christi imitator? domitor rabidae voluptatis? calcator ambitionis, et mortis ambitor, contemptor divitiarum, compressor lasciviae, intemperantiae persecutor?

<sup>22</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 3 (PL 20:445). Huius amores superstes maritus servat, et aeternitatis promissione palpat. In disparili sorte parilis palma virtutis est. Haec coitum manente conjugio horrore et pudore damnavit, haec mortuo commendavit.

<sup>23</sup>Hunter, "Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen," 417.



Though his emphasis on imitation is similar to that of many other bishops, Victricius's theology leads him to propose a very different vision of Christianity from that of Augustine. Victricius's Christ ascended to heaven by virtue, and salvation comes to the church through imitating that virtue rather than through any grace given on the basis of Christ's atonement. Victricius admonishes the people of Rouen, "Wisdom, justice, courage, self-control are the way to heaven."<sup>24</sup> Victricius offers salvation through moral reform; those who live virtuously will ascend the stairway to heaven. He admits, however, that some people cannot easily ascend because of the burden of sin. For these people, he offers hope through the martyrs. The martyrs, by their holiness, do ascend to heaven, and ordinary Christians can perhaps reach heaven by hanging on to the martyrs' feet.<sup>25</sup> Victricius presents the martyrs as the mediators between God and his people. Whereas orthodoxy affirmed that Christ—God who became man—provided the singular path to salvation, Victricius, who championed Nicene Trinitarianism, preached that the martyrs—humans who became God—facilitated humanity's ascent to God when Christians cannot ascend by their own moral virtue.

Victricius's interpretation of the cult of martyrs must be viewed within its context. His reasoning is not merely a theological aberration, but rather it is an understandable development of long-held ideas about martyrdom, a development motivated by the proliferation of the cults. In the pre-Constantinian church, martyr cults were localized, and Christians thought more about the meaning of martyrdom itself rather than the role of the martyrs in faith and praxis. After Constantine, congregations around the Mediterranean began to bind themselves together more

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<sup>24</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 6 (PL 20:447) Prudentia, justitia, fortitudo, temperantia via coelestis est.

<sup>25</sup>Victricius *Laude sanct.* 6 (PL 20:447) Qua de re oremus, charissimi, oremus, ut si ascendere nos cumulus prohibet peccatorum, vel ascendendum vestigia osculis arctioribus vaporemus.

closely, developing ideas about proper doctrine and sharing martyrs and their feast days.

Victricius justifies this new movement, a movement that began in the East and spread westward, picking up considerable momentum under the care of Ambrose. Victricius's sermon signals what Robert Markus might refer to as "the end of ancient Christianity" in Gaul.<sup>26</sup>

### **Vigilantius of Calagurris**

While Victricius of Rouen embraced his imported relics as being necessary for the life of his church in northern Gaul, in southern Gaul a presbyter named Vigilantius of Calagurris resisted the cult of martyrs, a movement that he saw as threatening traditional Gallic Christianity. By the year 404, Vigilantius had written a pamphlet condemning the cult and the emphasis on asceticism that seemed to travel along with it.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, this pamphlet has not survived, but Vigilantius's arguments can be reconstructed based on Jerome's forceful response to the pamphlet.<sup>28</sup> Needless to say, Jerome found Vigilantius's lack of faith disturbing.

Since so little of Vigilantius's life is known, it is impossible to reconstruct how he came to hold the views that he did, but he probably formed most of his ideas in the final years of the fourth century. In his early ecclesiastical career, Vigilantius associated himself with that circle of western thinkers who busily promoted asceticism and the cult of martyrs. In 395, he traveled to the Holy Land as Paulinus of Nola's messenger and stayed with Jerome in

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<sup>26</sup>Concerning Victricius's sermon, Markus writes, "Nothing, perhaps, in the literature of Late Antique Christianity evokes as poignantly both the gulf that had opened between the persecuted Church and its triumphant successor, and the power of the martyr's relic to bridge it." Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 94.

<sup>27</sup>Vigilantius's work cannot be dated precisely, but he probably wrote it not long before Jerome mentions it in *Ep.* 109, which is dated to 404.

<sup>28</sup>*Adversus Vigilantius* is one of Jerome's most caustic polemics, and Jerome had a reputation for being fairly abrasive. Kelly famously referred to the work as "this unpleasant fly-sheet;" J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 290.

Bethlehem, bringing him both correspondence and alms. The visit did not go well, and Vigilantius disappointed Jerome by cutting his stay too short. Jerome blamed this rudeness on Vigilantius's embarrassment at being caught praying naked during an earthquake. On the other hand, perhaps Vigilantius was uneasy with Jerome's extreme asceticism, but most likely Vigilantius was shocked to find upon his arrival that Jerome was under excommunication from John, the bishop of Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> Not only was Jerome offended by his guest's brief stay, but he also implied to Paulinus that Vigilantius did not give him a large enough share of the alms that he had been entrusted to distribute.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Jerome held a personal grudge against the young presbyter because upon his return to the West, Vigilantius began voicing concerns about Jerome's supposed Origenist leanings.<sup>31</sup>

In 404, Jerome received a letter from Riparius, a presbyter in Aquitaine, who informed Jerome that Vigilantius was preaching against the cult of the martyrs, calling its adherents "ashmongers and idolaters."<sup>32</sup> Though he abused Vigilantius thoroughly in his response, frequently referring to him as "Dormitantius" (sleepyhead) instead of "Vigilantius" (wideawake), he asked Riparius to send him copies of Vigilantius's writings so that he could refute them point-by-point.

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<sup>29</sup>J. N. D. Kelly describes this first encounter between the two men in Kelly, *Jerome*, 193; 201–202.

<sup>30</sup>Jerome *Ep.* 58.6–7. In this passage, Jerome admonishes Paulinus not to allow other men to distribute his wealth, which Kelly takes to mean that Jerome was not satisfied with how Vigilantius disposed of the money Paulinus had given him. Kelly seems correct when he speculates that Jerome's complaint about giving alms to people who do not need them refers to Melania and Rufinus, Jerome's ecclesiastical antagonists in Jerusalem. Kelly, *Jerome*, 193.

<sup>31</sup>Kelly, *Jerome*, 206.

<sup>32</sup>Jerome *Ep.* 109.1.

Jerome had to wait two years for a copy of Vigilantius's now-lost pamphlet, but his belated response preserves much of Vigilantius's criticism of Christian practices held dear by Jerome.<sup>33</sup> Vigilantius attacked the cult of martyrs, indicating that martyr relics are of no value and that honoring them was blasphemous because it led to worshiping something other than God. Jerome's rebuttal contains many quotations from Vigilantius's lost tract. According to Jerome, Vigilantius asked, "What need is there for you not only to pay such honour, not to say adoration, to the thing, whatever it may be, which you carry about in a little vessel and worship?" and "Why do you kiss and adore a bit of powder wrapped up in a cloth?"<sup>34</sup> Vigilantius saw the cult of the martyrs as stealing worship from God, making the Christians of Gaul idolaters. In his response, Jerome explains that if Vigilantius were not so slow of understanding, he would understand that Christians could never worship the martyrs. He writes, "Madman, who in the world ever adored the martyrs? who ever thought man was God?"<sup>35</sup> It seems that Jerome had never received a copy of Victricius's *De laude sanctorum*, in which Victricius advocated those very things, but it is entirely possible that Vigilantius had and that Victricius's views provoked Vigilantius's criticisms.<sup>36</sup>

Vigilantius also supposed that the customs of the cult were a revival of Gaul's pre-Christian religious traditions. He claimed, "Under the cloak of religion we see what is all but a

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<sup>33</sup>Kelly, *Jerome*, 287–290.

<sup>34</sup>Jerome *Adversus Vigilantium*, 4 (PL 23:357). Quid necesse est, te tanta honore non solum honorare, sed etiam adorare illud nescio quid, quod in modico vasculo transferendo colis? ... Quid pulverem linteamine circumdatum adorando oscularis?

<sup>35</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 5 (PL 23:357). Quis enim, o insanum caput, aliquando martyres adoravit? quis hominem putavit Deum?

<sup>36</sup>Hunter, "Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen," 422. Hunter makes the case that these two clergymen can be seen as examples of a very diverse Gallic church. He also hypothesizes that there could be some direct connection between the Victricius's ideas and Vigilantius's pamphlet.

heathen ceremony introduced into the churches: while the sun is still shining, heaps of tapers are lighted, and everywhere a paltry bit of powder wrapped up in a costly cloth, is kissed and worshipped.”<sup>37</sup> Along with the wastefulness of lighting candles in the daylight, Vigilantius was disturbed by the precious metals and costly cloth that encased relics.<sup>38</sup> Jerome concedes that only ignorant worshipers light candles in the daytime, but he maintains that this practice is inconsequential. Moreover, it should be tolerated because they mean well, even though, he admits, it is the same practice formerly used for worshiping idols. He writes, “In the one case respect was paid to idols, and therefore the ceremony is to be abhorred; in the other the martyrs are venerated, and the same ceremony is therefore to be allowed.”<sup>39</sup> Vigilantius was not just concerned about wrong forms of worship, but he also criticized the cult because it co-opted appropriate forms of worship for the wrong event. Vigilantius seemed most upset that the yearly Easter vigil, in which the congregation would spend the night of Holy Saturday waiting for sunrise on Easter morning, was becoming increasingly applied to the feasts of the martyrs as well. Not only did this practice rob Easter of its distinctive liturgy, but it also gave “youths and worthless women” more opportunity for licentious behavior under the cover of darkness.<sup>40</sup> Jerome, however, felt that if a religious activity was beneficial once a year, it should be appropriate to do it as often as possible.

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<sup>37</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 4 (PL 23:357). Prope ritum gentilium videmus sub praetextu religionis introductum in Ecclesiis, sole adhuc fulgente, moles cereorum accendi, et ubicunque pulvisculum nescio quod, in modico vasculo pretioso linteamine circumdatum osculantes adorant.

<sup>38</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 5.

<sup>39</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 7. (PL 23:361). Jerome suggests that candle lighters do what they do *per imperitiam*. Illud fiebat idolis, et idcirco detestandum est: hoc fit martyribus, idcirco recipiendum est.

<sup>40</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 9.

Vigilantius grounded his opposition to the cult in theology and scriptural interpretation, not merely in disapproval of perceived abuses. He taught that the souls of the martyrs were neither in their relics nor any other place on earth. Vigilantius claimed that the Scriptures taught that the souls of the martyrs and Apostles resided either in Abraham's bosom, or in a place of rest, or under the altar of God in heaven.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Vigilantius believed that persons could not pray for one another after they had died, so the requests of living persons at the shrines of martyrs were of no use.<sup>42</sup> Jerome, however, claimed that if Jesus is present everywhere, then those who are with him are everywhere as well. Also, Jerome suggested that men like Moses, Stephen, and Paul could not be limited by death. If the martyrs inherited power through their martyrdom, i.e., gained a crown, that power must have some use and allow them to occupy both worlds simultaneously. Jerome believed that Vigilantius thought too highly of his own ideas and did not esteem the apostles and saints enough. In his criticism he writes, "Shall Vigilantius the live dog be better than Paul the dead lion?"<sup>43</sup> Their differing views on the miraculous works done at the shrines are at the root of their ideas about the usefulness of martyrs. Vigilantius discounted the miracle tales and claimed that these stories were inconsistent with the miracles recorded in the Bible. He noted that Jesus' miracles were signs meant to convince unbelievers of the truthfulness of his message. Since miracles witness to the gospel's veracity, where the gospel is already believed, there is no need for miraculous signs. In his

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<sup>41</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 6 (PL 23:359). Ais enim vel in sinu Abrahae, vel in loco refrigerii, vel subter aram Dei, animas apostolorum et martyrum consedis, nec posse de suis tumulis, et ubi voluerint adesse praesente. A rough translation from the Latin might find God keeping the martyrs in the icebox until the final judgment.

<sup>42</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 6 (PL 23:359). Dicis in libello tuo, quod dum vivimus, mutuo pro nobis orare possumus; postquam autem mortui fuerimus, nullius sit pro alio exaudienda oratio: praesertim cum martyres ultionem sui sanguinis obsecrantes, impetrare non quiverint.

<sup>43</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 6 (PL 23:360). Meliorque erit Vigilantius canis vivens, quam ille leo mortuus?

rebuttal, Jerome admits that this theory might hold true for Jesus' miracles but dismisses the idea that all signs are for unbelievers. He claims that Vigilantius must have a demon that makes him deny the martyrs' miracles and that he ought to spend some time in a martyr's shrine to have it cast out.<sup>44</sup>

While Jerome's tract against Vigilantius is interesting because it witnesses to the existence of clergymen who disapproved of the cult of martyrs, it also shows that the cult and asceticism seemed to travel together. While Jerome attempts to refute Vigilantius's views on the martyrs, he also excoriates Vigilantius for questioning the benefits of virginity. Exhibiting a dichotomy between physicality and spirituality, Jerome claims that Vigilantius's dismissal of virginity turns humans into mere pigs and horses.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps even more upsetting to Jerome than his attack on sexual renunciation, Vigilantius suggested that the church should stop sending money to the monks in the Holy Land, of which Jerome was one.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Vigilantius questioned the legitimacy of monks living in seclusion. He believed that renouncing one's worldly possessions was a mistake and that Christians could do more good if they gave to the poor out of their income.<sup>47</sup> And he believed that asceticism could not be the Christian standard because if everyone lived as monks, who would go to church and who would encourage sinners

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<sup>44</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 10.

<sup>45</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 2.

<sup>46</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 13 (PL 23:365). Praeterea iisdem ad me relatum est Epistolis, quod contra auctoritatem apostoli Pauli, imo Petri, Joannis et Jacobi, qui dextras dederunt Paulo et Barnabae communicationis, et praeceperunt eis, ut pauperum memores essent, tu prohibeas Hierosolymam in usus sanctorum aliqua sumptuum solatia dirigi.

<sup>47</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 14 (PL 23:366). Quod autem asserit eos melius facere, qui utuntur rebus suis, et paulatim fructus possessionum suarum pauperibus dividunt, quam illos qui possessionibus venundatis, semel omnia largiuntur, non a me ei, sed a Domino respondebitur: "Si vis esse perfectus, vade, vende omnia quae habes, et da pauperibus: et veni sequere me."

towards repentance?<sup>48</sup> Jerome dismisses these as foolish objections to asceticism since most Christians do not possess enough virtue to become monks, and he claims that his job as a monk is not to teach them but to weep for them.<sup>49</sup>

Vigilantius's criticisms of asceticism and the cult of martyrs ought not be understood as a solitary voice crying its opposition to popular superstitions. His teachings must be analyzed in light of his Gallic context. David Hunter notes that ever since Edward Gibbon called Vigilantius a "Protestant of his age," the historiography has depicted him as a type of proto-Reformer. Hunter believes this view "neglects the specifically Gallic context of the controversy by failing to note the degree to which Vigilantius's opinions were received with sympathy by many Christians in Gaul, especially within the ecclesiastical hierarchy."<sup>50</sup> The evidence from Jerome's own writings suggests that many bishops supported this troublemaking presbyter. Vigilantius's own bishop, Exsuperius of Toulouse who financially aided Jerome at times, protected Vigilantius from those who condemned his teachings.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it seems clear that many of the Gallic bishops supported Vigilantius's ideas, especially those regarding asceticism.

Jerome complains bitterly about the number of bishops who associate with Vigilantius, but the picture he paints is not of men who have been led astray but of men who stubbornly maintain their own traditions. Jerome mocks the Gallic bishops, claiming that they

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<sup>48</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 15 (PL 23:366). Si omnes se clauserint, et fuerint in solitudine, quis celebrabit Ecclesias? quis saeculares homines lucrifacient? quis peccantes ad virtutes poterit cohortari?

<sup>49</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 15 (PL 23:366–367). Rara est virtus nec a pluribus appetitur. ... Monachus autem non doctoris habet, sed plangentis officium.

<sup>50</sup>Hunter, "Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen," 403.

<sup>51</sup>Kelly, *Jerome*, 287–289.



only ordain married men to be priests and deacons because they view chaste men as morally suspect. Jerome writes:

Shameful to relate, there are bishops who are said to be associated with him [Vigilantius] in his wickedness—if at least they are to be called bishops—who ordain no deacons but such as have been previously married; who credit no celibate with chastity—nay, rather, who show clearly what measure of holiness of life they can claim by indulging in evil suspicions of all men, and, unless the candidates for ordination appear before them with pregnant wives, and infants wailing in the arms of their mothers, will not administer to them Christ’s ordinance.<sup>52</sup>

At the turn of the fifth century, celibacy was not the tradition in Gaul, and Jerome and his circle were the ecclesiastical innovators in the Latin churches.<sup>53</sup> The Roman pontiff, at this time, was attempting with very limited success to force the Gallic churches to accept a chaste clergy. The official papal line was that a married clergyman could be ordained only if he was married just once, not to a widow, and agreed to remain chaste in marriage. These rules were based on the idea that priests had to be ceremonially pure by Levitical standards in order to perform the mass.<sup>54</sup> Victricius of Rouen promoted these ideas of the Pope, but he faced opposition from many of the bishops of Gaul. In a letter to Victricius, Paulinus of Nola indicates that many enemies have tried to discredit the ascetically minded bishop of Rouen but that God has

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<sup>52</sup>Jerome *Vigil.* 2 (PL 23:355–356). Proh nefas! episcopus sui sceleris dicitur habere consortes: si tamen episcopi nominandi sunt, qui non ordinant diaconos, nisi prius uxores duxerint: nulli caelibes credentes pudicitiam, imo ostendentes quam sancte vivant qui male de omnibus suspicantur: et nisi praegnantem uxorem viderint clericorum, infantes qui de ulnis matrum vagiantes, Christi sacramenta non tribuant. Of course the scene presented by Jerome seems astonishingly similar to the situation within many American Protestant denominations today.

<sup>53</sup>Hunter, “Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen,” 417; Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer*, 272. Cf. Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 139; Van Dam draws the battle lines between the Gallic factions a little differently, describing Jerome’s group as “a ‘stabilized’ Christianity,” but I think his analysis is less helpful than Stancliffe’s and Hunter’s.

<sup>54</sup>Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer*, 286.

protected him thus far.<sup>55</sup> Since Paulinus, in his letter, goes to great lengths to refute the Apollinarian heresy, Victricius's enemies had perhaps accused him of Apollinarianism, the doctrine that Christ was not fully human because the divine logos merely resided in a human body. If this is the case, his opponents probably trumped up these charges, and their real concern was his promotion of asceticism and the cult of the martyrs.<sup>56</sup>

The writings of Vigilantius and Victricius can only be understood within the context of the Priscillianist controversy that had disturbed the Gallic and Spanish congregations at the end of the fourth century. Priscillian, the bishop of Avila, had been executed in 385 on charges of witchcraft. In his ministry he promoted asceticism and taught that some apocryphal writings could be beneficial, but his ascetic views gained him many enemies who accused him of immorality and Manichaeism.<sup>57</sup> Some bishops, however, were reluctant to condemn Priscillian, and Martin of Tours—the monk and bishop—even risked condemnation himself to support Priscillian. Even though the bishops opposed to asceticism gained a victory with Priscillian's condemnation, the pressures to accommodate their churches to new Christian practices continued. When Vigilantius, as a presbyter in Toulouse, wrote his pamphlet at the beginning of the fifth century, he must have seen that the storm clouds of Priscillianism still loomed on the horizon. In Rouen, Victricius the ascetic bishop had been promoting relics and virginity in cooperation with the bishops in Milan and Rome. In Tours, Martin had recently died, and his ascetic supporters had already transformed the monkish bishop into a patron saint with his own

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<sup>55</sup>Paulinus of Nola *Ep.* 37.4.

<sup>56</sup>Hunter, "Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen," 423.

<sup>57</sup>For an overview of the Priscillian affair, see Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, 92–105.

cult. And in Spain, some bishops at the Council of Toledo in 400 defended their decision to enroll Priscillian himself on the lists of martyrs.<sup>58</sup>

Jerome and his circle condemned the ideas of Vigilantius, and eventually their brand of Christian piety prevailed in Gaul. The cult of the martyrs continued to grow in the mental sphere about what Christianity was all about, and by the sixth century, the relics of the martyrs and saints played a significant role in the consolidation of Merovingian Gaul.<sup>59</sup> But at the beginning of the fifth century, this development of Gallic Christianity to accommodate itself to the tastes of Eastern bishops was by no means assured. The Gallic bishops protected Vigilantius from the censure of Jerome and the disapproval of the bishop of Rome. The sources indicate that eventually he crossed the Pyrenees and had charge of his own congregation in the vicinity of Barcelona.<sup>60</sup>

### **Conclusions**

This dissertation is not an exhaustive analysis of the churches' relationship to the martyrs, but rather it explains some of the different avenues that relationship could take. The cult of the martyrs meant different things to different Christians, and the cult could be used for a variety of purposes. The fluidity of the cult's meanings stemmed from the fluidity of martyrdom itself. While the basis for third- and fourth-century Christianity was supposedly the Bible, martyrdom was a post-biblical phenomenon that the churches read back into the texts of Scripture. The second-century invention of this new Christian experience allowed individuals much latitude in ascribing meaning to the act. As noted in chapter one, the primary meanings that

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<sup>58</sup>Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, 107–109.

<sup>59</sup>Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, 177–ff.

<sup>60</sup>Kelly, *Jerome*, 290.

churches ascribed to martyrdom were witness bearing and sacrifice. This twin ideas could be held equally without tension, or in some cases, one of the two could overshadow the other.

As the cult of martyrs developed, the question of suicide martyrs continued to plague the bishops who sought to define what martyrdom means. The notion of martyrdom as sacrifice instigated the suicides of those who sought martyrdom. True sacrifices must be given willingly, so if martyrdom is to be a sacrifice, then the martyrs must give themselves willingly. Suicide martyrdom is the logical conclusion to martyrdom as sacrifice. Sacrifices are voluntary, and the most voluntary form of death is suicide. As we saw in chapter two, this question of voluntary martyrs continues to vex modern scholars, just as it vexed ancient bishops. Some bishops at the turn of the fifth century, like Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom, frowned upon suicide martyrdom unless it was performed to preserve something more precious than life itself, virginity. Augustine of Hippo, on the other hand, thought differently, believing that all forms of self-directed violence were taboo. Some of this difference of opinion was doubtless formed by differing contexts, but the differences in their theological foundations also were significant.

Chapter three discussed the attempts of some bishops to minimize their congregations' involvement in the traditional Greco-Roman spectacles by offering the cult of martyrs as a holy spectacle. As gladiatorial displays became less frequent, the bishops could cognitively revive them through the cult, providing an alternative to the theaters and chariot races. This endeavor demonstrates one way in which bishops tried to Christianize the empire. John Chrysostom wanted to turn Antioch, and later Constantinople, into a holy city where social interaction would come under the moral leading of Christianity. In pursuing this goal, Chrysostom assimilated *virtus*, the manly perfection, of Greco-Roman society to Christianity, claiming that the martyrs through their courage show Christians how to live. Augustine, on the other hand, was not

ashamed of the martyrs' vulnerability, and he ascribes *virtus* to Christ, suggesting that the Church's role is to exemplify the traditional feminine values.

Chapters four, five, and six all dealt with various bishops using the cult of the martyrs against their enemies. Ambrose promoted the cult in Milan to nullify the threat of Arianism. John Chrysostom, whose moralistic preaching aimed at behavior modification, used the cult to attack the evils of Greco-Roman society and the demons that reigned in that lawless society. Augustine of Hippo, attempting to restore unity, redefined martyrdom as a tactic in his struggle against the Donatists. Though they rally the martyrs to their causes, these bishops all have differing understandings of what the cult was good for. Ambrose is concerned with maintaining an orthodox understanding of the Trinity, and he believed that the martyrs aided him in his work. John Chrysostom, on the other hand, was more concerned with his flock living like Christians, and their understanding of theological nuance was secondary. Both men, however, connected martyrdom with asceticism. Since martyrdom is sacrifice and renunciation is sacrifice, then renunciation must be a form of martyrdom, or at least closely related. Both of these men eventually ran afoul of their emperors. Ambrose would not bow to an Arian ruler, and John died in exile because his moralizing offended the royal family. For these bishops, the civic institutions needed to conform themselves to Christian ideals. Augustine takes a different view. He attempts to return to his source material and read Christian history in light of the Bible, instead of the other way round. Accordingly, martyrdom was witness bearing, not sacrifice. Christ was the only sacrifice, and the Church, as his body, must witness to that truth. The body of Christ could not be sundered; the Donatists had to be corrected. Augustine interpreted the martyrdom tradition as witness bearing and embarked on a relentless assault on the Donatist schism. Compared to Gallic clerics like Vigilantius, Augustine represents the *via media*. Augustine wanted to return to

biblical definitions, while simultaneously nodding to the martyr tradition. Vigilantius and his partisans had no use for that tradition or the new wave of asceticism that had affected many of the churches around the Mediterranean.

Though different Christians imputed a variety of meanings to the cult of the martyrs, the cult was used broadly to promote continuity. Post-Constantinian Christians used the cult to claim a persecuted past that was no longer their reality. For bishops like Ambrose and John Chrysostom, asceticism could serve a similar purpose. The two worked together to draw past, present, and future into a Christian whole. The cult of martyrs and asceticism sought to immanentize the eschaton. The heavenly realm had broken into the present reality as evidenced by virgins drowning themselves and rich people dissolving their estates. The empire was slowly Christianizing, and it would one day become heaven on earth. Ambrose and John viewed their task as hastening that day.

Augustine of Hippo, however, had a much more modest agenda. In reaction to the violence that attended the German migrations, Augustine penned *City of God*, in which he critiques the triumphalist view of the Church that was held by many Christians. Society would never become Christian; it would always be a mixture of two cities, that of man and that of God, traveling through history together. According to Augustine, Christian teaching could influence the state, but no state could ever become “Christian.”<sup>61</sup> That epithet belonged solely to the Church. Augustine, in his theology of martyrdom, did not attempt to bring heaven to earth, but merely reminded the Church that they were not alone as they sojourned in this world. The universal Church was ahistorical, comprising all Christians whether alive or dead. Vigilantius

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<sup>61</sup>For an excellent analysis of Augustine’s theology of politics and how he believed Christians should relate to the state, see Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

might have agreed, but he seemed to desire a little more local autonomy for his sojourning congregation. Ultimately, the cult of the martyrs was about creating a story that could make sense of the world. But the stories people tell are molded by presupposition and perspective. Analyzing the cult of martyrs provides another avenue into understanding how fifth-century bishops and their congregations built identities based on their pasts.

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