

withstand the hectic rush of life by giving time to silent recollection, to meditation . . . spending some time daily in 'the antechamber of Heaven'. They bring healing for the world's restlessness in the peace which comes to them from God, which is God. This explains the need, deeply felt by many modern lay-folk, to draw apart from time to time in 'retreat'. Thus only can they find themselves, in the stillness and peace which alone has the power to heal wounds caused by the restlessness of modern living.



## THE MARTYRS OF LYONS, A.D. 177

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

**W**E have a first-hand account of the sufferings of these martyrs in a letter which the Christians of Lyons, in the south of France, wrote to the churches of Asia Minor, with whom they had historical connections. The letter was quoted at length by the Church historian Eusebius in the fourth century, and a translation of it as he gives it is here presented. The reader will notice that the word 'confession' occurs very often. It is always used in the sense of a confession of faith, and never in the sense of a confession of sins. Besides describing the gruesome torments which the martyrs endured, the writer constantly refers to them in terms from the athletic world. One such phrase which he uses has become a commonplace of Christian language, the phrase 'a martyr's crown'. Nowadays we think of a crown as a king's head-dress, made of gold and precious stones. But to the writer of this letter a crown meant a wreath of bay leaves with which the winner of athletic competitions was crowned. So I have translated the word as 'garland', since 'wreath' has for us rather funereal associations. The flowery and high-flown way in which the martyrs' ordeal is described, though it does not always appeal to modern taste, has this value that it gives us an inkling of how the early Christians regarded, ideally at least, these grisly crises which were always liable to fall upon them. What in themselves were just episodes of disgusting brutality, were seen as chances of competing in God's honour, of showing one's mettle, and of worsting the devil and his satellites in a strenuous wrestling or boxing match. The eyes of faith could even see them as festive wedding processions. The imagination is the weakest point in a man's armour when he is faced with such horrors, and perhaps this way of thinking about

*the persecutions in symbolic metaphorical terms was a technique the Christians found effective, under God's grace, in steeling their imaginations to face the ordeal without breaking.*

*The letter.* The servants of Christ who live at Vienne and Lyons in Gaul to our brothers down in Asia and Phrygia, who have the same faith and hope of redemption as we have; peace and grace and glory to you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is quite beyond the power of words to describe the intensity of our afflictions here, the fury of the pagans against the saints, the things which the blessed martyrs had to endure. The Adversary fell upon us with all his might, first giving us a foretaste of what his arrival in full force would be like, and providing his minions with practice against God's servants to get them used to the business. But the grace of God was in action against them, rescuing the weak from their hands, and setting firm standing pillars up against them, men of sufficient endurance to draw all the violence of the Evil One onto themselves; they even grappled with him hand to hand, putting up with every sort of abuse and ill-treatment. In their hurry to reach Christ they made light of enormous trials; they really showed how true it is that the sufferings of the present time are just not to be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

*Arrest.* The first thing they were to endure most nobly was being set upon by the city mob in a heap, howling, looting, throwing stones, pulling and knocking them about, doing everything in fact that the most savage rabble likes to see done to its enemies. Next they were brought into court by the chief of police and the justices and questioned in the presence of the people, and on confessing themselves Christians they were put in gaol until the arrival of the governor. When they were eventually brought before him, he started giving vent to the most ferocious sentiments against us. This was altogether too much for one of the brethren called Vettius Epagathus,<sup>1</sup> who was brim full of the love of God and his neighbour. He was only a young man, but had so ordered his life that he deserved the testimonial of an old man like Zachary, 'walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame' (Luke 1, 6), tireless

<sup>1</sup> Who was not one of those so far arrested.

in the service of his neighbour, full of zeal for God, and alive with the Holy Ghost. Being the man he was, then, he could not stomach such a display of irrational prejudice against us. He grew more and more angry, until at last he spoke up and demanded the right to be heard in defence of the brethren, and said he would show that there is nothing godless or impious about us. But the people round the platform shouted him down (he was a leading citizen<sup>1</sup>) and the governor would not allow his very fair request, but merely asked him if he was a Christian too. When he confessed in ringing tones that he was, he was taken off to share the martyrs' lot. They nicknamed him the Christian's advocate, but really it was the Advocate in him, the Holy Ghost, filling him even more than Zachary. The fullness of his charity showed this quite clearly, and his readiness to lay down his life in defence of the brethren. He was, and is, a true-born disciple of Christ, following the Lamb wherever he goes. (Apoc. 14, 4.)

*Interrogation.* Then the rest were put to the test and sifted out, and the first martyrs came forward, ready, even eager, to go through with the confession of martyrdom. It also became clear who were not ready, and not in good training, too weak to bear the strain of a great match. About ten of them fell out of the running. Besides causing us immense distress, this dampened the ardour of the others who had not yet been arrested, and who in spite of their heavy trials stuck to the martyrs throughout, and never forsook them. So we were a prey to great anxieties because of the uncertainty of the issue; not so much that we were afraid of the torments in store for us, but we could not help wondering how our confession would go, or being afraid that somebody might fall away. However, every day those worthy of it were being arrested, to make up for the number of the lapsed, until all the most outstanding members of our two churches, to whom our communities here owe everything, had been rounded up. And since the governor had ordered us all to be publicly examined, they also arrested some of our people's pagan slaves.<sup>2</sup> This was a cunning move of Satan's, because the slaves were so afraid of the tortures they saw the saints enduring, that the police easily goaded them to tell whatever lies they wanted to

<sup>1</sup> He was probably a barrister, who would be standing near the tribunal among his colleagues.

<sup>2</sup> It was in accordance with Roman law to arrest the slaves of accused persons, and examine them under torture to extract evidence against their masters.

hear. Thus they falsely accused us of cannibal feasts and incestuous intercourse, and of anything else that is too unholy even to mention or think of, indeed of things that one dares not believe have ever been committed by men. When these stories got around, they made everyone wild with rage against us, even people whose familiarity with us had previously inclined them to moderation. So our Lord's words came true, 'The time will come when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God' (John 16, 2). Thereupon the holy martyrs were subjected to indescribable tortures, because Satan was particularly anxious to get them to corroborate these blasphemous calumnies.

Mob, governor, and police turned the whole weight of their fury on Sanctus, a deacon from Vienne; on Maturus, who though only recently baptized turned out to be a staunch champion; on Attalus, a man from Pergamum by origin, who has always been a pillar and a buttress of our communities here; on Blandina, in whom Christ showed that God accords honour and glory to what men consider cheap and insignificant and worthless,<sup>1</sup> if he sees charity there, charity which shows itself in power, and not in boastful appearances. The rest of us were all terrified, and Blandina's earthly mistress, who was herself one of the competing martyrs, was wracked with anxiety that bodily weakness would rob her of the courage to confess her faith. But Blandina was filled with such power, that even the men taking it in turns to torture her from morning till night were utterly exhausted, and had to confess that she defeated them, and that there was nothing more they could do to her. They were astonished that there should still be any life left in her, when her whole body was so broken and torn, and they declared that the rack by itself was enough to have killed her, let alone all the other tortures. But the blessed woman, like the stout-hearted athlete she was, took on a new lease of life by her confession, and seemed to find refreshing comfort and relief from her torments in saying 'I am a Christian, and there is nothing criminal committed amongst us'.

Sanctus too in a superhuman fashion nobly bore every outrage men could inflict. The wicked were hoping to get something nasty out of him by the unceasing pressure of their tortures, but he withstood them with such unshakeable firmness that he did not even disclose his name or nationality or home town or whether

<sup>1</sup> She was a slave.

he was slave or free, but only answered all their questions in Latin with the words: 'I am a Christian'. Again and again it had to stand for name, nationality, home town, and everything else, and nothing more could the pagans get from him. This made the governor and the torturers all the more truculent, and when there was nothing else they could do to him, they applied red-hot plates of brass to the most tender parts of his body. Though these were indeed burnt away, he himself remained inflexible and unyielding, solid in his confession, sprinkled and strengthened by the heavenly water of the fountain of life which springs from the belly of Christ. (cf Ps. 35, 10, John 7, 38). His body was evidence of what he suffered, being just a mass of weals and wounds, and so twisted up that he no longer even looked human. But Christ was suffering in him and achieving great and glorious deeds, bringing the Adversary to nothing and showing the rest of us that where the Father's love is, there is nothing to be afraid of, and no pain where Christ's glory is present. Because after a few days the wicked put the martyr on the rack again, with the idea that they would get the better of him if they applied the same tortures, when his wounds were so swollen and inflamed that he could not even bear the touch of a hand; or that at least he would die under torture, and so strike fear into the rest of us. But in fact what happened was that, against all human expectations, his body revived and straightened up under these subsequent tortures, and he regained his original appearance and the use of his limbs; in a word, by the grace of Christ his second time on the rack turned out to be a cure instead of a torment.

Then there was a woman called Biblias, one of those who had denied the faith. The Devil reckoned therefore that he had already swallowed her, but he wanted to make sure of her by getting her to tell blasphemous and ungodly tales about us. So he fetched her up to be tortured, as being a cowardly creature whose spirit was already broken. But as a matter of fact she came to her senses when put on the rack, almost as if she had just woken from up a deep sleep. The transitory pains, I suppose, reminded her of the everlasting punishment of hell. So she contradicted their malicious calumnies, and said, 'How could such people eat children, seeing that they do not even allow themselves to eat the blood of dumb animals?' And from that moment she began to confess that she was a Christian, and so was added to the company of the martyrs.

In this way Christ checkmated the tyrants' tortures through the patience of the blessed martyrs, and the Devil had to think up other devices. These consisted of shutting them up in the gaol's foulest dungeon in the dark, and stretching their legs apart in the stocks to the fifth hole,<sup>1</sup> and treating them generally in the brutal manner which gaolers possessed by the Devil are in the habit of using on prisoners they have a grudge against. As a result most of them died off in gaol—as many, that is, as the Lord had intended this sort of release for, to manifest his glory. Some, you see, though so savagely tortured it seemed no medical aid could keep them alive, did keep going none the less in gaol. They lacked all human care, but were strengthened body and soul with new vigour by the Lord, and themselves encouraged and cheered on the rest. Others, late arrivals only recently arrested, whose bodies had endured no ill-treatment, succumbed beneath their close confinement, and died in prison.

Among them was the blessed Pothinus, who had been entrusted with the office of bishop of Lyons, a very frail old man over 90. He was afflicted with an infirmity which made breathing difficult, but his spirit<sup>2</sup> took on new strength at the prospect of martyrdom. He too was dragged before the judgment seat, almost dead with old age and sickness and only kept alive, it seems, so that Christ could triumph in him. The police brought him into court accompanied by the city magistrates, and the crowd yelled and screamed at him as if he were Christ himself, and he bore fine witness to the faith. When the governor asked him who was the God of the Christians, he answered, 'You would know if you were fit to'. At that he was mercilessly pulled about and beaten; the people nearest kicked and punched him in any way they could, and those further away threw at him whatever they could lay hands on. Everyone seemed to think that they would be committing some great sin or sacrilege if they did not have a share in his ill-treatment; they imagined that this was the right way to vindicate the honour of their gods. Finally he was thrown nin gaol scarcely able to breathe, and died two days later.

And then God disposed things in a wonderful way, and Jesus revealed his boundless mercy in a fashion that is rarely seen in our

<sup>1</sup> The stocks, it seems, would be a board with a row of holes in it, and a prisoner's feet would normally be secured in two adjoining holes; but to cause the maximum discomfort one leg would be put in the fifth hole from the other.

<sup>2</sup> The writer is contrasting 'breath' and 'spirit', Pothinus' physical and spiritual breathing.

brotherhood, but which is not for all that beyond the art and skill of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The thing was that those who had denied the faith when the first arrests were made, were locked up all the same with the rest, and shared their ordeal. So their betrayal did not do them any good even in this life. The ones who had confessed what they were, were locked up simply as Christians, without any other charge being made against them; but these others were held in custody as murderers and defilers, and received a double punishment. For while the trials of the rest were lightened by the joy of martyrdom, and the hope of the promises, and their love for Christ, and the Father's Spirit; these people were grievously vexed by their consciences, and when paraded in public they could even be distinguished from the rest by the very look on their faces. The others would come forth cheerfully, glory and great grace shining in their looks; and they wore their chains as splendid ornaments, like a bride decked out with a variety of golden tassels; they were perfumed so with the good odour of Christ, that some even thought they were anointed with scents and spices. But these were downcast and subdued and gloomy, robbed of all self-respect, scorned even by the pagans as paltry cowards; they were burdened with the accusation of murder, and had lost the glorious and honourable and life-giving title of Christian. When the rest observed this it steadied them wonderfully, and the moment they were arrested they would unhesitatingly confess, scarcely even noticing any of the Devil's suggestions.

*Executions.* After this it came to the final martyrdoms, a different sort for each. In this way they made an offering to the Father of one garland, fashioned from various coloured flowers. It was only right for these staunch athletes to earn the garland of immortality by contending in a variety of contests, and coming through victorious. So Maturus and Sanctus and Blandina and Attalus were led out to the wild beasts in the arena, for the pagans to make a public spectacle of their inhuman barbarity—a special show had been arranged for our benefit. Maturus and Sanctus again ran through the whole gamut of their torments in the amphitheatre, as if they had had nothing at all to suffer until now. Or rather like wrestlers who have beaten their oppo-

1 God's mercy does not consist merely in the discomfiture of the lapsed, as the writer seems at first to be saying; but in their restoration to grace which he describes much further on.

nents in bout after bout, until they come to compete for the prize in the finals, they ran the customary gauntlet of whips, they were mauled by the beasts, they endured every cruelty the blood-crazed people could think of to shout for, and to cap everything they were put on the iron chair to be roasted till the mob was sated with the reek of it. Not that even this could allay their thirst for blood; they became still more savage in their determination to break the martyrs' endurance. Even so they got nothing more out of Sanctus except the confession which he had been repeating from the very beginning. Finally after coming alive through their stupendous ordeal, they had their throats cut.

Blandina was hung up on a stake and left as fodder for the wild beasts which were then let in. She hung there in the form of a cross and never stopped praying. Thus she gave great encouragement to the others in their ordeal, since their Lord, who was crucified for them, in order to assure those who believe in him that every one who suffered for Christ's glory will enjoy the company of the living God, was in this way made visible to their very eyes in the person of their sister. When none of the wild beasts even so much as touched her, she was taken down from the stake and fetched back to prison, to be kept for another contest. So she was to come to victory through many trials, and inflict upon the crooked serpent the irrevocable sentence of defeat. She was to outstrip all the brethren, this weak, little insignificant woman who had put on Christ the great invincible athlete, and after beating the Adversary in many bouts she was to win through to the garland of incorruption. (cf. I Cor. 9, 25.)

Attalus too was loudly clamoured for by the crowd, since he was a well known figure. He came forth as a competitor well prepared in his conscience, a man soundly and genuinely trained in Christian discipline, who had always stood out among us as a witness and a martyr to the truth. He was led round the amphitheatre with a placard carried in front of him, on which was written in Latin 'This is Attalus the Christian'. The people were thoroughly roused against him, but when the governor learnt he was a Roman citizen, he had him taken back to the others in prison. Then he wrote to Caesar about them, and adjourned their case until he received his answer. The consequent delay was turned to the best advantage, for through the patience of these martyrs Christ revealed his boundless mercy. By means of the living he



brought the dead back to life, and made the martyrs a present of those who had shrunk from martyrdom. It was an occasion of immense joy to the virgin mother,<sup>1</sup> who thus received back the children she had, so to say, miscarried of. Thanks to these martyrs most of those who had denied the faith returned to her womb, and were conceived again and restored to life, and learnt to confess. Alive once more and stiffened with a new resolve, knowing the sweetness of God who does not desire the death of the sinner and receives repentance with mercy, (Ezech 18, 32) they came before the judgment seat to be questioned again by the governor. Caesar, you see, had replied that all who denied the faith were to be released, and the rest done to death. So on the occasion of our local fair, when people flock into town, the governor paraded the blessed martyrs before his tribunal for the benefit of the crowds. Next he questioned them again, and the Roman citizens he beheaded, the rest he condemned to the beasts. Then was Christ wonderfully glorified in those who had previously denied him, but now, to the astonishment of the pagans, confessed. They were in fact questioned separately in private, the intention being to release them forthwith. But when they confessed, they were added to the company of the martyrs. Only those fell out who never had a real trace of faith anyway, or genuine appreciation of the bridal garment, or any notion of the fear of God, whose manner of life had brought the Way<sup>2</sup> into ill-repute; (cf. John 17, 12), in fact the sons of destruction. (cf. I John 2, 19.) The rest were all restored to the Church.

Now there was a Phrygian doctor called Alexander who had spent many years in Gaul, and was known to practically everyone for his love of God and his boldness in speaking the word (he was not lacking in apostolic grace).<sup>3</sup> He was standing in court while these people were being examined, and by nodding and signalling he was egging them on to confess; he was so keyed up in fact, he seemed to the bystanders like a woman in childbirth. Well, the crowd was very annoyed to see those who had previously denied the faith now confessing, and they started shouting at Alexander as the cause of it. When the governor realised what was happening, he

1 The Church.

2 The Christian religion. cf. Acts 9, 2.

3 This may mean either that he was an officially ordained 'apostle' (cf. Eph. 3, 11), i.e. a priest ordained for missionary preaching; or that he enjoyed the special charism of the 'word of wisdom' (I Cor. 12, 8).

asked him who he was and flew into a temper when he said he was a Christian, and condemned him on the spot to the beasts. So the next day he went into the arena with Attalus, whom the governor had again sent to the beasts, in spite of his being a Roman citizen, to please the crowd. They were put through all the amphitheatre's facilities for torture, and were finally slaughtered after enduring a stupendous ordeal. Alexander never so much as groaned or grunted, being too busy talking to God in his heart. As for Attalus, when he was placed on the iron chair and roasted, he called out to the crowd in Latin amid the reek of his scorching flesh, 'This really is behaving like cannibals, what *you* are doing. But we never eat men or do anything else that is wicked.' When they asked him what God's name was, he answered, 'God hasn't got a name like a man'.

Finally on the last day of the games Blandina was brought out again, together with Ponticus, a boy of fifteen. They had been brought along every day to see the others suffer, and every way was tried of forcing them to swear by their idols. But they remained steadfast and disregarded them, and the mob grew so wild with them that they had no pity for the boy's age, or respect for the woman's sex. They subjected them to every form of horror, took them round from torture to torture, trying again and again to make them swear, but without any success. For Ponticus died under their hands after staunchly enduring every ordeal, greatly helped, as even the pagans were aware, by the tireless encouragement of his sister.<sup>1</sup> As for Blandina herself, she was the last of all to die, like a noble mother urging on her children and presenting them to the King for their prizes, after taking the measure of their efforts herself; and then she hurried after them in the procession, as if she had been invited to a wedding banquet instead of being thrown to the beasts. After being whipped and mauled and roasted, she was finally tied in a net and thrown to a bull. She was tossed by the animal several times, though such was the intensity of the hope she derived from her faith, and the intimacy of her conversation with Christ, that she felt nothing. At last she too was slaughtered, and even the pagans confessed that they had never seen a woman endure so much.

<sup>1</sup> We cannot assume that they were natural brother and sister. It is more likely the writer simply means 'his sister in the faith'. In the next sentence he clearly has the mother of Macchabees in mind (II Macc.).

*Aftermath.* Yet still their savage frenzy against the saints was not satisfied; wild and barbarous people stirred up by the wild beast<sup>1</sup> take a long time to calm down. . . .

And so they refused to let the Christians bury the martyrs' remains, and after throwing them to the dogs, and letting them lie unburied in the open, with a police guard to prevent the Christians taking them away, they burnt them and scattered the ashes in the Rhone.<sup>2</sup> They did this as if they could defeat God and deprive them of the resurrection. 'Now let us see', they said, 'if they will rise again, or if their God can help them and deliver them from our hands.'



## COMMENT

### A BOOK OF HOURS

IF I may be allowed to add a postscript to a postscript I should like to draw the attention of readers of the article *The Embracing Prayer* in the September number of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT to the appearance of an English version of a vernacular *Book of Hours* produced by the Benedictines of the abbey of Encalat in the South of France. This work, which was undertaken in the first place for congregations of Sisters who were not obliged to the recitation of the breviary, deserves to be widely known among those who are similarly at liberty to choose their daily method of prayer and who feel a legitimate desire to enter more fully into the spirit of the liturgical cycle. *The Book of Hours* is not a translation of the breviary but a shorter and simpler volume constructed on the Church's plan for the daily offices and furnished with a lectionary and a short martyrology. For many people, the lectionary alone will amply justify the immense care that has gone into its making. Even those who have little leisure or who lack the confidence to master the elementary rules for the recitation of the hours could easily and profitably follow the scheme of daily readings from the Old and New Testaments with their accompanying selection of patristic sermons and commentaries. The words of Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Leo, Gregory, Bernard have a directness,

1 The Devil.

2 This sentence is just a summary of quite a long section.