

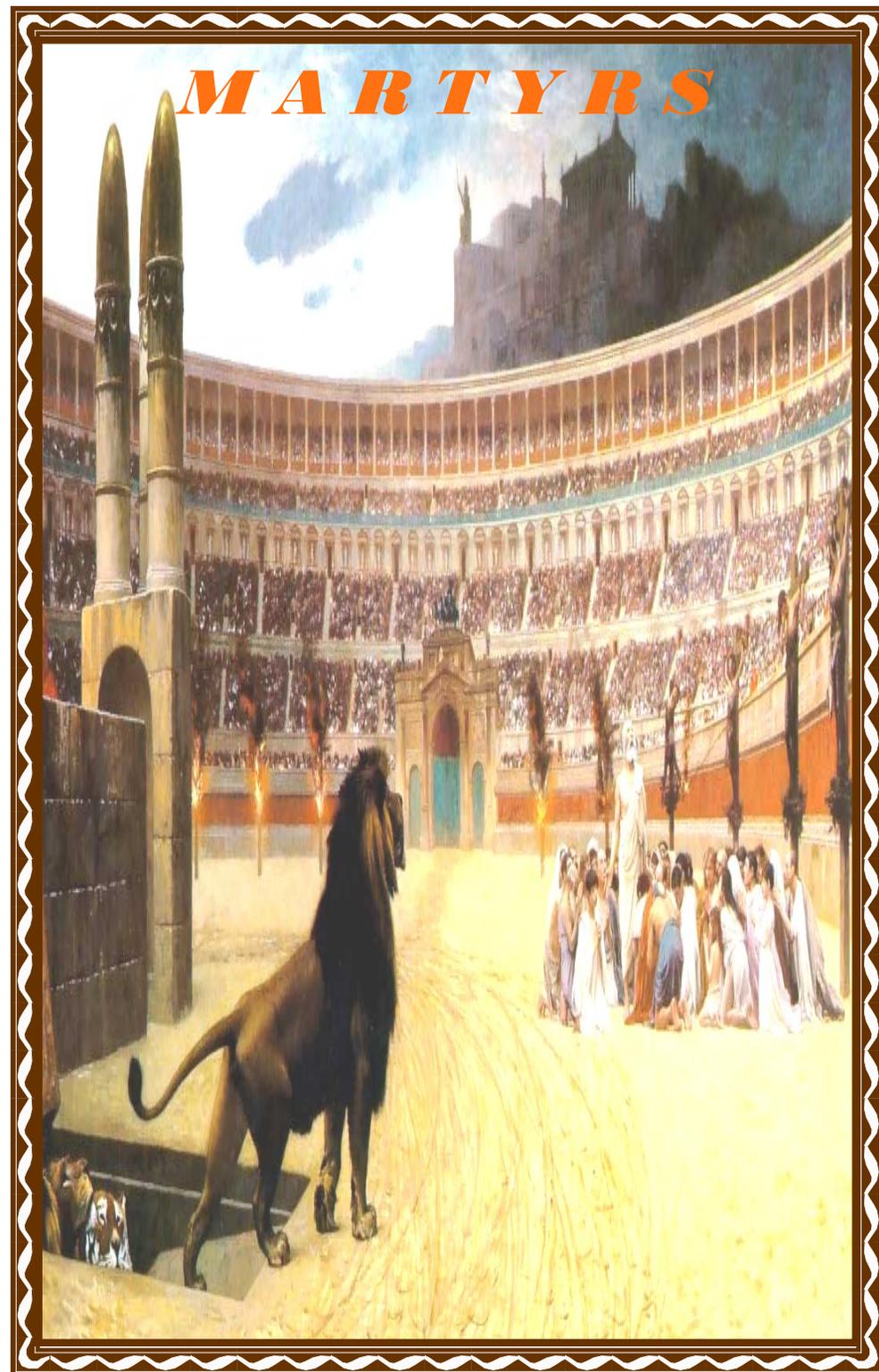
also, unless she recanted, we have here an example of three, possibly four, persons suffering capital punishment on the accusation of a man actuated by malice, solely for the reason that his wife had given up the evil life she had previously led in his society. We have no actual numbers of persons who died as martyrs during these two and a half centuries. Tacitus states that an immense multitude were put to death by Nero. The Apocalypse of St. John speaks of "the souls of them that were slain for the word of God" in the reign of Domitian, and Dion Cassius informs us that "many" of the Christian nobility suffered death for their faith during the persecution for which this emperor is responsible...But the last persecution was even more severe than any of the previous attempts to extirpate Christianity. In Nicomedia a great multitude were put to death with their bishop, Anthimus; in Egypt thousands of men, women, and children endured various deaths; and the same happened in many other places throughout the East...While a numerical number of martyrs is impossible to calculate, the evidence suggests that countless men, women, and even children were sacrificed.

The **trial of the martyrs** began with the first act of the tragedy of being arrested by an officer of the law. The accused Christians were generally cast into the public prisons, where often, for weeks or months at a time, they suffered the greatest hardships such as darkness, intense heat caused by overcrowding, and the brutality of the soldiers. They were deprived of food, save to keep them alive, of water, of light and air; weighted down with irons, or placed in stocks with their legs drawn apart as was possible without causing a rupture; exposed to infection overcrowding, and proper sanitary conditions-these were some of the afflictions that preceded actual martyrdom. Many died in prison under these conditions...those who endured were interrogated in court by the magistrates who endeavored by persuasion or torture to induce to recant. Torture included scourging, the rack, suspending the victim for a whole day at a time, by one hand; others were sentenced to the darkness of the mines, others to death in the arena, or by crucifixion.

The **honors paid the martyrs** who endured so much for their convictions were greatly venerated by their co-religionists from even the first days of trials in the reign of Nero. Roman officials usually permitted relatives to gather up the mutilated remains of the martyrs for internment, although in some instances such permission was refused. These relics the Christians regarded as "more valuable than gold or precious stones". Some of the most famous martyrs received special honors, as for instance, in Rome, SS. Peter and Paul, whose tombs, are spoken of at the beginning of the third century by the Roman priest Caius. Numerous crypts and chapels in the Roman catacombs were constructed in sub-Apostolic times, also bear witness to the early veneration for those champions of freedom of conscience who won, by dying, the greatest victory in the history of the human race. Special commemoration services of the martyrs, at which the holy Sacrifice was offered over their tombs-the origin of the time-honored custom of consecrating of altars by enclosing in them the relics of Martyrs-were held on the anniversaries of their deaths...

*(excerpted from: www.newadvent.org)

The martyrdom of Christians in the Coliseum Arena, Rome Italy



Martyrs

*The Greek word *martus* signifies a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. It is in this sense that the term first appears in Christian literature; the Apostles were "witnesses" of all that they had observed in the public life of Christ, as well as of all they had learned of His teaching, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). St. Peter, in his address to the Apostles and disciples relative to the election of a successor to Judas, employs the term with this meaning: "Wherefore, of these men who have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus came in and went out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until he was taken up from us, one of these must be made witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). In the first public discourse the chief of the Apostles speaks of himself and his companions as "witnesses" who saw the risen Christ and subsequently, after the miraculous escape of the Apostles from prison, when brought a second time before the tribunal, Peter again alludes to the twelve as witnesses to Christ, as the Prince and Savior of Israel, Who rose from the dead; and added that on giving their public testimony to the facts, of which they were certain, they must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29 sqq.). In his First Epistle St. Peter also refers to himself as a "witness of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 5:1). Later disciples of Christ ran no risk in bearing testimony to facts that came under their observation, whereas the witnesses of Christ were brought face to face daily, from the beginning of their apostolate, with the possibility of incurring severe punishment and even death itself. Thus St. Stephen was a witness who early in the history of Christianity sealed his testimony with his blood...

It was only by degrees, in the course of the first age of the Church, that the term martyr came to be exclusively applied to those who had died for the faith. The grandsons of St. Jude, for example, on their escape from the peril they underwent when cited before Domitian were afterwards regarded as martyrs by Eusebius. The famous confessors of Lyons, who endured so bravely awful tortures for their belief, were looked upon by their fellow-Christians as martyrs, but they themselves declined this title as of right only those who had actually died...The term martyr was still at times applied during the third century to persons still living...but the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus shows that by the middle of the fourth century the title was everywhere reserved to those who had actually suffered death for their faith...

The legal basis of the persecutions was the acceptance of the national religion in antiquity as an obligation on all its citizens, failure to worship the gods of the State was equivalent to treason...Christians denied the existence of and therefore refused to worship the gods of the state pantheon and were regarded as atheists. The Jews also rejected the gods of Rome, and escaped persecution because from the Roman Standpoint, had a national religion and a national God, Jehovah, whom they had a full legal right to worship...Pliny, a legate of the Emperor Trajan, was sent from Rome to restore order in the Province of Bithynia-Pontus...He found there a large number of Christians and was surprised by the widespread contagion of their "Superstition", as he reported to Trajan...Pliny raised three questions on how to deal with the Christians: 1. the age of the accused when deciding punishment; 2. if Christians renounced their belief should they be pardoned; and 3. whether the mere profession of Christianity should be regarded as a crime...Trajan replied in a rescript which was destined to have the force of law throughout the second century in relation to Christianity. He directed the following rule to be observed in dealing with Christians: no steps were to be taken by magistrates to ascertain who were or who were not Christians, but at the same time,

if any person was denounced, and admitted that he was a Christian, he was to be punished-evidently with death...those who repented of being Christians and offered sacrifice to the gods, were to be pardoned. Christians were not regarded as a menace to the State...their only crime was of an illegal religion...Subsequently, Emperor Septimius Severus modified what Trajan enacted by adding a clause forbidding any person to become a Christian... This new enactment was to check the growth of the Church by preventing conversions...The elevation of Decius as emperor resulted in an edict in the year 250 that all Christians of the empire should on a certain day offer sacrifice to the gods. This new law was quite different from existing legislation against Christianity. Christians had enjoyed comparative security until now because they were not to be sought after officially by the civil authorities. The edit of Decius was exactly the opposite of this: the magistrates were now constituted religious inquisitors, whose duty it was to punish Christians to apostatize. The emperor's aim was to annihilate Christianity by compelling every Christian in the empire to renounce his faith...The persecution lasted about 18 months, and wrought incalculable harm. Before the Church had time to repair the damage thus caused, a new conflict with the State was inaugurated by an edict of Valerian published in 257. This enactment was directed against the clergy -bishops, priests, and deacons- who were directed under pain of exile to offer sacrifice. Christians were also forbidden, under pain of death, to resort (buried) to their cemeteries. The result of this first edict did little so in 258, a new edict appeared requiring the clergy to offer sacrifice under penalty of death... Among the martyrs of this persecution were Pope Sixtus II and St. Cyprian of Carthage... The persecution came to an end with the capture (260) of Valerian by the Persians; his successor, Gallienus (260-268), revoked the edict and restored to the bishops the cemeteries and meeting places. From this date to the last persecution begun by Diocletian (284-305) the Church remained in the same legal situation as in the second century. The first edict of Diocletian was promulgated at Nicomedia in the year 303, and stated that Christian assemblies were forbidden; churches and sacred books were ordered destroyed, and all Christians were commanded to abjure their religion forthwith, under the penalty of death...This was the last and most determined effort of the Roman state to destroy Christianity. It gave the church countless martyrs, and ended in a triumph in the reign of Constantine.

The number of martyrs during the 249 years from the first persecution under Nero (64) to the year 313, when Constantine established a lasting peace, it is calculated that the Christians suffered persecution about 129 years and enjoyed a certain degree of toleration about 120 years...But taken into consideration the irrational hatred of the pagan population for Christians, it may safely be surmised that many Christians suffered martyrdom through betrayal...An example is related by St. Justin, martyr...of a woman who had converted to Christianity was accused by her husband before a magistrate of being a Christian. Through influence the accused was granted the favor of a brief respite to settle her worldly affairs, after which she was to appear in court and put forward her defense. Meanwhile her angry husband caused the arrest of the catechist Ptolomæus by name, who had instructed the convert. Ptolomæus, when questioned acknowledged that he was a Christian and was condemned to death. In the court, at the time this sentenced was pronounced were two persons who protested against the iniquity of inflicting capital punishment for the mere fact of professing Christianity. The magistrate in reply asked if they also were Christians, and on their answering in the affirmative both were ordered to be executed. As the same fate awaited the wife of the delator