

# THE FIRST CHRISTIAN OLYMPIAN<sup>1</sup>

---

***“Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified” (1Cor.9:24-27 NLT).***

The indoor arena was a common feature of architecture throughout the Roman Empire and was used as a venue to provide continual entertainment for vast crowds of Romans citizens who were supplied with a varied programme of entertainment from games to gladiatorial combatants, from chariot races to the spectacle of Christians facing wild beasts because they refused to give to Caesar the worship and allegiance due alone to God. These atheists (Christians who did not believe in the pagan gods) were thrown to the lions that tore them apart limb by limb or to the bears that gored them to death. The sand of the arena floor of the Coliseum was saturated with the blood of thousands of Christian martyrs.<sup>2</sup>

Probably the most famous martyr in the early church was Polycarp, perhaps because he was aged and a godly leader in the church but also because of the full account that we have of his trial and death in the Roman arena. Also there were several young people who endured unspeakable cruelties and death because of their uncompromising love and devotion to Jesus; among them Romans, Anabaptists, Scottish Covenanters and many in every generation. It has been estimated that more Christians have been martyred for their allegiance to Jesus in the twentieth century than all the previous centuries put together.

I also refer you to the death of a young slave girl called Blandina in France who eventually was killed at the Games in Lyon (see Appendix 1). It was here that the Olympic Games were reinstated in 1896. You could not be an Olympic spectator and be a Christian at the same time! As a child of God your death would be part of the entertainment at the Games. Your participation in the games would be as a martyr not as an athlete.

Our interest is in the use of these arenas and stadiums; the Coliseum in Rome for the Olympic Games and the Isthmian Games at Corinth which were held every two years – the year before and the year after the Olympic Games.<sup>3</sup> Paul also may have faced hungry lions in the arena at Ephesus because at the end of this letter he said, *“If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (1Cor.15:32).*

---

<sup>1</sup> This message was given at rccc and coincided with the final day of the Paralympics in London on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. My grandson Caleb shared in the delivery of this message.

<sup>2</sup> I refer you to my Module on “Early Church History” which I prepared for Ameva Bible School in Zimbabwe.

<sup>3</sup> If we accept the traditional date of the first Olympic Games (776 BC), we can say that the first Isthmian Games would have been held in 582 BC.

This statement may be taken figuratively or literally. We have no evidence from Acts Ch.19 that this took place at Ephesus and it is unlikely that a Roman citizen would be subjected to such punishment. If this was so we assume that the Corinthian believers understood what he was alluding to (read again Paul's account of his time there and the planting of the church at Corinth, Acts Ch.18). As he writes these words his life is in peril, he says we are, *"endangering our lives every hour."* He is writing from Ephesus where he wrote 1Corinthians. He says he is continually in danger of death, *"And why should we ourselves risk our lives hour by hour?" (1Cor.15:30 NLT)*. If there is to be no resurrection such danger and sacrifice is wasted.

Paul was speaking about the resurrection of all Christians at the return of Jesus Christ and pointed out how useless our lives of suffering and hardship would have been if no future resurrection is to take place. If that is the case let's have a wild party! To die for Christ would be futile if there is to be no resurrection. Paul declares that those who have died when Christ returns will receive an *imperishable* body (1Cor.15:53) and death will be swallowed up in victory!

The writer to the Hebrews catalogued those who by faith experienced the power and victory of God in their lives, even when faced by lions (Daniel of course is such an example), *"who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions"* (Heb.11:33).

Paul had these games in mind when he compared the disciplined training of the athlete to the Christian Olympian who likewise trains and disciplines his life for the Christian race.

***"Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified" (1Cor.9:24-27 NLT)***

Paul refers to two areas of competition, **running** and **boxing**. A further event that included a combination of boxing and wrestling was called **Pankration**<sup>4</sup> and may be described as an extreme form of martial arts. This is portrayed as gladiatorial fighting in contemporary films and may also be seen on ancient Greek pottery.

I refer to Paul as the first Christian Olympian because he begins by giving a strong exhortation for self-denial by using himself as an example and employing athletic figures familiar to the residents of Corinth at their own Isthmian Games. He repeated a familiar phrase which he used several times in this letter which highlights their spiritual ignorance, *"Do you not know?"* (v24). The necessary

---

<sup>4</sup> Men were trained and their particular strengths developed. Victory could ensue from the death of an opponent. In 393 A.D. the pankration, along with gladiatorial combat and all pagan festivals, was abolished by edict of the Christian Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I. Pankration itself was an event in the Olympic Games for some 1,000 years. At the time of the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 pankration was not reinstated as an Olympic event. Specifically, in 1895 Pierre-Hector Coullié, archbishop of Lyon, voiced his official decision on the reinstatement of sports to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Modern Olympic Games, by stating "We accept all [events to be reinstated], except pankration."

discipline required for victory in the Christian life was unknown to them; they were ignorant of the necessity of discipline as an essential part of growing in godliness and triumphing over sin and carnality. How many sermons have you heard on how hard it is to be a Christian? The important question we need to ask is this: what does Paul mean by “*disciplined in strict training*”? He answered the question by saying, “*I am **temperate** in all things*” (v25) and “*I **discipline** my body*” (v27). We have heard young athletes state how they trained for six years for six hours each day to develop their bodies to compete and win! Training and discipline seriously affected their social habits and their diet, and enabling them to reach the peak of their physical performance to win medals at the highest level – but such attainment is only possible at great cost. To appreciate what Paul the first Christian Olympian means you need to look again into those Scriptures where he described his costly service for Christ and the gospel.

### 1. The track athlete:

- (a) Running with one goal which is to win. Paul had seen the determination of the trained athlete to win the race.
- (b) All athletes are disciplined in training.
- (c) The runner who wins the race is crowned with a wreath of leaves.

### 2. The boxer:

- (a) He hits the mark – he is not “shadow boxing.”
- (b) All athletes are disciplined in training.
- (c) The boxer who wins the race is crowned with a wreath of leaves.

### 3. The Christian Olympian: *several Christian athletes competed in the London Games and the most famous Christian Olympian was Eric Liddell: the theme tune for the Olympics was taken from the film: “Chariots of Fire” – the story of his life.*

- (a) Every Christian is running a race and only the person who wins gets the prize (Hence Paul’s prayer that after running well at the end he fails to win and is rejected by God, v27).
- (b) The secret of success is training *before* the race. The Olympian athletes had to qualify to enter the games. The trainers were an essential part of the team; the competitors in the recent London Olympics and Paralympics gave continual thanks to their trainers and the encouragement and support of their families as keys to their success. Paul said that like a boxer he aims his blows, but unlike the boxer he aims the blows at his own body, beating it black and blue – into submission (*hypopiazō*; see also Lk.18:5). This is strange theology for today’s church! The picture Paul paints is of a brutal combat where boxers punish one another with knuckles and fists bound by leather thongs. Likewise by pummelling his body Paul beats it into submission, enslaving it to servanthood to gain the prize of the Olympian Christian, the final affirmation of Jesus – *Well done! good and faithful servant*” (Matt.25:23).
- (c) The Christian Olympian is not competing for a “*perishable crown*” says Paul, but for those who face immanent suffering, imprisonment and martyrdom will receive “*a crown of life*” (Rev.2:10). The perishable crown that John the apostle referred to in the book of Revelation (he was writing to the church at Smyrna) was the garland of flowers worn chiefly in the worship of

pagan gods. Smyrna was a large city of 200,000 residents and was the centre of the emperor worship, a city loyal to Rome. Jesus the Prophet and head of the church at Smyrna foretells imprisonment and death for some of the saints in the church. It is in this context that Jesus said to his martyrs *“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev.2:10)*.

Similarly, Paul spoke about a crown that does not fade like the Olympic wreath which was made of celery leaves! Incidentally, this is a cautionary word for Christians who get carried away with temporal things like Olympic Games or any other sport for that matter. Keep your accolades and excitement for the coming day when we will be crowned by our victorious and returning King. Then we will sing together the royal international anthem of the nations redeemed by the blood of Jesus our LORD and Saviour Jesus Christ. We will be crowned if we win the race! Cameras focus on the exhilarating moment of winning. Athletes are acclaimed for their accomplishments – and rightly so. We share with each one in that final moment of joyful emotion as the truth of their victory hits them - another record has been broken accompanied by the claps and standing ovations of the spectators. If we did not leap up and down with excitement we would be less than human. The interviewers rush to talk to the winner and to catch that priceless conversation following victory. This is a moment to be captured and a time to paint every post-box in Great Britain gold. Do you recall John’s description of the streets in the New Jerusalem? *“And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass” (Rev.21:21)*. The royal city is pure gold in celebration of Jesus’ victory at Calvary for us.

*For this purpose Christ was revealed  
To destroy all the works  
Of the Evil One  
Christ in us has overcome  
So with gladness we sing  
And welcome His kingdom in*

*Over sin He has conquered  
Hallelujah, He has conquered  
Over death victorious  
Hallelujah, victorious  
Over sickness He has triumphed  
Hallelujah, He has triumphed  
Jesus reigns over all!*

*In the name of Jesus we stand  
By the power of His blood  
We now claim this ground  
Satan has no authority here  
Powers of darkness must flee  
For Christ has the victory*

*Graham Kendrick*

Imagine the ecstatic moment when we hear “the last trumpet” sounded by the angels proclaiming Christ’s triumphant return for us his victorious church (1Cor.15:52; Mat.24:31). Athletes do not apologise for their victory, they exult in their triumph and so we Christians will be caught up from the earth to meet Jesus in the air and so we will be forever with the Lord. Next week the Olympic Stadium will be silent and empty and the victories a wonderful memory. We will be looking at the games from our rear view mirror. The athletes will go back to their training and life will resume its

normality of routine. Paul says we will receive an imperishable crown that will not fade and perish like the celery wreaths of the Olympian victors.

He concluded his teaching on the Christian Olympian by referring to the “herald” who announced the rules and the results of each event (1Cor.9:27). The name of the herald is a familiar word in the context of preaching the gospel and takes us back to John Baptist and Jesus who heralded the good news. Paul had devoted his entire life and strictly disciplined his body for one purpose alone and that was to be a herald of the gospel. His life was purpose driven yet for all that he did not want to let up at the end, lose the race and walk away ashamed, rejected and humiliated. For an athlete who has trained many hours a day for many long years to fail is a crushing unbearable disappointment. Paul’s prayer was that at the finishing line he would win gold. He would be crowned victor. Thank you Paul, you have been an amazing role model to the church and many young Christian Olympians have been inspired by your example to lay aside the legitimate pleasures of this life and to train for the ultimate victory of their life. The gold imperishable crown that they will receive from Jesus Christ at the podium of heaven will be their reward but in the light of heaven’s Lamb who was sacrificed for our sins all human sacrifice pails into insignificance. David Livingstone said “I never made a sacrifice,” in the light of Calvary that is true for each one of us. The glad response of the elders in the book of Revelation was to *“fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that lives for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for You have created all things, and for Your pleasure they are and were created” (Rev.4:10-11).*

Derrick Harrison Sept.7th 2012.

### **Appendix 1.**

The Persecuting Roman Emperors were: Claudius (41-54); Nero (54-68); Domitian (81-96); Trajan (98-117); Marcus Aurelius (161-180); Septimius Severus (193-211); Decius (249-251); Valerian (253-260).

### **Persecution and martyrdom in the early church:**

Christianity was declared illegal and no longer considered a branch of Judaism. Persecution had begun with the Jews who crucified Jesus and later persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem. In A.D. 64 most of Rome was burnt down and the Emperor Nero blamed first the Jews and then the Christians. Many Christians were tortured and done to death in the arena (perhaps Peter at this time was killed). Probably all the original apostles were martyred with the exception of John.

**Ignatius** became a martyr early in the second century, for about 40 years he had been the bishop of Antioch (in Syria). He is remembered for 7 letters he wrote to the churches and tradition has it that he is the child Jesus took in His arms as an example of humility (Mat.18:2). The Emperor Trajan visited Antioch and took Ignatius to Rome where he was thrown in the arena, “butchered to make a Roman holiday.” When Trajan sentenced him he replied, “I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast vouchsafed thus to honour me.” And faced with immediate death he said, “I am God’s grain, to be ground between the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become a holy loaf for the Lord.”



The amphitheatre at Rome, later called the Coliseum was a circular building, with three tiers of seats for 45,000 spectators. Almost

daily the crowds came together for various events and entertainments. Here Christians were thrown to the lions.

**Polycarp** (69 – 155) was a 2nd century Christian bishop of Smyrna. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* he died a martyr, bound and burned at the stake, then stabbed when the fire failed to touch him. It is recorded by Irenaeus, who heard him speak in his youth, and by Tertullian, that he had been a disciple of John the Apostle. The sole surviving work attributed to him is *Polycarp's letter to the Philipians*, a mosaic of references to the Greek Scriptures, preserved/produced in Irenaeus' account of Polycarp's life. It, and an account of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* that takes the form of a circular letter from the church of Smyrna to the churches of Pontus, form part of the collection of writings Roman Catholics term "The Apostolic Fathers" to emphasize their particular closeness to the apostles in Church traditions. Outside of the Book of Acts which contains the death of Saint Stephen, the *Martyrdom* is considered one of the earliest genuine accounts of a Christian martyrdom, and is one of the very few genuine accounts from the actual age of the persecutions. In the *Martyrdom*, Polycarp is recorded as saying on the day of his death, "Eighty and six years I have served him," which could indicate that he was then eighty-six years old or that he may have lived eighty-six years after his conversion. Polycarp goes on to say, "How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? Bring forth what thou wilt." Polycarp was burned at the stake for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor.<sup>[11]</sup> The date of Polycarp's death is in dispute. Eusebius dates it to the reign of Marcus Aurelius, c. 166 – 167. However, a post-Eusebian addition to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* dates his death to Saturday, February 23, in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus — which works out to be 155 or 156. These earlier dates better fit the tradition of his association with Ignatius and John the Evangelist. Bishop Lightfoot agrees with the earlier date.

The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp: This, then, was carried into effect with greater speed than it was spoken, the multitudes immediately gathering together wood and fagots out of the shops and baths; the Jews especially, according to custom, eagerly assisting them in it. And when the funeral pile was ready, Polycarp, laying aside all his garments, and loosing his girdle, sought also to take off his sandals,— a thing he was not accustomed to do, inasmuch as every one of the faithful was always eager who should first touch his skin. For, on account of his holy life, he was, even before his martyrdom, adorned with every kind of good. Immediately then they surrounded him with those substances which had been prepared for the funeral pile. But when they were about also to fix him with nails, he said, Leave me as I am; for He that gives me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile.

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said,

O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you, I give You thanks that You have counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before You as

a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as You, the ever-truthful God, have foreordained, have revealed beforehand to me, and now have fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise You for all things, I bless You, I glorify You, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, with whom, to You, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.

When he had pronounced this *amen*, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odour [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.

At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished; and all the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church which is in Smyrna. For every word that went out of his mouth either has been or shall yet be accomplished.



**The martyrdom of Blandina** who was a young slave girl in France.

She belongs to the band of martyrs of Lyon who, after some of their number had endured frightful tortures, suffered martyrdom in 177 in the reign of Marcus Aurelius and concerning whose death we have the report sent by the Church of Lyon to the Churches of Asia Minor. The fanaticism of the Roman populace in Lyon had been excited against the Christians. Blandina was a slave who had been taken into custody along with her master, also a Christian. Her companions greatly feared that on account

of her bodily frailty she might not remain steadfast under torture. But although the legate caused her to be tortured in a horrible manner, so that even the executioners became exhausted "as they did not know what more they could do to her", still she remained faithful and repeated to every question "I am a Christian, and we commit no wrongdoing."



Amphitheatre in Lyon

Through fear of torture heathen slaves had testified against their masters that the Christians when assembled committed cannibalism and incest, and the legate desired to wring confession of this misconduct from the Christian prisoners. The legate received instructions from the Emperor Marcus Aurelius allowing the Roman

citizens who persisted in the faith to be executed by beheading, but those without citizenship were to be tortured. Blandina was therefore subjected to new tortures with a number of companions in the town's amphitheatre (now known as the Amphitheatre of the Three Gauls) at the time of the public games. She was bound to a stake and wild beasts were set on her. According to legend, they

did not, however, touch her. After enduring this for a number of days she was led into the arena to see the sufferings of her companions. Finally, as the last of the martyrs, she was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate, enclosed in a net and thrown before a wild steer that tossed her into the air with his horns, and at last killed with a dagger.

In Carthage, North Africa, lived **Vivia Perpetua** and **Felicity** (died 7 March 203) who were Christian martyrs of the 3rd century. Perpetua (born in 181) was a 22-year old married noble and a nursing mother. Her co-martyr Felicity, an expectant mother, was her slave. They suffered together at Carthage in the Roman province of Africa.

*The Passion of St. Perpetua, St. Felicitas, and their Companions* is said to preserve the actual words of the martyrs and their friends. According to this *Passion*, in the year 203 during the persecutions of the emperor Septimius Severus, five catechumens, Perpetua and Felicity among them, were arrested for their faith and executed.

The details of the martyrdoms survive in both Latin and Greek texts (see below). Perpetua's account of events leading to their death, apparently historical, is written in the first person, the grounds for considering it the earliest surviving text written by a Christian woman. After a brief introduction, the narrative and visions of Perpetua are followed by the vision of Saturus; the account of their deaths, written by an eyewitness.

By order of Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211), all imperial subjects were forbidden under severe penalties to become Christians or Jews. Only recent converts were affected. As a result, all five were seized and cast into prison, but before being led away, they were baptized.

According to her "Acta", the terrors of imprisonment were increased for Perpetua by anxiety for her unweaned child. Two deacons succeeded in gaining admittance by bribing the jailer, and Perpetua's mother brought Perpetua's son in her arms, whom she was permitted to nurse and keep with her, "and straightway I became well and was lightened of my labour and care for the child; and suddenly the prison was made a palace for me." A vision assured her of her approaching martyrdom: Perpetua saw herself treading on a dragon's head and ascending a perilous bronze ladder leading to green meadows, where a flock of sheep was grazing. According to the "Acta", a few days later Perpetua's father, hearing that the trial of the imprisoned Christians would soon take place, again visited their dungeon and besought her not to bring this disgrace on their name; but Perpetua remained steadfast. The next day the trial of the six took place, before the Procurator Hilarianus. All six resolutely confessed their Christian faith. Perpetua's father, carrying her child in his arms, approached her again and attempted, for the last time, to induce her to apostatize; the procurator also remonstrated with her, but in vain. She refused to sacrifice to the gods. The procurator thereupon had the father removed by force; in the process he was struck with a whip.

The Christians were then condemned to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, for which they gave thanks to God.

In a vision Perpetua saw her brother Dinocrates, who had died from a disfiguring disease and unbaptized at the early age of seven, in a place of darkness and distress. She prayed for him and later had a vision of him happy and healthy, his disfigurement only a scar. In another apparition, she

apparently saw herself defeating a savage Egyptian, and her interpretation of this was that she would have to do battle not merely with wild beasts but with the Devil himself.

Saturus, who also recorded his visions, saw himself and Perpetua transported eastward by four angels to a beautiful garden, where they met with four other North African Christians who had suffered martyrdom during the same persecution, viz. Jocundus, Saturninus, Artaius, and Quintus.

He also saw in this vision Bishop Optatus of Carthage and the priest Aspasius, who besought the martyrs to arrange reconciliation between them. Meanwhile, the birthday of Emperor Geta approached, on which occasion the condemned Christians were to fight with wild beasts in the military games; they were therefore transferred to the prison in the camp.

Perpetua had another significant vision as well, which repeated the first. In this vision, Perpetua saw a ladder leading to heaven. At the bottom of the ladder was a serpent, attacking the Christians trying to climb the ladder to heaven. From this vision Perpetua claimed that she would have to fight Satan rather than just the beast of the arena. Furthermore, she learned that she would not be defeated in her quest and was defiantly confident.

Pudens, their gaoler, had come to respect his charges, and he permitted other Christians to visit them. Perpetua's father was also admitted and made another fruitless attempt to dissuade her from her impending martyrdom.

Secundulus died in prison. Felicitas, who was eight months pregnant, was apprehensive that she would not be permitted to suffer martyrdom with the others, since the law forbade the execution of pregnant women, but two days before the games she gave birth to a daughter, who was adopted by a Christian woman. On the day of the games, the five were led into the amphitheater. At the demand of the crowd they were first scourged; then a boar, a bear, and a leopard, were set on the men, and a wild cow on the women. Wounded by the wild animals, they gave each other the kiss of peace and were then put to the sword. "But Perpetua, that she might have some taste of pain, was pierced between the bones and shrieked out; and when the swordsman's hand wandered still (for he was a novice), herself set it upon her own neck. Perchance so great a woman could not else have been slain (being feared of the unclean spirit) had she not herself so willed it." So end the *Acta*.

Their bodies were interred at Carthage.

**Cyprian** (died September 14, 258) was bishop of Carthage and an important Early Christian writer, many of whose Latin works are extant. He was born around the beginning of the 3rd century in North Africa, perhaps at Carthage, where he received a classical education. After converting to Christianity, he became a bishop in 249 and eventually died a martyr at Carthage. He was born sometime in the early third century. He was of a wealthy and distinguished pagan background; in fact, the site of his eventual martyrdom was his own villa. Before becoming a Christian, he was an orator, "pleader in the courts", and a teacher of rhetoric. The date of his conversion is unknown, but after his baptism about 245–248 he gave away a portion of his wealth to the poor of Carthage, as befitted a man of his status.

At the end of 256 a new persecution of the Christians under Emperor Valerian I broke out, and both Pope Stephen I and his successor, Pope Sixtus II, suffered martyrdom at Rome.

In Africa Cyprian courageously prepared his people for the expected edict of persecution by his "*De exhortatione martyrii*," and himself set an example when he was brought before the Roman proconsul Aspasius Paternus (August 30, 257). He refused to sacrifice to the pagan deities and firmly professed Christ.

The consul banished him to Curubis, modern Korba, whence he assembled to the best of his ability his flock and his banished clergy. In a vision he saw his approaching fate. When a year had passed he was recalled and kept practically a prisoner in his own villa, in expectation of severer measures after a new and more stringent imperial edict arrived, demanding the execution of all Christian clerics, according to reports of it by Christian writers.

On September 13, 258, he was imprisoned at the behest of the new proconsul, Galerius Maximus. The day following he was examined for the last time and sentenced to die by the sword. His only answer was "*Thanks be to God!*" The execution was carried out at once in an open place near the city. A vast multitude followed Cyprian on his last journey. He removed his garments without assistance, knelt down, and prayed. After he blindfolded himself, he was beheaded by the sword.

Between 100-249 A.D. persecution was sporadic, depending on the emperor in power. From Trajan (98-117 A.D. to Maximus (235-536 A.D.). Christians were persecuted and killed. In 250 A.D. under Decius an empire wide order demanding annual worship of the emperor. In 250 A.D. under Valerian (257-260 A.D. it became illegal for Christians to meet and their properties were taken. The height of persecution came under Diocletian (303-311 A.D) when pagan sacrifices were required and houses were burnt.

The persecution of Christians continued through the centuries and it has been estimated that more Christians have been martyred in the twentieth century than in all the previous centuries put together. The so called "Arab Spring" where radical Muslims have overthrown secular governments will result in the persecution and martyrdom of Christians.