

# MARTYRS

by Rev. Kathryn J. Riss

The ministry of martyrs is not one many Westerners would sign up for today. But it was essential to the preservation of infant Christianity and the eventual victory of the church over Roman paganism. As a result of the prayers, witness, and willingness to die of thousands of martyrs over hundreds of years, pagan Rome itself was eventually won to Jesus Christ.

Many of these martyrs were women. From the earliest time, before his conversion, Saul of Tarsus "made havoc of the church, entering into every house and arresting men and women, committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). Not satisfied with persecuting Christians at Jerusalem, Saul "yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that if he found any of this way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." (Acts 9:1-2) These women could have protected themselves by keeping quiet, but they did not. Nor did their daughters in the faith later refrain from proclaiming Christ in the face of torture and death. Rather, they led the vanguard, lighting the way for others.

The earliest secular accounts extant of Christians who suffered for their faith bear witness to three women. Tacitus writes (*Annales xiii* 32, AD 57) of the trial of Pomponia Graecina, a woman of high rank, who was accused of "foreign superstition" and handed over to her husband as judge for trial. This woman was the first Christian persecuted for the faith that history records outside the New Testament. She suffered for her testimony even before the New Testament was completed!

Pliny the Younger writes in his letter to Trajan (c. AD 112), "I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this (accusation against Christians) by applying torture to two maidservants who were called ministers. But I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition." [*Pliny, Epp.X* (at Trajan) xcvi] These women, who may well have been quite young, were probably slaves since they were called maidservants. Yet they were recognized publicly as Christian ministers (Latin "*ministrae*", lit. "female ministers"). Their witness for Christ must have been public, for they were arrested and tortured to incriminate the rest of the church.

The apostle Peter's wife was martyred before him during the Neronian persecution at Rome. Clement writes in his *Stromateus*, "They relate that the blessed Peter, seeing his own wife led away to execution, was delighted on account of her calling and return to her country, and that he cried to her in a consolatory and encouraging voice, addressing her by name: 'Oh thou, remember ,the Lord!' Such was the marriage of these blessed ones, and such was their perfect affection towards their dearest friends."

Some of those persecuted were of high rank, giving up much for their Gospel witness. Eusebius writes, "At the same time, for professing Christ, Flavia Domatilla, the niece of Flavius Clemens, one of the consuls of Rome at that time, was transported with many others, by way of punishment, to the island of Pontia." (*Book 2, ch. XVIII*) This was during the persecution of Domitian when the apostle John was exiled to Patmos, c. AD 93.

Eusebius writes about those who suffered martyrdom at Pergamus around the time of Polycarp's death, "Of these we mention only Carpus and Papylus, and a woman named Agathonice; who, after many and illustrious testimonies given by them, gloriously finished their course." (*Book 4, ch XV*)

A terrible persecution broke out against Christians in Gaul under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 138-161). Eusebius *Book V, ch. 1* gives a full account of the martyr Blandina from accounts written by Christians at Lyons and Vienna to the saints in Asia and Phrygia. "Blandina, also, in whom Christ made manifest that the things that appear mean and deformed and contemptible among men are esteemed of great glory with God on account of love for him, which is really and powerfully displayed, and glories not in mere appearance. For while we were all trembling, and her earthly mistress, who was herself one of the contending martyrs, was apprehensive lest through the weakness of the flesh she should not be able to profess her faith with sufficient freedom, Blandina was filled with such power that her ingenious tormentors who relieved and succeeded each other from morning till night, confessed that they were overcome and had nothing more that they could inflict upon her. Only amazed that she still continued to breathe after her whole body was torn asunder and pierced, they gave their testimony that one single kind of the torture inflicted was of itself sufficient to destroy life, without resorting to so many and such excruciating sufferings as these. But this blessed saint, as a noble wrestler, in the midst of her confession itself renewed her strength, and to repeat, 'I am a Christian, no wickedness is carried on by us,' was to her rest, refreshment and relief from pain. . ."

When led into the amphitheater to die, "Blandina was bound and suspended on a stake, and thus exposed as food to the assaults of wild beasts, and as she thus appeared to hang after the manner of the cross, by her earnest prayers she infused much alacrity into the contending martyrs. For as they saw her in the contest, with the external eyes, through their sister, they contemplated Him that was crucified for them, to persuade those that believe in him, that every one who suffers for Christ will forever enjoy communion with the living God. But as none of the beasts then touched her, she was taken down from the stake, and remanded back again to prison to be reserved for another contest, so that by gaining the victory in many conflicts, she might render the condemnation

of the wily serpent, irrefragable, and though small and weak and contemptible, but yet clothed with the mighty and invincible wrestler Christ Jesus, might also encourage her brethren. Thus she overcame the enemy in many trials, and in the conflict received the crown of immortality."

The Christians were tortured and martyred for several more days, "After all these, on the last day of the shows of gladiators, Blandina was again brought forth together with Ponticus, a youth about fifteen years old. These were brought in every day to see the tortures of the rest. Force was also used to make them swear by their idols and when they continued firm and denied their pretended divinity, the multitude became outrageous at them, so that they neither compassionated the youth of the boy nor regarded the sex of the woman. Hence, they subjected them to every horrible suffering and led them through the whole round of torture, ever and anon striving to force them to swear, but were unable to effect it. Ponticus, indeed, encouraged by his sister, so that the heathen could see that she was encouraging and confirming him, nobly bore the whole of these sufferings and gave up his life.



"But the blessed Blandina, last of all, as a noble mother that had animated her children and sent them as victors to the great King, herself retracing the ground of all the conflicts her children had endured, hastened at last, with joy and exultation at the issue, to them, as if she were invited to a marriage feast and not to be cast to wild beasts. And thus, after scourging, after exposure to the beasts, after roasting, she was finally thrown into a net and cast before a bull, and when she had been well tossed by the animal, and had no longer any sense of what

was done to her by reason of her firm hope, confidence, faith and her communion with Christ, she too was dispatched. Even the Gentiles confessed that no woman among them had ever endured sufferings as many and great as these."

From this account, we see that the woman Blandina was recognized by this group of Christians as their greatest martyr. She not only endured more than all the others, but she continually encouraged and prayed for them. As a spiritual mother, she strengthened them to remain steadfast for Christ by her exhortations and example. Blandina's example was a witness to the persecutors and the crowd of her leadership and faith in Christ.

The martyrs were not only courageous witnesses of the hope of the resurrection, but also soul winners whose faith, courage and intercession sometimes converted even their executioners. One such notable martyr was the virgin Potamiaena, who died during the time of Origen. Eusebius calls her "the celebrated Potamiaena. . . concerning whom many traditions are still circulated abroad among the inhabitants of the place of the innumerable conflicts she endured for the preservation of her purity and chastity, in which indeed she was eminent. For besides the perfections of her mind, she was blooming also in the maturity of personal attractions. Many things are also related of her fortitude in suffering for faith in Christ; and, at length, after horrible tortures and pains, the very relation of which makes one shudder, she was, with her mother Macella, committed to the flames. . . . Immediately receiving the sentence of condemnation, she was led away to die by Basilides, one of the officers in the army. But when the multitude attempted to assault and insult her with abusive language, he, by keeping off, restrained their insolence; exhibiting the greatest compassion and kindness to her."

"Perceiving this man's sympathy, she exhorts him to be of good cheer, for that after she was gone she would intercede for him with her Lord, and it would not be long before she would reward him for his kind deeds towards her. Saying this, she nobly sustained the issue; having boiling pitch poured over different parts of her body, gradually by little and little, from her feet up to the crown of her head. And such, then, was the conflict which this noble virgin endured. But not long after, Basilides, being urged to swear on a certain occasion by his fellow soldiers, declared that it was not lawful for him to swear at all, for he was a Christian, and this he plainly professed. At first, indeed, they thought that he was thus far only jesting, but as he constantly persevered in the assertion, he was conducted to the judge, before whom, confessing his determination, he was committed to prison. But when some of the brethren came to see him and inquired the cause of this sudden and singular resolve, he is said to have declared that Potamiaena, indeed for the three days after her martyrdom, standing before him at night, placed a crown upon his head and said that she had entreated the Lord on his account, and she had obtained her prayer, and that ere long she would take him with her. On this, the brethren gave him the seal in the Lord, and he, bearing a distinguished testimony to the Lord, was beheaded. Many others also of those at Alexandria are recorded as having promptly attached themselves to the doctrine of Christ in these times, and this by reason of Potamiaena, who appeared in dreams and exhorted many to embrace the divine word."

God still has His women witnesses who suffer as martyrs, both physically and emotionally. Speaking of women denied the right to preach and testify publicly in her 1859 book, *The Promise of the Father*, Phoebe Palmer wrote, "We believe that hundreds of conscientious, sensitive Christian women have actually suffered more under the slowly crucifying process to which they have been subjected by men who bear the Christian name than many a martyr has endured in passing through the flames. We are aware that we are using strong language, but we do not use it in bitterness, but with feelings of deep humiliation before God that the cause of truth demands the utterance of such sentiments." (*Phoebe Palmer, Selected Writings*, Thomas C. Oden, ed. New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 42)