

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas

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"The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas"¹ chronicles the thoughts, sentiments, actions, visions and predictions recorded by two martyrs, themselves, and one or more observers and redactors. The two martyred writers, Perpetua and Saturus, were imprisoned with four companions in Carthage in 202 A.D. because they identified themselves as Christians and refused to offer sacrifice to the Roman Emperor. Perpetua's account of their several weeks of preparation for death elucidates the operation of the Holy Spirit within her. Saturus' only account, that of a vision, demonstrates belief in God's promised heavenly land. The third-party account expresses the writer's impressions of the Spirit's enabling the martyrs to transcend physical agony by concentrating on a divine reward.

Perpetua, a 22-year-old, educated, new mother from a patrician family, is a paradox. She exchanges a privileged existence for a grisly death sentence; she relinquishes her infant son to the care of her family; she disregards her father's concerns and jeopardizes her family's safety by publicizing her Christianity; she never refers to her husband. What is even more striking is that at the time of her arrest, she is a catechumen, or one who has not yet been accepted into full Christian fellowship and liturgical participation. The spiritual state of

¹R.E. Wallis (trans.), "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 697-706.

a catechumen is described by Cyril of Jerusalem as:

...hearing with the ears, hearing hope, and not perceiving; hearing mysteries, yet not understanding; hearing Scriptures, yet not knowing their depth. Thou no longer hearest with the ears, but thou hearest within; for the indwelling Spirit henceforth fashions thy mind into a house of God. When thou shalt hear what is written concerning mysteries, then thou shalt understand, what hitherto thou knewest not.²

What is striking about Perpetua's resoluteness is that it comes prior to baptism and formal instruction in the meaning of the eucharist. As her diary unfolds, she becomes a paradigm of one for whom "the indwelling Spirit henceforth fashions thy mind into a house of God."³ Perpetua signals this transformation within herself with these words after her baptism in prison: "... to me the Spirit prescribed that in the water baptism, nothing else was to be sought for bodily endurance." (Chap.I, para.2) Here, Perpetua discloses her faith in baptism's salvific power.

The statement toward the beginning of Perpetua's account, "In that same interval of a few

²F.L. Cross (ed.), *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 43-44.

³Ibid., 44.

days we were baptized," (Chap.I, para.2) is significant for its omission of who performed the ceremony and how it was accomplished in prison. Because no bishop is named, and two deacons are credited with helping secure a respite from the dungeon several days after the baptism, the reader can assume that the five young catechumens, Revocatus, Saturninus, Secundulus, Felicitas and Perpetua, were not baptized by church officials but, rather, baptized each other. Such self-empowerment and independence from ecclesiastical tradition are hallmarks of the Spirit in Perpetua and her companions.

Perpetua's confidence in her special spiritual status is revealed in her response to a request that she ask for a vision to determine if the group will die or escape: "And I, who knew that I was privileged to converse with the Lord, whose kindnesses I had found to be so great, boldly promised him, and said, 'Tomorrow I will tell you.'" (Chap.I, para.3) Her confidence is justified by the granting of a first vision that enables her to predict that their fate will be death.

The imagery of the vision propels Perpetua toward a higher spiritual plane. She describes ascending a steep, golden ladder, so narrow that only one person can pass at a time. Sharp weapons project from both sides of the ladder, and a menacing dragon tries to bite from underneath. Perpetua watches as Saturus, a fellow Christian who voluntarily joins Perpetua's group in prison, reaches the top and beckons her to ascend. Perpetua begins her ascent by proclaiming: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me." (Chap.I, para.3) The dragon, reacting fearfully to these words, lifts its head, upon which Perpetua steps as she climbs the golden ladder. At the top, Perpetua enters an immense garden and is welcomed as "daughter" by a tall, white-haired shepherd, milking sheep and surrounded by thousands of white-robed

beings. The shepherd gives Perpetua a little cake of cheese, which she receives with folded hands and eats. As the attendants say "Amen," Perpetua awakens with an indescribable sweetness in her mouth. When she relates the vision to her comrade, they comprehend that death is imminent and they "cease henceforth to have any hope in this world." (Chap.I, para.3)

In this vision, Perpetua experiences a mystical eucharist in paradise. Cheese and milk were eucharistic elements in the second and third centuries,⁴ and their presence grounds the vision in contemporary eucharistic practice. The ladder may relate to Jacob's dream of one reaching to heaven and his realization upon awakening that he had seen the house of God and the gate of heaven. (Genesis 28:12-17) The dragon, white-haired father, white-robed multitude and thousands of heavenly voices are found in the Book of Revelation. The amalgamation of Hebrew Scripture, Apocalypse, and contemporary sacramental elements gives this vision a compelling originality that draws the reader into it. The vision teaches Perpetua that she will withstand the vicious beasts and gruesome weapons of the arena on her journey to a heavenly reward. Her belief in the certainty of that reward empowers her to disregard earthly distractions.

A few days after her first vision, Perpetua is beseeched by her father to consider her infant, parents and brothers, whose health and safety are jeopardized by Perpetua's Christian

⁴Gregory Dix (ed.), *The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (Buntingford: Layston Press, 1968), p. 10,40.

identity. Although saddened by his words, Perpetua resolutely expresses her confidence in God's power: "On that scaffold whatever God wills shall happen. For know that we are not placed in our own power, but in that of God." (Chap.II, para.1) When the prisoners are summoned for public interrogation by the Roman procurator, an immense crowd gathers. In spite of her father's appearance with her son and the grief she feels watching her father being beaten, Perpetua proclaims that she is a Christian. Condemned to death by wild beasts, the prisoners cheerfully return to the dungeon, from which Perpetua sends Pomponius, a deacon, to ask her father to bring her child so that she can suckle him. When her father refuses, she credits God with the child's lack of desire for nursing and her being spared from breast pain. In this incident, we are shown the beginning of the mental and physical transformation that Perpetua undergoes. The mystical eucharist she experiences not only releases her from the emotional and physical torment of separating from her infant, but also encourages her to cheerfully endure the once hated, terrifying dungeon.

Several days later, while at communal prayer, Perpetua remembers the name of her brother, Dinocrates, who had died of facial cancer at the age of seven. Convinced that she is being called to intercede for him, Perpetua cries and groans in supplication to God, and she is rewarded with a vision that same night. She sees her brother, filthy, pallid, in a gloomy place, fruitlessly trying to slake his thirst from a pool too high for him to reach. Waking up, Perpetua realizes that her brother is suffering, and she prays for him every day during the prisoners' transfer to the camp where they will encounter the wild animals. On the day they are put in chains, Perpetua sees Dinocrates in a bright place, next to the pool, which is now short enough

for him to reach. Now clean, with a healed face, her brother drinks the water from a golden goblet and runs off to play joyously. Her assessment of the vision's meaning, "Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment," (Chap.II, para.4) confirms her role as an intercessor and agent for her brother's salvation. God's answering her prayers on behalf of another raises Perpetua to a higher spiritual plane at the same time that her physical situation becomes more dire. Perhaps this vision of a redeemed child, so soon after having separated from her son, assures Perpetua that she will be instrumental in her own child's baptism and salvation.

Shortly before the day of the exhibition, Perpetua records that:

Pudens, a soldier, an assistant overseer of the prison, who began to regard us in great esteem, perceiving that the great power of God was in us, admitted many brethren to see us, that both we and they might be mutually refreshed. (Chap.III, para.1)

With these words, Perpetua tells us that the Spirit, the great power of God within the prisoners, has affected their jailer and has prompted many brethren to visit them for mutual refreshment. Here we see both Christian and non-Christian recognizing that these condemned internees have a special power.

The day before the exhibition in the arena, Perpetua has a fourth vision, in which Pomponius, the deacon, leads her through rough, winding alleys to the center of the amphitheater. Pomponius tells Perpetua that he will labor with her and then departs. Watched by an immense crowd, Perpetua faces not wild animals, but a terrifying Egyptian gladiator. Perpetua, feeling as though she has become a man, is assisted by handsome youths who strip her

and rub her with oil in preparation for combat. Prior to the contest, a purple-robed giant, resembling a gladiator trainer, appears, holding a green branch with golden apples. He announces that the Egyptian's prize will be the death of Perpetua by sword, while Perpetua's reward will be the green branch. Reminiscent of the dragon beneath the golden ladder, the Egyptian rolls in the dust and tries to catch her feet. Miraculously lifted into the air, Perpetua thrusts at him, holds his head and pushes his face into the ground. Just as she did to the dragon in her first vision, Perpetua steps on the Egyptian's head. The trainer awards her the branch and kisses her with the words, "Daughter, peace be with you." (Chap. III, para.2) She then proceeds to depart through the Gate of the Living. Upon awakening, Perpetua understands that her foe in the arena will not be a beast, but the devil, and that she will be victorious.

This vision continues Perpetua's mystical reception of sacraments, begun with the eucharist of the first vision. Here, she receives the chrism of baptism from the helpers, who rub her with oil. They perform the functions of deacon and presbyter who hold and dispense the oils of exorcism and thanksgiving during the baptismal rite.⁵ The gladiator trainer acts like a bishop who seals the forehead of new initiates with the kiss of peace during confirmation.⁶ What is missing from the ceremony is water. Her victory over Satan, personified by the Egyptian, replaces immersion in water. In this vision, Perpetua, inspired by the promise of help, exorcises

⁵Dix, 34.

⁶Ibid., 39.

Satan. Empowered spiritually, she is uplifted and earns her own baptism and confirmation by overcoming evil in a contest, witnessed by a huge crowd of spectators, a foreshadowing of her death.

"The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas" also includes the written account of a vision experienced by Saturus, the comrade who appears in Perpetua's first vision. Saturus sees four angels bearing Perpetua and himself eastward up a gentle slope after their suffering and physical death. They alight into a boundless light and are welcomed into a pleasure garden by angels who honor and admire them. Walking along a broad path, they encounter several martyrs and are entreated to great the Lord. Robed in white by angels at the gate, they enter a place with walls built of light, hear the ceaseless chant of "Holy," and encounter a white-haired man on a throne, accompanied by 24 elders and a multitude of others. Raised up by four angels, Perpetua and Saturus kiss the enthroned figure, who passes his hand over their faces. They then stand and make peace with the elders, who bid them to enjoy the experience. Saturus congratulates Perpetua for having her wish fulfilled, and she thanks God for her joy.

As they are leaving the throne area, Perpetua and Saturus encounter Optatus, the bishop, and Aspasius, the presbyter, standing sadly and separately before the gate. The two ecclesiastics prostrate themselves before Perpetua and Saturus and declare: "Restore peace between us, because you have gone forth and have left us thus." (Chap.IV, para.3) Perpetua and Saturus embrace the two and lead them into the garden to speak with them. Suddenly, angels begin to rebuke the bishop and presbyter for interrupting Perpetua's and Saturus' refreshment and advise the men to forgive each other for any dissension. The angels then drive the two away and order

the bishop to scold his congregation because: "They assemble to you as if returning from the circus, and contending about factious matters." (Chap.IV, para.3). Then, it seems to Perpetua and Satorus that the angels shut the doors! At the end of the vision, Perpetua and Satorus recognize many brethren and martyrs, all of whom are nourished with an indescribable odor. Satorus awakens joyfully.

Similar to Perpetua's first vision, Satorus' vision is replete with imagery from the Book of Revelation: The white-haired, enthroned figure; angels in groups of four; twenty-four elders; white-robed multitudes. Different, however, is the lack of struggle to reach paradise. Perpetua's and Satorus' ordeal is over, and they are welcomed into the company of martyrs. It is significant that the term "martyr" appears for the first time in Satorus' vision because his account describes the great care and deference shown to Perpetua and Satorus by angels and heavenly elders. Clearly, those who witness Christ as the Lord by their blood can expect an even greater reward than non-martyrs. The martyrs' exalted position is underscored by the petition of two church officials for Perpetua and Satorus to restore peace between them. This is a stunning reversal of roles for the laity who bow before bishops and for the clergy who have intercessory power. This scene also marks the first time that either a bishop or presbyter appears in the text. Although the deacons, Tertius and Pomponius, have ministered to the prisoners, there is no mention of any other assistance by church authorities. Just as the catechumens were moved to baptize each other at the beginning of their ordeal, so, too, does Satorus envision that at the end of their trial, he and Perpetua attain paradise through the work of the Spirit within them, quite apart from any clerical intervention.

The account of the martyrdom, itself, is written by a witness who states:

Since then the Holy Spirit permitted, and by permitting willed, that the proceedings of that exhibition should be committed to writing, although we are unworthy to complete the description of so great a glory; yet we obey as it were the command of the most blessed Perpetua, nay her sacred trust, and add one more testimony concerning her constancy and her loftiness of mind. (Chap.V, para.3)

Here, the writer equates the Holy Spirit with Perpetua's command, suggesting that he views Perpetua as an exemplar of the Holy Spirit. In the incident alluded to, Perpetua complains to the tribune about the severity of treatment and paucity of food. Embarrassed, the tribune allows the prisoners' brethren and others to visit and be refreshed with them. This occurs after Felicitas' delivery of a daughter in her eighth month of pregnancy. Fearful that Felicitas' pregnancy would prevent her from dying with them, the comrades pray for, and are granted, an early delivery, three days before the exhibition. Felicitas expresses her confidence in facing death when she responds to the taunt of a visitor by stating: "Now it is I that suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I also am about to suffer for Him." (Chap.V, para.2)

It appears, moreover, that the five inmates (Secundulus has died in prison) are attracting curiosity-seekers. While attempting to celebrate their final meal as an agape, or private meal of fellowship, they respond to the on-lookers' curiosity with laughter and express happiness at their impending death. Saturus warns the visitors that they will recognize the condemned on the day of judgment. The narrator's avowal that the prison-keeper trusts the detainees and that many

people who have visited the prison leave as believers demonstrates his belief in the spread of the Spirit throughout the community.

The conduct of the martyrs in the amphitheater is remarkable for the courage, pride and self-control they display. When they are ordered to dress as priests of Saturn and Ceres, Perpetua argues with the tribune, who allows them to be presented as they are. Perpetua sings psalms, concentrating on her victory over Satan, and the three men warn the procurator that God will judge him. This stirs up the wrath of the crowd, who demand they be scourged. The narrator relates that the three Christians rejoice in sharing one of the Lord's torments. He also avers that God allows Satorius, Revocatus, and Saturninus to be killed by the animal of their choice.

The sight of Perpetua and Felicitas, two young mothers, naked and bound in nets, so repulses the crowd that the two are unbound and given tunics. When attacked and tossed by a wild cow, Perpetua repositions the tunic to maintain her modesty and binds up her dishevelled hair. Seeing that Felicitas is lying crushed, Perpetua extends her hand, lifts Felicitas up, and both of them stand in the arena, proudly facing the audience. After this, during the respite from the contest, Perpetua states: "I cannot tell when we are to be led out to the cow," (Chap.VI, para.3) not realizing that she has already been attacked until she sees her injuries and torn clothing. The narrator explains that Perpetua has been in ecstasy in the Spirit. As she reenters the arena, Perpetua tells a catechumen and a brother to: "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings." (Chap.VI, para.3)

Satorius, on his way back to the ring after avoiding death by boar and bear, predicts that he will be killed by a leopard. When the beast does bite him, there is so much blood that the crowd

chants "Saved and washed," ironically proclaiming Satorus' baptism by blood. He asks for a ring from Pudens, their sympathetic jailer, covers the ring with blood and says: "Farewell and be mindful of my faith; and let not these things disturb, but confirm you." (Chap.VI, para.4) When the crowd shouts for the nearly dead victims to be dragged into the center of the arena in order to witness the final sword thrusts, Perpetua, Satorus and their fellow martyrs rise up and bring themselves to the spot. Just before death, the martyrs share the kiss of peace with each other. Perpetua's final act is to bring the gladiator's hand to her throat, piercing her with a knife, just after he had thrust a sword between her ribs. The narrator surmises that: "Possibly such a woman could not have been slain unless she herself had willed it, because she was feared by the impure spirit." (Chap.VI, para.4)

Anyone either witnessing or reading about these extraordinary deaths is certain to be amazed at the physical and mental strength of the martyrs. Ill and undernourished from several weeks in prison, they not only survive their first attacks in the arena, but also summon the energy to stand before the crowd and walk to their place of execution. Perpetua's hand in her own death proves not only that she believes in her heavenly reward, but also underscores her admonition that the faithful should not be upset by her agony. Satorus' words to Pudens echo the same theme of keeping the faith and not being disturbed by these deaths. These five young Christians possess an unwavering conviction and singleness-of-purpose from the time of their arrest to the time of their death. They believe that the power of God, or the Holy Spirit, is present within them, and that their martyrdom will not only merit them honor in paradise, but also bring non-believers to faith in the Lord.

One of the most interesting aspects of this account is the absence of ecclesiastical influence. We know from The Apostolic Tradition that the second and third-century church taught the following:

Catechumens are instructed for three years.

Presbyters and deacons oversee the baptismal rite.

Bishops perform confirmation.

Bishops preside at the eucharist.

Men and women, either catechumens or baptized, are separated in assembly.

Men and women do not share the kiss of peace.

Catechumens do not attend agapes with those baptized.⁷

In their actions and visions, this group of young martyrs has bypassed contemporary church teaching by baptizing themselves, experiencing mystical baptism, confirmation and eucharist, and sharing inter-gender fellowship. By offering themselves as sacrifices to God, these martyrs become priests. By suffering before a jeering crowd and being sentenced to death by the Roman government, they share Jesus' passion. The Spirit has empowered them directly to take their faith into their own hands. One wonders if texts such as The Apostolic Tradition document an ideal conformation that was not adhered to in actual practice.

What is even more striking is the leadership of Perpetua, a young, educated, patrician

⁷Dix, 28,29,34-38,40-41,46

mother, who forsakes family loyalty, challenges the authorities to treat her comrades more humanely, reassures the faithful, and dies courageously. For 20th-century women struggling to find female role models in the early church, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas" offers us what no other text can: The oldest extant testimony by a Christian woman about her encounter with the Holy Spirit. Through their story, Perpetua and Felicitas continue to inspire us to seek what their names, Vivia Perpetua and Felicitas, signify: Happy, eternal life in the Spirit.

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