

Decius & Valerian, Novatian & Cyprian: Persecution and Schism in the Making of a Catholic Christianity - Part I

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To be presented is a two-phased historical-sociological study of “turning points” (Part I) and altered “trajectories” (Part II). In the mid-third century, two successive persecutions of Christians would be unleashed by the emperors Decius and Valerian. Those coercive efforts at suppressing the offending “superstitio” were empire-wide in scale, unprecedented in planned efficiency. Under Decius, a universally mandated requirement to offer sacrifices to the gods was backed by monitoring commissions and compliance certificates that featured confirmations of accomplishment and, most ominously, sworn, signed, and notarized declarations of lifelong religious orthopraxy. Great numbers of Christians complied with those directives—either by offering the demonic sacrifices outright or by securing fraudulent certificates attesting to having done so—actions that voided, through idolatrous trespass, the “celestial promise” of eternal life that had been gifted in the baptismal rite of spiritual rebirth. Efforts at resolving the ensuing crisis of mass apostasy split the mainstream Church into competing factions of disciplinary hardliners who resisted, and pragmatic reformers who endorsed the readmission of apostates. Drawing upon Schismogenesis and Sect-Church theories, I examine the course of this schism—doctrinally and demographically—to show how the socially induced and expedited trend towards penitential leniency, as adopted by the majority Catholic variant, facilitated the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The persecution and the schism it provoked carried greater world-historical significance than has hitherto been realized.

PART I: TURNING POINT

Introduction:

Imperial Crises and the Growing Threat of Christianity

In the turbulent history that passed between the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE and the ascension of Constantine in 306 CE, the Roman empire would undergo a series of fundamental alterations in its structural organization and in its cultural framings of reality. Two developmental trends, complexly interlinked, would decisively propel and shape the course of events and the fashioning of new arrangements and sensibilities.

A deepening crisis in the affairs of empire constituted the larger dynamic, which manifested most alarmingly in the Roman state’s growing incapacity to defend its extended borders and maintain stable internal governance. Mutinies

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and rebellions within the legionary ranks issued in a spate of usurpations, as contenders for the imperial crown rose and fell in murderous succession, their clashing armies draining resources from frontiers increasingly exposed to barbarian plundering and territorial encroachments by a resurgent Persian power. Escalating military demands placed debilitating strains on the treasury, for which the standard expediency—coinage debasement—came at the cost of inflationary pressures and disruptions in the commercial and craft sectors. The ravages of war and the burdens of taxation combined to batter the agricultural supports of the entire social order, setting off implosional processes of rural dislocation and distress in harder-pressed regions that would register in the dual guise of rising social banditry and declining population. Surveying the ruin as it appeared in its incipient stages, one well-placed participant discerned the onset of a catastrophic reversal, likening its course to a corrosive descent “from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust.”¹

The second developmental trend centers on the improving fortunes of the Christian Church, an illegal, quasi-secretive cult association that would find in the disorder of the times a greater receptiveness for its peculiar message of imminent world-destruction and alluring offer of selective deliverance from the impending doom.² Promises of welfare support, spiritual empowerment, and eternal

1. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 71.36 (c.230). For related *testimonia* on what Gibbon famously styled the “confusion and calamity” of the times, see Géza Alföldy, “The Crisis of the Third Century as Seen by Contemporaries,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 15 (1974): 89-111. More comprehensively, A. K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Averil Cameron (Eds.), *Cambridge Ancient History, XII: The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193-337* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). An archaeologically compelling analysis—documenting marked declines in seaborne trade, metal extraction, brick and stone construction, and overall agricultural output due to population losses, site abandonment, and cooling, drier climes—is Willem Jongman, “Gibbon Was Right,” in *Crises and the Roman Empire*, edited by O. Hekster et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183-199, a volume replete with valuable contributions. Simon Cleary, *The Roman West, AD 200-500: An Archaeological Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), shows that destabilizing “trajectories of change”—military, political, economic, cultural—were already underway in the late second century. Kyle Harper’s “Pandemics and Passages to Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 28 (2015): 223-260, offers an incisive account of the massive death tolls that resulted from repeated outbreaks of pestilence across the empire in this period. Revisionist murmurings against any notion of a “systemic crisis” undervalue the reliability of contemporary testimony and underestimate the extent to which sectorial disturbances and regional crises will reverberate throughout any complex social system.

2. Conveyed most tellingly in Minucius Felix’s apologetical dialogue *Octavius* (c.230), which sets forth the “Roman view” of Christianity for purposes of refutation: “They threaten the whole world and the universe and its stars with conflagration ... And not content with this insane idea (*furiosa opinione*), ... they avow they will be born anew after death from the cinders and ash ... Under this delusion they promise to themselves, as the virtuous, a life of eternal bliss after death; but for all others, whom they deem unjust, punishment everlasting” (11.1-5). Included in the Christian author’s defence of his faith is

salvation—bestowable upon those willing to renounce the idolatrous traditions of their ancestors and commit to the one true God, the one true *religio*—likewise commanded greater appeal. A marginal movement in terms of membership numbers—and beset periodically by sectarian fissuring that multiplied interior lines of division and dispute—the numerous cellular congregations across the empire were entering a growth phase in recruitment, which now extended to include proselytizing successes among the wealthy and educated, whose material and cultural resources would contribute appreciably to enhanced organizational performance.³ An effective command structure had achieved primacy in the office of the monarchical bishop, ruling through a hierarchical *ministerium* of presbyters and deacons, under which functioned various lesser offices, ranging from deaconesses and exorcists to porters and gravediggers. The capabilities of the Church in empire-wide coordination had developed significantly from the earliest days, when epistolary communication and occasional visitation had sufficed to bind local communities to a shared project of missionary evangelization. From the latter half of the second century onwards, major issues of dogma,

a surprisingly incautious denunciation of Rome's empire as a violent exercise in grand larceny, founded upon and sustained by an ongoing series of "unpunished sacrileges" and "the spoils of audacity" (*inpune sacrilegi; audaciae praeda*, 25.1-7). Celsus's *True Doctrine* (c.177) had earlier registered hostile awareness of the Christian teaching of an eschatological "conflagration" or ἐκπύρωσις, accusing the deluded renegades of impiously turning God into a "cook" keen on setting the world ablaze and sparing only those faithful to Christ (quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, c.248, 5.14: ὁ θεὸς ὡσπερ μάγειρος ἐπενέγκη τὸ πῦρ; and, with closer doctrinal accuracy, the Christian god as "fire-bearing torturer"; 4.13: τὸν θεὸν δίκην βασιανιστοῦ πῦρ φέροντα καταβαίνειν).

3. Disagreements over rites, doctrine, and scriptural interpretation resulted in a profusion of thought-currents and splinter movements across the shifting spectrum of early Christianity. Alarmed by the ferment, proponents of an emerging "proto-orthodoxy" were roused into developing a more coherent exposition of their own evolving beliefs and practices, a boundary-setting process that eventuated in the formulation of a discursive contrast pitting the "true faith" of a consolidating "Universal" Church against the myriad "heresies" and "schisms" that sought its diabolical subversion. For specific cases, we are largely dependent on heresiologists such as Irenaeus, *On the Detection and Overthrow of the False Gnosis* (c.190), who opposes some twenty different heterodox groups; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* (c.230), who expands the catalogue to just under thirty heretical schools; and the much later Epiphanius, whose *Panarion* or 'Medicine Chest' (c.375) supplies orthodox "antidotes" for the "poisons" of sixty Christian heresies. Many of those dissenting associations would prove transient or register scant social impact; but larger movements such as Marcionism and Montanism—each ascetically inclined and staunchly opposed to penitential leniency—remained formidable rivals of the mainstream Church well into the imperial Christian era. Jacques Berlinerblau, "Toward a Sociology of Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Doxa." *History of Religions* 40 (2001): 327-351, offers informed exegeses of the major social science contributions, ranging from Simmel and Gramsci to Coser and Bourdieu.

liturgical practice, and discipline would be subject to conciliar decisions by the high clergy, convening periodically at regional synods under metropolitans of increasing power and authority.⁴ If the *militia Christi*—as devotees of their crucified Messiah provocatively styled themselves—remained an “army” of modest muster, they could now daringly venture boasts of membership growth and ubiquitous presence.⁵

By mid-century, these opposing trends—an empire reeling from external onslaughts and internal disarray, an expansionary Church braced by recruitment gains and upgrades in organizational capacity—would intersect violently in the form of two state-sponsored persecutions, the first under the emperor Decius (249-51 CE), the second initiated by Valerian (257-60 CE). Both efforts were empire-wide in scope; both were unprecedented in targeting efficiency and punitive severity. Under the terrorizing impress of concerted imperial repression,

4. Comprehensively detailed in Karl Hefele’s *A History of the Councils of the Church: To the Close of the Council of Nicea, A.D. 325* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1871).

5. Exemplified by Tertullian’s brazen declaration: “We are of yesterday, yet we have filled all that belongs to you, your cities, tenements, fortresses, towns, ... military camps, municipal councils, palace, senate, forum; all that remains to you alone are your temples,” *Apologeticus* 37.2 (c.197). More striking still are the seditious implications of a preceding boast, that should Christ’s followers ever stand forth as “open enemies” of Rome, they would—as “a people spread the whole world over”—vastly outnumber any of the empire’s most formidable regional opponents: the Moors, Germanic Marcomanni, and the Parthians. Discounting the swagger, scholarly estimates generally limit the Christian share of the population to under 2% for this period: Keith Hopkins, “Christian Number and its Implications,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 185-226; Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity, A.D. 200-400* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), an important but contested downscaling reassessment. Thomas Robinson’s *Who Were the First Christians?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), brings the demographics into much clearer view. The longstanding assumption that Christian growth pre-Constantine was predominantly urban in social catchment is shown to yield “impossible numbers” when mathematical projections are carried out on the widely-credited computations of Hopkins, MacMullen, and Rodney Stark. Considering that up to 90% of the empire’s estimated 60 million people was rurally based, any growth/ constituency model predicated upon a largely “urban Christianity” will encounter intractable problems reaching the standard projections of 5 to 6 million Christians on the eve of Constantine’s conversion. Robinson explains: “[I]f the empire was 10% urban ... and Christians, at 10% of the empire, were themselves largely urban, Christians would have made up nearly the entire population of all urban areas by the year 300” (p. 18). Opening the calculus to include rural membership offers a more plausible path towards the conventionally accepted parametric ranges on numbers and percentages, as even minimal recruitment gains in the countryside would have added some 2 million members to the fold pre-Constantine, given the massive preponderance of the rural population. In support of his quantitative modelling, Robinson presents textual, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence confirming the presence of rural Christians across the empire, dating from apostolic times and multiplying substantially over the turbulent third century.

the Christian Church would buckle and fissure, as efforts to address the unanticipated crisis of mass apostasy within its ranks would split the movement into contending factions. In the struggle over Christian identity and authority that ensued, a reorganized Catholic mainstream would emerge triumphant, its prospects for continued growth markedly enhanced by the more moderate stance on membership requirements it had been forced to adopt in response to the dual exigencies of imperial persecution and schismatic rivalry with disciplinary hardliners.⁶

The Decian Persecution and the *Pax Deorum*

In the spring of 249, Gaius Messius Quintus Decius, accomplished military commander, statesman, and senior senator, was acclaimed *imperator* by the mutinous Danubian legions he had been sent to subdue. Following an autumn victory over the similarly disgruntled troops of Philippus Arabus, the unpopular reigning emperor, Decius marched on Rome where he would quickly secure senatorial endorsement for his program of imperial renewal. Signalling grand intentions at the outset, the new ruler added the glorious name of Trajan to his official nomenclature, pointedly invoking the popular legacy of the great conqueror and *Optimus Princeps*.⁷

6. Extrapolating from parametric estimates and literary indicators, Hopkins deduces that Christian expansion pre-Constantine experienced two distinct surges: “an increase of about one million Christians in the first half of the third century”; and “five million new Christians in the second half” (“Christian Number,” p. 221). With direct bearing on themes I will expand upon, Hopkins proposes that “the persecutions or contemporary conditions (civil wars, barbarian invasions, rampant inflation, repeated plagues, urban decline), or their combination, encouraged an unprecedented growth in the numbers of Christians,” whilst also prompting “a battle royal among Christians themselves, between traditional rigorists who wanted to maintain the old ways of the devoted small community, and the laxists, who wanted growth in numbers, even if that meant sacrificing moral standards” (p. 223; my own reading of this struggle will emphasize pastoral and theological concerns, not overt recruitment objectives). Benjamin Harnett, working from Hopkins’ estimates in conjunction with recalculated data on the adoption of the codex form, makes a convincing case that surging membership gains will have functioned as a “pressuring” factor in the Decian persecution; see Appendix 2: Christian Population, “Diffusion of the Codex,” *Classical Antiquity* 36 (2017): 183-235. Jan Bremmer’s *The Rise of Christianity Through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack, and Rodney Stark* (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2010) provides a judicious overview.

7. Salient particulars of Decius’ career and brief regnum are surveyed in F. S. Salisbury and H. Mattingly, “The Reign of Trajan Decius,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 14 (1924): 1-23, and A. R. Birley, “Decius Reconsidered.” In *Les empereurs illyriens*, edited by E. Frézouls and H. Jouffroy (Strasbourg: Civi Romaine, 1998), 57-80.

Experienced in governance, seasoned in war, Decius promptly set about restoring communication lines and frontier defences against the mounting barbarian menace. Roads and bridges were rebuilt across the vast, vulnerable empire—from Britain to the Euphrates, the Balkans to North Africa—and strategic garrisons were strengthened with reinforcements. Issues of troop morale were addressed with deliberative urgency, as attested by newly minted coinage extolling “the spirit” of the frontier legions and inscriptional acclamation of the emperor’s successes as *REPARATOR DISCIPLINAE MILITARIS*.

A concerted ideological campaign to revive confidence in empire complemented efforts to re-establish military preparedness. Imperial themes were celebrated in a special coinage issue, the *Divi antoniniani*, selectively commemorating deified emperors of the past. Coins bearing Decius’ own likeness carried depictions of traditional virtues and ideals, ranging from the political-military symbols of *Fides*, *Victoria*, and the ubiquitous Roman Eagle, to images of prosperity and social justice conveyed by *Abundantia*, *Liberitas*, *Aequitas*, and *Liberalitas*. The young Caesars, Herrenius and Hostilian, are commonly paired with Mercury and Mars the Defender; the Augusta herself appears with Vesta, Juno Regina, and the sanctifying feminine symbols *Pudicitia* and *Fecunditas*. A traditionalist iconography was utilized even more extensively in the Greek-speaking east, where mints at Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Edessa, and elsewhere produced a range of issues aligning members of the royal family with exalted deities of the Olympian pantheon, including Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Athena, Ares, Dionysus, Artemis, Demeter, and Herakles, along with popular Hellenistic divinities such as Tyche, Serapis, Isis, Cybele, Asklepios and Hygieia.⁸ Decius also sponsored the renewal of civic cult practices, to judge from inscriptions publicizing his involvement in the renovation and commissioning of temples and statues, one of which accords him the august title *RESTITUTOR SACRORUM*, ‘restorer of the sacred’.

8. Ramped up coinage production and stylistic innovations under Decius have been documented for various cities in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, highlighted by Karel Castelin’s *The Coinage of Rhesaena in Mesopotamia* (American Numismatic Society, 1946). For Palestine, see the contributions of Leo Kadman, who cogently proposes that the rapid production and diversity of coin-types issued at Caesarea Maritima attest to “advanced detailed planning,” with the entire series keyed to the Decian program of “reviving the old forms of religion,” *The Coins of Caesarea Maritima* (New York: Schocken, 1957), 71-77. Lee Levine, “Some Observations on the Coins of Caesarea Maritima,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 22 (1972): 131-40, likewise emphasizes the “extraordinary output” of new representational types under Decius, featuring both pantheon expansion and conspicuous altar symbolism. Erika Manders, in her informative *Coining Images of Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), questions whether Decius pursued any such “religious policy,” but her data-set—*Roman Imperial Coinage*, vols. IV-V—does not incorporate the fuller range of numismatic evidence available for mints beyond Rome and Milan.

The Decian cultural program countenanced far more, however, than a hallowing of public spaces with traditionalist symbols and monuments of piety and patriotism. The unprecedented succession of military defeats and natural calamities that had befallen the empire over the past half-century called for rectifying measures of corresponding scope, seeing as they augured nothing less than a rending of the *pax deorum* that had sustained Rome's imperial advance from its legendary founding. To that cosmological urgency—of reclaiming the favour of the protecting divinities—Decius would implement his most radical and historically momentous policy.

Early in the winter of 249, the soldier-emperor issued a directive to the governors of every province, mandating sacrificial offerings and veneration for the ancestral deities. This act of compulsory *religio* was to be carried out in public by all of the empire's inhabitants at their local temples and shrines.⁹ Entailing far more than a traditional *supplicatio*, to which the Romans customarily resorted on occasions of great triumphs or in times of national peril, Decius' edict came with an astonishing set of stipulations. Not only were the requested *sacrificia* obligatory rather than voluntary, but special commissions were established to schedule, superintend, and enforce the decreed ceremonial, starting in larger cities but soon radiating outwards even to remote villages. Census and tax rolls provided controls over identity, and those dutifully performing the required exercise in *reverentia*—as individuals or as families—would present for signature two matching certificates attesting to their devotional loyalty; one copy was returned to the sacrificant, the other was numbered by local officials for archival filing.¹⁰

9. Jews, in established recognition of their venerable monotheism, enjoyed exemption. Some Christians, seeking "immunity" from the hazards of forced idolatry, were turning to the synagogues for this very reason (*Martyrium Pionii* 13.1: desertion to Judaism condemned as an "unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"). On Jewish-Christian relations in Smyrna, as convulsed by the Decian edict, see Walter Ameling, "The Christian *lapsi* in Smyrna, 250 A.D. (*Martyrium Pionii* 12-14)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 133-160.

10. Skepticism regarding the Roman state's capacity to implement a universal sacrifice order should abate in light of Paul Schubert's "On the Form and Content of the Certificates of Pagan Sacrifice," *Journal of Roman Studies* 106 (2016): 172-198. Detailing the close working relations between scribes who produced documents and officials who administered policies, Schubert shows how the Decian *libelli* exhibit much the same format as other "memoranda" documents (ὑπομνήματα), through which individuals routinely filed petitions with state officials. The administrative apparatus that registered and regularly taxed the population, Schubert concludes, could easily have been adapted for implementing Decius' "extraordinary procedure" (p. 189). For a vivid reconstruction of how the mandated sacrifices might have been carried out, perceptively attentive to both scene-setting and ceremonial, see Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 207-209.

Procedurally elaborate and invasive in design, the Decian sacrifice order raises pressing questions of motive and objectives. Two opposing lines of interpretation have informed discussions to date. What might be called “maximalist” readings privilege the harrowing reports preserved in our Christian sources, and ascribe to Decius a determined resolve to check, and ultimately destroy, the deleterious advance of a deeply offensive *superstitio*.¹¹ Reconstructions of a “minimalist” persuasion discount these same testimonials as rhetorically inflated compositions, and recast the usurper-emperor as a traditionalist anxious to secure divine backing at the onset of his reign. That significant numbers of Christians refused to comply with the decree, and were thereupon subjected to torture, incarceration, property confiscations, and judicial executions, is seen as an “incidental” occurrence rather than planned outcome. A range of hybrid interpretations between these antithetical framings can also be found, assigning a variable mixture of aims and priorities to the emperor; yet others insist the edict’s universal scope and daunting oversight requirements tell against any deliberate targeting of a still marginal Christian population.¹²

11. Discovery of a papyrus “sacrifice certificate” in 1893 was widely taken to confirm the consensus view of Church historians—established since the time of Mosheim and Neander—that the emperor’s policy was eliminationist in objective: “Decius determined to destroy absolutely the strange religion. Every Christian, humble or exalted, was to be persecuted until death or apostasy resulted,” R. Beattie, “The Certificate of an Apostasy During the Persecution of Decius,” *Biblical World* 8 (1896): 295; “[T]he repressive spirit of the military religionist rose strong within him, and he decreed that Christianity should be exterminated,” John Gregg, *The Decian Persecution* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1897), 52-53.

12. Prominent scholars interpreting the edict as anti-Christian include Andreas Alföldi, “Zu den Christenverfolgungen in der Mitte des 3. Jahrhunderts,” *Klio* 31 (1938): 323-347; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6-38; and T. D. Barnes, “Legislation Against the Christians,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 32-50. Norman Baynes was among the first to propose the persecution was a “collateral” consequence, in “The Great Persecution,” *Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XII: The Imperial Crisis and Recovery*, edited by S. A. Cook, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 646-677. That notion now underpins the reigning consensus, articulated most notably by W. H. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967); James Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 135-154; David Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, A.D. 180-395* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Graeme Clarke, “Third-century Christianity,” *CAH XII: Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193-337* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 589-671, each of whom variously downplay persecutorial intent and place primacy on the “religious rally” thesis. For Bruno Bleckmann, “Zu den Motiven der Christenverfolgung des Decius,” the sacrifice order was fundamentally about securing a “Loyalitätsdemonstration” for a new regime desperate for legitimacy; see his essay in *Deleto paene imperio Romano*, edited by Johnne, Gerhardt, and Hartmann (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2006), 57-71. Marie-Françoise Baslez, in her synthesizing *Les persécutions dans l’Antiquité: Victimes, héros, martyrs* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), insists the edict was not intended

Through sociological assessment of the innovative features of the decree—its *compulsory component, inquisitorial function, monitoring requirement, and documentary controls*—I hope to establish that any proposal that would restrict this extraordinary measure to a celebratory or legitimizing function, of honouring a new emperor and the gods of empire, errantly underplays the coercive logic informing the directive. Correspondingly underappreciated is the fact that the governing operations of the Roman state—far from being inattentive to matters of surveillance or the consequences of policy—were sustained and guided by an accumulating body of rulings, records, and informational reports that constituted its bureaucratically preserved “institutional memory.” This was not an imperial power unfamiliar with the suppression of foreign rites or deviant cult groups (from the Bacchanalia crisis of 186 BCE onwards); and prior persecutions of the Christians will have received archival mention appropriate to the seriousness with which crimes of political disloyalty and religious impiety were treated. A decisively relevant datum in this regard is the lost Book VII of Ulpian’s *De officio proconsulis* (c.215), which included a digest of imperial *rescripta* laying out established procedures and punishments for dealing with the Christian problem. Composed under Caracalla as a manual for the instruction of governors on their legal responsibilities and authority, a working familiarity with the famed jurist’s text would have been acquired by Decius during his two tenures as *legatus propraetor*, the first served in Moesia Inferior (c.231-34), the second in Hispania Tarraconensis (c.236-38).¹³

as a “test d’identification des chrétiens,” but became so inadvertently through defiant non-compliance. The view that a universal sacrifice to nab a few Christians would have been “impossibly clumsy” to implement was initially broached by Hugh Last, “Review of The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. XII,” *American Journal of Philology* 61 (1940): 81-89; a supposition more fully taken up by Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), who projects a “bureaucratic nightmare” had certification been required of all inhabitants, and concludes only “suspect Christians” were targeted (pp. 454-458). This view is endorsed by Beard, North, and Price in their influential *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Sourcebook*: “The edict of persecution probably demanded that all inhabitants of the empire should sacrifice—but it is unlikely (given the administrative burden) that certificates would have been issued to those not under suspicion of being Christian” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165). An extreme minimalist account is offered by Reinhard Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), who can find in the Decian edict no innovation, either in policy or practice.

13. Denunciatory mention of the anti-Christian legislation in Ulpian’s handbook is made by Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.11.18-19 (c.310). Birley, “Decius Reconsidered,” 75-76, alertly suggests the emperor’s policies may have been influenced by earlier contacts with the senator-historian Cassius Dio, who served as governor in Pannonia (c.226-28) at a time when Decius held military commands in the region. Dio’s contemporaneous *Roman History* breathes a conservative spirit, the famous speech by Maecenas pointedly urging Augustus to enforce religious conformity, κατὰ τὰ πάτρια, and impose repressive

The interests and intentions of states are usually discernible from the legislation they enact, and though an integral text of the Decian edict has yet to surface, its provisions and manner of implementation are broadly recoverable. Christian accounts of the wending course of the persecution contain much information, direct and indirect, and more revelatory still are the “compliance certificates” individuals submitted for notarization upon completion of the sacrifices. Nearly fifty such *libelli* have been retrieved from the preserving sands of Egypt, all composed on papyrus leaf in standardized petitionary form. Local scribes will have produced a majority of the documents, but handwriting diversity even within the same village indicates literate individuals could, and did, submit their own affidavits, as drawn to the specifications listed in the emperor’s publicly posted edict.

Each complete *libellus* features six ordered sections: (1) a petitionary address to the commissioners; (2) a statement of personal identity; (3) a declaration that terms of the edict have been fulfilled and overseen by monitoring officials; (4) a request for certification; (5) signed attestations by the officials; (6) a dating of the ceremony. The following *libellus* is representative:

To those appointed to oversee the sacrifices. From Aurelius Alexander of the village of Theadelphia. I have always and continually sacrificed to the gods, and now in your presence and in accordance with the orders given, I have sacrificed, poured a libation, and eaten of the consecrated offering. I request your certification below. Prosperity to you. [1st Hand]

We, Aurelius Serenus and Aurelius Hermas, saw you sacrificing. [2nd Hand]

Year one of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Pauni 27 [= June 21, 250].¹⁴ [1st Hand]

Scholarly attention to date has focused all but exclusively on the requirement to sacrifice; yet the decisive testatory clause of the *libellus* assuredly lies elsewhere. For what is most remarkable, not to say astounding, is the novel provision whereby *all citizens and subjects of the empire are required to affirm a lifelong and unwavering religious orthopraxy*. Each surviving certificate is stipulatively centered not on the immediacy of forced ritual compliance, but on the establishment of prior consistency in traditional worship—a redundant requirement, surely, and a most “curious” interest for a ruling authority to pursue in a world overwhelmingly

measures against those introducing “alien practices” and “innovations in matters divine,” the known fonts of conspiracies and disturbances of public order (52.36.1-2).

14. This is *libellus* #15 of the forty-one certificates presented in the original Greek and translated by John Knipfing, “The Libelli of the Decian Persecution,” *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923): 345-390. Here as elsewhere I have slightly modified standard translations for greater literalness at certain points. Five additional *libelli* have since come to light, conveniently available in Selinger, *Mid-Third Century Persecutions*.

polytheistic in practice and outlook. The telling declaration, reproduced repeatedly with only minor variations, is rendered by locutions such as the following:

“I have always sacrificed to the gods without interruption ...,”

(ἀεί θύων τοῖς θεοῖς διετέλεσα)

– as written for an aged villager (*libellus* #1)

“I have always sacrificed to the gods continually throughout my life ...,”

(ἀεί μὲν θύουσα τοῖς θεοῖς διετέλεσα τὸν βίον)

– so declares a priestess of the crocodile god Petesouchos (#3)

“I have always sacrificed and poured libations to the gods continuously...,”

(ἀεί μὲν θύων καὶ σπένδων τοῖς θεοῖς διετέλεσα)

– attests a man from Oxyrhynchus (#4)

“I have always sacrificed to the gods and fulfilled my obligations to them ...,”

(ἀεί τοῖς θεοῖς θύουσα καὶ ἐπιτελοῦσα)

– a mother’s testimony, her young children accompanying (#30)

“It has always been my custom to offer sacrifice, pour libations, and worship the gods...,”

(ἀεί μὲν θύειν καὶ σπένδειν καὶ σέβειν θεοῖς εἰθισμένος)

– written on behalf of a declared illiterate (#33)

Appraised collectively, the formulaic consistency and precise phraseology of the Decian *libelli* bear the unmistakable impress of a bureaucratic directive, and thus point directly to the motivations behind the decree. For if, as minimalists propose, the imperial agenda had countenanced little more than a traditional *supplicatio*, a solicitation of divine support for a new regime in troubled times, why is the certification language so decidedly inquisitorial and compulsory, rather than celebratory or propitiatory? And if enhanced civic loyalty was intended, what purpose could have been served by securing and archiving millions of legally binding pledges from across the empire, all attesting that those dutifully participating on the present compulsory occasion had “always” and “continually” offered venerative sacrifices in the past? In their insistent fusing of the *interrogational* with the *performative*—an incongruent, even offensive coupling, had the principal function been celebratory—the Decian *libelli* confirm the edict was drafted so as to feature a “retrospective reach” in matters of religious observance, and to draw from each sacrificant a sworn and written declaration of unflinching devotion to the ancestral divinities.¹⁵ It was not, in other words, a

15. For a large majority of the *libelli*, the determinative linguistic formulation is a hendiadic coupling of the adverb ἀεί with the infinitive διατέλειν, the first signifying ongoing regularity of action or incessancy over extended duration, the second implying fulfillment of tasks undertaken. Latin certificates will have featured similar parlance: e.g., *semper et continue* or *semper constans*, etc. Inquisitorial phrasing of the congressional

desperate need for a unifying, one-time act of sacrifice that had called forth this massively intrusive action by the Roman state; but, rather, a pressing concern to expose, pressure, and discipline religious deviants, whose unchecked abominations and superstitious novelties were deemed responsible for the manifest fraying of the *pax deorum*. By calling upon the citizenry to affirm a pious orthopraxy of longstanding commitment—and not simply a mandated display of momentary compliance—Decius was mobilizing both state and populace to a specific end: the coercive intimidation, and detection, of those elements in the social order who were alienating the gods through perverse refusal of their customary worship. As for the subversives in question—so perceptively targeted by the decree’s probing anterior interest—they were already widely notorious, and consisted of “atheists” who had abandoned their ancestral traditions to join the criminal Christian cult, a conspiracy of deranged blasphemers of the gods and traitors to empire.¹⁶

For self-declared Christians, or those so accused, juridical precedent had long established that opportunity would be granted to either renounce or disprove involvement with the illegal *superstitio*. As Christian teachings were known to feature a demonizing denunciation of polytheistic belief and observance, a supplicating offer of sacrifice to the gods, conducted before a presiding magistrate, served as the standard arbitrating procedure.¹⁷ In combining this

hearings staged by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1930s and 40s provides an apt modern parallel: “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” Note, too, that when consular governor Pliny informs Trajan of his “Christian troubles” in Bithynia-Pontus (112 CE), he specifically reports dismissing charges against those who “denied they were, or had ever been Christians,” while executing non-citizens who obstinately refused to recant—actions the emperor endorses in his reply (*Epistles* 10.96; 10.97).

16. Persecutorial intent is further indicated by the fact that some Christians—including those with certificates and those who had sacrificed—were subjected to second arrests, as incisively documented by Graeme Clarke, “Double-Trials in the Persecution of Decius,” *Historia* 22 (1973): 650-663. See, for example, the letter of bishop Caldonius to Cyprian, metropolitan of the African Church, reporting that several of his lapsed flock had recently redeemed their salvation by bravely affirming Christ when “tested a second time” (Cyprian, *Epistle* 24.1: *iterato temptati*; similarly in Rome, *Ep.* 8.3). Feigned as well as actual acts of conformity provided no immunity, and suspected Christians remained vulnerable to secondary delations and arrests.

17. A “force them to sacrifice” procedure had already entered the repertoire of populist intimidation tactics, as bishop Dionysius relates concerning a major anti-Christian riot in Alexandria that erupted a year prior to Decius’ ascendancy (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.41, c.325). For the juridical principles and procedures deployed against Christians, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix’s essays remain fundamental, collected conveniently in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also James Rives’s insightful overview, “The Persecution of Christians and Ideas of Community in the Roman Empire,” in *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2011), 199-217. Donald Kyle’s *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* contains much value on

“sacrifice test” with a mandatory avowal of lifelong orthopraxy—and extending it to the population at large—Decius and his advisors will have surely anticipated the difficulties such a dual “oath & sacrifice” dictate would pose for Christians, whose membership in their own cult remained conditional upon confessional loyalty to Christ and principled avoidance of all idolatrous conventions.¹⁸ The edict’s binding requirement to obtain notarized certificates could be expected to induce defections from the less committed, while driving militant recusants into the open via flight or through defiant gestures of voluntary martyrdom—a response pattern familiar from earlier state-church encounters. In contrast to the sporadic and localized persecutorial efforts of the past, Decius’ innovative and menacing device of certification furnished officials with enforcement controls of comprehensive sweep, to which an anxious citizenry—now called upon to participate collectively in a sacred obligation to regain divine patronage—would provide the requisite local surveillance.¹⁹

the violent intensity of popular and official hostility towards Christians, as evidenced by degrading executions in the arena on charges of sacrilege and treason, the maltreatment of their corporeal remains, and outright incinerations or disposals at sea—calculated cruelties that purposefully mocked the preaching of bodily resurrection and frustrated devotional appetency for martyr relics (London: Routledge, 2001), 242-264.

18. The required sworn statement of abiding fealty to the ancestral gods was all but certainly devised to place Christians in direct contravention of the redemptive declaration they had uttered at the time of their sanctifying rebirth: “Could a servant of God stand there, speak and renounce Christ, when he had already renounced the Devil and the world?” (*Stare illic potuit Dei servus, et loqui et renuntiare Christo, qui jam diabolo renuntiaverat et saeculo?*). Thus Cyprian, *De lapsis* 8, categorically invoking the formulaic abjuration of “Satan and all his works” featured in the baptismal rite: “Upon entering the water, we make profession of the Christian faith ... bearing witness with our mouth that we have renounced the Devil, his pomp, and his angels” (Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 4, c.200; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21, c.215). Christians who obtained certificates through bribes or forgery—circumventing thereby the edict’s injunction to testify and sacrifice publicly—were nonetheless categorized as apostates, seeing as the wording of the *libellus* constituted “a confession of denial, the testimony of a Christian who rejects what he had been” (Cyprian, *De lapsis* 27.1; also the view of Novatian, *Ep.* 30.3.1). The Pliny-Trajan correspondence had already established that a formal renunciation or refutation of Christian affiliation required, as one of several corroborating proofs, a recited “invocation of the gods” (*deos appellarent; supplicando dis nostris*, 10.96; 10.97).

19. But why, minimalist scholars have pointedly asked, were Christians neither specifically mentioned in the *libelli*, nor simply attacked directly? Beyond slighting the seasoned practicality of Roman statecraft, this query fails to consider the downside of commencing with measures liable to inciting vigilantism. Past practice, moreover, confirmed the efficacy of “sacrifice tests” in achieving sought-for renunciations. In the midst of a roiling military crisis, Decius’ anti-Christian strategy will have been cognizant that punitive sanctions would be easier to implement following clear demonstrations of sacrilegious treason by members of the offending *superstitio*. And how feasible would any “direct” assault have been? Prominent clerics were locally known, but given the reliance

The persecution opened with targeted policing operations calculated to bring dread and disorder to the communities of Christ, as several high clerics were arrested prior to public scheduling of the oath-swearing sacrifices. The bishop of Rome was promptly tried and either beheaded or succumbed under torture, the martyrdoms of his episcopal peers at Antioch, Pamphylia, and Jerusalem soon to follow; others, including the bishops of Carthage, Alexandria, and Neo-Caesarea, evaded capture through hurried departures. Concerned locals assisted by clamoring for the apprehension of Christians of known prominence or involvement, sometimes to the point of hauling suspected “atheists” before the authorities by force. As administrative implementation of the edict took hold across the provinces, heroically resistant bishops, presbyters, deacons, and lesser clergy were imprisoned and tortured; a great many more eluded arrest through flight or concealment. Defiant members of the laity, women and children included, were also rounded up and subjected to carceral punishments, pending scheduled trials before provincial governors. Decius will have drawn yet greater reassurance from incoming reports that vast numbers of Christians were complying with the edict and returning to “ancestral custom,” the sacrosanct *mos maiorum*. In a few instances, congregants were summoned and led up to the smoking altars by their own bishops, cheered on by approving crowds.²⁰

How history might have transpired had the “blasphemous serpent” and “forerunner of Antichrist” been granted a longer tenure is open to speculation, for Decius and his eldest son were slain in battle during a Balkan campaign against invading Goths in the summer of 251. A horrific plague gripping the empire

of state authorities on security information provided by private citizens acting as *delatores* and *accusatores* (Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), a mass strike against a “furtive, light-shunning” cult-movement did not present enticing options (*Octavius* 8.3, c.230). Decius’ mandated notarization of avowed lifelong orthopraxy and witnessed sacrificial performance—both entirely unproblematic for the vast polytheist majority—not only effectively “exposed” the non-compliant to public view and traceable identity, it rendered continuing membership a far more hazardous choice.

20. Cyprian, *Ep.* 55.11, a case in Italy; 59.10, in Africa Proconsularis. Also in Smyrna, where bishop Euktemon encourages others to offer sacrifice, with resisters “searched for” and “dragged in” by a temple warden and his men, *Martyrium Pionii* 3.1; 4.13; 15.2; 18.13. Pagan vigilantism: Cyprian, *Epp.* 6.4; 14.1; 40.1, “stones and flames”; 56.1; Dionysius of Alexandria *ap.* Eusebius, *HE* 6.41.1-8: Christians compelled to sacrifice and recite impieties, homes ransacked, murderous stonings and burnings; 6.41.14-15: confessors paraded through the city on camels, assaulted by jeering onlookers, burnings in quicklime and beheadings. Agitated crowds acted similarly in the persecution that had erupted in Gaul c.177, with Christians brutally battered on the streets before being hauled off for summary trials and staged executions in the local amphitheatre (all vividly memorialized in a circular epistle preserved by Eusebius, *HE* 5.1). Tertullian attests that hostile mobs frequently assail Christians with stones and fire, their “Bacchanalian frenzy” extending even to cemeteries, where remains of the faithful are savagely disinterred and violated (*Apologeticus* 37.2, c.197).

carried off his younger son, and renewed political disorders and urgent military challenges—barbarian and Sassanian—would momentarily displace the Christian problem to a concern of secondary importance.²¹

Mass Apostasy, Penitential Discipline, and the Schism of the *Katharoi*

Christian leaders who experienced this violent “sweep of the dragon’s tail” were anxiously forthright in describing the devastation wrought upon their communities.²² From across the empire, all surviving testimony indicates great numbers of Christians—some in frantic eagerness, others in anguished trepidation—made their way to the temples and offered sacrifices to the gods they had denounced as demons upon their conversion to Christ. Some avoided

21. Christian invective against the persecuting emperor was drawn irresistibly to the luridly potent symbolism of John’s Apocalypse, its “great dragon” destined to wage war against “those keeping the testimony of Jesus,” and Rome herself, the vile Whore of Babylon, “drunk from the blood of the saints” she had cruelly martyred (Rev.12.3-17;17.3). For Decius as *anguem maiorem* and *metatorem antichristi*, see the letter from a Carthaginian confessor, preserved in Cyprian, *Ep.* 22.1. The *Martyrium Pionii* has its eponymous martyr make tearful allusion to John’s text by speaking of “the stars of heaven” that are being “dragged down to earth by the dragon’s tail,” clear reference to the many who were apostatizing under Decius’ demonic edict (τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὑπὸ τῆς οὐρας τοῦ δράκοντος εἰς τὴν γῆν σεσουμένους, 12.2-3, c.250).

22. Regional synopses as well as wider assessments are presented in clerical communiqués. The African metropolitan reported to his episcopal peers: “this hostile tempest has overthrown the greater part of our laity ... and has swept up in its deadly course even a portion of the clergy,” Cyprian, *Ep.* 14.1; cf. *Ep.* 10.4: “[O]ur Mother the Church mourns the downfall and death of very many”; *Ep.* 11.8: only a “scant few stand resolutely” amidst “slaughtered heaps” of the fallen and a “trembling remnant” beset by fear; *Ep.* 19.2: the crisis extends *totius orbis*. Letters from Rome describe the local situation and circulate news received from elsewhere: “the occurrence of this great crime has been widespread ... everywhere lie the ruins of those overthrown,” *Ep.* 30.5.3-4; cf. *Ep.* 31.6: “so grievous a transgression ... has spread incredible devastation almost the whole world over.” Metropolitan Dionysius reports from Egypt that “all cowered in dread” at the edict’s posting, and briefly recounts proceedings at Alexandria. As presiding officials “called out names,” throngs of Christians came forward to offer the mandated sacrifices, cheered on to their “spiritual deaths” by mocking banter from the assembled pagan multitude. Flight was common, while many of those arrested and imprisoned would deny their faith under torture. Of these “blessed pillars of the Lord” who resisted, Dionysius provides the names and heroic actions of eighteen men and women who were burned in quicklime, beheaded, or otherwise slain to win their crowns of martyrdom (in Eusebius, *HE* 6.41.9-23). Other regions known to have been convulsed by the persecution include Spain, Gaul, Italy, Sicily, Palestine, Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Arabia (Cyprian, *Epp.* 67, 68, 30; Eusebius, *HE* 6.39; 6.46; 7.5).

the horror of the polluting deed by sending slaves or kin as proxies; others plied local officials with bribes to procure signatures on covertly submitted affidavits of sacrifice. A brisk production in forged *libelli* appears to have developed as well, to judge from the scale of the penitential problem that would soon throw the churches into protracted chaos and factional conflict. Many from the clerical ranks opted for discretion over confrontation, their flights to safety abetted by clandestine networks of co-believers operating across rural areas and within the secretive havens of larger cities. Martyrdoms were surprisingly few.

Analysis of the fallout from the Decian sacrifice order cannot properly proceed without precursory assessment of the prevailing “minimalist” consensus, leveraged as it is on the sweeping premise that Christian sources vastly overstate and rhetorically dramatize the extent to which believers were subject to popular hostility and state repression.²³ Curiously, this assertive “default skepticism” has taken hold despite its unexplained and unjustified contravention of the long-established hermeneutical procedures of *Quellenkritik*, according to which the “sifting” of rhetoric, ideology, and myth-making from descriptive reportage and corollary informational disclosure must be carried out meticulously, not only on a case-by-case basis but through encompassing syntheses as well.

Due to the vastness of the empire and the limited scope of record-keeping, the numbers of Christians imprisoned, tortured, and executed will never be known, not even approximately. There is more than sufficient evidence, however, to deduce that the scale of persecutorial torments—corporeal and mental—was anything but negligible.²⁴ Projective modern sensibilities and reigning academic fashions have combined, unhelpfully, to blunt recognition of the extent to which membership in an illegal and widely-reviled cult association generated its own distinctive “experiential structure,” one permeated by what Geoffrey de Ste. Croix memorably characterized as “the atmosphere of constant menace” within which Christians negotiated their daily existence (*Christian Persecution*, p. 68).

23. Corke-Webster’s “The Roman Persecutions,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), provides an instructive overview. While in agreement with those questioning whether Decius’ sacrifice edict was an anti-Christian measure, Corke-Webster voices concern over the trending imbalance in the historiography, which has been marked by a pronounced drift towards “minimalism” and growing hesitancy about the degree to which the state sought to repress the Christian faith. The resulting one-sidedness, he cautions, has obscured “both the reality of Christian suffering, and the real reasons for it” (p. 47).

24. As to “death toll” testimony, we are unlikely to come across anything more credible than a statement attributed, either directly or derivatively, to Christianity’s preeminent intellectual critic, the Neoplatonist Porphyry. After commenting on the executions of the apostles Peter and Paul, the philosopher makes pointed reference to “the myriads, the innumerable others” who were “consumed by fire or put to death by other punishments” (μυρίοι, quoted in Makarios Magnes, *Apokritikos* IV.4, c.300?). Porphyry’s broad estimate, let it be noted, predates the far deadlier Great Persecution (303-313 CE), and it passes without challenge by the Christian Makarios.

Consider, for example, the psychologically harrowing implications of Tertullian's startling disclosure that entire church communities labored under "tributary bondage" to extortionists and military-police, yielding up "protection fees" as precarious surety against arrest or prosecution (*De Fuga* 13.5; 12.11, c.215). Christians were subjected to private shakedowns as well, preyed upon by informers, soldiers, and corrupt officials making the rounds for their customary "guilt-money" indemnities—transactions an outraged Tertullian denounces as a "selling-out" of Christ "under the folds of a tunic" (12.5). Similar hazards were encountered across the empire. Justin Martyr decries the readiness of Roman officials—acting under demonic sway—to execute Christians on the scheming accusations of rapacious informers (*Second Apology* 1.2; 12.3-4; 14.2, c.154). Melito of Sardis reports on new decrees that allow extortionists free reign to plunder the "pious of God," whilst yet other communicants undergo punishments and judicial murders (*To Antoninus*, c.170; in Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.5-6,). Athenagoras calls upon Marcus Aurelius to extend his celebrated benevolence to Christians, against whom an enraged populace "wages war" and who suffer "dispossession" and "slaughter" through the intrigues of covetous informers (*Plea for the Christians* 1.2-4, c.178). Hippolytus tells of recurring raids on houses of worship, with those apprehended forcibly compelled to venerate the accursed demons or risk imprisonment on capital charges (*Commentary on Daniel* 1.20-22, c.220). A pervasive sense of beleaguerment is likewise attested to by Tertullian: "Daily we are besieged, daily betrayed; in our gatherings and assemblies we are oft taken by surprise" (*Apologeticus* 7.4: *obsidemur ... prodimur ... opprimimur*).

If these and similar claims regarding anti-Christian repression were confined to writings of the purported victims, a measured skepticism might be warranted. But such is not the case. Corroborative testimony is amply preserved in the least impugnable of our sources, i.e., in texts authored by the pagan opposition, by those hostile to the subversive new cult. Indeed, Christians had gained notoriety for their defiant ἀφοβία in the face of torture and death already in the time of the Stoic Epictetus, who attributes their irrational bravery to habitual conditioning (ὑπὸ ἔθους, *Discourses* 4.11.6, c.108). Lucian of Samosata is likewise struck by the bizarre readiness of Christians to deliver themselves up for arrest and their open "scorn for death," derangements he attributes to their credulous belief in "pending immortality" (καταφρονούσιν τοῦ θανάτου; ἀθάνατοι ἔσεσθαι, *Death of Peregrinus* 13.13, c.165). Marcus Aurelius, the "fourth" of the persecuting emperors according to Christian tradition, registers similar disapproval of the "unarmed militancy" with which Christians obstinately embrace their fatal punishments (ψιλήν παρτάταξιν, *Meditations* 11.4, c.175). Galen, after faulting Christians for dogmatism and superstition, nonetheless expresses admiration for aspects of their moral conduct, including a "fearlessness of death" that "we witness in them every day" (quoted in Uṣaybi'ah's *History of Physicians*). The precarity of Christian existence is also extensively detailed by Celsus, who expressly states that Christ's deluded followers are routinely executed for

profaning the deities and seditious disloyalty to state and society: “you are bound, led to punishment, and fastened to the stake, whilst your demon—or Son of God, as you call him—takes no vengeance”; the gods “punish severely those who revile them, and every blasphemer must either flee and hide or be apprehended and slain”; “even when your transgressions escape detection, still you will be sought out, captured, and punished with death” (quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum*: 8.39, 41, 69; also 7.40; 8.38, 43, 49, 54, 65).

Another contributing factor in the genesis and maintenance of that “atmosphere of constant menace” was the prominence of public executions in the Roman penal system. The perils of Christian membership were repeatedly advertised to the citizenry from early on—and “spectacularly” so—through the elaborate rituals of punitive violence that were staged inside the blood-drenched amphitheatres of the empire. The macabre revelry of lexical abuse baying spectators heaped upon condemned Christians is revealing in itself, as those stalwart victims of cruelty were derisively dubbed “half-axels” and “firebrands,” gruesome nominalizations, respectively, of the stakes to which they were bound and the kindling of their agonizing incineration (*sarmenticios et semaxios appelletis*, Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 50.3, c.197).²⁵

Minimalist scholars, in denying persecutorial intent to Decius’ sacrifice edict, tendentially dismiss or downplay the coercive aspects of its implementation—some to the point of proposing that most Christians were either enthusiastic in their participation or untroubled by the prospects of committing idolatrous trespass.²⁶ The historical record, however, contains no attestations by any

25. On the sanguinary fates of Christians in the arenas, see Kathleen Coleman’s classic study, “Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 44-73. That the “punitive terrors” of the Roman state entered deeply into the making of Christian subjects is the compelling conclusion of Brent Shaw’s luminous investigation, “Judicial Nightmares and Christian Memory,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 533-563.

26. Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), speculates most Christians still shared the “metaphysical views” of the wider pagan society, and were thus no less anxious over the crisis conditions besetting the empire than their fellow citizens; taking part in Decius’ apotropaic *supplicatio* was accordingly embraced as both a “patriotic duty” and an efficacious means to reclaim divine favour (pp. 6-8, 226-29, 250). Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), insists Christians were neither targeted nor pressured by the state, and that the majorities who complied with the sacrifice order did so willingly and without awareness their participation jeopardized continuing Church membership. Most Christians, he theorizes, practiced a “situational selection of identities,” resulting in only “intermittent” involvement in Church life and a “low level of Christian groupness” overall. When called upon to venerate the gods, the majority of Christians simply chose to “deactivate their Christianness” in deference to their civic membership in the imperial commonwealth (pp. 7-8, 49-55, 60). Rives’s “Decree of Decius”, widely credited with establishing the “unintended persecution” thesis, is

Christians that they complied with the sacrifice order because they shared its aims, believed in its efficacy, or failed to understand that pouring libations and consuming flesh consecrated to the gods might be incompatible with their devotion to Christ. What we do have, however, is a considerable body of evidence—including clerical correspondence, scriptural commentaries, patristic treatises (prohibitions on idolatry and exhortations to martyrdom most notably), and sundry commemorative texts recounting the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of Christian martyrs—that communicates the motivational matrix for apostasy in vivifying detail and telling consistency. For the recurrent refrain across all these genres, unsurprisingly, is that Christians lapse into idolatry and apostasy primarily through fear: fear of being identified as Christian; fear of losing public office or status; fear of property confiscations; fear of imprisonment or exile; of torture; of condemnation to mines, arenas, brothels; and, ultimately, fear of judicial execution.

A brief sampling: “the double-minded, whenever they hear of persecution, become idolaters through cowardice” (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 9.21.3); timid brethren fearful that large and regularly scheduled assemblies will attract hostile surveillance (Tertullian, *De Fuga* 3.4, c.212); anxiously consenting to demon-invoking oaths, blessings, and signed contracts from fear of detection (*On Idolatry* 21-23, c.212); “weakness of the flesh” when confronting “the heavy sword, uplifted cross, ferocity of the beasts, the supreme punishment of fire, and all the ingenious torments of the executioner” (*To the Martyrs* 4.2, c.197); eminent and office-holding Christians, succumbing to fear, rush forward to offer idolatrous sacrifices (Dionysius, in Eusebius *HE* 6.41.11); threats of exile, torture, and proprietary loss will not “terrorize” stalwart believers who are “prepared to endure imprisonment, armed to accept death” (Cyprian, *De lapsis* 2); valiant Christian women, cast into the mythic roles of Danaids and Dirce, willing to suffer the depraved indignities and horrific tortures of the amphitheatre (*I Clement* 6, c.96); wives and maidens delivered over for brothel service—*ad lenonem* rather than *ad leonem*—a punitive degradation targeting the cult’s elevated norms of chastity and monogamic continence (Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 50.12-13).

Even allowing for a degree of “threat magnification” by Christian authors, the fears and terrors identified were scarcely imaginary, given the very real dangers that attended active involvement in a non-licit organization suspected of civic disloyalty and gross impiety. Indeed, as we have seen, all surviving pagan testimony—from Epictetus and Lucian to Celsus and Porphyry—establishes unambiguously that Christians were ever liable to sudden visitations of repressive violence. As a consequence of neglecting this evidential concordance between “persecutor” and “persecuted,” revisionist minimalism cannot but

notably cautious on the issue: “[I]t is possible ... [but there is] no compelling reason to see his decree as primarily an anti-Christian measure” (pp. 141-42); “Decius’ decision to require some kind of certification may in fact have simply been a whim” (p. 151).

present a portrait of Christian self-understanding and agency that is woefully lacking in social-psychological awareness and plausibility. For if, as minimalists speculatively propose, the majority of Christians were only tenuously committed to their membership, or so obligingly accepting of the metaphysical views of their pagan contemporaries—notwithstanding the altogether different eschatology imbibed during years of doctrinal instruction as catechumens (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 17-20)—why, one wonders, would such non-committal and open-minded people risk converting to a stigmatized cult movement that carried even the slightest possibilities of dispossession, torture, and execution?

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After an intense opening phase to the persecution, enforcement began to slacken during its second year of operation, as a beleaguered Roman state turned with urgency to the escalating military threats that would presently claim the emperor's life. Discretionary local amnesties appear to have been granted, with significant numbers of imprisoned confessors gaining unexpected release. Scheduled trials and repeat arrests continued sporadically, but the evident downturn in policing vigilance encouraged many exiles and fugitives to venture their returns. Resurfacing clerics, reclaiming a sometimes contested authority, set about the task of rebuilding shattered congregations and initiated plans for the reconvening of regional councils to address the manifold crisis.

According to the covenantal terms of the Christian salvation promise, the miraculous cleansing and spiritual empowerment of the baptismal “washing of rebirth” required continued preservation for its salvific efficacy; any return to “sin's dominion” risked the loss of what had been divinely gifted.²⁷ Lesser

27. “How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6.2). “Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin” (1 John 3.8-10). “For if we go on sinning willfully after having received knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains any sacrifice offering for our sins, but only a terrifying prospect of judgment and raging fire” (Hebrews 10.26-31). There are also nearly two dozen New Testament “Vice Lists” that comprise an extensive cataloguing of failings, the more serious of which—avarice, idolatry, fornication, murder, fraud—are explicitly stated to risk forfeiture of one's “inheritance in the kingdom of God” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Ephesians 5.3-5). Such stringent stipulations—articulated originally within the context of prophesied expectations of imminent eschatological deliverance—proved increasingly difficult to sustain as Christians found their earthly “sojourn” lengthening. To restore hope and forestall defections from those beset by doubt and despair, a remedial pardon for sins committed after baptism would be needed. That reform was first communicated in an influential apocalyptic text, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c.95-120), which announced a divinely-granted “last chance” remission for backsliding Christians (Mandate 4.3). No future sins could be forgiven, and heartfelt contrition must commence immediately, in the brief time remaining before Christ's return. A few generalizing passages might seem to suggest a plenary atonement, but the Black Mountain allegory expressly excludes “apostates,

failings of character or inter-personal conduct were atonable through acts of charity, prayer, and fasting, but the restorative adequacy of these measures did not extend to iniquities deemed offensive against God. In the Christian moral economy, no transgression carried greater opprobrium, or more lethal consequences, than apostasy. To deny Christ, in whatever circumstance or manner, was to reaffirm Satan; and by so doing the traitorous blasphemer forfeited membership in the community of God's elect, and therewith all prospects for salvation in the heavenly life to come.²⁸

blasphemers of the Lord, and betrayers of God's servants," offenses for which "there is no repentance, but only death" (Similitude 9.19.1). Over ensuing decades, this emergency "grace period" arrangement would be superseded by a clerically-administered sacrament that provided restorative cleansing for believers who had failed to keep their baptismal seal intact. Limited to single-use accessibility, this "second repentance" (*paenitentia secunda*, μετάνοια δευτέρα) required demonstrable evidence of remorse, as manifested by open confession, tearful lamentations, sackcloth and ashes, fasting, almsgiving, and prayer (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.13, c.200; Tertullian, *On Penitence* 7-10, c.204). Clerical discretion and differences in local custom will have influenced the implementation of the new sacrament—as indicated, for example, by the reported disagreement over chastity between the laxist Dionysius of Corinth and the rigorist Pinytos of Knossos, c.170 (Eusebius, *HE* 4.23). It is unlikely graver sins were conventionally pardoned at this time, however, for the penitential crises to come would erupt precisely over that issue.

28. There were self-identified Christians—typically styled Gnostics—who rejected the necessity of confessing Christ publicly and its corresponding obligation to martyrdom. In the *Testimony of Truth* (c.190), those professing that a martyr's death brings "perfection" and "assured salvation" are derided for their ignorance in "not knowing where they are going nor who Christ is," and for the blasphemy of believing "the Father desires human sacrifices" (31.22-34.10; in Tertullian's less reserved language: the heretics "reproach us with having a murderer for our God," *Scorpiace* 7.1, c.212). In the *Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter* (c.180), a docetic Christology underpins criticism of those professing to be God's appointed "bishops" and "deacons," but who in actuality are "messengers of evil" who "oppress their brothers" by encouraging them to embrace sacrificial deaths in vain belief that "salvation comes through this" (77.25-80.20). Dissenting views on confession and martyrdom also find combative mention in mainstream rebuttals. Irenaeus, extolling the loving readiness of the Church to send a "multitude of martyrs" on to the Father, charges Gnostic heretics with perversely rejecting the necessity of bearing witness and of pouring contempt on those slain for confessing Christ (*Adversus haeresus* 4.33.9; 3.18.5, c.180). Clement of Alexandria categorically dismisses all objections to confession and martyrdom as "sophisms of cowardice" that betoken "an impious and cowardly love of life." Even believers whose conduct falls short of the holy requirements will redeem their salvation, he insists, by "not denying Him when being tortured to death" (*Stromata* 4.4, δειλία σοφίσματα; 4.9). According to Origen, the Elkesaite sectarians likewise regarded public confession of Christ a matter of indifference, and urged those of sound mind to "deny with the mouth, but not in their heart" whenever threatened (Eusebius, *HE* 6.38.1). Orthodox opposition to dissembling, however, did not grant license to "rushing after

The gradual advance of Christianity over its first two centuries appears to have been but lightly impacted by disciplinary expulsions and incidental cases of voluntary exodus. The Decian calamity, however, was no localized problem involving a few wayward or discontented individuals, but a coercively induced mass apostasy that ravaged and split entire congregations across the empire. Confronted by idolatrous betrayals on a scale that called into question the organizational viability of the Christian movement and the credibility of its core teachings, Church leaders found their options fatefully polarized. Should traditional norms and disciplinary practices be upheld, in strict conformity with God's enduringly revealed word? Or should exigencies of the moment take precedence, in recognition that the redemptive mission of the Church permits tactical adjustments in the escalating cosmic struggle?

Instances of clerical misconduct and divisions within the lay ranks posed additional complications. Steadfast confessors could be found everywhere who had endured incarceration, horrendous tortures, and confiscatory banishments to affirm their devotion to Christ. A great many others ventured so-called *privatae confessiones* by refusing to appear before the superintending officials. As episcopal testimony concedes, however, the ranks of these *stantes*, the "standing faithful," were overwhelmed by the greater numbers of lapsed or "fallen" brethren who had denied their Saviour, whether by offering the abominable sacrifices outright or through faithlessly procuring the impious certificates attesting to compliance. As throngs of these *lapsi* now clamored for forgiveness and reinstatement, it became evident that if Christ's broken and demoralized militias were to regain their spirit for renewed battle, the deadly sin of apostasy would require a more compassionate understanding than either tradition or scripture appeared to allow.

If the magnitude of the Decian crisis was unprecedented, the pastoral implications raised familiar issues. Decades earlier, Christians had clashed over a related principle, occasioned by the fact that many recent converts and less zealous members were failing to abide by their baptismal purity commitments. Two reformist metropolitans, Agrippinus of Carthage (*fl.* 215) and Callistus of Rome (*fl.* 220), would address this demoralizing predicament by separately authorizing a reconfiguration of the established penitential distinction between sins pardonable and those irremissible.²⁹ These latter "sins unto death" (*peccata*

death" through militant provocations; persecutions were to be faithfully endured, not recklessly courted (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.4,10).

29. A distinction drawn from scripture: on the "everlasting" and "unforgiveable sin" against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3.29, Matt. 12.31-32, Luke 12.10); the "sin unto death" that cannot be rescinded through intercession (1 John 5.16); the so-called Apostolic Decree, mandating abstention from idolatry, fornication, and murder (Acts 15.22-29). Influential precedents: "if a man sins against God, who can intercede for him?" (1 Samuel 2:25); "He that sacrifices unto the gods ... shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 20.22). Disputes and divisions over these and related matters—gradations of sin, rules for expulsion, the extent

mortalia, ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον) were held to terminate the perpetrator's prospect for salvation, their soul-damning commission provoking an aggrieved departure of the indwelling Holy Spirit that had been gifted during baptism. Though fornication and adultery had long ranked alongside apostasy and murder in the *peccata mortalia* category, Agrippinus and Callistus now ruled that sacerdotal absolution could be extended to those carnal offenses, conditional upon suitable displays of repentance and atonement. Moderates everywhere embraced the new policy, but traditionalists either refused or resisted its implementation—even to the point of an open split in the Roman church, where conservative elements were led into schism by the learned presbyter Hippolytus (c.170-235), who denounced his laxist rival Callistus as a corrupting abettor of sins against Christ.³⁰

In shifting the focus from licentious desire to issues of idolatry and apostasy, the empire-wide persecution launched by Decius struck at the very core of

of priestly powers of absolution, recidivism problems—were inevitable, the sacred texts providing no integral, unified penitential program, but only scattered and reiterated appeals to both sinlessness and repentance, divine mercy and righteous punishment. Polemical exchanges between disciplinary moderates and hardliners will accordingly oscillate within the confines of selective exegesis. For key texts and commentary, Oscar Watkins, *A History of Penance, Vol. I* (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1920). See also Jeffrey Siker, *Jesus, Sin, and Perfection in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially Chapter 3, “A Taxonomy of Sin.”

30. Hippolytus reports Callistus trawled the scriptures for proof-texts and images he could adapt to justify his nefarious reforms. Shrewd reinterpretations of the Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43) and the symbol of Noah's Ark proved particularly influential. Against the Lord's own explanation—that the “field” represents the world, Christ's “wheat” shall be gathered come Judgement Day, and Satan's “tares” cast into a fiery furnace—Callistus ingeniously takes the field to symbolize the Church, wherein “the tares grow alongside the wheat” till world's end. A similar “inclusionary” exegesis is offered for the Ark, traditionally taken as an emblem of the Church as a “vessel of salvation” for those “sealed” safely inside by the purifying waters of baptism (1 Peter 3.20-22; Tertullian, *On Baptism* 8.3-5). Callistus emphasizes instead the Ark's conveyance of all manner of animals “clean and unclean,” a signification, he insists, of the Church's obligation to provide shelter for those “pure and impure” alike. The popular appeal of these indulgent accommodations is bitterly conceded by Hippolytus himself, who bemoans the multiplication of Callistus' deluded followers, as “crowds stream into his *didaskaleion* ... gathering in throngs for the sake of pleasures Christ did not permit” (*Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* 9.12.20-24, c.230). Tertullian, giving vent to rigorist concerns in the African churches, likewise condemns the new reconciling measures as an assault on chastity and purity—decrees “fit for posting on the doors of brothels”—and ridicules the inconsistency of granting absolution to adulterers and fornicators while continuing to uphold the scriptural ban on murderers and idolaters (*De pudicitia* 1.6; 5.10-15; 12.11; 19.25, c.218). Surveying the scene from Egypt and Palestine, Origen voices similar apprehension over rampant penitential leniency and the arrogation of priestly powers not countenanced by scripture, even to the point of remitting “sins unto death” (*De oratione* 28.9-10, c.234).

Christian identity. For here the Redeemer had spoken not in parables, but in categorical speech: “Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before my Father in heaven; whosoever shall deny Me, him will I also deny” (Matt. 10.32-3). Indeed, the parallel scripture in Luke expressly links the obligation of “bearing witness to Christ” to trials of persecution, whether held in the “synagogues” or before “the rulers and authorities” (12.8-11). In the wake of the mass apostasy brought on by the Decian “oath & sacrifice” edict, the ecclesiological quandary permitted no evasion. Would the Church continue to self-identify as a community whose sanctified members “stand firm” against the Satanic foe, ever faithful to their baptismal pledge? Or did the widening crisis now necessitate replenishment of Christ’s ravaged army, through the demoralizing and polluting readmission of known apostates?

The action-sequence that would propel the course of this transformative episode can be reconstructed from the pastoral pamphleteering and epistolary correspondence that survives, much of it conveying information of evocatively textured specificity.³¹ Explanatory comprehension of the unfolding dynamic must be keyed to its developing phases:

- (1) initial shock, collapse, and disorientation, as the Decian edict induces widespread apostasy and disrupts effective governance in the churches through targeted arrests and ensuing clerical flight;
- (2) crisis management, as Church leaders begin the process of negotiating policy responses to address the many-sided problems of shattered communities and ministerial misconduct;
- (3) the crystallization of factional alignments—laxist, moderate, rigorist—that will contend openly for control over Christian identity and ecclesiastical authority; and
- (4) the outbreak of full schismatic rupture, pitting puritan traditionalists against a consolidating majority increasingly inclined towards disciplinary clemency and a wider deployment of sacramental means of group preservation.

The tension-filled passage from the onset of persecution to the eruption of schism was driven by two overriding concerns: an *organizational imperative* of

31. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* books VI and VII, surveys the Decian and Valerian persecutions and reproduces key texts from the period, including correspondence of the influential Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria. The voluminous writings of Cyprian of Carthage provide a fascinating bedrock of alert observation and interested polemic. In addition to his major treatises on the crisis, *De lapsis* and *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, a collection of 82 letters consisting of “real time” engagements survives, the majority either written by or to Cyprian during his time of concealment. The entire corpus receives luminously detailed exegesis in Graeme Clarke’s indispensable four-volume set of annotated translations, *The Letters of St. Cyprian* (New York: Newman Press, 1984-89). A few *Acta Martyrum* and several treatises authored by the “anti-pope” Novatian convey invaluable supplemental information.

restoring to communion the majorities that had apostatized; and a *discursive requirement* of appearing to do so within the legitimizing bounds set by tradition and scripture. Difficulties arose from the start. Large numbers of those who had procured fraudulent certificates of sacrifice, the so-called *libellatici*, pressed for immediate readmission, citing in mitigation their adroit avoidance of the pollutions of idolatry. Imprisoned confessors, in their exalted status as martyrs-to-be, were soon utilizing their anticipated intercessory powers with God to grant *libelli pacis* to those making appeal, all but forcing the bishops to offer merciful pardons to the lapsed. In several notorious instances, letters of indulgence were extended to *sacrificati* who had openly apostatized. As panic and disorder spread, various confessor groups began issuing blanket reconciliations for all those expressing remorse, while clerics who had remained at their stations—either inclining towards leniency themselves or yielding to popular pressures—responded by readmitting to communion all who had fallen.³² Traditionalists will straightaway decry the “false mercies” of these deceptive practices, which not only leave the “wounds of the dying” untreated, but expose God’s faithful to the “lethal contagion” of those who had but recently served at the Devil’s altars, their contaminating breath still reeking of “the death-bearing foods of idols.”³³

From their places of concealment, the preeminent bishops attempted to reassert disciplinary controls through envoys and letters; compromised by their own unseemly retreat from the fray, their counsels met mixed reception. Illustrative is the predicament Dionysius of Alexandria confronted, as he recounts in an imploring missive to his colleague, Fabius of Antioch. Across all Egypt, he

32. Cyprian, *Ep.* 15.4: entire households pardoned; *Ep.* 20.2: “no distinctions drawn, no examinations of cases ... thousands of *libelli pacis* issued daily”; *Ep.* 27.1-3: raucous lapsi demanding full restoration, confessors bestowing great numbers of reconciling certificates; *De lapsis* 16: reckless confessors “pardoning sins at random” (*remittendis passim*). Though the practice of seeking intercession from confessor-martyrs was of longstanding, bishops strove to subordinate its discretionary pliancy to episcopal oversight and ratification. Opposition to known abuses was voiced most forcefully by hardliners such as Tertullian, who complains adulterers and fornicators flock to the prisons and mines to receive absolution for sins only God can remit. What next, he queries, martyrs granting pardons to murderers, idolaters, apostates? (*De pudicitia* 22.1-3, 11-15). He was apparently unaware, or preferred not to notice, that Christians who had lapsed during the persecutions in Gaul under Marcus Aurelius had already received reconciliation from the confessor-martyrs, who in compassionate love for their fallen brethren “released all and bound none” (ἔλυον ἅπαντας, ἐδέσμευον δὲ οὐδένα, Eusebius, *HE* 5.2.5-8).

33. Cyprian, *De lapsis* 15: *contagia funesta, mortiferos idolorum cibos*; 14-17 *passim*, a blistering anti-laxist indictment: “Contrary to the rigor of the Gospel, contrary to the law of the Lord and God ... a reckless communion has been allowed, an empty and false peace that is dangerous to those granting it and of no benefit to those receiving it” (15.2); “Let no one be deceived ... Only the Lord can grant mercy. Sins committed against Him can be pardoned by Him alone who bore our sins and who suffered for us, whom God delivered up for our sins” (*Nemo se fallat, nemo se decipiat. Solus Dominus misereri potest ...*, 17.1).

laments, churches have been “torn asunder” by imprisonments, banishments, and martyrdoms for the heroic few, widespread flight and apostasies from the fainthearted many. The fugitive metropolitan proceeds to the attending scandal. In his absence, and without authority, his own confessor-martyrs are pushing through laxist accommodations for the *sacrificati*, restoring them as penitents eligible to share in congregational feasting and prayers. Wary of Fabius’ traditionalist leanings, Dionysius registers his cautious approval by invoking Ezekiel 18.23, on God’s preference for the repentance rather than the deaths of sinners.³⁴ Cyprian will encounter yet greater challenges in the African churches, where localized alliances between imprisoned confessors and laxist clerics has resulted in a collapse of all penitential order and the polluting readmission of apostates to the sacrosanct table of the Eucharist.³⁵ In Rome the situation appeared less fractious, as the incarcerated confessors stood united with the managing presbyters against any premature restoration of the lapsed. Even here, however, paralyzing uncertainties prevented the election of a bishop to succeed the martyred Fabian, leaving all policy determinations unsettled (*Ep.* 8.1).

Miasmatic apprehensions ran high throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, and markedly so among Christians, for whom any contact with the demonically-infested culture of polytheism would call forth a panic of apotropaic utterances, gestures and execrations to ward off the polluting dangers.³⁶ In an atmosphere charged with such baleful dread, any proposal to readmit idolatrous apostates into communion with the faithful would provoke visceral revulsion, welling up from assiduously conditioned habits of mind and body. The advocates of clemency, to achieve their aims, would not only need to relocate the most heinous of the *aeterna peccata* within the ambit of sacerdotal powers of reconciliation, but do so on the basis of justifications responsive to the ingrained pollution anxieties of their traumatized congregations.

During the intense opening phase of the persecution, moderates and traditionalists stood united against the conduct of laxist confessors and clerics, who were readmitting the lapsed to communion without regard to scripture or proper episcopal oversight. To contain these contaminating breaches, the Carthaginian and Roman sees issued interim rulings that sought to stabilize practices on the following principles: (i) *sacrificati* and *libellatici* are alike guilty of

34. Quoted in Eusebius, *HE* 6.42.5; similar letters on penitential policy, specifying “degrees of failure” among the lapsed, τάξεις παραπτώματων, were sent to bishops in Upper Egypt, Laodicea, Armenia, and elsewhere, *HE* 6.46.

35. *Epp.* 15.1-2,4; 16.3; 17.2; 18.1-2; 19.2.3; 20.2.

36. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 37 (c.215): making the sign of the cross as “a shield against the Devil”; warding off the Adversary by spitting and insufflation; also Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 1.3 (c.212): “tracing the sign and adjuring and treading the beast underfoot”; *On Idolatry* 11.7 (c.212): spitting upon and blowing out smoldering altars. The proclivity persisted: the “apostate” emperor Julian notes that the “impious Galileans” routinely “hiss at demons and mark their foreheads with the cross,” *Epistle* 19 (c.362).

apostasy, the former having denied Christ openly, the latter having done so inwardly; (ii) apostasy, as a “sin against God,” lay beyond priestly powers of absolution; (iii) penance is to be enjoined on the fallen in the hope heartfelt contrition might revive their zeal for a battle still raging or, failing that, induce *divina misericordia* in the Judgement to come; (iv) demonstrated repentance will merit Eucharistic consolation for those whose death is imminent; and (v) martyrdom, the all-cleansing “baptism of blood,” remains available for those eager to reclaim their lost salvation.³⁷

These provisional guidelines, pragmatically attuned to the urgency of the crisis and the demands of tradition, proved unworkable. The sheer magnitude of the disaster was such that Church leaders who adopted a principled stance against leniency found themselves outflanked by laxist clerics and the apostate majorities who were rallying behind claims that God’s privileged advocates—the confessor-martyrs—had already sanctified their full restoration. In the regional synods that resumed convening over the spring and summer of 251, these social realities would decisively constrain the conciliar discussions that ensued and the accommodative resolutions that prevailed.

The African churches were first to hold congress, a reduced but adequate number of clerics managing to assemble in Carthage in late April. After much charged debate over the competing claims of scripture, custom, and reason, an effective majority coalesced around the legalistic principle that the varying grades and circumstances of apostasy required corresponding penitential distinctions. Those who had lapsed through the ruse of bogus certificates were adjudged to have committed a lesser offense. Censurable for lack of faith, their avowed intention—to avoid fatal ingestion of demonic offerings—rendered their misconduct pardonable. On condition the “pollution of conscience” thereby incurred had since been cleansed by repentant gestures of humbling affliction, these *libellatici* were pronounced eligible for immediate restoration. As for those who had offered the accursed sacrifices, theirs was a defilement of both flesh and spirit; terms of lifelong penance were deemed necessary to yield the required *satisfactio*. Even here, however, Church leaders acknowledged many of the fallen had succumbed only after excruciating rounds of torture, as methodically inflicted through the barbarous Roman pentad of *flagella*, *fustes*, *equuleus*, *ungula*, and *flamma*.³⁸ Professed empathies would inform policy choices in due course,

37. Cyprian, *Epp.* 18.1-2; 19.2.1; 20.2-3; 27.4; Roman clergy, *Epp.* 8.2.3, 3.1; 30.3.1-2, 6.2, 8.1; 36.3.3. In Egypt, Dionysius was already following a more committed laxist course, to the point of granting a full “blotting out of the sin” through bestowal of the Viaticum (in Eusebius, *HE* 6.44: τῆς ἀμαρτίας ἐξαλειφθεῖσης).

38. *De lapsis* 13: a gruesome account of confessors contending bravely against lash, cudgels, rack, claw, and flame; Roman presbyters reporting on bodies “mangled, racked, and butchered” by fiendishly cruel instruments of torture (*extorto et excruciato et excarnificato*, *Ep.* 31.3). See also Eusebius’ account of the horrific torments suffered by Origen during his incarceration in Caesarea Maritima, *HE* 6.39.5.

but the assembled bishops were as yet unwilling to move beyond assurances that all death-bed reconciliations of the penitent would be supported by intercessory blessings for the heavenly trials to come.³⁹

In their cautious endorsement of leniency within restraints, these synodal rulings disclose the shifting social pressures in play. It is of telling significance that Cyprian, his immense authority as metropolitan notwithstanding, failed to garner support for the rigorist compact he had negotiated earlier with the presbyters of Rome: *libellatici* and *sacrificati* alike guilty of apostasy, and no “loosing” by God’s earthly servants is permissible for this most transgressive of mortal sins. The extent to which Cyprian affirmed those traditionalist positions during conclave is unrecoverable from the summary reports, but the new direction he charted in its aftermath is unmistakable. Having yielded to the tide of conciliatory opinion, the Carthaginian bishop will henceforth extol the new consensus for its “healthy moderation” and commit his office unreservedly to the sacred trust of “restoring the many to salvation.”⁴⁰

As the African synod drew to a close, its hard-won achievements were abruptly superseded by news the Roman church was verging on schism, precipitated by a papal succession crisis. The consecration of Cornelius, a hitherto unmentioned presbyter, provoked the immediate counter-election of Novatian, the gifted presbyter-theologian who had been exercising ecclesiastical guidance in the year since pope Fabian’s early martyrdom. Novatian’s envoys, pressing for an open investigation, laid damning charges that the elevation of Cornelius was both procedurally fraudulent and sacrilegious, owing to his earlier procurement of a certificate of sacrifice. Two Italian bishops who had participated in Cornelius’ divisive ordination arrived shortly thereafter, denouncing Novatian as a maniacal usurper (*Epp.* 44.1-2; 45.1.2). With the possibility that a *libellaticus* had been raised to the throne of Peter, presumably at the behest of importuning *lapsi*, the situation was manifestly dire. For if the counter-election signified nothing more than an act of personal aggrandizement, as Cornelius’ representatives alleged, why were the Roman confessors—presbyters and deacons among them—so enthusiastic and active in their support of Novatian?

39. All circumspectly conveyed by Cyprian in *Ep.*55, especially 6.1-2; 13; 14.2: *conscientiam pollutam*; 15; 17.3; 29.

40. *Ep.* 55.6.1, 11.3: *salubri moderatione; restituta multorum salus*. Cyprian acknowledges the new policy of reconciliation encountered vociferous resistance even within his own congregation, as fierce objections were raised against restoring anyone “contaminated” by sacrifices and adulteries. It was less by persuasion, he attests, than through extortion that he secured reinstatements for such grievous offenders (*Ep.* 59.15.3). More telling still is Cyprian’s remarkable admission that his own undue leniency has given “just cause” for the anxieties of his flock: “I remit everything, and there is much I overlook in my zeal and pledge to gather together our fraternity. Even sins committed against God I do not investigate in the full judgement of religion. In remitting more sins than I ought, I myself come near to sinning” (16.2: *Remitto omnia ...*).

Situated within the ongoing crisis of mass apostasy, the Roman succession dispute quickly erupted into a wider struggle pitting traditionalists against reformers throughout the extended network of Christian churches. Letters of justification were dispatched by the rival popes, setting off an intense round of propagandistic charges and ideological positioning. Opinion would split along existing fault-lines, with laxist and rigorist factions vying for the moderates whose backing typically decided local balances of power. Excommunicated by an Italian synod hastily convened by Cornelius later that summer, Novatian and his partisans respond by launching a full-scale campaign to rally support for the rigorist cause. Standing forth as “defenders of ecclesiastical doctrine” and “vindicators of the Gospel,” the Novatianists—working through teams of emissaries and written communications—quickly establish ties of solidarity with like-minded clerics and laity across the empire. To ensure the efficacy of sacramental ministrations, congregations being led by bishops who had failed to stand faithfully during the Decian persecution would receive replacements, consecrated by Novatian himself.⁴¹

Out of these coordinated actions, a self-proclaimed “Holy Church of the Pure” will attain rapid institutional consolidation, its ranks filled by all the many traditionalists who could find no warrant—scriptural or customary—for continued communion with known idolaters and apostates. By elevating the cause of “purity” in their very title, the Καθαροὶ resoundingly announce their principled opposition to the laxist progression underway within the “Universal” Catholic Church, whose leaders they assail as abettors of the most sacrilegious sins against God. Novatian’s rallying call to revive and defend the *ecclesia pura* Christ and His Apostles had mandated—a Church free from the contaminating

41. Cyprian’s report on the crisis betrays unmistakable alarm beneath the outrage: “Against the unity of the Catholic Church, he [Novatian] is attempting to fashion a *humanam Ecclesiam*, and is sending forth throughout numerous cities his own *novos Apostolos*, establishing foundations for arrangements of his own devising. And notwithstanding that in each of the cities and through all the provinces there are bishops already ordained, venerable in age, sound in faith, tested in trial, and proscribed in persecution, he yet dares to create *pseudo-episcopi* above these men. As if he could straddle the entire globe with his new, perverse venture, or tear asunder the connecting bonds of the Church’s body, simply by sowing his seeds of discord, not knowing that schismatics are always fervid at the outset, but are unable to add to what they have unlawfully begun,” *Ep.* 55.24.1-3. For a glimpse into the “epistolary war,” see Cornelius’ missive to Cyprian, relating that numerous letters—filled with Novatian’s “calumnies and slanders”—have been sent everywhere, sparking “divisions and disturbances in nearly all the churches,” *Ep.* 49.1.4. It is in Cornelius’ letter to Fabius of Antioch that Novatian is ridiculed for posing as a defender of Church doctrine and vindicator of the true teachings of the Gospel: ὁ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἐπιστήμης ὑπερασπιστής; ὁ ἐκδικητὴς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (quoted in Eusebius, *HE* 6.43.8,11).

presence of fornicators, adulterers, and apostates—struck a deeply resonant chord.⁴²

Cyprian's pragmatic embrace of "measured leniency" at the African synod left him little choice but to endorse Cornelius. His own episcopacy still under siege by laxist partisans, any continuing alliance with disciplinary hardliners would jeopardize the emerging Catholic consensus.⁴³ The party of moderation courted grave risks, however, in overturning traditional stipulations regarding the mandatory and permanent excommunication of apostates. By appearing to place expediency above sacred principle, the reformers exposed themselves to charges of abusing the scriptural requirement for purity within the Church, and of corrupting Christ's "virginal bride" through the polluting readmission of those who had sacrilegiously renounced their Saviour. And did these scandalous indulgences not strip from heroic martyrs and confessors the full measure of their glory, and make open mockery of the sacred obligation to bear witness?

Pressed on those very points by one of his own African bishops—absent, like many others, from the recent synod—Cyprian responds with a lengthy, carefully guarded circular. He acknowledges having opposed the reconciliation of apostates during the persecution, but insists his prior actions do not condemn his apparent reversal now. As metropolitan, his paramount responsibility lay with exhorting the fallen to redeem their lost salvation, an outcome rendered certain only through bearing witness and martyrdom. But now, with Decius slain and persecution abating, he can openly endorse the compassionate views of his colleagues, that terms for clemency should be made less stringent. And if, as his critics charge, he presently shows greater forbearance than tradition warrants, he does so for the loving purpose of "healing the wounds" of the fallen, expressly

42. The Katharoi moved quickly to rescind earlier concessions that had extended sacerdotal powers of remission to the sins of adultery and fornication. In *De bono pudicitiae*, Novatian reaffirms that those guilty of "vices of the flesh" forfeit their heavenly inheritance, as these are among the unpardonable sins that "bring death to the soul" (*vitia carnis*, 6.4-6; *animam interficiat*, 14.1, c.253). For Novatian's understanding of the true Church as a holy body, *incorruptam et inviolatam*, perpetually sustained and guided by a Holy Spirit that "brings about our sanctification" and "trains our bodies towards immortality," see *De trinitate* 29.16-17: *sanctitatis effector ... corpora nostra ad immortalitatem proficere* (c.256).

43. A full year after accepting a report clearing Cornelius of the charge of having procured a certificate (*Ep.* 55.10.2: *nulla illum libelli*), Cyprian found himself greatly troubled by news Cornelius had entered discussions with laxist bishops newly arrived from Africa, keen on winning Roman support (*Ep.* 59.2,14). He censures Cornelius for minimizing their grave "offenses against God" and warns that the pope's vacillating conduct offers yet greater scope for Novatian's abusive attacks (13.4;18.1). The difficulty in Cyprian's *via media* policy is disclosed by the uncomfortable fact that in rebuking Cornelius, he is reliant upon rigorist proof-texts such as Exodus 22.20 (idolaters shall not live) and Matthew 10.33 (Christ denies those who deny Him), as well as traditionalist "contagion" alarms that the readmission of heinous sinners risks contaminating "the entire flock with the infection of their clinging evil" (12.2,15.2).

rationalizing this turn to leniency as a “necessary submission to the urgencies of the times” (*necessitati temporum succubuisse*, Ep. 55.7.2). As for those cruel renegades who bar the door of repentance, is it not manifest they have enrolled in the Devil’s camp, the *castra diaboli*, and become complicit thereby in the callous murder of their abandoned brethren? In refusing to distinguish between those who sacrificed and those who merely obtained certificates, the pitiless Novatian reveals himself a devotee not of Christ and the Gospel, but of the Stoics and their perverse “all sins are equal” paradox (*omnia peccata paria esse*, 55.16.1). Hardened in *inclementia* and *acerbia*, this raving schismatic fails to perceive that the lapsed, however grievous their wounds, can be “revived unto faith” through the purgative cures of penitence (55.17.1).⁴⁴ In the battle against Satan, the Church must deploy her restorative powers of absolution to maximal extent: “No one,” Cyprian roundly affirms, “is to be denied the fruits of penance and the hope of reconciliation.” As the Church stands in appointed service of the Lord’s redemptive compassion, it follows that “reconciliation may be granted through His priests, bestowable to all who mournfully implore and call upon His mercy.”⁴⁵

With this new discourse of moderation, Catholic pastoral reasoning has broken through the limiting encumbrances of tradition and scripture, clearing a path for future disciplinary adjustments as circumstances might demand. In the spring of 253, the African synod will lift its sentence of lifelong penance for the *sacrificati* and grant amnesty to all. Justifying this abrupt reversal, Cyprian alludes to having received “divine communications” warning of renewed persecution. For the apocalyptic contest fast approaching, the attending bishops were agreed

44. Only months prior, when still in concord with Novatian, Cyprian had written uncompromisingly that the *sacrificati* had immolated themselves upon Satan’s altars, “cremating their faith to ash in the fatal fires,” *De lapsis* 8. In another turnabout, Cyprian now strives to allay the “contamination anxieties” his own earlier rhetoric had incited, quoting scriptural affirmations that the sins of the guilty do not pass to the innocent (Ep. 55.27, citing Ezek.12 and Deut.24). He will thereafter limit the hazards of contagion to clerical offenders, and to schismatics and heretics above all (Epp. 65.3.2; 67.2-3; 69.9.2).

45. Ep. 55.27.3: *Quod legentes scilicet et tenentes neminem putamus a fructu satisfactionis et spe pacis arcendum; 29.1: Quod si invenimus a poenitentia agenda neminem debere prohiberi, et deprecantibus atque exorantibus Domini misericordiam, secundum quod ille misericors et pius est, per sacerdotes ejus pacem posse concedi, admittendus est plangentium gemitus, et poenitentiae fructus dolentibus non negandus.* Here, too, Cyprian abandons a position formerly affirmed categorically in his catechismal treatise: “There can be no remission in the Church for one who has sinned against God” (*Non posse in ecclesia remitti ei qui in deum deliquerit, Testimonies* 3.28, c.249). In support of this traditionalist principle, Cyprian references several of the scriptural passages the Katharoi would subsequently invoke when condemning the new Catholic practice of granting absolution to those repenting of mortal sins: Matt.12.30-32; Mark 3.28-29; and 1 Sam. 2.25. Cynical motives ought not be assumed: casuistry commonly lies at the crossroads of principle and predicament.

that every willing soldier among the lapsed should be restored to communion, to ensure adequate muster for the Lord's harried army. Against the traditional view that the redeeming glories of martyrdom offer sufficient inspiration for those fallen from grace—an injunction he himself had repeatedly employed—Cyprian now counters by vesting the potency for heroic accomplishment in the ecclesiastical *sacramentum* itself, rather than in the hearts of believers. "One cannot be fit for martyrdom," he declares, "if the Church has not furnished the armament for battle; that mind will falter which has not been roused and set afire by reception of the Eucharist."⁴⁶

In Rome, Cornelius and his successor Lucius will oversee similarly accommodative reforms for the Italian churches (*Ep.* 68.5), following the same laxist course Dionysius had been charting for Egypt. By summer's end in 253, the Catholic policy of clemency for the penitent *lapsi* will secure widespread confirmation in the Eastern churches, when a grand synod convening in Antioch rules against what are brazenly styled the "aberrant innovations" of Novatian!⁴⁷ Propelled by the concussive shocks of persecution and schism, a new trajectory for Christianity was now underway.

To be continued in Part II.

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46. Synodal letter to Cornelius, *Ep.* 57.4.2: *esse non potest ad martyrium, qui ab Ecclesia non armatur ad praelium: et mens deficit, quam non recepta Eucharistia erigit et accendit.*

47. Dionysius' account is selectively preserved in Eusebius, *HE* 7.4. But the text discloses Novatian had attracted powerful supporters in the East, not least Fabius of Antioch. It was only following the deaths of several traditionalist leaders—and the passage of their sees into more moderate hands—that the tide turned decisively against the alleged "νεωτεροποιία" of the Katharoi. For the pivotal episcopal turnovers, compare the earlier and later lists reported at *HE* 6.46 and 7.5, where Dionysius also claims, rather optimistically, that the churches of Cilicia, Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Pontus, Bithynia, and elsewhere, "formerly split asunder," have all now joyfully returned to "concord and brotherly love" (ἀγαλλιῶνται πάντες πανταχοῦ τῇ ὁμονοίᾳ καὶ φιλαδελφίᾳ).

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