

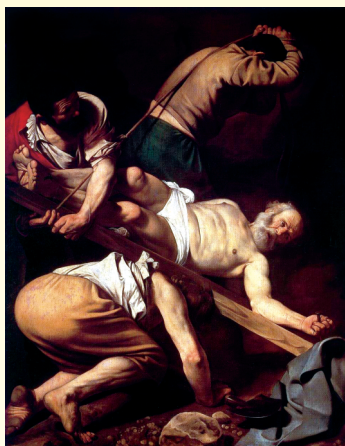
Lesson 4

HEROIC WITNESSES OF FAITH



King Herod began to persecute the Christians. He put Jacob, brother of John to the sword. Sensing that this action made the Jews happy he arrested Peter and imprisoned him and appointed four groups of four soldiers each for security. The intention of the King was to bring Peter before the people after the Passover. The entire Church went on praying zealously for Peter (Acts 12 : 1-5)

It was in Jerusalem and Judea and their neighbouring places, the places of Jesus and His disciples, that the Gospel was preached and accepted first. These areas were the part of the Roman empire. The disciples of Jesus continued



proclamation in other parts of the empire. The zealous missionary activities of the apostles led many to Christian faith. The exemplary life of the Christians also inspired many to become members of the Church. But the Jews were placing obstacles to the spread of the Christian faith. They made false charges against the apostles and set traps for them so that the rulers may punish them. The priests and idol makers of other religions joined hands with them against Christian faith.

Martyrdom of the Apostles

When the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, went to different parts of the world and proclaimed the Gospel, many joined the Church, accepting Jesus as their saviour. Side by side there were many enemies too. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn. 15:20). "An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God". (Jn. 16:2) These are the words of warning given by Jesus to the apostles. The Church suffered persecution right from the beginning as Jesus warned. We read the history of St. Stephen, the first martyr in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:8 - 7:60).

History testifies that all the apostles except St. John became martyrs. The historian Eusebius describes their martyrdom and the places where they proclaimed the Gospel. The Bible records that Jacob, brother of John, was put to the sword by king Herod (Acts 12:2), Peter, the apostle was crucified with head down at the time of Persecution of emperor Nero in Rome. Thomas, the apostle, was speared at Chinnamala in Mylapoor. Andrews glorified Jesus through his death on the cross. Little Jacob was killed in Jerusalem in A.D. 62. Simeon, Barthelomeo, Philip, Mathew, Judas Thadeus and Mathias received martyrdom for Jesus. John, the apostle, was exiled to the island Patmos as a result of witnessing to the Word of God in times of persecution. Eusebius testifies that later John came back to Ephesus, lived there and died a natural death in old age. Paul, the apostle, was put to the sword in Rome.

Activity-1. Prepare a write-up of the martyrdom of Stephen from the Acts of the Apostles.

Reasons for Persecution

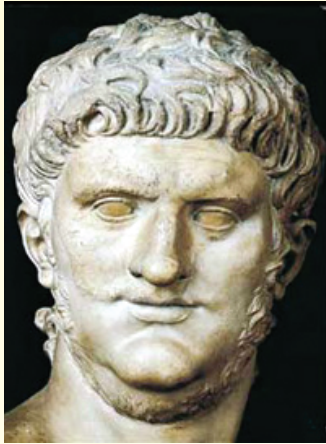
From the day of Pentecost to 313 AD the Church underwent a period of persecution. The early Church communities had to suffer a lot to retain their faith and to share it. Many lost their lives because they received Christian faith. The fact that many Jews gave up their religion and became Christians provoked the Jews. They were not willing to accept the Gentiles becoming Christians. Hence they considered Christians as their enemies and thought of ways to destroy them.



In Rome, there was a custom of worshipping the emperor as God. Christians were not ready to do that. Instead, they declared their faith in the true God. Roman rulers and heads did not like this. Further, others regarded the prayer meetings of the Christians with suspicions. The declaration of the Christians that they are receiving the flesh and blood of Jesus in the service of the breaking of the bread made them subject to the accusation that they are killing men and eating human flesh (Cannibalism). Christians were depicted as uncultured men led by superstitions. Given the hatred of the Jews, the enmity of the Roman rulers and the ridicules of the Greco-Roman writers, the emperors found it very easy to persecute the Christians. Ten Religious persecutions of the Roman emperors are mainly recorded in history.

Roman Emperors and Religious Persecutions

From the time of emperor Nero to Diocletius, Christians had to suffer ten severe religious persecutions. It was emperor Nero who started torturing Christians (54-68) on account of their faith. The torture began with the accusation that the



Christians were at the back of the fire in the city of Rome in A D 64. Many were killed. Though the fire did not cause much damage, the emperor himself ordered to kill Christians. Actually the emperor's own people were behind the incident. St. Peter and St. Paul became martyrs at the time of Nero.

The next emperor Domitian (81-95) also like Nero adopted a policy of cruelty towards Christians. His relatives Flavius Clemens and his wife Dometila became martyrs at his time. During the time of emperor Trajan (98-117) Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, Clement and Telesphorus, two other bishops of Rome, Simeon, the bishop of Jerusalem became martyrs. Popes, St. Hyginus, Pius I, and Polycarp the Great, received martyrdom during the time of Antonius Pius (138-161). Marcus Aurelius (161-180) killed Christians, exiled them and sentenced them to life-long punishment with very hard work. Fothinus of Lions and Justin became martyrs during his time.

Septemius Severius (193-211) tortured those who received baptism and were preparing for baptism. Those who gave up their faith were set free. Maximin Tras (235-238) tried to kill Church authorities. Maxian Datus (249-251) set free the people who got certificate for worshipping Roman Gods and tortured and killed those who refused to do so. The next emperor Valerian (253-260) compelled bishops, priests and deacons to worship Roman gods. He thought that when they did so, people also would be ready to do the same. But none of them were prepared to give-up their faith and adore Roman gods. Hence, many were tortured and killed mercilessly. Cyprian, Pope Sixtus II, deacon Laurence etc. became martyrs at his time.

Emperor Dioclesian (284-305) tortured Christians by dismissing them from their jobs and by destroying the Bible and other books. He destroyed churches,

imprisoned the rulers of the Church and tortured them mentally and physically. Many saints like St. Agnes, St. Sebastian, St. Felix, etc. became martyrs during this period.

In A D 313, the Church got back her freedom with emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan. Yet, many gave up their lives for faith in later times too.

Activity-2. Prepare a write-up of modern martyrs whose names are not mentioned in this lesson.

Eastern Martyrs

From the beginning of the 3rd century A D , some emperors tortured the Christians in persia very cruelly. The martyrs who sacrificed their lives for faith during this period are St. Candida, Barba'shmin, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, his sisters, Posy, the servant in the palace, his daughter Martha, St. Marutha, etc. Along with them, thousands of the faithful including bishops, priest and religious were tortured and martyred. During the middle ages, many gave up their lives in Iran, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and China for the sake of Christian faith.

Martyrs of Later Times

St. Thomas Moore, the chancellor of King Henry VIII became a martyr in the 16th century for Christian faith and the teachings of the Church. He became a martyr because he opposed the king who desired to give up his wife Catherine and marry Anne Bolyne, her maid. He valued heavenly bliss more than material achievements and accepted the death-sentence confessing that no political ruler has the authority to divide the single undivided Church. St. Maximilian Colbe was a priest who gave up his life for Chistian love. During the time of the second world war, Hitler imprisoned many. One of them escaped. In retaliation Hitler decided to put ten persons in a gas chamber and kill them. The persons were decided by lot. The priest Maxmillan Colbe offered to die for another person who came there by lot; and thus this priest became a martyr.

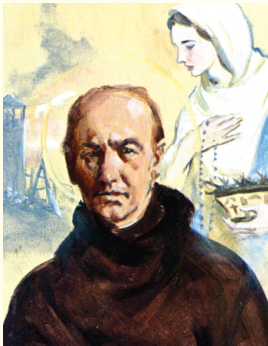
Martyrs in India

Among the martyrs in India, John Britto and Devasahayam Pilla are specially memorable. John Britto was born in Lisbon. He came to India as a jesuit priest. He did missionary work in Madhura taking up the name Arulananthar. He became a martyr on 4th Feb. 1693 for proclaiming the Gospel and spreading Christian faith. His head was cut off.



St. Thomas Moore

Devasahayam Pilla was born in a Brahmin family at Nattalam village near Nagarcoil. He was the minister of Maharaja Marthandavarma. He came into contact with Delano, the Dutch captain and became a Christian. The king imprisoned him as he accepted Christian faith and was shot dead on Mt. Kattady on 14th January 1752. There are many such courageous martyrs in Indian Church. Sr. Rani Maria, Fr. Aruldas etc. are some among them.



St. Maximilian Colbe

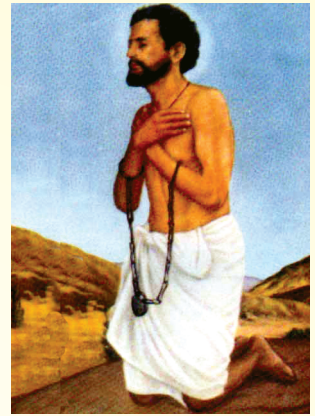
The Courage of the Martyrs

The faith and courage of the martyrs when they were tortured was wonderful. The conversation between St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smirna and his judge, when he was about to be killed is a proof of this. The judge said: "Curse Christ and I shall set you free". The saint replied: "I served Him for 86 years. He never deserted me. How can I curse such a king, my saviour, now. I declare truly that I am a Christian" when he was threatened that he would be burned in fire St. Polycarp said: "You threaten me with fire. This fire will be destroyed soon. What do you know about eternal fire? That is meant for you. Come, do whatever you want". When the body of Polycarp was burned in fire, the hearts of the faithful burned with zeal and courage to sacrifice their lives for faith.



St. John Britto

Religious persecutions did not weaken the Church; instead it strengthened the Church. The courageous endurance and persevering faith of the martyrs attracted many to Christian faith. Even their persecutors, seeing their faith, got converted, confessed that they too were Christians and accepted martyrdom. The seed of the Church grew very strong and powerful in the land wet with the blood of the martyrs.



Devasahayam Pilla

Even if we need not give up our lives to preserve our faith, courage and sacrifice are necessary to follow the way of love and patience and forgiveness which Jesus showed us. With a spirit of sacrifice let us take up the occasions that come our way to witness to forgiving love and selfless service and thus own the courage of faith of the martyrs and live accordingly.

Let us Read the Word of God and Meditate

Mt. 10:16-23

A Word of God to Remember

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven” (Mt. 10: 32)

Let us Pray

O Lord Jesus, strengthen us to follow the example of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for true faith.

My Decision

I will offer my sorrows and sufferings for those who suffer persecution for in faith and pray for them.

Let us think with the Church

The Church led by the spirit of Christ should walk in His path. It is a way of poverty, obedience and service and commitment until death. Christ became glorious through resurrection from this death. Just as Christ suffered for the Church, His body, the apostles also suffered much. Very often, Christian blood became the seed of the Church. (AG-5)

Let us find out the answers

1. Prepare a write-up on the Martyrdom of the apostles.
2. What are the reasons for early church persecutions ?
3. Name the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for faith during the time of Roman emperors.
4. Prepare a short write-up on later martyrs.
5. Why do we say that religious persecution did not weaken but strengthen the Church ?