



March 7

Commemoration: Perpetua and Felicity and companions, martyrs at Carthage, 202

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

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

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

are appended (xiv–xxi).

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

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

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

In a vision Perpetua saw her brother Dinocrates, who had died from a disfiguring disease and unbaptized at the early age of seven, in a place of darkness and distress. She prayed for him and later had a vision of him happy and healthy, his disfigurement only a scar. In another apparition, she apparently saw herself defeating a savage Egyptian, and her interpretation of this was that she would have to do battle not merely with wild beasts but with the Devil himself.

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

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

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

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

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

Their bodies were interred at Carthage.

Stained-glass window of St Perpetua of Carthage (church of Notre-Dame of Vierzon, France, 19th century): martyrdom of St Perpetua and her fellows in the stadium of Carthage; saint Felicity on her left.

Author: Gaetan Poix. Date: 20 August 2008