

TO THE MARTYRS

Chapter 1

BLESSED MARTYRS ELECT,¹ along with the nourishment for the body which our Lady Mother the Church² from her breast, as well as individual brethren from their private resources, furnish you in prison,³ accept also from me some offering that will contribute to the sustenance of the spirit. For it is not good that the flesh

1 'Blessed' (*benedicti*) was an appellation given especially to catechumens and neophytes. The addressees are headed for martyrdom, hence Tertullian calls them 'martyrs elect' (*martyres designati*); the more common title for those awaiting martyrdom was 'confessors.'

2 The notion of the Church as a mother occurs here for the first time in early Latin Christian literature. Two earlier instances of 'Mother' as a direct appellative for the Church are found in Greek Christian literature, namely, in a letter written in 177 or the year following by the Christian communities of Lyons and Vienne to their brethren in Asia Minor and Phrygia (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1-2.8). Cf. J. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia. An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington, D. C. 1943) 35-62.

3 In his Montanist period Tertullian bitterly denounced the custom of sending food to brethren awaiting martyrdom in prison, on the ground that this practice only weakened their preparedness for the final conflict. Cf. *De ieiunio* 12.2-3.

be feasted while the spirit goes hungry. Indeed, if care is bestowed on that which is weak, there is all the more reason not to neglect that which is still weaker.⁴ (2) Not that I am specially entitled to exhort you. Yet, even the most accomplished gladiators are spurred on not only by their trainers and managers but also from afar by people inexperienced in this art and by all who choose, without the slightest need for it, with the result that hints issuing from the crowd have often proved profitable for them.

(3) In the first place, then, O blessed, 'do not grieve the Holy Spirit'⁵ who has entered prison with you. For, if He had not accompanied you there in your present trial, you would not be there today. See to it, therefore, that He remain with you there and so lead you out of that place to the Lord.⁶ (4) Indeed, the prison is the Devil's house, too, where he keeps his household. But you have come to the prison for the very purpose of trampling upon him⁷ right in his own house. For you have engaged him in battle already outside the prison and trampled him underfoot. (5) Let him, therefore, not say: 'Now that they are in my domain, I will tempt them with base hatreds, with defections or dissensions among themselves.' Let him flee from your presence, and let him, coiled and numb, like a snake that is driven out by charms or smoke, hide away in the depths

⁴ Cf. Matt. 26.41; Mark 14.38.

⁵ Eph. 4.30.

⁶ In early Christian literature death is often referred to as a going to the Lord (*migratio ad Dominum*). Cf. A. C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C. 1941) 54-71.

⁷ Cf. *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 4, where Perpetua describes her first vision. In her ascent to heaven on a golden ladder on the sides of which there were fixed all kinds of instruments of torture, she saw a dragon crouching under the first step and frightening those who ascended, but, invoking the Lord Jesus Christ, she 'trampled upon the dragon's head' and went up.

of his den. Do not allow him the good fortune in his own kingdom of setting you against one another, but let him find you fortified by the arms of peace among yourselves, because peace among yourselves means war with him. (6) Some, not able to find this peace in the Church, are accustomed to seek it from the martyrs in prison. For this reason, too, then, you ought to possess, cherish and preserve it among yourselves that you may perhaps be able to bestow it upon others also.⁸

Chapter 2

(1) Other attachments, equally burdensome to the spirit, may have accompanied you to the prison gate; so far your relatives, too, may have escorted you. From that very moment on you have been separated from the very world. How much more, then, from its spirit and its ways and doings? Nor let this separation from the world trouble you. For, if we reflect that it is the very world that is more truly a prison, we shall realize that you have left a prison rather than entered one. (2) The world holds the greater dark-

8 During persecution a number of Christians had denied the faith in the face of torture. To be sure, many had done so only to save their property, life, and freedom, and at heart had wished to remain Christians. But readmission to the communion of the Church was not so easy, since the then existing penitential discipline demanded a life-long penance for apostasy. The universal respect accorded to the martyrs, however, induced some bishops to recognize letters of recommendation (*libelli pacis*), written by confessors on the eve of martyrdom in behalf of penitent apostates, as availing to shorten the length of canonical penance. In the above passage Tertullian refers to such a speedier restoration to the communion of the Church through the intercession of the martyrs. There is no doubt that the exaggerated honors paid to martyrdom occasionally led to abuses. However this may be, in his Montanist period Tertullian strongly condemns these letters of martyrs recommending lapsed brethren to the bishop's consideration (cf. *De pudicitia* 22).

ness, blinding men's hearts. The world puts on the heavier chains, fettering the very souls of men. The world breathes forth the fouler impurities—human lusts. (3) Finally, the world contains the larger number of criminals, namely, the entire human race. In fact, it awaits sentence not from the proconsul but from God. (4) Wherefore, O blessed, consider yourselves as having been transferred from prison to what we may call a place of safety. Darkness is there, but you are light;¹ fetters are there, but you are free before God. It breathes forth a foul smell, but you are an odor of sweetness.² There the judge is expected at every moment, but you are going to pass sentence upon the judges themselves.³ (5) There sadness may come upon the man who sighs for the pleasures of the world. The Christian, however, even when he is outside the prison, has renounced the world, and, when in prison, even prison itself. It does not matter what part of the world you are in, you who are apart from the world. (6) And if you have missed some of the enjoyments of life, remember that it is the way of business to suffer some losses in order to make larger profits.

I say nothing yet about the reward to which God invites the martyrs. Meanwhile, let us compare the life in the world with that in prison to see if the spirit does not gain more in prison than the flesh loses there. (7) In fact, owing to the solicitude of the Church and the charity of the brethren, the flesh does not miss there what it ought to have, while, in addition, the spirit obtains what is always beneficial to the faith:⁴ you do not look at strange gods; you do not

1 Cf. Matt. 5.14; Eph. 5.8; 1 Thess. 5.5.

2 Cf. Ezech. 20.41; Eph. 5.2.

3 Cf. Wisd. 5.8; 1 Cor. 6.2.

4 In the following Tertullian enumerates those features of pagan life which, because of their idolatrous or immoral character, the Christians found especially revolting. Cf. a similar account in his *Apology* 35.

chance upon their images; you do not, even by mere physical contact, participate in heathen holidays; you are not plagued by the foul fumes of the sacrificial banquets, not tormented by the noise of the spectacles, nor by the atrocity or frenzy or shamelessness of those taking part in the celebrations; your eyes do not fall on houses of lewdness; you are free from inducements to sin, from temptations, from unholy reminiscences, free, indeed, even from persecution.

(8) The prison now offers to the Christian what the desert once gave to the Prophets.⁵ Our Lord Himself quite often spent time in solitude to pray there more freely,⁶ to be there away from the world. In fact, it was in a secluded place that He manifested His glory to His disciples.⁷ Let us drop the name 'prison' and call it a place of seclusion.

(9) Though the body is confined, though the flesh is detained, there is nothing that is not open to the spirit. In spirit wander about, in spirit take a walk, setting before yourselves not shady promenades and long porticoes but that path which leads to God. As often as you walk that path, you will not be in prison. (10) The leg does not feel the fetter when the spirit is in heaven. The spirit carries about the whole man and brings him wherever he wishes. And where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.⁸ There, then, let our heart be where we would have our treasure.

5 Cf. 3 Kings 19.4.

6 Cf. Mark 1.35.

7 Cf. Matt. 17.1,2; Mark 9.1,2; Luke 9.28,29; 2 Peter 1.16,17.

8 Cf. Matt. 6. 21

Chapter 3

(1) Granted now, O blessed, that even to Christians the prison is unpleasant—yet, we were called to the service in the army of the living God in the very moment when we gave response to the words of the sacramental oath.¹ No soldier goes out to war encumbered with luxuries, nor does he march to the line of battle from the sleeping chamber, but from light and cramped tents where every kind of austerity, discomfort, and inconvenience is experienced. (2) Even in time of peace soldiers are toughened to warfare by toils and hardships: by marching in arms, by practising swift maneuvers in the field, by digging a trench, by joining closely together to form a tortoise-shield.² Everything is set in sweating toil, lest bodies and minds be frightened at having to pass from shade to sunshine, from sunshine to icy cold, from the tunic to the breastplate, from hushed silence to the warcry, from rest to the din of battle.³

1 In military language, the term *sacramentum* was used to denote the military oath of allegiance. It is in this sense that Tertullian employs the word here, referring to the baptismal vows of the Christian.

2 In military language, the term 'tortoise-shield' (*testudo*) denoted a shelter used in attacking ramparts or walls. The soldiers interlocked their shields over their heads, thus forming a protective cover like the shell of a tortoise.

3 A reminiscence of this passage is found in St. Jerome's letter to Heliodorus (*Ep.* 14.2.1-2). Jerome reproaches Heliodorus for having gone back from the perfect way of the ascetic life: 'What are you, dainty soldier, doing in your father's house? Where are your ramparts and trenches? When have you spent a winter in the camp? . . . Do you intend to march straight from the sleeping chamber to the line of battle, from the shade into the heat of the sun? A body used to a tunic cannot endure a heavy breastplate, a head that has worn a cap refuses a helmet, a hand made tender by disuse is galled by the hard handle of a sword.'

(3) In like manner, O blessed, consider whatever is hard in your present situation as an exercise of your powers of mind and body. You are about to enter a noble contest⁴ in which the living God acts the part of superintendent and the Holy Spirit is your trainer, a contest whose crown is eternity, whose prize is angelic nature, citizenship in heaven and glory for ever and ever. (4) And so your Master, Jesus Christ, who has anointed you with His Spirit⁵ and has brought you to this training ground, has resolved, before the day of the contest, to take you from a softer way of life to a harsher treatment that your strength may be increased. For athletes, too, are set apart for more rigid training that they may apply themselves to the building up of their physical strength. They are kept from lavish living, from more tempting dishes, from more pleasurable drinks. They are urged on, they are subjected to torturing toils, they are worn out: the more strenuously they have exerted themselves, the greater is their hope of victory. (5) And they do this, says the Apostle, to win a perishable crown. We who are about to win an eternal one⁶ recognize in the prison our training ground, that we may be led forth to the actual contest before the seat of the presiding judge well practised in all hardships, because strength is built up by austerity, but destroyed by softness.

⁴ Cf. 1 Tim. 6.12.

⁵ Cf. 1 John 2.20. This anointing of the Christian with the Holy Spirit Tertullian compares to the use of oil to anoint the bodies of athletes in the palaestra.

⁶ Cf. 1 Cor. 9.25.

Chapter 4

(1) We know from our Lord's teaching that, while the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.¹ Let us, however, not derive delusive gratification from the Lord's acknowledgment of the weakness of the flesh. For it was on purpose that He first declared the spirit willing: He wanted to show which of the two ought to be subject to the other, that is to say, that the flesh should be submissive to the spirit, the weaker to the stronger, so that the former may draw strength from the latter. (2) Let the spirit converse with the flesh on their common salvation, no longer thinking about the hardships of prison but, rather, about the struggle of the actual contest. The flesh will perhaps fear the heavy sword and the lofty cross and the wild beasts mad with rage and the most terrible punishment of all—death by fire—and, finally, all the executioner's cunning during the torture. (3) But let the spirit present to both itself and the flesh the other side of the picture: granted, these sufferings are grievous, yet many have borne them patiently, nay, have even sought them on their own accord for the sake of fame and glory; and this is true not only of men but also of women so that you, too, O blessed women, may be worthy of your sex.

(4) It would lead me too far were I to enumerate each one of those who, led by the impulse of their own mind, put an end to their lives by the sword. Among women there is the well-known instance of Lucretia. A victim of violence, she stabbed herself in the presence of her kinsfolk to gain glory for her chastity.² Mucius burnt his right

1 Cf. Matt. 26.41; Mark 14.38.

2 Lucretia, the Roman model of womanly conduct, killed herself after

hand on the altar that his fair fame might include this deed.³ (5) Nor did the philosophers act less courageously: Heraclitus, for instance, who put an end to his life by smearing himself with cow dung;⁴ Empedocles, too, who leaped down into the fires of Mt. Etna;⁵ and Peregrinus who not long ago threw himself upon a funeral pile.⁶ Why, even women have despised the flames: Dido did so in order not to be forced to marry after the departure of the

having been violated by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of King L. Tarquinius Superbus. According to Roman tradition, this misdeed brought about the overthrow of the monarchy in Rome. Cf. Livy 1.58-59; Cicero, *De re publica* 2.25.46; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 6.1.1.

- 3 According to Roman tradition, C. Mucius Scaevola, a Roman youth, was caught in the attempt to assassinate Porsenna, the Etruscan king of Clusium, who had made war upon Rome in order to restore the monarchy of the Tarquinian family. Threatened with torture, he burned off his right hand over a brazier to show his courage, and hence received the surname Scaevola, i.e., Left-handed. Cf. Livy 2.12; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 3.3.1. Tertullian cites this example also in his *Apology* 50.5.
- 4 Very little is known about the life of Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 500 B.C.). Of his death we have the unsupported story, told by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers* (9.1.3), which runs as follows. Attacked by dropsy and challenging the physicians he had consulted first, Heraclitus covered himself with cow dung, hoping that the warmth thus produced would cause the excess of water in his body to evaporate. The experiment, however, ended fatally.
- 5 A popular story in antiquity, but likewise unworthy of credence, related that Empedocles of Acragas (c. 500-430 B.C.), committed suicide by leaping into the fiery mouth of Mt. Etna so that he might die without leaving a trace behind him, and thereby confirm his divinity. Cf. Diogenes Laertius 8.2.69. Tertullian cites this example also in his *Apology* 50.5.
- 6 Finding his popularity waning, Peregrinus Proteus, a wandering Cynic philosopher, decided to immolate himself on a funeral pile at the celebration of the Olympic Games in A.D. 165 to set an example of contempt of death. In his *On the Death of Peregrinus*, Lucian of Samosata, the second-century Greek sophist and satirist, tells us the story, asserting that he was an eye-witness of the event.

man she had loved most dearly;⁷ the wife of Hasdrubal, too, with Carthage in flames, cast herself along with her children into the fire that was destroying her native city, that she might not see her husband a suppliant at Scipio's feet.⁸ (6) Regulus, a Roman general, was taken prisoner by the Carthaginians, but refused to be the only Roman exchanged for a large number of Carthaginian captives. He preferred to be returned to the enemy, and, crammed into a kind of chest, suffered as many crucifixions as nails were driven in from the outside in all directions to pierce him.⁹ A woman voluntarily sought out wild beasts, namely, vipers, serpents more horrible than either bull or bear,

7 This refers to the well-known legend of Dido, the mythical foundress of Carthage, and Aeneas. After various adventures during his wanderings, Aeneas and his men were driven by a storm upon the coast of Africa, near the site of Carthage. There they were hospitably received by Dido, whom Venus caused to fall violently in love with Aeneas. When, after a stay of a few months, Aeneas was ordered by Jupiter to leave, Dido in despair at his departure killed herself. Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.504ff. The example is also cited by Tertullian in his *Apology* 50.5 and *Ad nationes* 1.18.3.

8 In the Third Punic War (149-146 B.C.) Carthage had stood a siege of four years, when at last the Roman legions forced their way over the walls of the unhappy city. Fighting in the streets continued for several days, until Hasdrubal, the Carthaginian commander, with a few surviving defenders at last surrendered to the Roman general, Scipio the Younger. But Hasdrubal's wife, upbraiding her husband for his cowardice, slew her two boys and cast herself with them from the top of a burning temple into the ruins. Cf. Florus, *Epitome* 1.31 (2.15).17; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memor.* 3.2 ext. 8. Tertullian cites this example also in his *Ad nationes* 1.18.3.

9 M. Atilius Regulus, a Roman consul, was taken prisoner during the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.). According to tradition, he was sent to Rome on parole to negotiate a peace, but urged the Senate to refuse the proposals of the Carthaginians; on his return to Carthage he was tortured to death. Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 3.26.99; Horace, *Odes* 3.5; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memor.* 1.1.14; Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 7 (6).4. Tertullian cites this example also in his *Apology* 50.6 and *Ad nationes* 1.18.3.

which Cleopatra let loose upon herself as not to fall into the hands of the enemy.¹⁰

(7) You may object: 'But the fear of death is not so great as the fear of torture.' Did the Athenian courtesan yield on that account to the executioner? For, being privy to a conspiracy, she was subjected to torture by the tyrant. But she did not betray her fellow conspirators, and at last bit off her own tongue and spat it into the tyrant's face to let him know that torments, however prolonged, could achieve nothing against her.¹¹ (8) Everybody knows that to this day the most important festival of the Lacedaemonians is the διαμαστίγωσις, that is, The Whipping. In this sacred rite all the noble youth are scourged with whips before the altar, while their parents and kinsfolk stand by and exhort them to perseverance. For they regard it as a mark of greater distinction and glory if the soul rather than the body has submitted to the stripes.¹²

(9) Therefore, if earthly glory accruing from strength

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- 10 After their defeat by Octavian at Actium in 31 B.C., Cleopatra and Mark Antony escaped to Egypt. When Octavian landed there, Antony committed suicide. Cleopatra tried in vain to entice Octavian by her charms and, according to the common tradition, put an end to her life by applying an asp to her bosom. Cf. Florus, *Epitome* 2.21 (4.11).11; Horace, *Odes* 1.37.25-28. The example is also found in Tertullian's *Ad nationes* 1.18.3.
- 11 The story of the Athenian courtesan is told by Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 7.23.87 and Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae* 1.23.1-2. The courtesan's name was Leaena, and Harmodius and Aristogiton were the conspirators. Tertullian cites this example of female fortitude also in his *Apology* 50.8 and in *Ad nationes* 1.18.4.
- 12 This test of endurance in pain, which formed an element in the rigorous training of the Spartan youth, took place at the festival of Artemis Orthia. The original meaning of the ceremony is obscure. Some scholars have thought to recognize in this practice the blow with the sacred bough, whereby its power is communicated to man. Tertullian mentions this example of endurance in pain also in his *Apology* 50.9 and in *Ad nationes* 1.18.11.

of body and soul is valued so highly that one despises sword, fire, piercing with nails, wild beasts and tortures for the reward of human praise, then I may say the sufferings you endure are but trifling in comparison with the heavenly glory and divine reward. If the bead made of glass is rated so highly, how much must the true pearl be worth? Who, therefore, does not most gladly spend as much for the true as others spend for the false?

Chapter 5

(1) I omit here an account of the motive of glory. For inordinate ambition among men as well as a certain morbidity of mind have already set at naught all the cruel and torturing contests mentioned above. How many of the leisure class are urged by an excessive love of arms to become gladiators? Surely it is from vanity that they descend to the wild beasts in the very arena, and think themselves more handsome because of the bites and scars. Some have even hired themselves out to tests by fire, with the result that they ran a certain distance in a burning tunic. Others have pranced up and down amid the bullwhips of the animal-baiters, unflinchingly exposing their shoulders.¹ (2) All this, O blessed, the Lord tolerates in the world for good reason, that is, for the sake of encouraging us in the present moment and of confounding us on that final day, if we have recoiled from suffering for the truth unto salvation what others have pursued out of vanity unto perdition.

¹ Tertullian mentions these degrading practices also in *Ad nationes* 1.18.8-11.

Chapter 6

(1) Let us, however, no longer talk about those examples of perseverance proceeding from inordinate ambition. Let us, rather, turn to a simple contemplation of man's ordinary lot so that, if we ever have to undergo such trials with fortitude, we may also learn from those misfortunes which sometimes even befall unwilling victims. For how often have people been burned to death in conflagrations! How often have wild beasts devoured men either in the forests or in the heart of cities after escaping from their cages! How many have been slain by the sword of robbers! How many have even suffered the death of the cross at the hands of enemies, after having been tortured first and, indeed, treated with every kind of insult! (2) Furthermore, many a man is able to suffer in the cause of a mere human being what he hesitates to suffer in the cause of God. To this fact, indeed, our present days may bear witness. How many prominent persons have met with death in the cause of a man, though such a fate seemed most unlikely in view of their birth and their rank, their physical condition and their age! Death came to them either from him, if they had opposed him, or from his enemies, if they had sided with him.¹

¹ This may refer to the destruction of the army of Clodius Albinus, the most powerful rival of Septimius Severus for the throne of the Caesars, near Lyons, in A.D. 197 and to the still more terrible massacre of Albinus' partisans throughout the empire. At Rome the victor wreaked vengeance especially upon a number of senators who had sided with his opponents.