

THE CHRISTIANS OF THE AGE OF PERSECUTIONS in the defense by the Apologists

The " IDENTITY CARD" of the Christians.

The Christian religion developed rapidly in Rome and all over the world since the 1st century, owing to its being original and suitable for all mankind; but this was also due to the testimony of fervour, of brotherly love and of charity shown by the Christians towards everybody.

The Roman authorities were at first indifferent to the new religion, yet very soon, incited also by the people showed themselves hostile to it, because the Christians refused to worship the ancient pagan deities of Rome, as well as the emperor. The Christians were accused of disloyalty to their fatherland, of atheism, of hatred towards mankind, of hidden crimes, such as incest, infanticide and ritual cannibalism; likewise they were held responsible for all natural calamities, such as plagues, floods, famines, etc.

The Christian religion was proclaimed "strana et illicita - strange and unlawful" (Senatorial decree of the year 35); "exitialis - deadly"(Tacitus); "prava et immodica - wicked and unbridled" (Plinius); "nova et malefica - new and harmful" (Svetonius); "tenebrosa et lucifuga - mysterious and opposed to light" (from "Octavius" by Minucius); "detestabilis- hateful" (Tacitus); therefore it was outlawed and persecuted, because it was considered the most dangerous enemy of the power of Rome, which was based upon the ancient national religion and on the emperor's worship.

The first three centuries constitute the age of Martyrs, which ended in 313 with the edict of Milan, by which the emperors Constantine and Licinius gave freedom to the Church. The persecution was not always continuous and universal, nor equally cruel and bloody. Periods of persecution were followed by periods of relative peace.

Christians faced persecution with courage, a very large percentage with heroism, but they did not submit to it without opposition. They defended themselves with great strength by confuting the accusations of those crimes as being false and groundless and by producing the contents of their faith (What we believe) and describing their identity (What we are).

In the "Apologies" ("defences"), prepared by the Christian writers of the time, and often addressed to the emperors, the Christians protested vigorously against their being condemned unjustly, without being known and without being convicted. According to the Apologies, the principle of the senatorial law "Non licet vos esse- you have no right to exist" is unjustifiable and unlawful, because Christians are honest citizens, respectful of laws, loyal to the emperor, hard-working and exemplary both in their private and public life.

In the catacombs we can check the evidence of the wonderful life of Christians, as it is described by the Apologists. We quote here some passages of their defence, which constitute almost an "Identity Card" of early Christians.

1. From the **Letter to Diognetus** (apology by an unknown author of the 2nd C.).

They are men like others

"Christians are not different because of their country or the language they speak or the way they dress. They do not isolate themselves in their cities nor use a private language; even the life they lead has nothing strange.

Their doctrine does not originate from the elaborate disquisitions of intellectuals, nor do they follow, as many do, philosophical systems which are the fruit of human thinking. They live in Greek or in barbarian (foreign) cities, as the case may be, and adapt themselves to local traditions in dress, food and all usage. Yet they testify to a way which, in the opinion of the many, has something extraordinary about it".

They dwell on earth, but are citizens of heaven

"They live in their own countries and are strangers. They loyally fulfil their duties as citizens, but are treated as foreigners. Every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland, foreign.

They marry like everyone, they have children, but they do not abandon their new-born. They have the table in common, but not the bed. *They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh* (2 Cor 10,3; Rom 8, 12-15).
They dwell on earth, but are citizens of heaven.

They obey the laws of the state, but in their lives they go beyond the law. They love everyone, yet are persecuted by everyone. No one really knows them, but all condemn them. They are killed, but go on living. *They are poor, but enrich many* (2 Cor 6,9-10). They have nothing, but abound in everything. but in that contempt they find glory before God. Their honour is insulted, while their justice is acknowledged.

When they are cursed, they bless. When they are insulted, they answer with kind words

(1 Cor 4,12-13). They do good to others and are punished like evil-doers. When they are punished, they rejoice, as if they were given life. The Jews make war against them as if they were a foreign race. The Greek persecute them, but those who hate them, cannot tell the reason for their hatred".

They are in the world as the soul is in the body

"In the way the Christians are in the world, so the soul is in the body. As the soul is diffused in all parts of the body, so Christians are spread in the various cities of the earth. The soul lives in the body, but is not of the body; so Christians live in the world, but are not of the world. As the invisible soul is imprisoned in a visible body, so Christians are a reality quite visible in the world, while the spiritual worship they give to God is invisible.

As the flesh hates the spirit and fights against it, though not receiving any offence from it, but only because the spirit hinders it in its savouring of harmful joys and pleasures; so the world hates the Christians who have done it no harm, merely because they oppose a way of life based on mere pleasure.

As the soul loves the body and its limbs, which hate it in return, thus Christians love those who hate them. The soul, though it sustains the body, is enclosed in it. So Christians, though they are a support to the world, are confined in the world as a prison. The immortal soul lives in a mortal tent, so Christians live like strangers among corruptible things, awaiting the incorruptibility of heaven.

By mortifying itself in food and drink, the soul is refined and strengthened; so Christians, maltreated and persecuted, grow in number every day. God has assigned them such a high state that they are never to abandon it" (*Sources Chrétiennes 33 bis, 62-67*).

2. From the **"Books to Autolicus"** of S. Theophilus of Antioch, 2nd C.

The Christians pay homage to the emperor and pray for him (I, 2)

"I shall pay homage to the emperor, but will not adore him; I shall instead pray for him. I adore the true and only God, by whom I know the sovereign was made. Well now, you might ask me: 'Why don't you adore the emperor?'. The emperor, given authority by God, must be honoured with a proper respect, but he must not be adored.

You see, he is not God; he is only a man whom God has placed in that office not to be adored, but in order that he exercise justice on earth. In a way this authority was entrusted to him by God. As the emperor may not tolerate that his title be taken over by those subject to him, so no one may be adored, save God.

The sovereign must therefore be honoured with sentiments of reverence; we must obey him and pray for him: In this

way God's will is done".

The life of Christians proves the greatness and beauty of their religion (III, 15)

"We find out that Christians have a wise self-control, practice temperance, marry only once, keep chaste, refuse injustice, uproot sin, practice justice, observe the law, have a positive appreciation of piety. God is acknowledged, and truth is regarded as the supreme law.

Grace guards them; peace protects them; the Sacred Word guides them, wisdom teaches them; eternal life directs them. God is their king".

3. From the "Apology" by Aristides, 2nd C.

Christians observe the divine laws

"Christians bear the divine laws impressed on their hearts and observe them in the hope of a future life. For this reason they do not commit adultery, or fornication; don't bear false witness; don't misappropriate the money they have received on deposit; don't crave for what is not due to them; honour father and mother, do good to their neighbour; and when they are appointed judges, judge rightly.

They don't adore idols in human form; whatever they don't want others do to them, they do not do it to anyone. They don't eat meat offered to the gods, because it is contaminated: Their daughters are pure and keep their virginity and shun prostitution; men abstain from every illegitimate union and from all impurity; likewise their women are chaste, in the hope of the great recompense in the next life...

They are kind and charitable

They help those who offend them, making friends of them; do good to their enemies. They don't adore idols; they are kind, good, modest, sincere, they love one another; don't despise widows; protect the orphans; those who have much give without grumbling, to those in need. When they meet strangers, they invite them to their homes with joy, for they recognise them as true brothers, not natural but spiritual.

When a poor man dies, if they become aware, they contribute according to their means for his funeral; if they come to know that some people are persecuted or sent to prison or condemned for the sake of Christ's name, they put their alms together and send them to those in need. If they can do it, they try to obtain their release. When a slave or a beggar is in need of help, they fast two or three days, and give him the food they had prepared for themselves, because they think that he too should be joyful, as he has been called to be joyful like themselves.

They live in justice and sanctity

They strictly observe the commandments of the Lord, by living in a saintly and right way, as the Lord God has prescribed to them; they give Him thanks each morning and evening for all food and drink and every other thing. These are, o emperor, their laws; the goods they have to ask God, they ask Him, and so they pass through this world till the end of time; because God has subjected everything to them. Therefore they are grateful to Him, because the whole universe and all creation have been made for them. Surely these people have found truth".

4. From "The Apologeticus" of Tertullian, 2nd - 3rd C.

Christians are not useless and unproductive

"We are accused of being unproductive in the various fields of activity. But how can you say this of men who live with you, eat with you, wear the same clothes, follow the same way of life and have the same necessities of life?"

We remember to give thanks to God, our Lord and Creator, and do not refuse any fruit of his work. There is no doubt that we make use of things with moderation and not in an evil or unrestrained way. We live together with you and often attend the forum, the market-place, the baths, the shops and workshops, the stables, taking part in all activities.

We also are at sea together with you, we serve in the army, we till the land, we carry on trade, we exchange goods and put on sale, for your benefit, the fruits of our work. I really cannot understand how we may appear useless and unproductive for your affairs, when we live with you and for you.

Surely, there are some people who have good grounds for complaining about Christians, as they cannot do any business with them. They are the masters of prostitutes, the procurers and their accomplices; then there come the criminals, the murderers through poison, the sorcerers, the fortune-tellers, the wizards, the astrologers.

What an unbelievable thing is to be unproductive for such people!... And finally, you will never find any Christian in prison, unless he be there for religious reasons.

We have learnt from God to live honest lives".