

Roman Martyrs of the First Century

Feast Day: June 30

Many martyrs who suffered death under Emperor Nero. Owing to their executions during the reign of Emperor Nero, they are called the Neronian Martyrs, and they are also termed the Protomartyrs of Rome, being honored by the site in Vatican City called the Piazza of the Protomartyrs. These early Christians were disciples of the Apostles, and they endured hideous tortures and ghastly deaths following the burning of Rome in the infamous fire of 62. Their dignity in suffering, and their fervor to the end, did not provide Nero or the Romans with the public diversion desired. Instead, the faith was firmly planted in the Eternal City. http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=4937

Tacitus (c. 55 -117 CE): Nero's persecution of the Christians

*Tacitus was a fierce critic of Nero, and modern scholars have questioned the reliability of his account of this notorious Roman Emperor; but the following passage from his Annals is famous because it is one of the first mentions in a non-Christian source of Christianity. **In 64 CE Rome underwent a catastrophic fire, which some believed had been set at the orders of the emperor himself. Tacitus claims that Nero tried to shift the blame to the unpopular Christians, though other sources indicate that their persecution may have been unconnected to the fire. It is not clear exactly why many Romans so detested the new believers, though Christians were often confused with Jews, who were accused of being rebellious (with some reason, since the Jews of Judaea more than once created insurrections against the Roman provincial government) and lazy (since they rested on the Sabbath). Scandalous rumors about obscene Christian rituals circulated at an early date, and we know that they were accused of disloyalty because of their refusal to perform the token ritual acknowledging the divine status of the Emperor, viewed by most citizens as little different from a modern flag salute. **If Tacitus shows sympathy for them, it is because he detests Nero more.** Whatever their exact cause this early persecution and later ones made a profound impact on the Christian Church, and bequeathed a legacy of colorful tales of martyred saints who were celebrated in story, song, and art for the next two millenia, long after the Church had triumphed over its opponents.***

Tacitus wrote, “Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire.

Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, **Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians**, who were infamous for their abominations [*Steve’s note: atheists, cannibals, incestuous*].

The originator of the name, **Christ**, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated. Therefore, first those were seized who admitted their faith, and then, using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race.

And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame,



and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps.

Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.”



(This is an excerpt from *Reading About the World, Volume 1*, published by Harcourt Brace Custom Books, translated by Richard Hooker.)

St. Clement of Rome, reigned as pope and wrote his Epistle to the Corinthians in 96 AD. He mentions here the persecution and martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul and the first Roman Martyrs persecuted by Emperor Nero.

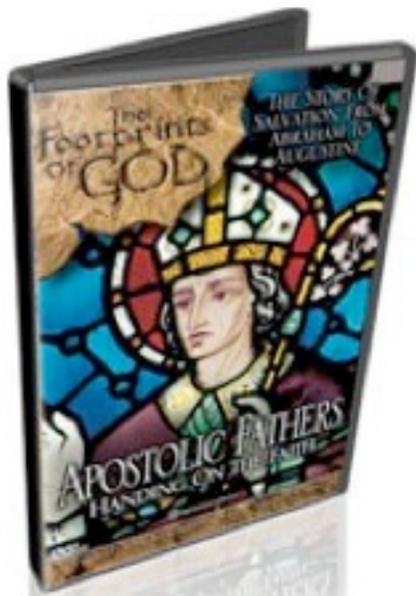
Chapter V.—No Less Evils Have Arisen from the Same Source in the Most Recent Times. The Martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

But not to dwell upon ancient examples, let us come to the most recent spiritual heroes. Let us take the noble examples furnished in our own generation. Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles. Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience.

**Chapter VI.—
Continuation.
Several Other
Martyrs.**

To these men who spent their lives in the practice of holiness, there is to be added a great multitude of the elect, who, having through envy endured many indignities and tortures, furnished us with a most excellent example. Through envy, those women, the Danaids and Dircae, being persecuted, after they had suffered

terrible and unspeakable torments, finished the course of their faith with steadfastness, and though weak in body, received a noble reward. Envy has alienated wives from their husbands, and changed that saying of our father Adam, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” Envy and strife have overthrown great cities and rooted up mighty nations.



To watch our DVD on the [Apostolic Fathers: Handing on the Faith](#), click here. In this documentary filmed on location we discuss the first Christians, the persecution and martyrdom for the Faith.