

Essential Readings  
for the Study of History

# Humanitas

Early Middle Ages

BOOK

1



Twilight of Rome to Rise of Islam

Junius Johnson, PhD

Christopher Maiocca, Series Editor • Nathan Antiel and David Diener, PhD, Series Managing Editors



*Humanitas: Early Middle Ages Book 1, Twilight of Rome to Rise of Islam*

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†Translated for *Humanitas* by Junius Johnson.

## NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

The Middle Ages were not the Dark Ages but a time of multidimensional growth and development. These centuries were bright and bursting with invention, discovery, conflict, conquest, and various attempts at reconciliation and resolution. While the Middle Ages indeed were “in the middle,” caught between antiquity and the modern age, this was no pass-through period. A recent book by two medieval historians captures this by calling the long medieval period the Bright Ages,<sup>1</sup> seeking to emphasize the vitality of these centuries.

For some dubious reason, high school students are rarely given the opportunity and delight of studying the Middle Ages in depth, even though this history is integral to understanding the story of who we were and who we now are. *Humanitas* addresses this lack. For the first time, high school students can now, over a year-long course, read and study over 100 curated and annotated primary source readings that guide them through the Middle Ages.

Like our *Humanitas* books on Greece and Rome, the readings from the Middle Ages will take students *ad fontes*—that is, to the fountains or sources of human wisdom and great ideas. Though secondary sources certainly have their place, we ought not make what is secondary primary.

Consider, for example, that as students are preparing to read one of the greatest orators of the past, they learn that John Chrysostom was called *Chrysostom*, “golden tongued” or “golden mouthed,” because he was such a great orator that almost every time he spoke at his church in Constantinople he caused a sensation. The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon describes Chrysostom this way:

The monuments of that eloquence, which was admired near twenty years at Antioch and Constantinople, have been carefully preserved; and the possession of near one thousand sermons or homilies has authorised the critics of succeeding times to appreciate the genuine merit of Chrysostom. They unanimously attribute to the Christian orator the free command of an elegant and copious language; the judgment to conceal the advantages which he derived from the knowledge of rhetoric and philosophy; an inexhaustible fund of metaphors and similitudes, of ideas and images, to vary and illustrate the most familiar topics; the happy art of engaging the passions in the service of virtue, and of exposing the folly as well as the turpitude of vice almost with the truth and spirit of a dramatic representation.<sup>2</sup>

Having read this, who would not want to read an actual sermon or oration by Chrysostom? In *Humanitas*, one can. Direct contact with Chrysostom will impart a firsthand familiarity with the great orator that no other text—not even Gibbon’s,

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1. Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper, 2021).

2. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 3:347–48.

renowned as its eloquence is—can adequately describe. To know about him is important; to know him is altogether better.

Following the sequence of *Humanitas*, as students have read through the history of Greece and Rome, they can now fully witness and engage the long, great conversation that was begun in antiquity. They have been equipped so as to see how it extends and expands into a cultural discourse with many rich dimensions. This discourse has been called the Great Tradition, and in the Middle Ages it blossoms forth from the bud that was developing and swelling throughout the history of ancient Greece and Rome. Since this is so, the authors in the pages that follow will often refer to ideas and artifacts, persons, authors, and events from antiquity. It is here that students will perceive their ongoing interaction and development in the Middle Ages. For the great figures of the Middle Ages received and transformed the wisdom of the past, but the transformation didn't stop there: the medievals were themselves transformed by what they inherited. Our hope is that as students witness this commerce between antiquity and the Middle Ages, the way in which the authors of the past can transform and be made present in the future, they will likewise receive, transform, and be transformed themselves.

Students will also enjoy reading some seminal texts in the *Humanitas* books on the Middle Ages, and they will encounter fresh, newly commissioned translations as well as several texts that appear in English for the first time, having been translated by the lead author, Dr. Junius Johnson. These texts are noted both in the table of contents and in the chapter headings where they appear.

Like the rest of the *Humanitas* series, these books attempt to bring the wealth of primary sources to high school students so that they may hear from the great authors themselves, thus gaining an understanding and appreciation of history from those who lived it. Nonetheless, we have also provided the necessary orientation to these sources as well as some practical guidance throughout the readings. We have carefully arranged the sequence and included brief introductions to each reading along with many explanatory annotations to provide clarity and context for students. Our goal has been to find just the right balance of the primary (original source readings) and the secondary (introductions, annotations, time lines, questions). The Teacher Guides for each semester of *Humanitas* offers further insight not only to the texts and art that appears throughout these pages but also into pedagogy, suggesting how best to guide students to engage the texts and to enable them to learn how to encounter the medievals for themselves.

We believe that students who study the Middle Ages through an engaged and direct study of its great authors will find themselves growing wiser as they behold the Middle Ages grow brighter.

—Christopher J. Perrin  
Publisher & CEO

## NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITOR

The need for a series like *Humanitas* first occurred to me in the summer of 2014 when, as the newly appointed Humanities Chair at a small classical school in San Diego, my dean requested that we transition our history classes from a lecture model to a Socratic or discussion-based format. To accomplish this, three changes needed to take place.

First, the architecture of the classroom had to transform. Instead of students lined up in rows before a lectern, they would be seated with their teacher around a long, oval table. Second, students and teachers would need to approach the classroom with a different mindset. The former would become active participants in their education, while the latter would lead conversations about texts that raised questions rather than offering lectures that simplified and categorized. Teachers, in other words, would become model students, participating in discussion and discovery even while demonstrating how to read and discuss and think alongside and with students. The endeavor was to be collaborative. Finally, we would have to find a curriculum capable of facilitating this type of learning, which meant replacing textbooks with something more substantial.

Traditional history texts were designed to distill large epochs of time into easily digestible paragraphs, helping students become familiar with the important people, events, and ideas of a particular era. They did so, however, by holding those people, events, and ideas at a distance. We were after something much different. Rather than reducing history to a series of facts that could be regurgitated and checked for accuracy, our mission was to help students approach and indeed experience these events through the people who lived them, to interact with the great ideas by directly engaging the geniuses who articulated them. Traditional textbooks reduced history for the sake of students' "mastery," most often demonstrated by way of multiple-choice tests favored by so-called Advanced Placement courses that only occasionally involve primary sources; but we wanted history to expand the minds and hearts and souls of our students for the sake of the student's humility. In short, our aim was to enable students to cultivate wisdom rather than simply memorize facts. The goal was not to allow students to test out of college classes but to prepare them for a life marked by the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, to give them a love and desire for the True, the Good, the Beautiful, and the Holy.

Though we all understood that this meant "going back to the sources," collecting and organizing primary texts into a three-ring binder proved much more difficult than we could have imagined. For starters, one had to be a scholar in each of the different epochs of history to know which documents should be read, but one also had to be a master pedagogue to know which sort of texts freshman could wrestle with and how seniors' readings could call on and incorporate ideas and authors encountered in our study of previous periods. And while it is true

that there are several online sourcebooks, we found that they were often disorganized messes of broken links, terrible or overly technical translations, and cumbersome redactions—and none were informed by classical pedagogy or compiled with a view for discussion in a high school classroom.

We saw too that there would be challenges unique to each period. If freshmen were to study Greece and Rome, that meant curating selections of Plato and Aristotle that would be accessible. Though the Middle Ages has many primary sources from which to choose, the period has long been the domain of specialists who work in Latin. As there are few and sometimes no English versions of texts available, we would have to commission translations of certain texts for the first time.

Furthermore, even when these sources and translations could be secured, we soon discovered there was a marked difference between teaching a good class and creating a comprehensive course. In other words, while it is true that we had many wonderful discussions, at the end of the year, I knew my students were not getting a sense of having been exposed to an unfolding, cohesive, and chronological narrative. In that sense, we were still falling short. These were, after all, courses in history.

Then came the great supposal: What if we could create a resource that had all the accoutrements of a traditional text—beautiful art, helpful annotations, clear prose, explanatory essays coupled with proper seminar questions, and an obvious, historical progression—yet that was completely built around the source documents? That is, what if we could get the sources to tell the story and send the pedagogue into the background where he belongs? Wouldn't it be best to let the Greeks teach the student what it meant to be Greek? If this could happen, then students will have received, in the truest sense of the word, an education.

In this vein, we humbly offer you the *Humanitas* series. We designed the books so students and teachers can experience unfettered delight in discussing the most profound specimens of firsthand knowledge in the Western historical canon. This is the story of humanity, told in an unfolding narrative, through primary sources. This, in the simplest terms, is *Humanitas*.

—Christopher Maiocca  
Series Editor



**Christopher Maiocca** received a Master of Arts from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. Since graduating, he has taught at three classical schools and currently resides in Boise, Idaho. He is married to Robin, his wife of twenty years, with whom he has four children—Hannah, Christopher, Phoebe, and Jeremiah.



## Welcome to *Humanitas*

The emphasis on the importance of firsthand knowledge has been traditionally communicated by the Latin phrase *ad fontes*, meaning “to the fountains.” This phrase was used as a banner by both humanist scholars and reformers of the high medieval and the early modern periods to describe their renewed interest in studying the primary sources that contained the ideas most responsible for precipitating the civilizations and cultural milieus in which they found themselves. While this approach to education fell out of vogue in the twentieth century, the *Humanitas* series seeks to return *ad fontes*, to provide high school students and educators with a comprehensive course in the Western story, told through primary sources.

Why is “going back to the sources” so important? As Emerson observed, “We, as we read, must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner; must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly.” The hope, then, is that our reading becomes our lives, that our own experience will be enriched because it contains something of the best of ancient Greece and Rome. At the very least, the old authors enable us to live our lives with remarkable freshness, to encounter our days of joy and tribulation in light of the wisdom of the past. Thoreau, Emerson’s great student, likewise observes, “Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the

only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as well omit studying Nature because she is old.” As Emerson and Thoreau well knew, the texts in these volumes transcend time: in a mysterious way, though aged, they do not grow old—they are ever new. They not only offer adventure in themselves—who has not been excited at the prospect of journeying across the Aegean with Odysseus or entering the Heorot with Beowulf to feast and sing and lie in wait for Grendel?—but they also equip students to lead adventurous lives of their own, to meet joy and sorrow, love and death, the sublime and the mundane having been shaped to desire the true, the good, and the beautiful. The student who has wept with Sophocles’s *Antigone* and been consoled by Boethius’s *Lady Philosophy* has been equipped, in a profound way, though she may not realize it during her education, to inhabit and bear her own sorrows. So too, because she has delighted in Theocritus and leaned and loafed at her ease with Walt Whitman, she has been taught how to leisure, to find rest in nature and poetry alike.

While the early humanists and reformers might not appear to have much in common with the American transcendentalists, both approached the authors of the past with awe and expectation, and both were intent on not leading lives of quiet desperation. In the middle of the last century, however, C. S. Lewis noticed that a profound change had occurred. Many of his students now preferred to pick up technical books of modern scholarship about the Greeks rather than to read the old authors themselves. He went on to note that, in his

experience, students often avoided the old authors out of humility. Plato's *Republic*, after all, is hard. Yet Plato is accessible and pleasurable in a way that contemporary scholarship, unfortunately, often is not. Thus, we agree with Lewis when he observed: "The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always therefore been one of my main endeavors as a teacher to persuade the young that firsthand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than secondhand knowledge but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire." For Lewis and nearly every other person living in Europe and America, Greece and Rome are the fountainheads of our civilization, and it is to these sources we must return if we hope to become "educated" in the classical sense of the word.

For example, it is in ancient Greece and Rome that you will encounter the beginnings of Western poetry in Homer and Hesiod, Ovid and Virgil. They were the founts to which all subsequent European and British letters would return, wrestle with, and imitate. They inspire the tradition and keep it alive. Those we call the medievals read them. Without the classical poets, we would have no *Song of Roland* or *Divine Comedy*. The medievals, in turn, would hand down the tradition and so shape those who came after them. So having read these volumes, when the student comes to Milton, she will not only encounter the greatest epic in English, she will also hear echoes of Hesiod's *Theogony* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. She will begin to overhear the great conversation that has been unfolding between poets and slowly become able to participate in that conversation by how she lives her own life.

Moreover, here is where students will encounter the first writers of history—Thucydides and Herodotus, Livy and Plutarch—who themselves were the education of the American founders and provided models of virtue for countless figures throughout history. This, perhaps more than anything else, is the particular value of *Humanitas*. It is by reading and wrestling with the authors themselves, with living texts, that our students can experience not

only a quickening of their minds but also of their *thymos*. Classical education, after all, aims to develop virtue in the student. By participating in the great conversation that *Humanitas* presents to students, the reader can enter into that experience, not merely to read *about* the Greeks and Romans, but to read the Greeks and Romans themselves, to count them as friends and attempt to understand them from the inside out.

*Humanitas* then not only offers students the fountain of Western civilization and culture, the delight of reading primary texts, and the broadening of experience properly called "education," it also encourages them to develop a charitable hermeneutic. We approach the past not to assert our superiority or to home in on where we think past authors are wrong, but with a strong belief that we have something to learn and that there is wisdom in the past that can help us come to better understand our selves. This approach to history *animates* it—that is, etymologically, gives it soul. History becomes a living thing to engage and study rather than a desiccated relic of which we are embarrassed because it lacks modern sensibility.

As you open these volumes of *Humanitas* and encounter the sources of Western civilization for yourself, we believe that you will get to know the Greeks and the Romans, the medievals and early modern Europeans—how they thought, lived, worshiped, and fought—better than you could through the conventional textbooks that have occupied our classrooms for more than a century. Here you will march into Gaul with Julius Caesar, sit with Socrates as he willingly drinks the hemlock, and discover what daily life was like on a Roman farm. You will watch Rome be sacked with Augustine, meditate on the nature of law first with Justinian and then Aquinas, encounter the liberal arts of Charlemagne's court and be instructed by his teacher, Alcuin. In short, we believe that this is as close as we can take students into the past without traveling back in time to see it for themselves. In *Humanitas*, they will see it for themselves.

—Christopher Maiocca  
and Nathan Antiel

# INTRODUCTION TO EARLY MIDDLE AGES

## *Twilight of Rome to Rise of Islam*

It is customary to describe the period covered by this volume (c. 500–1000) as a dark age: an age of superstition, ignorance, brutality, and sickness. All this was caused by the supposed fall of Rome and the consequent loss of security, meaning, learning, and culture. Some credit is given to the high Middle Ages as a time when progress was made, but it was not to be until the Renaissance that true recovery from this dismal state of affairs would occur. But this is a narrative told by the Renaissance and, to a greater extent, the Enlightenment, as they attempted to elevate their own intellectual achievements. The Dark Ages are a constructed bogeyman of later ages, providing the necessary contrast to support their own claims to preeminence. When we look at the period itself, however, and listen to the voices of its intellectual and political leaders, a different story emerges.

Our story begins with Rome—but which Rome? Historically, there was the Rome that tied itself to Greece through myth (Virgil and Ovid) as well as history (Dionysius of Halicarnassus); then there was the early republic, a Rome that came to dominate the Mediterranean (as imagined by Livy); then again, there was the Rome that allowed generals such as Julius Caesar to charismatically supersede that republic; this gave way to imperial Rome, with all its trappings; and finally a Christian Rome arose, demonstrating that the idea of Rome could be translated, carried from central Italy to a soon-to-be-built city on the Bosphorus that would be called both Constantinople and New Rome. Throughout all of this cultural change, Romans worked to tell a story that would justify their sense of continuity, the held belief that they were still the same as the Romans of all those previous iterations. What emerged, perhaps quite naturally, was the sense that Rome was an ideal that could remain intact through various historical instantiations.

As a result, Rome became a powerful idea in the cultural imaginations of peoples living from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Middle East. Indeed, time would show that this idea of Rome was even more powerful and influential than the considerable military might of Rome; for long after the legions had abandoned the far-flung territories and left the beautifully engineered roads to fall into disrepair, and long after the political influence of the city of seven hills had shifted far to the north, the notion of Rome continued to hold the imagination. It is an idea that did not fade with time but transformed through it: it would cross the Atlantic and manifest itself in the democratic republic envisioned by the American Founding Fathers; “It would even echo forth into the twentieth century. Both the German and Russian emperors took to themselves the imperial title of Caesar (German *kaiser*, Russian *tsar*). Imperial Russia even conceived of itself as the “Third Rome,” after Rome and Constantinople. Rome has become eternal not through her unconquerable legions, but as an invincible ideal.

As I have been poring over medieval documents and texts for the last two and a half years to assemble the story being told here, one thing has struck me more deeply than ever before: continuity. The false narrative of the Dark Ages is primarily a story of loss, of discontinuity and forgetting. But what I find when I slow down and let the people who lived at the time speak for themselves is something quite different. They do not speak as if Rome were fallen; they do not see themselves inhabiting a different era of world history from “classical” Rome; they have not forgotten where they came from.

It is true that this is an era of great cultural upheaval, but that would be true of any five-hundred-year period of recorded history you select. Specifically, there were large migrations of peoples, most of them moving southward. This produced wars as the invaders fought to carve out kingdoms for themselves. These kingdoms in turn warred with each other in accordance with the typical human greed and lust for power that has not weakened in the time since the Middle Ages ended. The story of this time is a story of over two hundred kingdoms that rose and fell in the territory that is today divided among just a handful of European nations.

But it is also the story of how those contemporary national identities were forged. It is the time of the great heroes (some legendary, some historical) who would become archetypal, shaping the cultures of those who lived in the shadow of their tales. Through these legends and heroes, the hearers were able to make sense of where they stood in the story of Rome and of the new political realities that were taking shape.

Importantly, this was not unique to the west. The world was being reshaped in significant ways in the east as well. The reign of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, which began with the promise of inaugurating a new golden age for the eastern empire, ended in disaster and confusion, having been characterized by a stream of catastrophes. The people of the eastern empire did not enjoy a new *Pax Romana* or cultural renaissance; they were left picking up pieces of lives that had been shattered by natural disasters, costly military campaigns, and civil unrest.

Meanwhile, in the deserts of Arabia, a middle-aged man began having visions and dictated a text that, when written down, would launch not only a new religion but a new world power. Over the following centuries, Europe would be defined in many ways by its conversation and conflict with the Islamic Caliphates that grew from the seed of the prophet’s spiritual fervor.

These volumes contain a wealth of primary source information, some of it available in English for the first time, as well as a wide range of important art and artifacts from the period. The work of selecting, translating, editing, and annotating that I have been engaged in these last couple of years has all been undertaken with an eye to setting forth as coherent and authentic a story as possible. But the reader must always keep in mind that we are dealing with hundreds of kingdoms over hundreds of years. No truly comprehensive story is possible. This story is, as it were, an average; it is what the events of this time might look like viewed from several thousand feet in the air. The real story is far richer and deeper, as is apparent from the glimpses we get in the sources we have. Likewise, while we occasionally look to Constantinople and the Caliphates, because their development profoundly shaped what was happening in Europe, one ultimately has to decide which story to tell, and then to make the appropriate but difficult sacrifices. This is not the story of Byzantium or the Islamic principalities, and therefore does not really do them justice.

With all of these shortcomings in mind, allow me to invite you to enter into the mystery, intrigue, and excitement that is the early Middle Ages. It is a time of great technological progress, of massive social change, of expansive religious development, and of legendary deeds. Here you will rub shoulders with giants such as Emperor Justinian, King Arthur, Charlemagne, Saint Augustine, and Saint Patrick. Here are battles that will shape the destinies of millions, and ideas that will remake the world. Enter in, and rediscover our shared past.

— Junius Johnson  
Christmastide 2024

# UNIT I

## *Negotiating the Classical World as the People of God*

Sometime in the 370s, the Huns swept down from the steppes of central Asia and entered Europe, falling upon the Germanic tribes who lived there. Faced with an overwhelming enemy, the native tribes took what possessions they had and fled westward. In 376, these tribes were given leave to cross the Danube and enter the confines of the Roman Empire, where they would serve the emperor. By 410, things had been so badly managed by the Romans that descendants of the “barbarians” who were welcomed by Rome actually besieged the Eternal City, ultimately sacking it. They would return in 455 and again in 476, when a boy—possibly as young as ten years old—was sitting on the throne of the Western Roman Empire. He was removed by the Germanic king Odoacer, and the western imperial insignia were sent to Constantinople, the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Each of these moments has been identified by various historians as marking the definitive end of the Western Roman Empire. But the problem with attempting to pinpoint any particular moment or event as the fall of Rome is the experiences of those living at the time. As we examine the writings of the people who actually lived through these great changes, we do not find them discussing the decisive end of the empire in the west. That is something we look for, but it did not animate the peoples at that time. Indeed, Theodoric the Great, leader of the Ostrogothic kingdom that would ultimately bring Italy under its sway in 493, was sent the western imperial insignia by the eastern emperor in 497. He named consuls, and the patrician families of Italy addressed him as emperor; it seemed the west had an emperor again. It was not until the emperor Justin I ascended the throne in Constantinople in 518 that talk about the Western Roman Empire as fallen began to be heard in the east: talk that was probably originated by the emperor’s powerful nephew, Justinian, as a way to delegitimize Theodoric’s rule.

When Theodoric died in 526, leaving his ten-year-old grandson the throne, the empire Theodoric had built both by force of personality and by force of arms began to disintegrate. The very next year, Justin died, and Justinian I ascended the throne. His sights quickly turned westward as he sought to recover the lands that were now in the hands of those he considered barbarians.

Justinian’s reign saw the world radically transformed on nearly every level. As for intellectual developments, codes of law were rewritten, a Christian worldview swept away the last vestiges of pagan philosophy, and a major theological controversy raged. Politically, Justinian’s wars ravaged the Mediterranean world, reducing large parts of the west to eastern rule. Socially, the most famous riot of late antiquity nearly cost the emperor his reign, and a significant drop in global temperatures led to famine and one of the worst plagues in human history. Waves of natural disasters struck, leaving countless thousands dead

and multiple cities destroyed. It must have seemed to those who lived through these times as though the prophecies of the book of Revelation were coming true: “When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place” (Revelation 6:12-14). God, it seemed, was rending the foundations of the world.

The world that emerged from all this turmoil is the one we now refer to as “the Middle Ages,” a derogatory term first used in the seventeenth century. The term was dismissive, suggesting the period merely connected the ancient world to the modern one, to the so-called Renaissance where, as the name suggests, art and culture would finally be reborn. But as we shall see, the Middle Ages would become one of the most culturally fruitful times in human history. Its early stages were characterized by perpetual realignment as society worked to cope with the constant upheavals of mass migrations, continual war, and the transformation of cultural institutions. But the processes by which groups of people began to see themselves not in relation to Roman rule, but as legitimate challengers to it, were not instantaneous or simple.

And so, when we turn to consider the Middle Ages, we must not begin by presuming a decisive break from Rome, nor with a lament for fallen Rome, but rather with the understanding that the people in the west perceived a continuity with Rome, a sense of legitimate succession. The medieval period succeeded the classical not only because it came after it, but also because it drew from and built upon many of the ideas and elements of the earlier period: the languages that were developing were formed from or in conversation with Latin, and the epic stories of great heroes and wars that were being sung constantly looked back to the great stories of Greece and, particularly, Rome. And although classical paganism was replaced by Christianity, it was nevertheless a *Roman* church, one influenced by Roman traditions, that emerged to hold sway over all the lands of Europe. This is reflected in various elements, from the architecture of early churches to the titles of church officials. The pope, for example, took on the title of *pontifex maximus*, a priestly and political title that first appeared under the legendary Roman king Numa Pompilius. This title was once used to refer to the highest priest in Roman religion; later, it also became one of the imperial titles (see *History of Ancient Rome Book I*, chapters 5 and 20).

In the early medieval period, this encounter between Roman culture and Christianity shaped much of what followed. When the time came for the founding of a new empire, Charlemagne’s kingdom, it was called “Holy” and “Roman,” indicating the importance of the Christian faith as well as the importance of establishing continuity with Rome. There was a general interest among medieval peoples in displaying continuity with what came before. This impulse was itself Roman: consider the way Virgil legitimized the Roman *imperium* by connecting it to Troy (see *HARI*, chapter 1), or how Livy worked to demonstrate continuity from the earliest Roman kings down to his own day (see *HARI*, chapters 2, 4, and 5). This notion of *traditio*, or “handing on,” which gives us the English “tradition,” was not new to the Romans. Plato used it in the *Timaeus*, the only text of his that was available in Europe during the Middle Ages, but it became distinctively Roman and central to their cultural identity. It had also been a profoundly Jewish virtue, animating much of the Hebrew Scriptures. No wonder, then, that it played such a massive role in the life of the Church.

There were significant challenges, however. Even before the disintegration of the empire preceding the reign of Justinian and the massive upheavals that marked his tenure as emperor, there were fault lines in Roman society that grew and connected until they became the great divide that separated the classical from the medieval world. Therefore, our story begins before the great upheavals of Justinian, in a time when the Christians who would ultimately inherit and define the mantle of Roman authority were still trying to think through what it meant to be both Christian and Roman.

# I

## A People Set Apart

Tertullian's mind saw everything sharply defined as white or black, true or false, right or wrong. Such a person makes a stalwart advocate for the faithful and a formidable prosecutor of the unbeliever.

—Hugh T. Kerr

### INTRODUCTION

The encounter between Greco-Roman culture and Christianity could not be entirely amicable because religion was no small or accidental feature of Roman life. The *Feriale Duranum*, which was used by the Roman army during the reign of Severus Alexander (AD 223–235), prescribed forty-three festivals for the portion of the year the incomplete calendar covers, attesting to the extent to which the various religious activities that made up Roman paganism dominated every aspect of Roman life (see *History of Ancient Rome Book 2*, chapter 33). This means that the encounter between Roman culture and Christianity was really an encounter between the old pagan gods, the emperors' claims to divinity, and the triune God of Christianity. Roman culture could not simply be baptized: it had to be thoroughly examined and purified, with every vestige of pagan influence rooted out.

This discussion had already begun in the earliest days of the Christian faith. 1 Corinthians 8 records one such encounter: the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth to give them practical guidance about whether they were allowed to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. This can seem like a very small point, but it isn't: most of the

festivals described in the *Feriale Duranum* required a sacrifice of a cow or an ox, and it would have been hard to find meat in the major cities of the empire such as Rome and Corinth that had not been sacrificed to idols, especially if one wasn't particularly wealthy. To abstain from food sacrificed to idols would, for most, mean a fairly vegetarian diet.

In addition, there was a serious question of convenience. Food was often served at public events, paid for by government officials or by the temples, and the food was usually dedicated to one or more of the gods before it was offered to the people. If Christians could not partake, it would be like going to the state fair or the ballpark and not being allowed to eat anything there. And it may be that one had traveled a significant distance to get to the city that day. To be barred from food sacrificed to idols might have meant enforced fasting until one could get home late at night or the next day.

Paul's answer to this problem was twofold: on the one hand, it is not really a matter of competition between gods. It was not that the Christian God was stronger than the idols but that he was real and the idols were not. Therefore, food dedicated to idols was not changed in any way, just as food dedicated

to leprechauns wouldn't be. For that reason, Paul said, Christians could partake with a free conscience. But on the other hand, not all Christians understood this. Some Christians thought that the idols were real or that the food had been tainted in some way by its association with idols. If they believed this, even though they were wrong, Paul said, they should not eat it lest they violate their sense of moral obligation. By extension, even those who knew better should take care not to partake around a Christian who misconceived what was at stake in order to not cause confusion and consternation. Better never to eat meat, Paul said, than to cause your brother to stumble. Christian unity was privileged over nuanced knowledge. In essence, he left it up to the conscience of each believer; but he did lay down some principles that could guide future action.

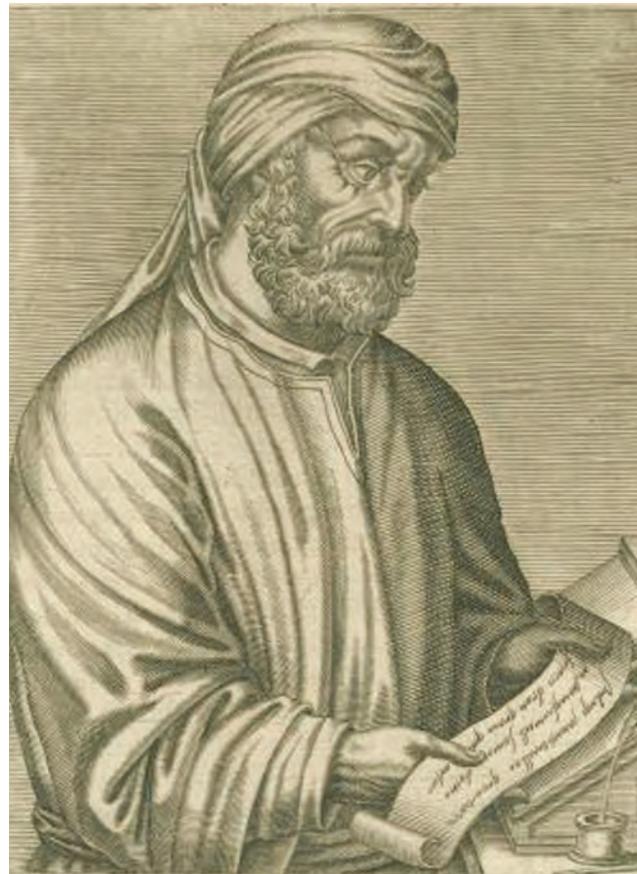
Tertullian, an early Christian writer, lived over a century after Paul's letter to the church at Corinth was written. He wrote at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century AD, when Christians were still undergoing periodic persecutions by the Roman government. He lived before the formal legalization of Christianity by Constantine and before the troubles that beset the later empire. Indeed, the empire he knew was still undivided, and its capital was still Rome. Little is known about his life except that he was an exceptionally learned African Christian from Carthage. Perhaps he studied in Alexandria, the dominant center of Christian culture in Africa. Tertullian is the first writer we know of who produced a rich body of theology in the Latin language (what came before him was written in Greek, the language of the New Testament), and his excellent rhetorical style influenced all major Latin writers to follow.

In Tertullian's judgment, Christians were still confused about the relationship they ought to maintain with the broader culture. The issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols did not seem to be a major topic of concern anymore, but there was a much deeper question at play, of which sacrificed meat was just one facet, although an important one. The reason the government and the temples were

providing food in the first place was that eating together was a symbol of unity: it made the Romans into one people.

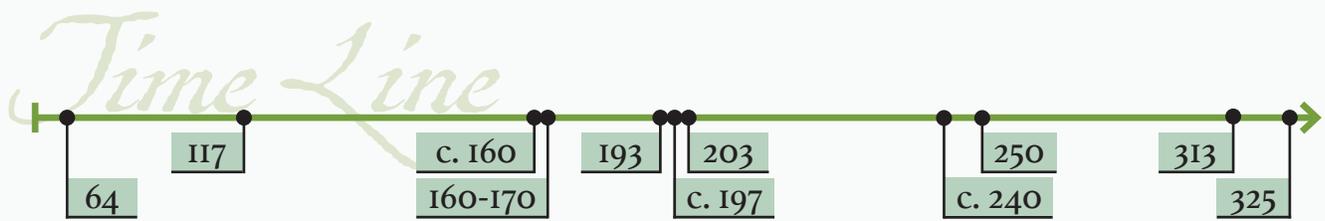
With religion so deeply ingrained in public culture, Tertullian felt that every form of entertainment on offer was suspect, tainted by its association with paganism. From the theater to the chariot races, from the Olympics to the gladiatorial games, everything was offered in worship to the pagan gods. Could a Christian participate in these public celebrations if that amounted to a form of worshipping the pagan gods?

So the dietary question the apostle Paul considered turned out to involve a much deeper and broader concern: can Christians participate in the public life of the culture around them? Or does the separation that the life of holiness requires also mean that they must separate themselves from the common life of the state?



**TERTULLIAN**

*Tertullian came from Carthage, a Roman province in northern Africa. He wrote extensively on Christian teachings, aiming to expand the reach of the budding religion.*



**64** — Traditional date for the death of the apostle Paul.

**117** — Hadrian becomes emperor, and the empire reaches its greatest extent.

**c. 160** — Tertullian is born in Carthage.

**160–170** — Montanus leads a new prophetic movement in Asia Minor.

**193** — Lucius Septimius Severus becomes emperor of Rome.

**c. 197** — Tertullian begins writing *On Spectacles*.

**203** — Perpetua and Felicity, two young Christian women, are martyred in Carthage.

**c. 240** — Tertullian dies.

**250** — The Decian persecution begins.

**313** — Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, ending all formal persecution of Christianity.

**325** — Constantine convenes the Council of Nicaea to define the doctrine of the Trinity.

## Roman Festivals in *On Spectacles*

Roman festivals were held throughout the entire year across the empire. Many of the festivals originated in the early republic and honored the pagan gods. There were also numerous solemnities and municipal holidays that commemorated events from the legendary history of Rome (see *HAR1*, chapter 8) and, as the Roman Republic gave way to the Roman Empire, many that centered on emperor worship (see *HAR2*, chapter 33). Tertullian critiqued the broader Roman practice so prevalent in his day, but he also addressed several particular festivals. The ones Tertullian names in our selection for this chapter involved chariot races, equestrian contests, and theatrical performances.

### **The *Megalesia* or *Megalesia Ludi*:**

This festival was celebrated from April 4–10 in honor of Cybele, whom the Romans called the Great Mother. It involved stage performances at her temple and concluded with chariot races in her honor at the Circus Maximus.

### **The *Ludi Apollinares*:**

These games were held at the Circus Maximus and featured equestrian contests and stage performances. In addition to being the god of the sun, archery, and prophecy, Apollo was associated with poetry and was one of the patron gods of the theater.

### The Cerealia:

Held for seven days in mid- to late April, the Cerealia celebrated the harvest. With a record dating to the oldest Roman calendars, it was a very traditional festival, often attributed to the king Numa Pompilius. The poet Ovid wrote of a nocturnal festival ritual that involved releasing live foxes with burning torches tied to their tails. Festival games were held as part of the celebration.

### The Neptunalia:

Named for the god of the waters and seas, this two-day festival was held in July, though little is known about how it was celebrated. Many have speculated the purpose was to propitiate Neptune at a time when fresh water would have been scarce. While little is known about the actual celebrations—which likely included horse races, as Neptune was the god of horses—Horace voiced a strong opinion in *Odes* 3.28 about his preference to stay home with a good bottle of wine.

### The Feriae Latinae:

Held at the end of April on Mount Alban (modern-day Monte Cavo) where Jupiter had an important temple, this was one of the most ancient Roman festivals. A white bull was sacrificed to Jupiter of the Latins, and hostilities were forbidden as a sign of unity. This festival is believed to predate Rome itself.

### The Floralia:

The festival of Flora, goddess of flowers and fertility, was held on April 28. The celebrations lasted for six days and were marked by excessive licentiousness and lewd exhibitions. In his *Life of Galba*, Suetonius mentions that one year the games for Flora included an elephant walking a tightrope.

## On Spectacles

Tertullian

c. 197

### ON THE ABUSE OF GOOD THINGS



ou servants of God who wish to draw near to him: so that you may solemnly consecrate yourselves to him, seek to understand well the condition of faith, the reasons of the truth, and the laws of Christian discipline, which forbid, among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows. For those who say that you have done this already, review the subject so that you do not sin through either real or willful ignorance. For earthly pleasures have the power to make us willingly prolong our ignorance or bribe knowledge into dishonesty so that we may still have the chance to partake in them. Some of you, perhaps, are allured to both these things by the views of the heathens, who are wont in this matter to press us with cunning arguments. First, they contend that the **exquisite enjoyments** our ears and eyes have in external things are not in the least opposed to a religious mind and conscience. Second, they argue that surely no human

**exquisite enjoyments**  
that is, the pleasure derived  
from looking at something  
beautiful or hearing beau-  
tiful words or music

enjoyment or pleasure that is not sinful in its own right offers an offense to God. When our pleasures are enjoyed in their proper time and place, all due honor and reverence to God is preserved. But this is precisely what we are ready to prove: that these things are not consistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God.

And everyone is ready with the argument that all things, as we Christians teach, were created by God and given to man for his use. Coming from so good a source, they must be good. Among these good things we find the various elements that constitute the public shows, such as the horse, the lion, bodily strength, and the musical voice. It cannot, then, be thought that what exists by God's own creative will is either **foreign** or hostile to him. And if it is not opposed to him, it cannot be regarded as harmful to his worshippers, because it is certainly not **foreign to them**. And beyond all doubt, even the buildings connected with the places of public amusement, composed as they are of rocks, stones, marbles, and columns, are things of God, who has given these various materials for the earth's embellishment. Indeed, the very scenes are enacted under **God's own heaven**.

But all sorts of evils, which even the heathens condemn as obviously evil and against which they guard themselves, come from the works of God. Take, for instance, murder, whether committed by iron, by poison, or by **magical enchantments**. Iron and herbs and demons are all equally creatures of God. The creator hasn't provided these things for man's destruction, has he? No, he forbids every sort of man-killing by one command, "You shall not murder."<sup>A</sup> Moreover, who but God, the maker of the world, put gold, brass, silver, ivory, wood, and all the other materials used to manufacture idols into the world? Yet has he done this so that men may worship something other than God? On the contrary, **idolatry** is in his eyes the crowning sin.



### foreign

*Because everything ultimately comes from God's hands and in some way declares his power, nothing is outside of or foreign to his will.*

### foreign to them

*Created things are not foreign to us because we too are created; we are all fellow creatures—literally, "created things."*

### God's own heaven

*Plays were performed in open air theaters.*

### magical enchantments

*There were many magicians in Tertullian's day, and some were able to do things that appeared to be supernatural. Tertullian, like many early Christians, attributed magic to demons.*

### <sup>A</sup>Exodus 20:13

### idolatry

*Since Christians admit no God but the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, any other god must be considered an idol—that is, a false god.*

### ROMAN CHARIOT RACING

*In his writings, Tertullian criticized the Roman obsession with gladiatorial games and chariot racing. This mosaic depicts the "Greens" after winning one such race. The charioteers would often wear different colors so that spectators seated far away could identify their favorite team. After the race, the victors were awarded the palm frond, a symbol of triumph.*

### WOMEN BEFORE AN IDOL

*This image from a fifteenth-century manuscript shows four women participating in idol worship. Idolatry was—and remains—an important issue for Christians. Tertullian criticized the Roman spectacles, arguing that they were idolatrous products of the devil.*

### iniquity

*another word for sin or immoral behavior*

### made in his image

*See Genesis 1:26-27.*

### our seal

*Early Christians referred to Baptism as the “seal of faith” (see Ephesians 1:13).*

### make profession

*The person to be baptized was first asked if they believed in the articles of the Apostles’ Creed, which summarizes the central beliefs of Christianity.*

### renounced the devil

*The person to be baptized was also asked if they renounced Satan, all his works, and his empty promises. Baptism thus involved positive assertions about what one believed alongside negative statements about what one rejected.*

### wicked spirit

*Tertullian granted the existence of the pagan gods, claiming they were demons rather than gods. This was a common early Christian position toward paganism.*

### apparatus

*the various equipment and practices attendant upon the Roman entertainments*

What is there offensive to God that is not God’s? But in offending him, it ceases to be his, and in ceasing to be his, it becomes an offending thing in his eyes. Man himself, guilty as he is of every **iniquity**, is not only a work of God but is **made in his image**. And yet both in soul and body he has severed himself from his maker. For we did not receive eyes to minister to lust, the tongue to speak evil, ears to be the receptacle of evil speech, the throat to serve the vice of gluttony, the belly to be gluttony’s ally, the genitals for unchaste excesses, hands for deeds of violence, or feet for an erring life. Was the soul placed in the body that it might become a thought-factory of snares and fraud and injustice? I think



not! For if God, as the righteous exactor of innocence, hates everything like malignity, if he utterly hates the plotting of evil, it is clear beyond a doubt that of all things that have come from his hand; he has made none to perform works that he condemns even though these same works may be carried out by things of his making. This is the one ground of condemnation: that the creature misuses the creation.

Lest anyone think that we are dealing in mere argumentative subtleties, I will turn to **our seal** as the highest authority. When entering the water, we **make profession** of the Christian faith in the words of its rule, and we also bear public testimony that we have **renounced the devil**, his empty promises, and his angels. Well, is it not in connection with idolatry, above all, that you have the devil with his pomp and his angels? From idolatry—if I may say it this way, because I do not wish to spend too long on this—comes every unclean and **wicked spirit**. If, therefore, it becomes clear that the entire apparatus of the public shows is based on idolatry, beyond all doubt that will carry with it the conclusion that our baptismal renunciations also include the shows. For the shows, through their idolatry, have been given over to the devil, his pomp, and his angels.

We will describe, then, the origins of each, showing in what nurseries they have grown to manhood; next the titles of some of them, and the names by which they are called; then their **apparatus**, showing with what superstitions they are observed; then their places, showing to what patrons they are dedicated; then the arts that minister to them, showing to what authors they are traced. If any of these will be found to have had no connection with an idol-god, it will be held as free at once from the taint of idolatry, and as not coming within the range of our baptismal renunciations.

# HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

## ◆ The Beginning of Latin Christianity

Tertullian is the earliest Christian author whose works survive in Latin. The New Testament and all the earliest Christian writings were composed in *koine*, a simplified version of ancient Greek. After Alexander the Great spread the Greek culture and language across the known world, Greek became the *lingua franca*, or common language, of the Mediterranean world. Romans in western Europe and North Africa, however, spoke Latin. Tertullian was highly educated and could read Greek, but as a Roman citizen from the North African city of Carthage, Tertullian chose to write books in his native language. Partly due to the influence of Latin authors such as Tertullian and his student Cyprian, Latin quickly became the dominant language for Christian literature in the western half of the empire.

## ◆ Ancient Celebrities

Today our best actors, musicians, and athletes are rich and famous. Not so in ancient Rome. Despite the popularity of theaters, arenas, and racetracks, participation in the entertainment industry was widely considered to be a shameful profession, and enslaved persons filled many of these roles. Certain gladiators and chariot drivers did, in fact, garner a following for their accomplishments in the arena and occasionally won large prizes, but this did not raise their social status. An upstanding Roman citizen would never be seen socializing with actors or athletes. Naturally, then, the Romans were mortified when the emperor Nero took up acting and the emperor Commodus entered the Colosseum to fight in the arena.



## ◆ The Trinity

Tertullian holds a special place in the history of Christian theology because he was the first author to use the term *trinitas*, which gives us the English cognate “trinity.” Early Christians inherited a commitment to monotheism, a belief in only one God, from ancient Judaism. At the same time, however, many of the earliest Christian writers identified the human Jesus as divine. How then were Christians supposed to understand the relationship between Jesus and the God of Israel? Tertullian argued that God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were three distinct persons but still only one God. Tertullian supplied many of the terms and categories that later Christians would use to formulate their creeds or statements of belief about God.

## ◆ Montanism

Midway through his life, Tertullian involved himself with a heretical group of Christians known as the Montanists. They called themselves “the New Prophecy” and followed a self-proclaimed prophet, Montanus, and two female prophetesses. They differed little in terms of theology from other Christians; Montanists, however, were distinctive for their practices, including moral rigorism and the use of ecstatic prophecy to clarify the meaning of Scripture. The former probably appealed to the already quite strict sensibilities of Tertullian. Although Tertullian was never excommunicated or formally separated from the Church, his drift into Montanism is probably the reason that this important theologian, polemicist, and cultural critic was never recognized by the Church as a saint.

## festivals

See HARI, chapter 8 for Ovid's account of the origins of many festivals.

## solemnities of kings

A formalized rite or ceremony honoring an emperor; an example is the Augustalia, celebrated on October 12 in honor of Caesar Augustus.

## municipal holidays

state-sponsored holidays

## funeral honors

The gladiatorial games began as a species of rites for the deceased. In the Iliad, the Greeks held funeral games for Patroclus (see History of Ancient Greece Book 2, chapter 31). They competed in chariot races, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, single combat, discus throwing, archery, and the javelin.

## dead

The Romans practiced a form of ancestor worship. Tertullian is not referring to funerals that commemorate the deceased but to funereal practices that worshiped the dead as lesser deities.

## Circus

The Circus Maximus was the largest chariot racing stadium in Rome. Measuring more than 2,000 feet long and nearly 390 feet wide, it had a seating capacity of about 150,000.

## object

In the imperial era, the sun god (whether Sol or Apollo) was the patron of the Circus and its games. A large, sacred obelisk sat nearby at a temple of Apollo, towering above the action. Apollo was often represented as a charioteer who drove the sun through the sky each day.

## Circe

Daughter of Helios (Sol in Roman myth), Circe was the witch who held Odysseus captive for many years. See books 10 and 12 of the Odyssey.

# ON THE ORIGINS OF THE FESTIVALS

The very titles of the **festivals** reveal something of the idolatrous nature of their conception, for each declares the idol and religious object the various games, of one kind or another, were designed to honor. You have festivals bearing the name of Cybele, the great Mother, and Apollo, of Ceres, too, and Neptune, Jupiter, and Flora, all celebrated for a common end. The others have their religious origin in the birthdays and **solemnities of kings**, in public successes and **municipal holidays**. There are also testamentary exhibitions, in which **funeral honors** are rendered to the memories of private persons, and these originated in ancient times. For from the first the *ludi* or games were regarded as being of two sorts: sacred and funereal, that is in honor of the heathen deities and of the dead. But in the matter of idolatry, it makes no difference with us under what name or title it is practiced if it has to do with the wicked spirits whom we abjure. If it is lawful to offer homage to the **dead**, it will be just as lawful to offer it to their gods, for you have the same origin in both cases. Our part, however, requires the same solemn renunciation of all idolatry.

In addition to the names of the festivals, we might also consider the places where they occur. The **Circus** is chiefly consecrated to the Sun, whose temple stands in its midst and whose image shines forth from the temple summit, for they have not thought it proper to pay sacred honors underneath a roof to an **object** that exists in open space. Those who assert that the first spectacle was



## BAPTISM OF CHRIST

This stained glass panel shows the baptism of Christ. The vertical composition draws the eye up toward the Holy Spirit, who appears in the form of a dove, an effect that would be enhanced by the viewer's position below the window. Tertullian presents Christian Baptism as a type of cure for the taint of the devil, a renunciation of Roman excess.

VICTORY PILLAR AT  
THE SERAPEUM OF  
ALEXANDRIA

*Tertullian spends much time detailing the danger of Roman temples, particularly those dedicated to Serapis, also called serapea. This pillar, at the Serapeum of Alexandria in Egypt, represents the victory of Emperor Diocletian over a would-be usurper, Domitian Domitianus. The pillar represents much Tertullian writes against, especially the treatment of men as gods. The pillar declares Domitian polioúchos, which roughly translates to “city guardian god.”*



exhibited by **Circe** in honor of the Sun, who they say is her father, also maintain the name of “Circus” was derived from her. Plainly, then, the enchantress did this in the name of the parties whose priestess she was—I mean the demons and spirits of evil. What an aggregation of idolatries you see, accordingly, in the decoration of the place! Every ornament of the Circus is a temple by itself. The eggs are regarded as sacred by men who are not ashamed to profess faith in the production of Castor and Pollux from the **egg of a swan** that was visited by no other than Jupiter himself. The **dolphins** dip down in honor of Neptune. Images of Sessia (the so-called goddess of sowing), Messia (the so-called goddess of reaping), and Tutulina (the so-called fruit-protecting deity) load the **pillars**. In front of these you have three altars to three gods: **Great, Mighty, Victorious**. They have these gods from **Samothrace**. The huge obelisk, as Hermeteles affirms, is set up in public to the Sun. Its inscription, like its origin, belongs to **Egyptian superstition**. Cheerless were the demon-gathering without their Mater Magna, and so she presides there over the **Euripus**. **Consus** lies hidden underground at the Murcian Goals. These two sprang from an idol. For they will have it that **Murcia** is the goddess of love, and they have consecrated a temple to her at that spot. See, Christian, how many impure names have taken possession of the Circus! You have nothing to do with a sacred place that is tenanted by such multitudes of diabolic spirits.

And speaking of places, this is the right time for some remarks in anticipation of a point that some will raise. Will you be in danger of pollution if you go to the Circus when the games are not being celebrated? There is no law forbidding the mere places to us. For not only the places where they gather for shows but even the temples may be entered without any danger to true devotion by the servant of God, if he has only some honest reason for it, unconnected with their proper business and official duties. Why, even the streets and the marketplace, and the baths and taverns, and our very dwelling places, are not altogether free from idols. Satan and his angels have filled the whole world. It is not by merely

**egg of a swan**

*Castor and Pollux were the twin sons of Leda, who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan. They hatched from an egg, as did their sisters Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra.*

**dolphins**

*A second series of larger lap counters in the shape of dolphins was added in 33 BC.*

**pillars**

*turning posts that marked the course for chariot races*

**Great, Mighty, Victorious**

*Probably a reference to the sisters Kratos (“strength”), Bia (“force”), and Nike (“victory,” Latin Victoria), who were children of the river nymph Styx. The sisters held honored places because they were early supporters of Zeus in his war against the Titans. See Hesiod’s account in History of Ancient Greece Book I, chapters 1–2.*

**Samothrace**

*an island in Greece*

**Egyptian superstition**

*The 67-foot tall Flaminio Obelisk was created in Egypt in the thirteenth century BC at the command of Pharaoh Seti I. It was dedicated to the sun god Ra in the city the Greeks called Heliopolis, “the city of the Sun.” Augustus Caesar brought it to Rome in 10 BC and set it in the Circus Maximus. It stands today in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome.*

**Euripus**

*A water channel built by Julius Caesar to separate the spectators from the action (and accidental mauling by wild beasts involved in the games). Nero had it filled in to make room for more seats, but in Tertullian’s time a section of the stadium still went by that name.*

**Consus**

*the protector of grains*

**Murcia**

*an occasional name for Venus as well as the Aventine Hill*



## THE MUSES

The Greeks and Romans honored the Muses as goddesses who inspired the arts. Each was associated with particular attributes. For instance, in this sculptural relief from a sarcophagus, Euterpe holds a tibia or pipe and Terpsichore holds a lyre. The sculpture is roughly contemporary with Tertullian, who argued the Muses were merely demons in disguise.

being in the world, however, that we lapse from God, but by touching and tainting ourselves with the world's sins. I will break with my maker, that is, by going to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus or the temple of Serapis to sacrifice or adore, as I will also do by going as a spectator to the Circus and the theater. The places in themselves do not contaminate but what is done in them. From this even the places themselves, we maintain, become defiled. The polluted things pollute us. This is why I have explained who these places are dedicated to: to prove that what happens there belongs to the idolatrous patrons to whom the places themselves are sacred.

## ON THE THEATER

Let us pass on now to theatrical exhibitions, which have a common origin with the Circus. They likewise bear idolatrous titles and equally minister to idols—they have borne the name of *ludi* from the beginning. At first the theater was properly a temple of Venus. It was because of this that stage performances were allowed to escape censure and established a foothold in the world. For often the censors, in the interests of morality, suppressed the theaters as they were coming into existence, foreseeing that there was great danger of their leading to a general licentiousness. Already, then, the heathen agrees with us, and natural human knowledge anticipates our own views. Accordingly, when **Pompey the Great** had erected a theater greater than himself, a citadel of all impurities, he built a temple of Venus over it, fearing condemnation of his legacy by the censors. Summoning the people to its consecration by public proclamation, he called it not a theater but a **temple**, “under which,” said he, “we have placed tiers of seats for viewing the shows.” So he threw a veil over a structure on which condemnation had often been passed. He pretended that it was a sacred place, and thus through superstition he deluded virtue.

Now some remarks about the arts of the theater. We see that the arts are also consecrated to the service of the beings named as their founders. For things cannot be considered free from the taint of idolatry whose inventors are deified for their discoveries. Actually, concerning the arts, we should have gone further back to bar all further argument. For the demons, for their own advantage, established from the very beginning the pollutions of the public shows. In this way they aimed to call people away from the Lord and bind them to their own service. They carried out their purpose by bestowing on humanity the **artistic**

### Pompey the Great

Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus was a Roman general and politician who rose to prominence in the late republic. He eventually opposed Julius Caesar, leading Rome into the civil war of 49–45 BC that resulted in Pompey's death and Caesar's subsequent rise to total control of the state. See HARI, chapters 13–14.

### temple

The structure, completed in 55 BC, was the first permanent theater in Rome. At the time, permanent stone theaters were forbidden. This paved the way for more like it, and the next was built forty years later.

### artistic gifts

Tertullian's view that demons invented the arts accords with the Greek and Roman accounts of their origins in the Muses and other gods. He would have found confirmation in the text of Genesis 4:19–22, which attributes the invention of architecture, agriculture, music, and blacksmithing to the cursed line of Cain.

### personas

The demons are portrayed as stage actors, pretending to be the classical gods by wearing *personas* or theatrical masks.

gifts that the shows require. For no one but them would have made preparations for the things they had in mind. Nor would they use any **personas** to give the arts to the world other than those names, images, and histories they had created for themselves so that they might receive worship.

## ON THE MARTIAL ARTS AND GLADIATORIAL GAMES

Let us now go on to consider the **martial arts**. Their origin is like that of the games. They are either sacred or funereal, depending on whether they have been instituted in honor of the pagan gods or of the dead. So they are called **Olympian** in honor of Jupiter, known at Rome as the Capitoline; **Nemean**, in honor of Hercules; **Isthmian**, in honor of Neptune; the rest are various contests for the dead. What wonder, then, if idolatry pollutes the combat-parade with profane crowns, with priestly presiders, with ministers of the **colleges**, last of all with the blood of its sacrifices? A final word about the place: they emulate the Circus in the arena with contest and sound of trumpet, in the shared space for the college of the arts sacred to the Muses, Apollo, Minerva, and the arts dedicated to Mars. This is itself a temple of the idol whose festivals it celebrates. The **gymnastic arts** also originated with Castor and Pollux, Hercules, and Mercury.

It remains for us to examine the most famous spectacle of all, the one given highest favor: the gladiatorial games. It is called a **munus** or dutiful service and is also called an **officium**. The ancients thought that in this solemnity they offered service to the dead. At a later period, with a more refined cruelty, they somewhat modified its character. Earlier, believing that the souls of the departed



### **martial arts**

The martial arts, or combats—named after Mars, the god of war—were ludi that involved either fighting or training for fighting.

### **Olympian**

The Olympics included wrestling, boxing, and the pankration, a sort of ancient mixed martial arts contest (see HAGI, chapter 31).

### **Nemean**

The Nemean games were held in honor of Hercules's defeat of the Nemean lion, a beast with impervious skin (see HAGI, chapter 5).

### **Isthmian**

games held at Corinth since 582 BC in honor of Neptune

### **colleges**

Religious colleges were associations of priests who handled the religious aspects of festivals. Their presence in the procession indicated the religious nature of the event (see HARI, chapter 8).

### **gymnastic arts**

The gymnastic arts were a series of athletic skills designed to prepare young men for war.

### **munus**

The Latin word munus referred to a duty, or office, as well as a tribute or gift. It was applied to public shows, especially gladiatorial games, because elected officials sponsored them in gratitude for their election.

### **officium**

any service one does for another, whether voluntary or obligatory

### **RETIARIUS VS SECUTOR**

Tertullian expressed his disdain for the tradition of Roman gladiatorial combats as cruel and devil-inspired. In this mosaic, gladiators are shown locked in such combat and are labeled with names, attesting to their fame in Roman culture.



## ◆ A Famous Martyrdom

The *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity* (see HAR2, chapter 42), one of the most famous stories of early Christian martyrdom, is set in the city of Carthage. What's more, it took place during the life of Tertullian and featured the very Roman games Tertullian criticized. Perpetua and Felicity were young female converts to Christianity, still preparing to be baptized into the Church. The emperor Septimius Severus, however, had made it illegal to convert to Judaism or Christianity. The young women were arrested and sentenced to be killed by wild animals during a celebration of the emperor's birthday. While awaiting their execution, these young women claimed to experience a series of visions. One vision featured Perpetua dueling with and ultimately defeating Satan in gladiatorial combat. In the end, a number of animals—including an enraged cow, a leopard, and a bear—were loosed upon the martyrs, and they died professing their faith.

## ◆ The Circus Maximus

Not far from the world-famous Colosseum was Rome's largest public attraction, the Circus Maximus. This massive racetrack held nearly two hundred thousand spectators for chariot races, animal hunts, and imperial parades. This impressive stadium was the model for similar tracks all over the world, including the one in Tertullian's Carthage. But unlike sporting events today, Roman entertainment was not divorced from the worship of Rome's gods. The Circus in particular was filled with statues, altars, and other religious monuments. At the very center of the racetrack stood an obelisk, plundered from Egypt by Caesar Augustus and rededicated to the sun god for this new Roman context. Even today, tourists can visit a shrine to the Persian god, Mithras, which was probably built into the Circus building itself.



## ◆ Rise of the Jin Dynasty

For most of the third century AD, the rule of China was divided across the Three Kingdoms: the Wei, Shu Han, and Wu. The Sima clan was a prominent family under the Wei kingdom, and by the year 230, the Sima had gained control of the Wei's military force. The leader of the Sima clan, Sima Yi, was a talented military commander and strategist and an adept politician. Even though the emperor of the Wei kingdom, Cao Shuang, tried to ostracize Yi from the court and power, he was unable to do so as Yi outmaneuvered the emperor. The conflict escalated when Sima Yi raised the flag of rebellion while Cao Shuang was away, and Yi's superior abilities forced Shuang and his supporters to surrender, making the Sima the rulers of Wei. The emperor's son failed to regain authority from the Yi family, and in 260, Cao Huan

succeeded to the throne, only to abdicate. In 266, Sima Yi's grandson, Sima Yan, seized the throne and consolidated power, changing the name of the kingdom to "Jin." With the emergence of the Jin dynasty, Sima Yan conquered the Shu Han and Wu kingdoms, resulting in a reunified China.

were appeased by human blood, they used to buy criminal captives or slaves and **immolate** them in their funeral rites. Later, they covered their iniquity with a veil of pleasure. They trained the ones to be sacrificed in combat, but only so they might learn to die. On the funeral day, they fought to the death at the tombs. In this way they consoled the dead with murders. Such is the origin of the *munus*. But their refinement gradually caught up with their cruelty, for these human beasts could not find exquisite enough pleasure except in the spectacle of men torn to pieces by actual beasts. Offerings to satisfy the dead surely belong to the class of funeral sacrifices, and these are idolatry—for idolatry, in fact, is a sort of homage to the departed. The one as well as the other ministers to the dead. Moreover, demons reside in the images of the dead.

## CHRISTIANS AND THE SPECTACLES

We have, I think, faithfully carried out our plan of showing, in how many different ways, the sin of idolatry clings to the shows in their origins, their titles, their paraphernalia, their places of celebration, and their arts. And we may consider it beyond all doubt that for us who have renounced all idols, they are utterly unsuitable. “Not because an idol is anything,”<sup>B</sup> as the apostle says, but because the homage they render is to demons, who are the real occupants of these consecrated images, whether of dead men or, as they think, of gods. For this reason, therefore, because they have a common source—for their dead and their deities are one—we abstain from both idolatries. Nor do we dislike the temples less than the monuments. We have nothing to do with either altar, and we adore neither image. We do not offer sacrifices to the gods, and we make no funeral oblations to the departed. No, we do not partake of what is offered either in the one case or the other, for we cannot partake of **God’s feast** and **the feast of devils**. If, then, we keep throat and belly free from such defilements, how much more do we withhold our nobler parts, our ears and eyes, from the idolatrous and funereal enjoyments, which are not passed through the body but are digested in the very spirit and soul, whose purity, much more than that of our bodily organs, God has a right to claim from us.

That suffices for the main argument that there is in all these spectacles the taint of idolatry. Let us now contrast the other characteristics of the shows with the things of God. God has enjoined us to deal calmly, gently, quietly, and peacefully with the Holy Spirit because these alone are in keeping with the goodness of his nature, with his tenderness and delicateness. He commands us not to vex him with rage, anger, or grief. Well, how will this be made to accord with the shows? For the shows always lead to spiritual agitation, since where there is pleasure, there is zeal, which gives pleasure its savor. And where there is zeal, there is **imitation**, which gives zeal its savor. So then, where you have imitation, you have rage, bitterness, wrath, and grief, with all the bad things that flow from them and that do not accord with virtue. For even supposing that one could enjoy the shows in a moderate way, as is suitable to his rank, age, or nature, still he will not be undisturbed in mind; he will yet undergo some unuttered, internal motions. No one partakes of pleasure without being moved, and no one is moved without **lapses**. These lapses in turn move us. If there is no desire, then

### **immolate**

*to kill as a sacrifice, especially by burning*

<sup>B</sup>1 Corinthians 8:4

### **God’s feast**

*the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper*

### **the feast of devils**

*Tertullian seems to be indicating here that it had become common practice by his time for Christians to entirely abstain from food sacrificed to idols.*

### **imitation**

*Virtue ethics posit that we become virtuous or vicious by imitating the deeds of virtuous and vicious people. Plutarch’s Life of Pericles connected zeal to imitation: “Great and zealous eagerness . . . leads to imitation.” The games were dangerous, then, because they aroused zeal for the wrong things.*

### **lapses**

*i.e., falling away from the path of virtue*

there will be no pleasure. And the one who attends where nothing is gained is guilty of vanity. And in my view, vanity should be foreign to us. Moreover, a man pronounces his own condemnation in the very act of taking his place among those with whom he confesses to have no sympathy. It is not enough that we do no such things ourselves—we must break all connection also with those who do. “If you see a thief,” says the psalmist, “you fell in with him.”<sup>c</sup> Would that we did not even inhabit the same world as these wicked men! But though that wish cannot be realized, even now we are separate from them in what is of the world. For the world is God’s, but the worldly is the devil’s.

Since, then, such strong desire is forbidden us, we are barred from every kind of spectacle, and especially from the Circus, where such excitement presides as its proper element. See the people coming to it, already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets. The **praetor** is too slow for them—their eyes are ever rolling as though along with the **lots** in his urn. They hang eagerly on the starting signal, and there is the united shout of a common madness. Observe their madness from their foolish speeches. “He has thrown it!” they exclaim, announcing to each other what they all saw. I have the clearest evidence of their blindness, for they do not see what is really thrown. They think it a mere signal cloth, but it is actually the likeness of the devil that the praetor casts headlong from on high. And the result is that they fly into rages, passions, and discords and everything that those who are consecrated to peace ought never to indulge in. Then there are curses and reproaches with no cause of hatred. There are cries of applause with nothing to merit them. What do those who, driven out of their minds, do these things obtain? Only what makes them belong to another: they are saddened by another’s sorrow; they are gladdened by another’s joy. Whatever they desire on the one hand, or detest on the other, is entirely outside of themselves.

<sup>c</sup>Psalm 50:18

**praetor**

*the official who dropped the white flag to start the race*

**lots**

*Each charioteer placed a token in an urn, which were then drawn to determine their starting gates.*



**THE ROMAN HIPPODROME**

*This early modern print shows a Roman hippodrome, where many competitions and games were held.*

*A large Egyptian obelisk stands in the middle of the frame, while different types of competitions take place in front of an eager crowd of spectators.*

So love is a useless thing with them, and **hatred is unjust**. Or is a groundless love perhaps more legitimate than a groundless hatred? God certainly forbids us to hate even with a reason for our hating; for he commands us to **love our enemies**. God forbids us to curse, though there be some ground for doing so, in commanding that **we are to bless** those who curse us. But what is more merciless than the Circus, where people do not spare even their rulers and fellow citizens? If any of its madnesses are acceptable elsewhere among the saints of God, then they are fitting in the Circus as well. But if they are not right anywhere, they are not right at the shows.



Likewise, we are commanded to put away all immodesty. This reason also excludes us from the theater, which is immodesty's own peculiar abode. Nothing is approved there but what is disapproved elsewhere. So the best path to the highest favor of its god is the vileness that the **Atellan displays** and that the mime in woman's clothes exhibits, destroying all natural modesty such that they blush more readily at home than at the play. The **pantomime** suffers from his childhood so that he may become an actor. Even prostitutes, victims of public lust, are brought upon the stage. Their misery is increased from being in the presence of their own sex, from whom alone they usually hide themselves. They are **paraded publicly** before every age and rank—their abode, their price, their praises are set forth, even in the hearing of those who should not hear such things. I say nothing about other matters, which it is best to hide away in their own darkness and their own gloomy caves, lest they should stain the light of day. Let the Senate, let all social classes, blush for very shame! Why, even these miserable women, who by their own gestures destroy their modesty, dreading the light of day, and the people's gaze, know something of shame at least once a year.

We will now see how the Scriptures condemn the amphitheater. If we can maintain that it is right to indulge in the cruel, the impious, and the fierce, let us go there. If we are what others say we are, let us regale ourselves there with **human blood**. It is good, no doubt, to punish the guilty. Who but the criminal himself will deny that? And yet the innocent can find no pleasure in another's sufferings. He rather mourns that a brother has sinned so heinously as to need a punishment so dreadful. But who can guarantee that it is always the guilty who are condemned to the wild beasts, or some other doom, and that the guiltless never suffer from the revenge of the judge, or the weakness of the defense, or **torture**? How much better, then, is it for me to remain ignorant of the punishment inflicted on the wicked, lest I learn also that good people are perishing, if they resemble the good in spite of what they suffer. At any rate, gladiators not guilty of any crime are sold for the games to become the victims of the public pleasure. Even in the case of those who are justly condemned to the games, what a monstrous thing it is that in receiving their punishment, they progress from a lesser crime to **homicide**!

#### **hatred is unjust**

*Tertullian is describing the situation, familiar to fans of sports, of delighting in the triumph of one's team or sorrowing in their loss. The Romans were fanatically devoted to their favorite chariot teams. In AD 532, a rivalry between fans of the most popular chariot teams led to a riot that burned nearly half the city of Constantinople.*

#### **love our enemies**

*See Luke 6:27.*

#### **we are to bless**

*See Luke 6:28.*

#### **Atellan displays**

*The Atellan farce was a type of comedic play in Rome that mocked leading citizens. They contained displays so vulgar that even before the Christianization of the empire they were often suppressed, notably by the emperor Tiberius.*

#### **pantomime**

*An art of portraying famous scenes from mythology in dance. Due to restrictions on who was allowed to dance, the participants, most often slaves from childhood, forfeited the rights of Roman citizenship.*

#### **paraded publicly**

*Prostitutes performed on the stage during the Floralia.*

#### **human blood**

*Some Romans accused Christians of cannibalism because they spoke of the Lord's Supper as eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ.*

#### **torture**

*Innocent people may, under torture, confess to crimes they didn't commit.*

#### **homicide**

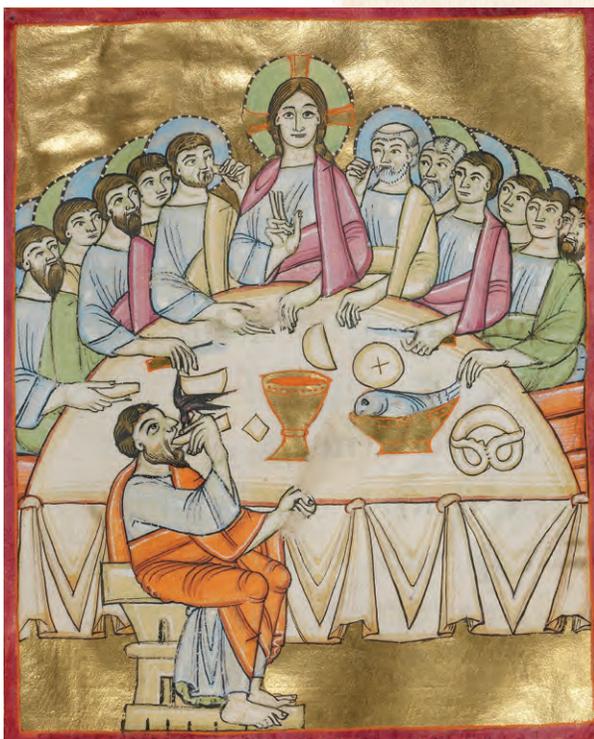
*Someone condemned to the arena for a crime such as theft was then forced to kill to survive, thus becoming a murderer while suffering his sentence for theft.*

## THE SPECTACLES OF THE CHRISTIAN

Even as things stand, if your thought is to spend this life in pleasures, how are you so ungrateful as to reckon insufficient the many and exquisite pleasures God has bestowed upon you? For what could be more delightful than to have God the Father and our Lord at peace with us, than revelation of the truth, than confession of our errors, than pardon of the innumerable sins of our past life? What greater pleasure than distaste of pleasure itself, contempt of all that the world can give, true liberty, a pure conscience, a contented life, and freedom from all fear of death? What is nobler than to tread underfoot the gods of the nations, to exorcise evil spirits, to perform cures, to seek divine revelation, to live for God? These are the pleasures, these the holy, everlasting, and free spectacles of the Christian. Count these as your circus games: fix your eyes on the courses of the world, the gliding seasons, reckon up the periods of time; long for the goal of the final

consummation, defend the societies of the churches, be startled at God's signal, be roused up at the angel's trumpet, glory in the palms of martyrdom. If the literature of the stage delights you, we have literature in abundance of our own: plenty of verses, sentences, songs, proverbs. And what is more, these are not fables but true! They are not tricks of art, but plain realities. Would you have fighting and wrestling? Well, of these there is no lack, and they are not of little worth. Behold unchastity overcome by chastity, treachery slain by faithfulness, cruelty stricken by compassion, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty—these are the contests we have among us, and in these we win our crowns. Would you have something of blood too? You have Christ's.

But what a spectacle is that fast approaching arrival of our Lord, now undoubted, now highly exalted, now triumphant! What that exultation of the angelic hosts! What the glory of the rising saints! What the kingdom of the just thereafter! What the city New Jerusalem! Yes, and there are other sights. That last and everlasting day of judgment, that day unlooked for by the nations, the theme of their derision, when the world, weighed down with age, and all its many products, will be consumed in one great flame! How vast a spectacle then bursts upon the eye! What there excites my admiration? what my derision? Which sight gives me joy? which rouses me to exultation? I see so many illustrious monarchs, whose reception into the heavens was publicly announced, groaning now in the **lowest darkness** with great Jove himself, and those, too, who bore witness of their exultation—governors of provinces, too, who persecuted the Christian name, in **fires more fierce** than those with which in the days of their pride they raged against the followers of Christ. What world's wise men besides, the very philosophers, in fact, who taught their followers that God had no concern with anything here below and were accustomed to assuring themselves that either they had no souls or that they would never return to the



### THE LAST SUPPER

*This illuminated manuscript depicts the Last Supper, which Christ shared with his disciples before his crucifixion.*

*Tertullian refers to "God's feast," where Christians remember the Last Supper by partaking of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The bread on the table bears the Greek letter "chi," the first letter of "Christ," signifying that the bread is his body. The artist made Judas clearly recognizable by setting him apart from the other disciples, presenting him without a halo, and placing a demon in the shape of a bird by his mouth.*

### lowest darkness

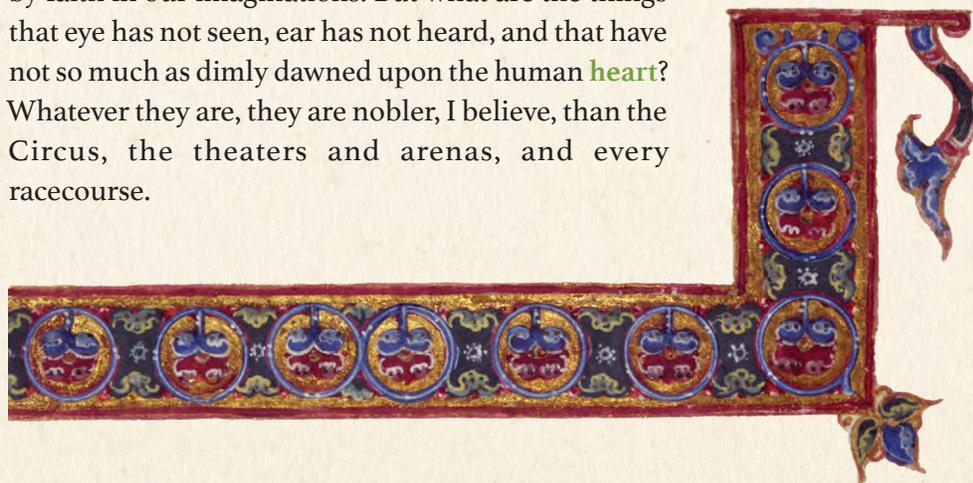
*Literally, Hell or Tartarus; though the emperors were exalted to the rank of deities and celebrated in public parades, Tertullian is remarking on the sudden reversal of their fortune when they discover they are not in fact gods but are damned.*

### fires more fierce

*That is, the fires of Hell will be worse than the fires in Rome that Nero blamed on the Christians, which led to a great persecution (see HAR1, chapter 23 and HAR2, chapter 40).*

bodies that at death they had left, now covered with shame before the poor deluded ones, as one fire consumes them!

I also see poets trembling not before the judgment seat of **Rhadamanthus or Minos** but before the unexpected Christ! I will have a better opportunity then of hearing the tragedians, loudly voicing their own calamity; of viewing the actors, much more dissolute in the dissolving flame; of looking upon the charioteer, all glowing in his chariot of fire; of beholding the wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows. But perhaps even then I will not care to attend to such ministers of sin! Instead, I will eagerly fix my insatiable gaze on those who ceased raging against the Lord. “**This**,” I will say, “this is that carpenter’s or hireling’s son, that the Sabbath breaker, that the Samaritan and devil possessed! This is he whom you purchased from Judas! This is he whom you struck with reed and fist, whom you contemptuously spat upon, the one to whom you gave gall and vinegar to drink! This is he whose disciples secretly **stole away**, that it might be said he had risen again, or the gardener abstracted, that his lettuces might come to no harm from the crowds of visitants!” What quaestor or priest in his munificence will bestow on you the favor of seeing and exulting in such things as these? And yet even now we in a measure have them by faith in our imaginations. But what are the things that eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and that have not so much as dimly dawned upon the human **heart**? Whatever they are, they are nobler, I believe, than the Circus, the theaters and arenas, and every racecourse.



**Rhadamanthus or Minos**  
*mythical kings of Crete  
who were believed to judge  
the dead in the afterlife*

**This**  
*The following terms and  
phrases refer to Jesus, who  
was called these things  
pejoratively by his enemies.*

**stole away**  
*This and the claim about  
the gardener were com-  
mon arguments against  
the Christian claim that  
Christ rose from the dead.*

**heart**  
*See 1 Corinthians 2:9.*

## AFTERWORD

Tertullian’s condemnations covered not just the standard entertainments of the empire but extended to pretty much every Roman holiday and festival as well. It is important to remember that Roman holidays and festivals were frequent and included nearly the entire month of April. It was all but impossible to escape these pagan celebrations. Civic life and religious observation went hand in hand throughout the empire. The result was that

Christians found themselves consistently out of step with the culture around them. Jesus said of his disciples: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:16). And yet, he would go on to say: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). This tension of being *in* the world but not *of* the world is one that Tertullian’s work would intensify. The failure to join in with the celebrations of their fellow citizens

would be a factor in sparking the last of the great persecutions, the one that took place under Diocletian.<sup>1</sup>

Tertullian was uncompromising in his examination of the pagan majority culture, and skeptical of its value to the Christians. As he said famously elsewhere: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?”<sup>2</sup> The strength of this opposition encouraged Christians through the later persecutions, which did not entirely cease until the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 312.

But it would also raise deeper questions about the relationship between the two duties by which

Christians find themselves bound: duty to the emperor or civic ruler and duty to God. Jesus had said: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17); but the task of dividing the world into Caesar’s things and God’s things was a new one for the Romans. It would only be further exacerbated when Caesar himself, in the person of Constantine, became a Christian and claimed to be ruling God’s people in God’s name. How then did these two duties interact? This is the question we find John Chrysostom and the bishop of Antioch navigating in the aftermath of the riots of AD 387.

1. See *HAR2*, chapter 43.

2. *Prescription Against Heretics*, chapter 7 (in *Ante-Nicene Fathers volume 3: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], pp. 243-267).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are the various types of festivals and public shows Tertullian criticizes in *On Spectacles*? How does Tertullian view Roman culture at large? Are there any aspects of Roman culture that Christians can participate in?
2. What are the “views of the heathens” regarding public shows that Tertullian addresses? How does Tertullian combat these arguments?
3. Trace Tertullian’s argument. What does he set out to prove? What does Tertullian find objectionable about the public shows? How do the shows affect spectators? What makes this especially problematic for Christians?
4. In his argument, Tertullian calls idolatry “the crowning sin.” The Old Testament refers to idolatry as worshiping and sacrificing to foreign gods, which seems at first glance to be entirely different from attending a play or chariot race. What then is idolatry according to Tertullian? What forms does it take in his day? What dangers does idolatry present to Christians at this time?
5. Why might the locations and decorations of the spectacles be idolatrous as well? When does Tertullian say it is permissible to enter these places, if ever?
6. How does the origin of the theater support Tertullian’s thesis? How are martial arts and gladiatorial combat similar to the wickedness of the games? Why are the various passions aroused by the festivals incompatible with Christianity?
7. What solutions for Christians does Tertullian provide, if any? How should Christians act? What are the Christians’ spectacles?
8. Are there any internal inconsistencies in Tertullian’s argument?

# 2

## *Negotiating Citizenship*

A bright, cheerful, gentle soul; a sensitive heart, a temperament open to emotion and impulse; and all this elevated, refined, transformed by the touch of heaven—such was St. John Chrysostom.

—John Henry Newman

### INTRODUCTION

For the first four centuries of its existence, Roman emperors played a major role in spreading Christianity and in defining the nature of Christian experience in the world. The emperors of the first three centuries found they could not stamp out this new faith by persecuting its practitioners; it grew even in the face of torture and death. Nevertheless, at various times the emperors drove Christians to worship in secret in houses and in catacombs and to work by other such indirect methods. When Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan, the religion gained an air of fashionability it had not previously enjoyed: as it became clearer that the emperor favored Christianity, adherence to the religion became desirable as a way of gaining imperial favor. But far from freeing Christianity from the emperors, this actually bound it more closely to imperial favor. An incident regarding some statues shows how involved the Christians felt themselves to be with the common life of the empire. The event took place not far from the Mediterranean in Antioch, modern Antakya in Turkey, the most important city in Roman Syria.

In early 387, the leaders of the city of Antioch gathered on a certain morning to hear a new

proclamation from the emperor Theodosius I read. It contained a new tax for the city, which the leaders thought burdensome. Over the course of the day, tempers flared, speeches were made, and eventually a riot broke out. The mob tore down the statues of the emperor and his relatives in the city and vandalized them. When things cooled down, the citizens realized that the emperor would be very angry about what had occurred and that the punishment might range anywhere from mass executions to the destruction of the whole city. Large numbers of citizens fled to the countryside and nearby cities, fearing for their lives. The emperor sent two officials to the city to investigate the situation and punish those responsible. A tribunal was set up, and the entire city council was condemned to execution. The officials decided to wait for the emperor to confirm the sentence.

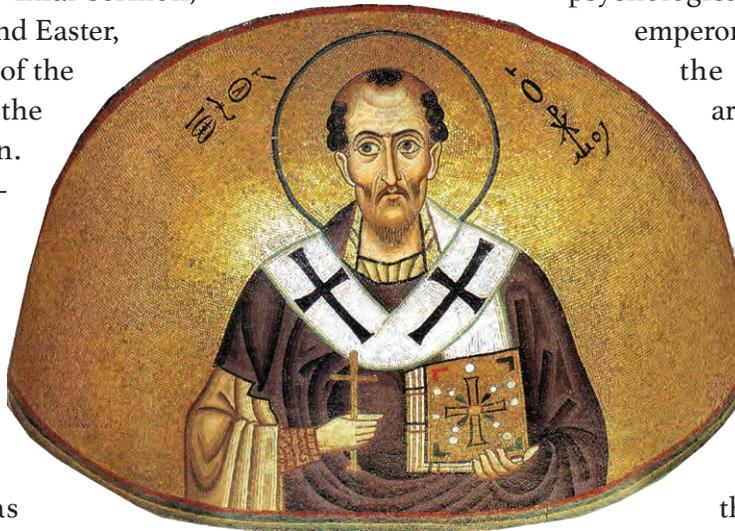
In the meantime, the local bishop, Flavian, traveled to Constantinople to ask the emperor, Theodosius I, to spare the city. He seems to have passed the imperial officials as they were headed to set up the tribunal. This happened during Lent, the penitential season of the Christian liturgical calendar leading up to Easter.

John Chrysostom was a native of Antioch who had just been ordained to the priesthood the year before all of these events took place, at around forty years of age. He was an outstanding orator, which is how he earned the name Chrysostom, which means “golden tongued.” During the Lenten season when the councilors were imprisoned, he preached twenty-one homilies or sermons in which he both addressed the current political situation and taught the Scriptures. The final sermon, delivered on or around Easter, was on the occasion of the bishop’s return with the emperor’s decision. Our text for this chapter is drawn from several of these sermons.

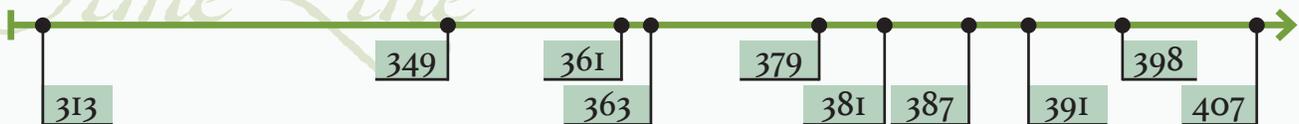
Throughout, John does not shy away from the realities that were facing the city: there was

great terror all around, and citizens turned on one another as vigilantes took to the streets to try to punish those who had brought imperial disfavor upon the city. John’s descriptions of the suffering of his people are poignantly tender: we see a wife and a mother together at the gates of judgment, cringing and weeping at every blow of the whip they hear within, as well as citizens afraid to leave their homes. Through it all, he paints a picture of the

psychological terror of feeling the emperor’s displeasure surround the city like a besieging army. What might a priest say to a city on the brink of destruction, especially when the threat was posed by a fellow Christian? And how might Flavian approach the emperor Theodosius, who controlled the city’s fate?



## Time Line



**313** — Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, ending all formal persecution of Christianity.

**349** — John Chrysostom is born in Antioch.

**361** — Julian the Apostate becomes emperor and attempts to resurrect paganism.

**363** — Jovian becomes emperor and reasserts Christianity’s privileged status.

**379** — Theodosius I becomes emperor of Rome.

**381** — John Chrysostom is ordained a deacon.

**381** — The Council of Constantinople ratifies the Nicene formulation of Trinitarian theology.

**387** — John Chrysostom delivers *Homilies on the Statues* in response to a riot in Antioch.

**391** — Theodosius I bans public practice of traditional Roman religion.

**398** — John Chrysostom becomes the archbishop of Constantinople.

**407** — John Chrysostom dies.

# Homilies on the Statues

John Chrysostom

387

## HOMILY 2



hat shall I say, or what shall I speak of? The **present season** is one for tears and not for words, for lamentation not for discourse, for prayer not for preaching. Such is the magnitude of the deeds daringly done. So incurable is the wound, so deep the blow, even beyond the power of all treatment, that it craves **assistance from above**. Thus it was that Job, when he had **lost all**, sat himself down upon a dunghill. And his friends heard of it, and came, and seeing him, while yet afar off, they rent their garments, and sprinkled themselves with ashes, and made great **lamentation**. All the cities around ought to do the same thing now: come to our city and lament with all sympathy what has befallen us. Job sat down on his dunghill; Antioch is now seated in the midst of a great snare. For even as the devil then had his way with the flocks, and herds, and all the substance of the just man, so now hath he raged against this whole city. But then, as well as now, God permitted it. Then, indeed, that he might make the just man more illustrious by the greatness of his trials; and now, that he might make us more sober minded by the intensity of this tribulation. Allow me to mourn over our present state. We have been silent seven days, even as the friends of Job were. Allow me to open my mouth today, and to bewail this common calamity.

Who, **beloved**, has bewitched us? Whose ill will has struck us? Where has all this change come over us from? Nothing was more honorable than our city! Now, never was any thing so deplorable! The populace so well ordered and quiet, yea, even like a docile and good-natured steed, always submissive to the hands of its rulers, has now so suddenly started off with us, as to have wrought such evils that one can hardly dare to mention them. I mourn now and lament, not for the greatness of that wrath that is to be expected, but for the extremity of the madness that has been perpetrated! For even if **the emperor** was not provoked, or in anger, even if he were neither to punish nor take vengeance, how, I pray, are we to bear the shame of all that



### present season

The season of Lent is a penitential period in the Christian calendar, marked by repentance, prayer, and fasting.

### assistance from above

i.e., divine aid

### lost all

At the start of the book of Job, God tells Satan that Job is a great servant. Satan responds that he is only godly because he is so blessed, asking God for permission to cause Job suffering, thinking that Job would then curse God. Permission is granted, and over the rest of chapters 1 and 2 Job loses his wealth and his children.

### lamentation

See Job 2:11-13.

### beloved

Christian ministers often address the congregation as "beloved," identifying the Church as the "bride of Christ," the beloved of God.

### the emperor

Theodosius I, who ruled the Eastern Roman Empire from 379 to 392 and both the eastern and western empires from 392 to 395.

### THE VISION OF CONSTANTINE

This panel painting by Elias Moskas depicts Constantine having a vision before a major battle with his rival, Emperor Maxentius. This vision confirmed to Constantine that he would be victorious because he had accepted the Christian faith. Here, Moskas conveys this by showing Constantine with open hands as he accepts the news from the angel in the upper right-hand corner of the work.

### MISSORIUM OF THEODOSIUS I

This elaborate ceremonial dish is made entirely out of silver. As a gift, it served both to honor the emperor and to depict him as a powerful Christian leader. Though faint, you can still see an aureola, a halo of light, around his head.



### All flee

Fearing the emperor's reprisal against the city, many people were fleeing to avoid a possible siege or slaughter.

### penalty of Cain

When Cain killed his brother Abel out of envy, God cursed him, saying: "You are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:11-12).

### forum

A large space in the center of town that served both as the marketplace and the center of life in Roman cities. It was the site of elections, public speeches, trials, and entertainment. It was where everyone went to hear the latest news and to do business.

has been done? I find the word of instruction broken off by lamentation. Scarcely am I able to open my mouth, to raise my lips, to move my tongue, or to utter a syllable! So, even like a curb, the weight of grief checks my tongue, and holds in check what I would say.

Nothing is sweeter than one's own country; but now, it has come to pass that nothing is more bitter! **All flee** from the place that brought them forth, as from a snare. They desert it as they would a dungeon. They leap out of it, as from a fire. And just as when a house is seized upon by the flames, not only those who dwell in it, but all who are near, flee from it with the utmost haste, content to save their bodies alone—just so now too, when the wrath of the emperor is expected to come as a fire from above, every one presses to get out in time, even if it means saving themselves in a state of nakedness, before the fire reaches them. And now our calamity has become an enigma, a flight without enemies, an expulsion of inhabitants without a battle, a captivity without capture! We have not seen the fire of barbarians, nor beheld the face of enemies, and yet we suffer what those who are taken do! All men now hear of our calamities. In receiving our exiles, they learn from them the stroke that has fallen upon our city.

We live in constant terror and endure the **penalty of Cain**, a more pitiable one than that of those who were the former inmates of the prison, undergoing as we now do a new and strange kind of siege, far more terrible than an ordinary one. For those who are besieged by enemies are only shut up within their walls, but even the **forum** has become impassable to us and everyone is pent up within the walls of his own house! And as in the case of those who are besieged, it is not safe to go beyond the walls, while the enemy without is encamped around.

So neither, to many of those who inhabit this city, is it safe to go out of doors or to appear openly, on account of those who are **hunting everywhere** for the innocent as well as the guilty, seizing them even in the midst of the forum and dragging them to the court of justice, without ceremony, guided only by chance. For this reason, freemen sit indoors shackled up with their servants, anxiously and minutely inquiring of those to whom they may safely put the question, “Who has been seized today? Carried off? Punished? How was it? In what manner?” They live a life more wretched than any kind of death and are compelled daily to mourn the calamities of others while they tremble for their own safety, and they are in no way better than the dead. Indeed, they are already dead with fear.

## HOMILY 13



ow again I will say, “Blessed be God!” What a day we saw **Wednesday**! And what a day this is! How heavy was its gloom at that time, and how bright the calm of **this present day**! This was the day when that fearful tribunal was set in the city, and

shook the hearts of all, and made the day seem no better than night—not because the beams of the sun were extinguished, but because fear and sadness darkened your eyes. Therefore, that we may reap the more pleasure, I wish to relate a few of the circumstances that then occurred. For I perceive that a narrative of these things will be of use to you and to all who shall come afterwards.

When the greater portion of the city had taken refuge in secret places out of fear and in light of the danger of that occasion—in deserts and in hollows, with terror besetting them in all directions—the houses were empty of women and the forum was empty of men. Scarcely two or three appeared walking together across the forum, and even these went about as if they were animated corpses. I, in the midst of this, proceeded to the tribunal of justice to see the end of these matters. And there, beholding the fragments of the city gathered together, I marveled most of all at this: that although a crowd was around the doors, there was the profoundest silence, as though there had been no one there. They were all looking at one another, but not one dared to inquire of his neighbor, nor to hear anything from him. For each regarded his neighbor with suspicion because many, having already been dragged away unexpectedly from the middle of the forum, were now confined within. Thus we all alike looked up to Heaven, and stretched out our hands in silence, expecting help from above, and beseeching God to stand by those who were brought to judgment, to soften the hearts of the judges, and to make their sentence a merciful one.

Such was the state of things outside. But when I entered the court, I saw other sights that were still more awful: soldiers armed with swords and clubs,

### hunting everywhere

*It seems that a group of citizens had taken it upon themselves to try to find those responsible and punish them in hopes of appeasing the emperor.*

### Wednesday

*Theodosius sent two officials to the city to investigate and hand out appropriate punishments. The tribunal occurred on March 17, 387, a day of gloom.*

### this present day

*Chrysostom's homily was preached the following Sunday; it seems that, after the tribunal, some semblance of normalcy was restored to the city.*



### JOB ON THE DUNG HEAP

*In Chrysostom's homily, he compares the residents of Antioch to Job, who here sits atop a dung heap after being tested to his limit by Satan.*



strictly keeping the peace for the judges within. For since all the relatives of those under trial, whether wives, mothers, daughters, or fathers, stood before the doors of the seat of justice, the soldiers drove them all afar off so that no one, angered at the sight of the calamity, might raise any tumult or disturbance if it should so happen that anyone were to be led away to execution. This filled the minds of all with fear.

One sight there was, more pitiable than all: a mother and a sister of one who was on trial within sat at the very vestibule of the court of justice, rolling themselves on the pavement, and becoming a common spectacle to all the bystanders, veiling their faces, and showing no sense of shame except what the urgency of the calamity permitted. Neither maidservant, nor neighbor, nor female friend, nor any other relative accompanied them. But surrounded in the midst of so many soldiers, alone, and poorly clad, and dragging themselves along upon the ground before the very doors, they were even more to be pitied than those who were undergoing judgment within. And when they heard the voice of the executioners, the strokes of the scourge, the wailing of those who were scourged, the fearful threats of the judges, they themselves endured, at every scourging, sharper pains than those who were beaten. For since there was a danger that when some confessed they might also prove accusations made against others, if those outside heard anyone whipped such that he might mention those who were guilty, they, uttering cries, looked up to Heaven and prayed for God to give the sufferer some strength of endurance so that the safety of their own relations not be betrayed by the weakness of others who were incapable of sustaining the sharp anguish of the strokes. If at any time they heard voices or cries that reached them, they saw a thousand deaths before their eyes. They were in terror, fearing that those who were urged to bear witness might give way to their torments and name one of their relatives. Both within and without, one saw tortures. Inside, the executioners were tormenting; outside, the resistless force of nature and deep sympathy tortured these women. Within there was lamentation of those who were found guilty; without was the lamentation of their relatives. Indeed, not only these, but their very judges inwardly lamented and endured heavier woes than all the rest, being compelled to take part in so bitter a tragedy.

As for me, I sat and beheld how matrons and virgins, accustomed only to private apartments, were now made a common spectacle to all. I saw how those who were accustomed to lie on soft couches now had pavement for their beds, how they who had enjoyed so constant an attendance of female servants and **eunuchs** and every sort of outward distinction were now bereft of all these things. I watched them prostrate themselves at the feet of everyone, begging each to lend help by any means in his power to those who were undergoing examination, that everyone might contribute together to the cause of mercy. As I saw all this, I exclaimed, in those words of Solomon, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!”<sup>A</sup> For I saw both this and another **prophecy** fulfilled in actual fact, which says, “All the glory of flesh is like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls.” For then, indeed, wealth, nobility, notoriety, the patronage of friends, and all worldly things were found worthless. The sin and transgression

#### **eunuchs**

*Men who had been castrated or otherwise damaged to ensure chastity. Because there was no need to worry about sexual misconduct with eunuchs, they were often allowed to serve nobles in their bedchambers. At this point in the Roman Empire, it had become very fashionable to have eunuchs in one's service.*

#### <sup>A</sup>**Ecclesiastes 1:2**

#### **prophecy**

*Chrysostom quotes 1 Peter 1:24; Peter himself is quoting Isaiah 40:6.*

# HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS



## ◆ Chrysostom's Teacher

John Chrysostom is remembered as one of Christianity's greatest preachers. He studied rhetoric—the art of public speaking—under Libanius, one of Rome's last great pagan authors. Libanius was a staunch defender of traditional Roman religion, arguing that pagan rites and monuments were vital to the well-being of the Roman people. He was also an advocate for religious tolerance. In a striking parallel to John's homilies, Libanius delivered his own plea for mercy before the emperor, Theodosius I. But Libanius was asking for the emperor to intervene to protect his pagan subjects from Christian mobs. Christians, said Libanius, were ransacking ancient temples and local shrines. There is even evidence to suggest that John himself may

have been involved in these attacks on paganism. In the end, Theodosius I sided with John and against Libanius, rejecting pleas for religious tolerance and passing a series of anti-pagan laws.

## ◆ Theodosius I

In many ways, the reign of Emperor Theodosius, whose statues the citizens of Antioch had destroyed, was a turning point for Roman history. Theodosius, for instance, was the last emperor to rule over a united empire. Thereafter, the eastern and western halves each had their own independent governments. Theodosius was also an important legislator, particularly on religious subjects. He removed pagan holidays from the calendar, prohibited the ritual use of pagan temples, and expanded his predecessors' bans on sacrifice and other practices. Lastly, Theodosius involved himself in intra-Christian disputes, passing laws against certain heretical Christians and convening one of the most important ecumenical councils in Christian history: the Council of Constantinople definitively condemned Arianism as a heresy. Arianism was a popular form of Trinitarian theology in the third and fourth centuries that taught that Jesus was a creature, the first creation of God the Father. Theodosius gave imperial support to Nicene Christians who, unlike the Arians, taught that Jesus was divine, coeternal and consubstantial with the Father. It was this council at Constantinople that produced the (confusingly titled) Nicene Creed that many Christians still recite today.



## ◆ Theological Controversies

John was first ordained as a deacon by a famous bishop named Meletius, the leader of a schismatic group of Christians in Antioch. Meletius and his followers believed in the Trinity but did not accept the precise language from the Council of Nicaea. Nicene Christians insisted that all three persons of the Trinity (i.e., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) were of the same *ousios*, a technical Greek term that means “substance.” But Meletius and many other Christians did not want to use the term “substance,” since it was not found in Scripture. If that seems like a small point of disagreement to you, the emperor Constantine agreed! But this was a big deal to Christians in the fourth century. At one point during John's life, there were actually three rival bishops in Antioch, each with slightly different formulations of Trinitarian theology. John was later ordained by another bishop who belonged to the Nicene faction. Then, after the death of Meletius, John brought the followers of Meletius into his own Nicene church.



of the law that had taken place put all these supports to flight. And just as the mother of young birds that have been carried away, on finding her nest empty, is unable to rescue her captive brood but displays her grief by hovering around the hands of the fowler, even so did these women behave when their children were snatched away from their dwellings and shut up within, as it were in a net or a trap. They could not indeed come in and deliver the prisoners, but they manifested their anguish by rolling themselves about near the very doors, by lamentation and groans, and by endeavoring to approach as near as possible to those who had captured them.

Beholding these things, then, I cast my mind on **that dread tribunal**, and I said within myself, “If now, when men are the judges, neither mother, nor sister, nor father, nor any other person, though guiltless of the deeds that have been perpetrated, can avail to rescue the criminals, who will stand by us when we are judged at the dread tribunal of Christ? Who will dare to raise his voice? Who will be able to rescue those who shall be led away to such unspeakable punishments?” Even though they were the first men of the city who were then brought to trial, and the very chief of the nobility, yet they would have been glad if they could have traded all their possessions—indeed, their very liberty itself—so that they might continue to enjoy this present life.

But to proceed. The day was hastening to its close, and, with late evening arriving and the final sentence of the court expected, all were in still greater agony, and prayed that God would grant some delay and respite and incline the soul of the judges to refer the facts that had been investigated to the decision of the emperor, since this might bring some advantage. Moreover, general supplications were sent up by the people to the merciful God, imploring that he save the remnants of the city and not suffer it to be entirely razed from its foundations. Nor did any one join in this cry without tears. Nevertheless, none

**that dread tribunal**  
not the present tribunal,  
but the future Day of  
Judgment when God will  
judge all humankind

#### THE PUNISHMENT OF CAIN

Chrysostom speaks of the “penalty of Cain,” which the residents of Antioch must suffer. This punishment was the banishment of Cain and his family for his murder of Abel. Here, Chassériau shows the family wandering through a dark, barren landscape, devoid of light and life. Chrysostom describes the people of Antioch’s fear of leaving their own homes as an extension of Cain’s punishment.





were ejected from their parents' home, and each had to go through the very same fate as **Job's wife**. For they went wandering from house to house and from place to place, seeking a lodging. And this it was not easy for them to find, because everyone was afraid to receive or to render assistance in any way to the relatives of those who were under impeachment. Nevertheless, though such events had happened, the sufferers were patient under all, since they were not deprived of the present life. And now they learned how simple a thing virtue is for us, how easy and efficient its performance, and that it only seems to be laborious because of our neglect of it. Those who before this time could not bear the loss of a little money with meekness, now that they were subjected to a greater fear, although they had lost all their wealth, behaved as if they had found a treasure, because they had not lost their lives. So that if the sense of a future Hell took possession of us, and we thought of those intolerable punishments, we should not grieve, though for the sake of the law of God we were to give both our wealth and our bodies and lives too, knowing that we would gain greater things: deliverance from the terrors that are hereafter.

## NOMILY 21

I shall begin **today** with that very same saying I have always used when beginning my address to you in a season of danger, and will say along with you: "Blessed be God," who has granted us to celebrate **this holy feast** today with much joy and gladness, who has **restored the head** to the body, the shepherd to the sheep, the master to the disciples, the general to the soldiers, the High Priest to the priests! Blessed be God, who does far more abundantly than all that we **ask or think**! For to us it would have seemed sufficient if we

of these things moved the judges within, although they heard. They only had one concern: that there might be a rigid inquiry into the deeds that had been perpetrated.

At last they **put them in chains**, and bound them with iron, and sent them away through the middle of the forum to the prison. Men that had kept prize horses, who could reckon up a thousand different offices of distinction that they had held, had their goods confiscated, and **seals** placed upon all their doors. Their wives also

### MOSES ON MOUNT SINAI; ADORATION OF THE GOLDEN CALF

*Chrysostom makes another analogy in which Flavian is compared to Moses, Theodosius to God, and the people of Antioch to the Israelites. In the Old Testament story, Moses quells God's anger when the Israelites make and begin to worship a golden calf in his absence. Just as Moses did before God, Flavian appeals to Theodosius's merciful nature to obtain forgiveness for his people.*

#### put them in chains

*The judges condemned the entire city council to death, deferring the executions until the emperor could confirm he agreed with their decision. This appeal to the emperor was exactly what the citizens had been hoping for, as Chrysostom mentioned earlier.*

#### seals

*The seals served to publicize the disgrace of the guilty; they also seem to have been locks, making the properties unusable.*

#### Job's wife

*In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Job's wife says that she has to wander from house to house, serving those there, in order to find food and a place to rest (Job 2:9).*

#### today

*Chrysostom preached this sermon on the return of the bishop Flavian to Antioch, after he met with the emperor on behalf of the city and those under threat of execution.*

#### this holy feast

*i.e., Easter, the feast of the resurrection of Christ*

#### restored the head

*This is a reference to the bishop, Flavian, who had just returned from the imperial court where he had pled for mercy. Chrysostom may also intend to allude to the pardoned senators.*

#### ask or think

*See Ephesians 3:20.*

### JOSEPH SOLD BY HIS BROTHERS

Chrysostom also compared Theodosius to Joseph, who, after being sold into slavery by his brothers, eventually shows them mercy when they need help surviving a famine.



**our father**  
i.e., Flavian

**Holy Passover**  
Easter, which is celebrated  
at the time of Passover

had only been delivered from the impending evil—and this was our whole prayer! But the God who loves man, and in his giving always surpasses our prayers with an excess of bounty, has brought back **our father**, too, sooner than we could have expected at all. Who would, indeed, have thought that in so few days he would have gone and had an audience with the emperor, and set us free from the calamity, and again come back to us so quickly as to be in time for the **Holy Passover**, and to celebrate it with us? Behold: this event, which was so contrary to expectation, has been realized! We have received back our father, and we enjoy a much greater pleasure because we have received him back sooner than we had hoped. For all these things, let us give thanks to merciful God, and be amazed at the power, the loving-kindness, the wisdom, and the providence that has been exerted for the city. For the devil had attempted its entire subversion, through the daring crimes committed. But God, by means of this same calamity, has conferred honor upon the city, our bishop Flavian, and the emperor and has made them all more illustrious.

The city has become glorious because, when such a danger had overtaken her, passing by at once all those who were in power, those who were surrounded with much wealth, those who possessed great influence with the emperor, it fled for refuge to the Church, and to the priest of God, and with much faith committed itself entirely to the hope that is from above! Many indeed, after the departure of the common father, were ready to terrify those who lay in prison, by saying, “The emperor does not lay aside his wrath but is still more provoked and is thinking of the utter ruin of the city.” But while they were whispering all this, and much more, they who were then in bonds were not the least intimidated. Upon our saying, “These things are false, and they are a device of the

devil, who desires to fill you with consternation,” they replied to us, “We need no consolation to be addressed to us, for we know where we have taken refuge from the first, and upon what hope we have suspended ourselves. We have fixed our safety upon the sacred anchor! We have not entrusted this to man but to the almighty God. Therefore we are most assuredly confident that the result will be favorable, for it is impossible, truly impossible, that this hope can ever be confounded!” To how many crowns, how many praises, is this equivalent for our city? How much of God’s favor will it draw down upon us even in our other affairs! For it is not, it is very much not a thing belonging to a soul of **lesser condition** to be watchful against the attack of temptations, to look to God, and, scorning all that is human, to gaze after that divine aid.

The city then hath thus obtained honor, and the priest not less than the city, for he risked his life for all. And while there were many things to hinder him, such as the winter, his age, the feast, and not less than these, his sister, who was then at her last breath, he raised himself above all these obstacles, valuing the fear of God above all the ties of kindred. He knew this well: that as tempests display the skill of the pilot, and dangers the general, so also a time of trial reveals the quality of priest. “All men,” saith he, “are gazing on us—the Jews as well as the Greeks—let us not confound the expectations that these have of us. Let us not overlook so great a shipwreck, but having turned over to God all things that pertain to ourselves, let us venture our life itself too!”

Thus, the priest has indeed acquitted himself honorably before God and man! This transaction has also adorned the emperor with a splendor beyond the **diadem**! First, in that it was then made apparent that he would grant to the priests what he would not grant to any other. Secondly, that he granted the favor without delay and broke off his resentment. But that you may more clearly learn the magnanimity of the emperor, and the wisdom of the priest, and—more than both of these—the loving-kindness of God, allow me to relate to you a few particulars of the conference that took place. But what I am now about to relate, I learned from one of those who was within the palace. For the father has told us neither much nor little about the affair, but ever imitating the magnanimity of Paul, he hides his own good deeds. To those who on all sides were asking him questions as to what he said to the emperor, and how he prevailed upon him and turned away his wrath entirely, he replied, “We contributed nothing to the matter, but the emperor himself, God having softened his heart, even before we had spoken, dismissed his anger and broke off his resentment. And discoursing on the events that had taken place as if some other person had been insulted, he thus went over all the events that had happened without anger.” But those things that he concealed from humility, God has brought to light.

And what were these? I will go a little farther back in the story to relate them to you. When he went forth from

#### **lesser condition**

*That the senators thus placed their hopes in God is proof that their souls were great, not common.*

#### **diadem**

*i.e., the imperial crown*

#### **SAINT AMBROSE BARS THEODOSIUS FROM MILAN CATHEDRAL**

*The people of Antioch were not the only ones who were afraid of Theodosius’s wrath. Just a few years after Chrysostom preached his homilies and Theodosius forgave the city for their destructiveness, the emperor massacred the people of Thessalonica. In this painting by van Dyck, Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, prevents Theodosius from entering the cathedral because of his vicious acts, exhorting him to repent.*



## ◆ The Last Pagan Emperor



The fourth century saw the last gasps of paganism. The emperor Julian was raised by Christian parents but, after ascending to the imperium, abandoned the Christian faith in order to adopt traditional Roman religion. This act earned him the title “the Apostate,” a word used to identify someone who has abandoned their faith. Julian, however, saw Christianity’s organizational structure, systematic theology, and social justice work as a competitive advantage in the marketplace of religious ideas. What we call “paganism” was never a single religion. Traditional beliefs and practices with respect to the gods were diverse and incoherent. Julian thought he could save Roman religion by making it look more like Christianity. For instance, Julian adopted Christianity’s system of bishops and priests, advocated for social programs, and sponsored scholars to write a coherent theology of paganism. In only the third year of his reign, Julian was killed while on campaign against Persia. His Christian successors quickly undid Julian’s religious reforms and reversed his pro-pagan policies.

## ◆ John the Exile

John Chrysostom did not always enjoy imperial favor. In fact, he was repeatedly exiled from the capital city of Constantinople, where he presided as bishop. Some of John’s troubles stemmed from palace politics—he had the wrong friends at the wrong time. But John also made a powerful enemy for himself in the emperor’s wife, Eudoxia. John often preached against wealth, lavish banquets, and expensive clothing. And some of these sermons, Eudoxia suspected, were directed against her. Moreover, Eudoxia was a staunch supporter of Nicene Christianity, and John supported certain Christians whose orthodoxy was suspect. In the end, John was escorted from the city by armed guards and died as an exile, far from the great churches of Antioch and Constantinople where he had delivered his most famous sermons. Nevertheless, Christians around the world today honor John as a saint and Doctor of the Church.



## ◆ Rome’s New Capital

Constantinople, where John Chrysostom was bishop, had been transformed into the capital of the Roman Empire only decades before John was born. The emperor Constantine, famous for converting to Christianity and ending imperial persecution of the faith, had selected the small Greek city (previously known as Byzantium) for its strategic location on a peninsula in northwestern Turkey that connected the Black Sea with the broader Mediterranean. Constantine sponsored massive construction projects to make the city worthy of being his imperial capital. The most famous of these projects was a massive church where the Hagia Sophia stands today. While Constantine continued to sponsor pagan rites and practices throughout the empire, he expressly prohibited the construction of any new temples in his capital city. The city of Constantinople remained the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (often called the Byzantine Empire) until its fall to Muslim invaders in the mid-fifteenth century.



the city, leaving all in so much sadness, he endured what was far more grievous than what we ourselves, who were in the midst of these calamities, suffered. For, in the first place, he met those who had been sent by the emperor in the midst of his journey to investigate the events that had happened. And learning from them on what terms they were sent, and reflecting upon the dreadful events that were in store for the city—the tumults, the confusion, the terror, the agony, the perils—he wept a flood of tears, and his heart was torn with compassion. For with fathers, it is usual to grieve much more, when they are not able to be present with their suffering children. This the most tenderhearted man endured, not only lamenting the calamities that were in store for us, but that he was far away from us while we were enduring them. But this was for our safety. For as soon as he had learned these things from them, more warmly did the fountain of his tears gush forth, and he sought out God with more fervent supplication and spent his nights without sleep, praying that God would comfort the city, while enduring these things, and calm the mind of the emperor.

And as soon as he came to that **great city**, and had entered the royal palace, he stood before the emperor at a distance, speechless, weeping, with downcast eyes, covering his face as if he himself had been the doer of all the mischief. He did this in order first to incline the emperor to mercy by his posture, aspect, and tears, and then to begin an apology on our behalf, since there is but one hope of pardon for those who have offended, which is to be silent and to utter nothing in defense of what has been done. For he was desirous that one feeling should be got rid of, and that another should take its place: that anger should be expelled and sadness introduced, especially such sadness as might prepare the way for the words of his apology, which was indeed what really took place. And just as Moses going up to the mount, when the people had offended, stood speechless himself, until God called him, saying, “Let me alone, and I will blot out this people,”<sup>B</sup> so also did he now act. The emperor therefore, when he saw him shedding tears and bending toward the ground, drew near. What he really felt on seeing the tears of the priest he made evident by the words he addressed to him. For they were not those of a person provoked or inflamed but of one in sorrow—not of one enraged but rather dejected and under constraint of extreme pain.

Our father then spoke to the emperor, saying, “Reflect, that the matter before you does not concern this city alone, but is one that concerns your own glory or, rather, one that affects the cause of Christianity in general. Even now the **Gentiles**, and Jews, and the whole empire, as well as the barbarians—for they also have heard of these events—are gazing on you and waiting to see what sentence you will pronounce with regard to these transactions. And should you decree a humane and merciful sentence, all will applaud the decision and glorify God, saying to one another, ‘Oh! How passing wonderful is the power of Christianity, that it restrains and bridles a man who has no equal upon earth—a sovereign, powerful enough to destroy and devastate all things—and teaches him to practice such philosophy, as one in a private station would not



**great city**  
*Constantinople*

<sup>B</sup>Exodus 32:10

**Gentiles**  
*a Jewish term, adopted  
by Christians, referring  
to non-Jewish nations*

**JOHN CHRYSOSTOM GOES  
INTO EXILE**

Although we only get a small glimpse of Chrysostom's life and work in this chapter, after composing these homilies, he was appointed archbishop of Constantinople. He was eventually banished from the city due to religious disagreements with people in power. He was canonized as a saint not long after his death in 407, which is clear from his halo in this image.



have been likely to show! Great indeed must be the God of the Christians, who makes angels out of men, and renders them superior to all the constraining urgency of our nature!

“Do not, then, carry this calamity any farther but allow them to draw breath again. For to punish the guilty, and to exact the penalty for these deeds, would be easy and available to any one. But to spare those who have insulted you, and to grant a pardon to those who have committed offences undeserving of pardon, is an act of which but some one or two are capable, especially when the person treated with indignity is the emperor. It is an easy matter to place the city under the subjection of fear, but to dispose all to be loving subjects, to persuade them to hold themselves well affected toward your government, and to offer not only their common but individual prayers for your empire is a work of difficulty.”

Having said this, and much more to the same effect, he overcame the emperor, such that the same thing occurred that once happened to **Joseph**. For just as he, when he beheld his brethren, longed to shed tears, but restrained his feeling, in order that he might not destroy appearances, even so did the emperor weep internally, careful not to let it be seen, for the sake of those who were present. He was not, however, able to suppress the feeling at the end of the meeting, but betrayed himself against his will. For after this speech was finished, no further words were necessary, but he gave utterance to only one sentiment, which did him much more honor than the diadem. And what was that? “How,” said he, “can it be counted wonderful or great that we should remit our anger against those who have treated us with indignity? We, who ourselves are but men, when the Lord of the universe, coming as he did on earth, and being made a servant for us, and crucified by those who had experienced his kindness, prayed to the Father on behalf of his crucifiers, saying, ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do?’<sup>c</sup> What wonder, then, if we also should forgive our fellow-servants!”

What could be gentler than such a soul? Let the Gentiles henceforward be ashamed. Rather, instead of being ashamed, let them be instructed and, leaving their native error, let them come back to the strength of Christianity. Let them learn what our philosophy is, from the example of the emperor and of the priest!

Let us never fail to give God thanks continually for all these things, not only because he has freed us from these calamities but also as he permitted them to

**Joseph**

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers but rose to become the prime minister of Egypt. Years later, his brothers came to Egypt seeking food during a famine. Joseph heard their request, but they did not recognize him. He treated them severely until he was sure of their intentions. Three times during his dealings with them he had to leave the room or send people away so they would not see him weep (see Genesis 42:24, 43:30, and 45:2).

<sup>c</sup>Luke 23:34

happen. And let us acknowledge his abundant goodness! According to the prophetic saying, “Tell your children of it; and let your children tell their children; and their children to another generation.”<sup>D</sup> So that all who shall be hereafter, even to the **consummation**, learning this act of God’s loving-kindness toward the city, may call us blessed for having enjoyed such a favor. May they marvel at our sovereign, who raised up the city when it was so grievously falling. And may they be stimulated to piety through all such events! For the history of what has lately happened to us will have power to benefit not only ourselves, if we constantly remember it, but also those who will come after us.

All of these things then being considered, let us always give thanks to God who loveth man, not just for our deliverance from these fearful evils, but for their being permitted to overtake us. Let us learn from the divine Scriptures, as well as from the recent events that have happened to us, that he rules over all things to provide what we need, ever with his own loving-kindness. May God grant that we, continually enjoying this loving-kindness, may also obtain the Kingdom of Heaven, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>D</sup>Joel 1:3

**consummation**  
*that is, to the coming  
of the Kingdom of God  
at the end of history*

## AFTERWORD

The soothing of the emperor’s wrath by a bishop—in the emperor’s own account, he forgave the people of Antioch on the basis of the forgiveness he himself had received from God—challenges Tertullian’s call for a stark separation of the two spheres. Where some might have interpreted Tertullian’s rejection of the pagan forms of entertainment as a total refusal to participate in the common life of the empire, Chrysostom and his bishop, Flavian, modeled an active participation in public affairs that benefited both church and state. The emperor sat at the top of the civil hierarchy; but as a believer, even he was under authority.

What we do not see here, however, is any sense that the Church had a right to call upon the emperor to submit: Flavian conquers Theodosius with humility, not by insisting on his rights according to

his spiritual authority. To go further would have been dangerous at this time; Chrysostom himself was exiled twice, at least once in connection with his criticism of the emperor’s family. But, more importantly, it does not seem to have occurred to the bishop to insist on any such rights. He accepted the emperor’s absolute authority in matters of state while still appealing to him as a Christian to consider leniency.

Christianity, then, continued to have to navigate its relationships to a political regime that retained the power of life and death over its members. What was needed was a framework for thinking about how these two duties could be related to one another and navigating their conflicts. The stage was set for Augustine of Hippo to offer a powerful new vision of this relationship.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How is the situation of the citizens in Antioch similar to Job's situation in the Old Testament according to John Chrysostom? What is unique about their plight? Why is it worse than other disaster scenarios in Chrysostom's opinion?
2. How do the citizens feel about their plight? Does Chrysostom agree with them or suggest they should understand their situation differently?
3. How has the situation changed between Homily 2 and Homily 13? How does the state of the city appear in both homilies? What has improved for the citizens? What evidence reveals that not all is well?
4. How do the women comport themselves throughout these events?
5. How does Chrysostom connect the present suffering of the city with the Christian life? How does he connect their suffering to the afterlife? To what extent does he suggest Christians should be concerned with each?
6. In light of the words and actions of the various clergy or priests, what roles did members of the Church hierarchy play in society? Do they deal primarily with religious or political matters? Are there other arenas in which they move? Think in particular of Bishop Flavian and Chrysostom.
7. What roles did the townspeople, the people of God, play in these events? Were the townspeople or clergy more influential in determining the course of these events?
8. What is the nature of the Church's relationship with the state in this region? To what extent does Christianity impact the emperor's actions? Conversely, how did the state affect the Church?