

Sts. Perpetua, Felicity, and Companions



BORN ABOUT 181
(PERPETUA); DIED 203
MARTYRS
FEAST DAY: MARCH 7

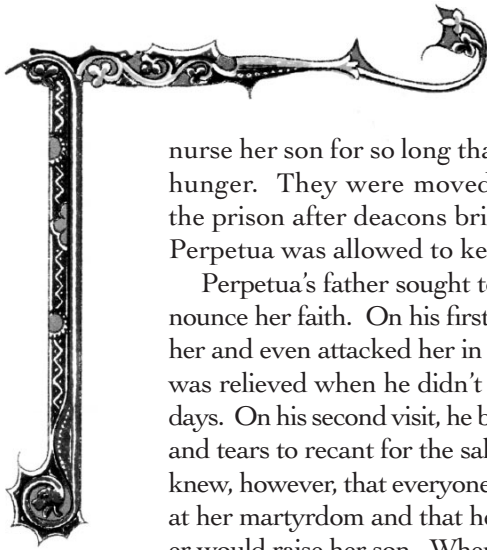
North Africa.
They were Sts. Perpetua, Saturninus, Secundulus, and the slaves Sts. Felicity and Revocatus. St. Satorus seems to have voluntarily joined them in their imprisonment.

JESUS once said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30). Too many people read no further, and assume that our Lord does not ask very much. But Jesus also said, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:37-39).

Following an edict by the Roman emperor Septimus Severus, five catechumens were arrested in Carthage, in the Roman province of

Twenty-two-year-old Perpetua was of noble birth. She was the only daughter and favorite child of her pagan father. One brother had died of cancer in childhood, another was a Christian, and the third was, like Perpetua herself, a catechumen. Their mother was perhaps also a Christian. Perpetua was married and was still nursing an infant son. Felicity was heavily pregnant. No biographical information is available on the four men.

Temporarily kept in a private home, the five catechumens were baptized, perhaps by Satorus. They were soon moved to prison and, at first, their experience was horrible. It was dark, hot, and crowded, and they were roughly treated by the soldiers. Perpetua was unable to



nurse her son for so long that he was weak from hunger. They were moved to a better part of the prison after deacons bribed the guards, and Perpetua was allowed to keep her son with her.

Perpetua's father sought to persuade her to renounce her faith. On his first visit, he argued with her and even attacked her in his anger, so that she was relieved when he didn't come back for a few days. On his second visit, he begged her with kisses and tears to recant for the sake of her family. She knew, however, that everyone but he would rejoice at her martyrdom and that her mother and brother would raise her son. When the group was tried before a procurator, her father held her baby in his arms and pleaded with her to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Although grief-stricken, she refused and professed her Christian faith. The procurator then had him forcibly removed and he was beaten with rods. The response of the Christians to their sentence, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, was cheerfulness as they returned to the prison. Perpetua sent word

to her father that she wanted her son back, but he refused. Blessedly, the child suddenly no longer desired to nurse, nor did Perpetua suffer from the abrupt weaning. Her father's last visit was an agony of grief for both father and daughter.

Both Perpetua and Saturus had visions while in prison that assured them of their martyrdom. Perpetua also saw a vision of her dead little brother which suggested that her prayers for him might have been sufficient to bring him to Heaven. Felicity, however, was grief-stricken at the prospect of not being martyred with the group, for pregnant women were not allowed to be executed in public. She and the others prayed that she would deliver her child early. She prematurely gave birth to her daughter, whom a Christian woman raised as her own child.

The group gave such a powerful witness of faith and joy that they began to receive better treatment in the prison, especially from Pudens, an assistant overseer of the prison who had begun to greatly admire the group. They were allowed numerous visitors. As was then customary, their last meal was in public. During the meal, they spoke of

their happiness and of the judgments of God. The crowd was astonished at their courage, and many of the pagans among them were converted.

On the day of their execution, during a soldiers'-camp show, the two women and three men (by then, Secundulus had died) went from prison joyously, their faces radiant. At the amphitheater, guards tried to force the men to wear pagan priests' robes and the women to wear robes as though consecrated to a pagan goddess. Perpetua strenuously refused for all of them, and they were allowed to keep their own clothing. As they entered, Perpetua sang psalms and the men threatened the people with God's judgment. The people then demanded that they be scourged as they passed by the gladiators.

Revocatus and Saturninus were attacked by a leopard and then tied to a scaffold and mauled by a bear, but did not die. Saturus hoped a leopard would kill him right away; however, he was first dragged but not killed by a wild boar. He was taken from the arena

and then put back with a leopard, who bit him mortally. He exhorted Pudens to believe in the Christian faith and, as he lay covered with blood and dying, he took a ring from the jailer's finger, dipped it in his own blood, and returned it as a token.

Perpetua and Felicity were stripped, covered only with nets, and exposed to a savage cow. After Perpetua was tossed by the cow, she pulled her torn clothing around herself and even rebound her hair (loosened hair was a sign of mourning). She then went to help Felicity, who had been crushed by the cow. The four, two men, Perpetua, and Felicity, were then brought together for execution. They gave one another a kiss of peace and were then put to the sword.

Perpetua and Felicity, young women still in the catechumenate and not yet baptized at the time of their arrest, completely understood the call of Jesus. They loved their children, but they loved our Lord even more. They trusted that God would provide for their children, joyfully surrendered up their lives, and were found worthy of their Master.

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