

Faith, Devotion, and Salvation

Rome's Policy toward Christians

47•Pliny the Younger and Trajan,

LETTERS REGARDING CHRISTIANS

Despite a general attitude that Christians were an unsavory lot and deserved whatever sanctions were laid upon them, before the middle of the third century the Roman state was reluctant to prosecute Christians too vigorously. The following exchange of letters around the year 112 between Pliny the Younger (61/62—ca. 114), imperial deputy in Bithynia and Pontus, provinces that stretched along the Black Sea coast of Anatolia (modern Asiatic Turkey), and Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117) reveals the empire's attitude and policy toward Christians during the second-century *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace.

If Pliny's name strikes a chord in your memory, it is because he was the nephew, namesake, and adopted son of Pliny the Elder (source 36).

PLINY TO EMPEROR TRAJAN

It is my inviolable rule, my Lord, to refer all uncertain matters to you. For who is better able to guide my uncertainty or instruct *me* in my ignorance?

I never was present at the trials of Christians. Therefore, I am unacquainted with what is customary as to the method and extent of punishing and examining them. I am more than just a little *uncertain* on several points: Whether any dis

crimination is made for age; whether the weak are treated differently from the stronger; whether

repentance earns a pardon; or whether, if someone was ever a Christian, his ceasing to be one does not gain him anything; whether the very name [*of* Christian) itself is punishable, *even* when it is not associated with any crimes; or whether crimes, which are associated with the name, are the punishable offenses,

Meanwhile, I have followed this procedure in regard to those who were brought before me as

I Christians. I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians. If they confessed, I asked a second and a third time,¹ adding the threat of capital punishment. If they persevered, I ordered them executed. For I did not doubt that, whatever it might be that they believed, certainly their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy merited punishment. There were others of similar madness, who, because they were Roman citizens, I directed to be remanded to the City.²

Soon, as is usually the case, accusations multiplied, simply because the matter was being investigated, and more forms of this phenomenon cropped up. An unsigned placard containing many names was put up. I thought it appropriate to dismiss those who denied they were or ever had been Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, who made supplication to Your statue with incense and wine, which I had ordered to be brought forward for that purpose, along with images of the gods, and who, furthermore, cursed Christ. For it is said that not one of these is an act that those who are truly Christians can be compelled to perform. Others who were named by the informer said they were Christians and afterwards denied it. In fact, they had been, but had forsaken it — some three years ago, others many years ago, a few even twenty-five years ago. They all venerated your statue and the images of the gods and cursed Christ.

They continued to affirm, moreover, that the sum total of their guilt or error was that they were in the habit of meeting before dawn on a certain fixed day of the week and to sing in alternating verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by sacred oath not to commit any impious action but that they would never

perpetrate fraud, theft, or adultery nor would they bear false witness or, when called upon, refuse to deliver up anything entrusted to them. After this was over, they customarily dispersed and then reassembled to partake of food, but food of a common and innocent sort.³ They had even ceased doing this after my edict was published in which, following your orders, I had forbidden secret associations. Given this, I believed it to be all the more necessary, in order to extract the truth, to question under torture two female slaves, who were called deaconesses.⁴ I discovered, however, nothing more than a depraved and excessive superstition.

Consequently I suspended the proceedings and hastened to consult You. For the matter seemed to me well worth consultation, especially in light of the numbers at peril. For many of every age and rank, and even of both sexes, are and will be called into peril. For the contagion of this superstition has not only spread through the cities but even through villages and rural districts. It does, however, seem possible to contain and cure it. It is quite clear that the temples, which had been up to now almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, have been restored, and far and wide sacrificial victims,⁵ which up until now very rarely had a buyer, are sold.⁶ From this it is easy to judge what multitude of people might be set right, if there is room for repentance.

TRAJAN TO PLINY

You have acted properly, my dear Secundus:⁷ in your handling of the cases of those denounced to you as Christians. For there is no general rule that

¹Roman law required that a confession unsupported by external evidence had to be repeated in order for a person to be found guilty

²They were sent to Rome, where they would be tried in an imperial court as citizens.

³See the next source by Tertullian for insight into the sort of uncommon and not-so-innocent food that many ascribed to Christians. The ceremony alluded to here is the *agape*, or love, feast — a communal meal in commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his apostles.

⁴See source 46, note 8.

⁵cattle and other sacrificial animals.

⁶I prefer *passimque venire victimas* (sell sacrificial victims far and wide) rather than *pastumque venire victimas* (sell the fodder for sacrificial victims), which appears in some editions of this letter.

⁷Pliny's full name was Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus.

can be set down as if it were a fixed standard for every case.' These people should not be sought out. If they are charged and convicted, they must be punished. Yet if someone denies being a Christian and provides proof in this matter, namely by praying to our gods, however much he

⁸Trajan avoids laying down an imperial rescript that would have the force of law throughout the empire. Rather, he of-

might have been under suspicion in the past, he shall secure pardon by virtue of his repentance. Anonymous accusations have no place in a criminal proceeding. They are exceedingly bad precedents and do not conform to the standards of our age.

fers Pliny practical advice for the situation at hand in these two provinces.