

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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One of the most precious documents of early Christian history is *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, an early third-century account of the martyrdom of two women and three men in the arena at Carthage in 203 CE. This document is invaluable because it contains the actual diary kept by Perpetua while she was imprisoned awaiting her death. Although it is framed by the comments of an editor, scholars universally accept the authenticity of Perpetua's account as the earliest piece of writing by a known woman in Christian history. It grants a rare glimpse into what a woman thought about the meaning of the Christian faith, free from the gloss of male commentary.

These women and men were martyred in obedience to a proclamation of the Roman emperor Lucius Septimius Severus (197-211 CE) around the year 200 forbidding conversion to Judaism and Christianity. It was aimed at new converts or catechumens to discourage others who were considering such conversions. Stiff penalties, including death, were meted out to those who violated it. However, since enforcement was dependent upon local governors or magistrates, application of the law was not uniform.

Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire for their refusal to honor the traditional Roman gods.

Such behavior was considered a mark of poor citizenship, even treason, against the Roman Empire. It was believed that the gods protected Rome and its far-flung lands from drought, poverty, pestilence and war. Thus, refusal to pay homage to them was a threat to peace and public order. In 203, Publius Aelius

Hilarius became the local ruler of Carthage. Being of a conservative and fervent religious bent, he determined to enforce Severus'

edict rigorously. Perpetua and her companions were among his victims.

A Martyrdom Story

Vibia Perpetua was of noble birth, from one of the most illustrious families of North Africa. When arrested, she was twenty-two years old, respectably married, with an infant son whom she was still nursing. Felicity, arrested with her, was a slave and eight months pregnant. Since it was against Roman law to execute a pregnant woman, Felicity was fearful she would not die with the others. However, the companions prayed, and she delivered her child, a girl, prematurely, a few days before the scheduled execution. Another slave, Revocatas, was arrested with

the women, along with Saturninus and Secundulus. All five were catechumens, newly converted to Christianity; all five were baptized shortly after their arrest. Saturus, who had been instrumental in their conversion, was arrested later, after having aggressively sought their release. Secundulus died in prison, but the rest were executed in the arena at Carthage on March 7, 203 in a spectacle honoring the birthday of Geta, the emperor's son. For the entertainment of a large crowd, each was made to fight with wild beasts. The men fought a bear, a wild boar, and a leopard. The women were stripped

PERPETUA and FELICITY



naked, enclosed in nets, and kicked about by a wild heifer. Only Saturus suffered a mortal wound from the beasts; one bite of a leopard was sufficient to kill him. The rest were mauled and bleeding, but survived. In the end, their throats were slit before the crowd. Perpetua had to guide to her throat the wavering, trembling hand of the young gladiator assigned to kill her. Such are the facts of the martyrdom story recounted by the editor of Perpetua's *Passion*.

The stories of the early Christian martyrs are sometimes difficult for contemporary Christians to understand. This is true not so much for the historical circumstances surrounding their deaths as it is for the attitude with which they faced death. Story after story recounts the martyrs' longing for heaven and their joy over being able to die with Christ. Felicity mourns the fact that she may not be able to die with the others. The Carthage martyrs celebrate their last meal together as a "love-feast," they give witness to others of their happiness over their coming passion, and they enter the amphitheatre trembling, "not with fear but joy." Perpetua guides the hand of her assailant to her throat. Such eagerness for death is difficult to appreciate. This is especially the case for a young woman like Perpetua, who seemingly had everything to live for. What motivated her to march towards her death with eagerness and joy? The pages of Perpetua's diary provide us with a more realistic picture of the struggles underlying her eventual acceptance of her fate.

Perpetua's Diary

Perpetua's diary contains both outer and inner dimensions. Outwardly, it records the day-to-day events Perpetua and her companions experienced after their arrest. Inwardly, it gives us a glimpse into the depths of Perpetua's spiritual consciousness through the record of her personal thoughts, and especially of her dream-visions. The two dimensions of the diary need to be read together in order to form an adequate picture of Perpetua's struggle to be faithful to her Christian identity. In particular, her dreams provide creative ways for her to respond to actual conflicts in her waking world.

We must remember how the ancient world, both pagan and Christian, regarded dreams and dreamers. Properly discerned, some dreams were regarded as trustworthy sources of divine revelation and prophecy. Furthermore, certain dreamers were thought to be gifted human agents of the divine, empowered to bring revelation to others through their close association with the supernatural order. In early Christianity, those called to martyrdom held a special place. Perpetua's brother understands her as such a holy one. He suggests that she request a vision to know whether she will be condemned or freed.

Perpetua does not refuse. She knows she is privy to supernatural revelations.

Outwardly, three things cause Perpetua anxiety: conflict with her father, concern about her infant son, and the ordeal she was soon to face. All three explicitly involve aspects of Perpetua's female identity: her filial duty to her father, her maternal obligation toward her son, and the supposition of female frailty in the face of severe suffering. In all three cases, Perpetua's dreams provide her with the means to transcend these earthly expectations.

Perpetua's Struggle with Filial Duty

As a noble Roman matron, Perpetua's first duty was respect and obedience to her father. However, this important filial duty came into direct conflict with her identity as a Christian. The opening entry in the diary finds Perpetua in battle with her father, who tries to persuade her to renounce Christianity in order to save herself. Pointing to a water jug, she asks whether it can be called by any name other than what it is. When her father answers "no," Perpetua replies that she cannot call herself by any name other than "Christian," for that is what she is. Her father leaves in a fit of rage and Perpetua is relieved by his absence.

That evening Perpetua dreams about a long narrow ladder stretching from earth to heaven. It is lined with weaponry: swords, lances, hooks, daggers, and supreme caution is needed to ascend it. A fierce dragon guards the foot of the ladder. Saturus climbs first; then Perpetua steps on the head of the dragon and ascends safely. At the top is a magnificent garden inhabited by thousands dressed in white. But the prominent figure is a tall, white haired man dressed as a shepherd. He is milking sheep and welcomes her warmly, giving her some of the milk to drink. Perpetua awakens with the taste of something sweet in her mouth.

The kindly heavenly shepherd becomes Perpetua's new "father," giving her the courage to resist the pull her earthly father holds over her. Her father comes back again and again, falling at her feet, kissing her hands, begging her not to cause ruin to fall on her family. Perpetua grieves for his sorrow and attempts to comfort him, but she remains firm in her resolve. The image of the heavenly shepherd sustains and comforts her.

Perpetua's Struggle with Maternal Obligation

Even more painful is Perpetua's struggle with her feelings for her baby. When she is first lodged in prison, Perpetua has extreme anxiety about her baby from whom she is separated, except for the times he is brought to her to be nursed. Eventually she is allowed to keep her baby with her, and then, she says "the prison became a

palace.” Clearly Perpetua’s ties to her infant are strong.

One day in prayer, Perpetua is moved to pray for her brother Dinocrates, who died at age seven with a cancerous wound on his face. That evening she dreams that Dinocrates emerges from a dark place. He is hot, dirty and thirsty, and the disfiguring wound dominates his face. He approaches a font full of water, but he cannot reach it, since the bowl is above his head. Moved by the dream, Perpetua prays for him constantly, seeking

Although young in her faith, Perpetua seems to have been regarded as a female prophet. She is, beyond doubt, the leader of the Carthaginian martyrs, all of whom seem to acknowledge her prophetic gifts and look to her for

to relieve his suffering. Shortly afterwards, Perpetua has a subsequent dream in which she sees Dinocrates again. This time he is clean and well-dressed and the wound on his face is gone. The font has been lowered to his waist; he drinks from it and runs off to play.

Perpetua believes that her prayers released Dinocrates from his suffering. Just as her love and care for her brother extended across the boundaries of heaven and earth, so it will be with her love and care for her baby. Once again the knowledge gained in a dream comforts Perpetua and enables her to face separation from her infant. She is further consoled when her baby refuses her breasts, indicating no more need of them.

Perpetua’s Struggle with “Female Frailty”

Perpetua’s first vision of the treacherous ladder guarded by the dragon served as confirmation of the fact that she would be condemned to death. The heavenly garden at its tip predicted the happiness she would enjoy once her ordeal was over. The day before the fight with the wild beasts, Perpetua dreams again. This time the deacon Pomponius leads her from prison to an amphitheatre filled with people. Saying, “fear not, I am here with you and I suffer with you,” he leaves her in the center of the arena. Eventually an Egyptian, “foul of look,” emerges with a host of attendants. Perpetua learns she is to fight with him. Her attendants surround her. They strip her

and Perpetua realizes she has been changed into a man. She is rubbed with oil in preparation for combat. A huge man dressed as a trainer comes forward, holding a wand in one hand and in the other a green bough with golden apples, which will be the reward for the victor. Perpetua fights with the Egyptian, overcoming him easily by striking his face over and over with her heels. Eventually she knocks him over and steps on his head. The trainer gives her the bough and kisses her, saying “Peace be with thee, my daughter.”

This dream-vision prepares Perpetua for the ordeal she must face in the arena. Being turned into a man suggests she is endowed with so-called “manly” virtues such as courage and the physical strength to endure the suffering to come. She also understands that her fight will be with the devil, who is exemplified by both the dragon in the first dream and the Egyptian in the last. In both cases, Perpetua treads upon his head in a gesture of victory.

The Noblewoman and the Slave

Historians believe that the edited version of Perpetua’s *Passion* probably originated with an early Christian sect known as Montanists, who were active in Northern Africa in the early third century. The church theologian Tertullian belonged to this group; indeed, some have suggested that he may have been the diary’s final editor. This group of Christians could be compared with today’s charismatics, placing a lot of emphasis on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and evidence of ecstatic gifts, such as prophecy and speaking in tongues. They were also important for recognizing the leadership of women on a par equal to that of men. Although young in her faith, Perpetua seems to have been regarded as a female prophet. She is, beyond doubt, the leader of the Carthaginian martyrs, all of whom seem to acknowledge her prophetic gifts and look to her for courage and guidance.

We know little about Felicity beyond what the editor of the story tells us. She may have been Perpetua’s maidservant, although that is speculation. Nonetheless, it is significant for our understanding of early Christianity, that the two, noblewoman and slave, were honored together as equals in their embracing of Christianity and the martyrdom that resulted from that. Perpetua and Felicity were memorialized in the Roman canon of the Mass as two of the most important early Christian martyrs, their courage and devotion to their faith being held up as exemplary for imitation. Taking into consideration Perpetua’s female leadership, and her partnering with the slave Felicity in their imprisonment and martyrdom, we know that certain groups in the church of the early third century continued to give credence to Paul’s famous injunction in his letter to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ



have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28).

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The feast day for Perpetua and Felicity is celebrated on March 7. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service Honoring Perpetua & Felicity

Celebrate Perpetua & Felicity's feast on March 7 or at any other time

Greeting: *The prayer leader welcomes participants and makes sure they are introduced to each other.*

Introduction: *If the group is not already familiar with Perpetua and Felicity, the prayer leader should give a brief introduction to their lives. The following excerpt from Dr. Joan Nuth's essay may be helpful:*

“The stories of the early Christian martyrs are sometimes difficult for contemporary Christians to understand. This is true not so much for the historical circumstances surrounding their deaths as it is for the attitude with which they faced death. Story after story recounts the martyrs' longing for heaven and their joy over being able to die with Christ. [In the readings today] Felicity mourns the fact that she may not be able to die with the others. The Carthage martyrs celebrate their last meal together as a ‘love feast,’ they give witness to others of their happiness over their coming passion and they enter the amphitheater trembling, ‘not with fear but joy.’ Perpetua guides the hand of her assailant to her throat. Such eagerness for death is difficult to appreciate. This is especially the case for a young woman like Perpetua, who seemingly had everything to live for. What motivated her to march towards her death with eagerness and joy?” [Let us enter into our prayer service now with the eyes of faith to see if we can discover the source of their happiness.]

Opening Song: *You Are Near* (Dan Shutte © 1971 OCP Today's Missal Music Issue #452)

Reading I: “As for Felicitas, she too was touched by God's grace...She was pregnant when arrested and was now in her eighth month. ...She became very distressed that her martyrdom might be delayed, since the law forbade the execution of a pregnant woman. Then she would have to shed her holy and innocent blood among common criminals ...Her friends in martyrdom were equally sad at the thought of abandoning such a good friend to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, united in grief they prayed to the Lord. Immediately after their prayers, her labor pains began ...she suffered greatly during the birth, and one of the prison guards taunted her: ‘If you're complaining now, what will you do when you'll be thrown to the wild beasts?’ ...She answered, ‘...now it is I who suffer, but then another shall be in me to bear pain for me, since I am not suffering for him.’ And she gave birth to a girl whom one of her sisters reared as her own daughter.”

(from *Perpetua's Diary* as found in *In Her Words*, edited by Amy Oden, Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 33-34)

Response: *Unless a Grain of Wheat* (Bernadette Farrell © 1983 OCP Publications, *Today's Missal Music Issue #427*) Verses 1-3

Reading II: “The day of their victory dawned, and with joyful countenances they marched from prison to the arena as though on their way to heaven. If there was any trembling it was from joy, not fear. Perpetua followed with quick step as a true spouse of Christ, the darling of God, her brightly flashing eyes quelling the gaze of the crowd. Felicitas, too, joyful because she had safely survived child-birth and was now able to participate in the contest with the wild animals, passed from one shedding of blood to another; from midwife to gladiator...As they were led through the gate they were ordered to put on different clothes; the men, those priests of Saturn, the women, those priestesses of Ceres. But [Perpetua] stubbornly resisted even to the end. She said, ‘We've come this far voluntarily in order to protect our rights, and we've pledged our lives not to recapitulate on any such matter as this. We made this agreement with you.’ Injustice bowed to justice and the guard conceded that they could enter the arena in their ordinary dress. ...And when the crowd demanded that the prisoners be brought out into the open so that they might feast their eyes on death by the sword, they ...kissed each other so that their martyrdom would be completely perfected by the rite of the kiss of peace. The others, without making any movement or sound, were killed by the sword... But Perpetua, in order to feel some of the pain, groaning as she was stuck between the ribs, took the gladiator's trembling hand [and] guided it to her throat. Perhaps it was that so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be slain had not she herself willed it.”

(From *Perpetua's Diary* as found in *In Her Words*, edited by Amy Oden, Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 33-34)

Response: *Unless a Grain of Wheat* (Bernadette Farrell © 1983 Published by OCP Publications, #427 in Today's Missal Music Issue) Verse 3-6

Gospel Reading: Mark 8: 34-37 (*Celtic Alleluia or other suitable before and after*)

Preaching: *A good place to develop the paschal dimension of suffering...connecting this where possible to the experiences of those who attend the service. The experience of childbirth and the nurturing of infants and children would seem especially appropriate.*

Sharing/Reflection: *Even though it is rare in our day for Christians to experience physical martyrdom, all Christians will find as they journey that they are called to sacrifice or give up something so that new life or Jesus' new creation can come forth. Participants are invited to reflect on the following questions. If the group is large, ask people to get into groups of three or four, and allow about 15-20 minutes of interaction.*

1. Who are present day martyrs and what is it that makes them "witnesses?" To what or to whom do they witness?
2. Do you know anyone among your family and friends who has such a consciousness of heaven/God's new creation...whether it be the new creation of infants and children or the new creation of justice and peace...that the hardships of life seem not as important as the joys of fruition? What is it about this person's faith that attracts?
3. Do you experience a call or need in your own life to "let go" and let God's power accomplish that which it wishes? What is this experience like for you?

Prayers of Intercession: *Invite people to offer their own prayers as the Spirit leads.*

Sung Refrain (All): "We hold the death of the Lord, deep in our hearts, living, now we remain, in Jesus the Christ" *Now We Remain* (© David Haas 1983 G.I.A. Publications in *Today's Missal Music Issue #424*)

- R. God, Perpetua and Felicity loved and supported each other through pregnancy, childbirth, imprisonment and violent death.
L. Help us support each other in time of need and let us choose the health and well being of the world's women and children rather than war and violence as means to achieve political ends.
- R. God, you helped Perpetua find courage by guiding her in her dreams.
L. Let us not be afraid to discover your guidance in spiritual companionship and in our dreams and visions.
- R. God, you consoled Felicity and Perpetua on the loss of their babies, and provided loving caregivers for them.
L. Give your peace to all mothers who mourn for children lost through miscarriage, abortion, still birth or untimely death. Bring nurturing caregivers and deep peace to all children, no matter what age, who lost their mothers or fathers at an early age, especially those who lost a parent to violence.

Other intercessions may now be offered. The response is "Nurturing God, hear our prayer." When all have finished conclude the intercession prayers with the sung refrain below.

Sung Refrain (All): "We hold the death of the Lord, deep in our hearts, living, now we remain, in Jesus the Christ" *Now We Remain* (© David Haas 1983 G.I.A. Publications in *Today's Missal Music Issue #424*)

Rite of Peace: Invite people to approach the altar for a blessing of peace as everyone sings the verses to "Now We Remain." If the crowd is large have several "ministers of peace" prepared to begin the ritual with the prayer leader. The prayer leader (and ministers) sign the forehead of each person with the sign of the Cross while saying: "**(name)_____**, **receive the peace of Christ for by this Cross we are made whole.**" This person then signs the person in back of them and recites the same prayer. If the group knows each other well and is comfortable with it, the ritual may include an embrace or a kiss.

Closing Reading (Prayer Leader): "O brave and fortunate martyrs, [Perpetua and Felicity...you were] truly called and chosen to give honor to our Lord Jesus Christ! And anyone who...reverences that honor, should read these more recent examples, along with the ancient, as sources of encouragement for the Christian community. In this way, there will be new examples of courage witnessing to the fact that even in our day the same Holy Spirit is still present, Amen" (Conclusion to *Perpetua's Diary* as found in *In Her Words*, edited by Amy Oden, Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 34)

Closing Song: *Eye Has Not Seen* (Marty Haugen © 1982 G.I.A. *Today's Missal Music Issue #508*)

Service prepared by Christine Schenk csj who has Master's degrees in Midwifery and Theology and is the Executive Director of FutureChurch.

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Perpetua and Felicity: Courageous unto Death

1. What is the written source that has provided historical information about Perpetua and Felicity?

2. What basic facts do we know about each woman? Write a “?” if the article does not give this information about one of the women.

	Perpetua	Felicity
Age when arrested		
Social Status		
# of Children		
Date of death		

3. Why were Christians in the Roman Empire persecuted?

4. What is the “outward dimension” of Perpetua’s diary?

What is the “inner dimension” of the diary?

5. What were the three things that worried Perpetua the most while she was in prison?

a.

b.

c.

6. How does the shepherd in Perpetua’s dream help her overcome her sense of duty to her father?

7. Who was Dinocrates?

How does Perpetua’s dream about Dinocrates help her in her struggle with her obligation to her baby?

8. How does Perpetua's dream about her execution help her overcome her fear that she will not be strong enough?

9. What evidence exists that Perpetua was considered a leader and a prophet?

10. Who were the Montanists?

12. How does the Scripture passage at the end of the article (Galatians 3:27-28) relate to Perpetua and Felicity?

13. Felicity and Perpetua are mentioned in a list of saints to be imitated in one of the Eucharistic prayers at Mass. What do you wish other Catholics knew about these two women's witness to their faith? How can they speak to us today?

14. Write an imaginary letter from Perpetua or Felicity to their infant children that the children will open when they were teenagers. How would these women have explained their choice to suffer martyrdom to their children?



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch's **More! Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher's Edition**. To order the complete edition with 13 essays, prayer services and worksheets, go to www.futurechurch.org or call 216-228-0869 X5.*