

THE DAILY LIFE OF SECOND CENTURY CHRISTIANS*

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The Church in the second century is a church in search of identity. It is born from Judaism but it is not Jewish. It lives among pagans and shares some of their customs and beliefs, as we shall see, but it is not pagan. It has philosophers but it is not a philosophy. It is a faith in a risen person; it is faith in the risen Christ. This faith is preached first to the Jews, then to the pagan world. What is this pagan world? It is not an atheistic world, by any means. Greeks and Romans believed in a divinity and in divinities. They had in common with the Christians a religious feeling; in fact, St. Paul, in his speech on the Aeropagus begins with praising the religious sensibility of the pagans of Athens. Some schools of philosophy, especially Stoicism, had very much in common with Christian doctrine. Stoic philosophers believed in one god, an immanent god, the soul of the world. They demythologized the many pagan gods, and professed a strict morality which can be compared with Pauline or Jewish ethics. The mystery religions took a more mystical turn and inspired their followers to escape from this world and entrust themselves to some divinity in a very personal manner.

Of course the spread of the Christian religion had many stumbling-blocks as well. First and foremost, the doctrine of the resurrection. That was about the

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most difficult doctrine for pagans, as can be seen in Paul's failure on the Areopagus in Acts 17.

The distinction between matter and spirit was another matter of contention. The Greek world depreciated matter and glorified spirit. The Jewish and Christian religions taught that matter and man's body were created by God. They possess therefore a positive value. Good and evil are moral not physical categories.

Other stumbling blocks were the doctrine of a crucified God, the strict morality, which was not confined to a sect or to a philosophical school as in the Roman Empire, but applied to all Christians, and last but not least the social standing of Christians who came from the lowest strata of society. Yet around the year 180, we find Christianity in Europe, Africa and Asia, from the Rhine to Mesopotamia. We find Christians in Antioch, in all Asia Minor, in North Africa, especially in Carthage, in Alexandria, Edessa, Greece, Italy and Gaul. Here, is how Tertullian at the end of the century describes the spread of Christianity:

"We are but of yesterday and we have filled everything you have: cities, tenements, forts, towns, exchanges. Yes, and camps, tribes, palace, senate, forum. All we have left to you is the temples. For what war could we not have been fit and ready even if unequal in forces, we who are so glad to be butchered were it not of course, that in our doctrine we are given ampler liberty to be killed rather than to kill? Why, without taking up arms, without rebellion, simply by standing aside, by mere ill-natured separation we could have fought you." (*Apology* 37,4-6)

In other words Tertullian stresses the fact that the Christians were so numerous that had they gone on strike the Roman Empire would have been paralysed.

We find Christians mainly in the cities, in harbours and in the towns along the main imperial roads. In Italy, people living in the country remained pagan till the fifth or sixth century. In fact, *pagan* or *paganus* means a *country man*. In Pontus, however, we already find many country Christians already in the year 120. Italy may have been an exception. Now, how did this rapid spread of Christianity come about? The infrastructures of the Roman Empire did help the spread of the Gospel of course. We know that travel and communications were rather easy. In the period of peace and prosperity from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, excellent roads were constructed with stations all along to

change horses. There was unitary money and a good postal service. Greek was the *lingua franca* in the whole of the Empire, even in Rome itself. Consumer goods increased commerce. Many students travelled around. But who were the preachers of Christianity?

We often imagine the twelve Apostles preaching in fora and public places. Our apostles were actually simple lay people, who shared their experience of faith with fellow travellers in a boat or while travelling by land. They just told others what they felt, the experience of joy which comes from having found one's purpose of life. They spoke to fellow workers, to other slaves in a family, or to the master of a household. Wives convinced husbands and husbands wives and children. It was mostly these humble people that spread Christianity.

Though humble they were versed in Scripture. They were not Scripture scholars by any means. But they did know large portions of the Bible, and they could quote them against Jews, or to illustrate their faith to the pagans. People were impressed by their poverty, their sense of fellowship and fraternity which we call Christian charity, their honesty, and especially the new virtue, chastity. Christians gave hope to a lost world, especially through their preaching of the doctrine of resurrection. Their greatest witness -in fact the word means witness- was *martyrdom*. But mainly it was the existential message they passed on which differed from the empty words of the rhetors and the philosophers and gave meaning to each and every single life with which they came into contact.

Many of them were charismatics. They had the gift of healing. We know this even from extra-Biblical sources. We have some testimonies in the Talmud which prohibit Jews, especially rabbis, to go and be healed by Christians. One famous rabbi who went to them to be healed was brought to court.

Here is an extract from the famous Epistle to Diognetus, written in the middle of the second century:

They (the Christians) live in countries of their own but simply as sojourners. They share the life of citizens, they endure the lot of foreigners, every foreign land is to them a fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land. They marry like the rest of the world. They breed children

but they do not cast their offspring adrift. They have a common table, but yet not common. They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh. They spend their existence upon earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws and in their own lives they surpass the

laws. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, and yet are condemned and put to death, and they gain new life.

In a word, what the soul is in the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is spread to all the members of the body and Christians to all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body but it is not of the body. Christians dwell in the world but they are not of this world. The soul, itself invisible, is detained in a body which is itself visible. So, Christians are recognized as being in the world but their religious life remains invisible." (*Ep to Diognetus* V,5-10; VII,1-4)

Of course, the author of this epistle describes the life of Christians in very idealistic terms. The Christians also had their defects. They were men.

Once a community was formed through preaching the presbyter-bishops looked after it. In the first century, we do not yet distinguish between *presbyter* and *overseer* or *bishop*, but by the year 110 we find monarchical episcopacy all over Asia, and in about 150, each and every city has its own monarchical bishop surrounded by presbyters.

What about the social standing of Christians once the community was formed? There have been many studies lately on this social problem, for example, Meeks' excellent book *The First Urban Christians*, and a book by Peter Lampe on the Sociology of Christians in Rome in the second century. We can deduce enough about the social standing of Christians to state that the great majority came from the lower classes. It is only in the second half of the second century that we have people of senatorial status joining the Church.

In Rome, for example, their living quarters are known to us. Christians were numerous in Trastevere, on the Via Appia, between the Aventine and Porta Capena, less numerous in Campo Marzio and on the Aventine, but we do not find any Christians inside the Servian walls, a quarter reserved for the nobility. Only in the year 200, can we count about 42 Christians of senatorial rank among thousands of people of this status. The aristocracy remained usually pagan. It is only in the late 5th century that the aristocracy started becoming Christian.

We find all ages, all trades - we know this from funerary inscriptions - slaves and free. Each community had a common fund to succour widows and orphans, the shipwrecked, travellers, prisoners and slaves. Of course, it is the relatively richer people who sustained this common fund. Tertullian writes:

"Even if there is a chest of a sort, it is not made up of money paid in entrance fees, as if religion were a matter of contract. Every man, once a month, brings some modest coin or whenever he wishes, and only if he does wish and if he can, for nobody is compelled. It is a voluntary offering.

You might call them the "trust funds of piety" for they are not spent upon banquets nor drinking parties nor thankless eating houses but to feed the poor and to bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old and ship-wrecked mariners and any who may be in mines, islands or prisons..." (*Apology* 39,5-6)

These funds were invested, and it seems that the clergy or bishops did not always have the *charisma* for investment. Sometimes money was mismanaged and lost even by such a well-known man like Calixtus, who then later became Pope.

These things naturally caused scandal, but this did not prevent the richer classes from providing a house-church. There were no formal churches yet in the second century. Christians met in private houses and those who had a larger house opened it every Sunday for the celebration of the Eucharist. They also donated money, but sometimes, as Clement of Alexandria informs us, the rich caused scandal by their luxurious and scandalous living. All that glitters is not gold.

The Church was very strict in its discipline especially with the rich. Penance could only be received once in a lifetime. It is only later that all sins were forgiven because in the very first decades of the century adultery, homicide and idolatry were not forgiven at all.

Little by little integration took place between the higher and the lower classes. In a pagan society this was almost unthinkable, but in the new Christian society the higher classes began to mix freely with all kinds of other people, even with slaves. Some went so far as to marry slaves. In this process of integration the poor benefitted culturally and raised both their standard of living and their education. Their *lingua franca*, even in Rome, was Greek, which was the first liturgical language. The first father to write in Latin was Tertullian around the year 200.

There was no official acknowledgment by the State of Christianity as such. It is only later that the Christians formed a funerary society, which was the only way in which they could be recognized as some sort of society. We usually think

of the Christians as living in the catacombs. Burial in catacombs only starts in the third century. The Christians in the second century were buried above ground and we do not have many inscriptions from the first two centuries because burial above ground was rather temporary and the graves were just removed for new burials. Many known graves could be Christian, but Christians were not always buried as such and it is difficult to know from grave inscriptions in the second century, who is Christian and who is not. It is only in the third century then that catacombs are used but the faithful did not celebrate Mass in these catacombs. Sometimes they took refuge there, so it is not exact to speak of Christians living in the catacombs. They just mixed with society. They lived above ground.

In this society, there were some prohibited trades: magic, astrology, prostitution of course, the circus, the amphitheatres, pagan cults, not the army. Christians could go into the army. They could not rise to the higher ranks because usually these demanded an oath to the Emperor, a stand which the Christians could not take. It is only later, in the third century, that we find Christians opposing conscientious objection.

In the higher strata of society, women were more numerous than men. The influence of women especially on slaves, husbands, etc., was quite strong, and many conversions are due to female witness and testimony. Widows seemed to have formed a community and there were also prayer communities. Widows formed charitable institutions and acted as social workers helping the deacons. It was the deacon who was the main social worker. Of course, in the female world, values were revolutionised by the new ideas about monogamous marriage, the prohibition of abortion and divorce, the ideal of virginity and the equality of women and men, slaves and free in Christ.

How did the Christian families educate their children? Children went to pagan schools. They followed the elementary, grammar and rhetoric schools, but naturally their parents taught them to discriminate between what was just literature and such myths that were not reconcilable with their faith. They could know everything about the pagan gods, but they believed in and adored only one God and Christ. Some names have remained, as in the case of a widow called Grapte who used to teach orphans.

The catechumenate in preparation for baptism was very long and Christians were educated as such by the presbyters. Sometimes we have famous people giving free lectures. We know of Origen, for example, and Justin. Even Marcion the heretic gave free lectures to small groups. In fact, little by little, Christianity

will be called a philosophy even by pagan philosophers themselves, but mostly Christians were not very well educated except in their own faith.

Friction very often arose between the State and Christianity. The accusation was that Christians were atheists; this may cause surprise but it is precisely what Justin tells us:

"Hence, we are called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned. But not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But, both him and the Son who came forth from him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow are made like to him, and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to everyone who wishes to learn as we have been taught." (*Apology* 1,6)

They were also accused of lack of patriotism because they refused to take part in the cult of the Emperor. Ever since the first century, Emperors were deified, and men like Domitian were called *Dominus et Deus noster* to which Christians opposed their confession of faith, *My Lord and my God*, which means, it is only Christ who is our Lord and God.

Christians were accused of hatred of the human race, just as the Jews had been accused before them, because in a way they were separatists. There were even financial reasons. Artists, for example, started losing money because less idols and less statues were requested.

Celsus objects against Christians that they were ignorant, low class, superstitious, absentees, cannibals and immoral. As often happens, if people have secret meetings it is very easy for those outside to play with the imagination on what happens in these meetings; it was thought that they ate the flesh of children. These however were popular accusations, not legal ones.

From the very beginning we have a series of persecutions. In the first century under Nero and Domitian; in the second century, under Trajan, with persecutions in Rome, Palestine and Asia Minor, under Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in Africa, Rome and Asia Minor; under Septimius Severus in Rome, Africa, Egypt, etc. until the great persecution of Diocletian. Here is a vivid description.

From the Acts of the Martyrdom of Justin and his companions:

"When they were brought before the judgement seat, Rusticus, the Prefect, said to Justin: "First of all, obey the gods and make submission to the princes." Justin said: "To obey the commands of our Saviour Jesus Christ is not worthy of blame or condemnation." The Prefect Rusticus said: "What doctrines do you hold?" Justin: "I have endeavoured to make myself acquainted with all doctrines, but I have given my assent to the true doctrines of the Christians whether they please the holders of false beliefs or not." The Prefect Rusticus said: "Do these doctrines please you, you wretch?" Justin said: "Yes, for the belief in accordance with which I follow them is right." "What belief do you mean?" "That which we religiously profess, concerning the God of the Christians in whom we believe, one God existing from the beginning, maker and artificer of the whole creation, seen and unseen and concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God who has also been proclaimed aforetime by the prophets, as about to come to the race of men, as herald of salvation, and master of true disciples." The conversation continues. Rusticus also enquires from the companions of Justin whether they believe in this doctrine. The Prefect Rusticus said: "If you do not obey, you shall be punished without mercy." Justin said: "If we are punished for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hope to be saved. For this shall be our salvation of confidence before the most terrible judgement seat of our Lord and Saviour who shall judge the world." So also said the other martyrs: "Do what you will, for we are Christians and offer no sacrifice to idols." Rusticus the Prefect gave sentence: "Let those who will not sacrifice to the gods and yield to the commands of the Emperor be scourged and led away to be beheaded in accordance with the law." (*Acta S. Justini et sociorum*, Ed O.von Gebhardt p.18)

This is quite typical of the trial of Christians. As to organisation, we said that Christians gathered around house-churches. They had at first collegiate presbyter-bishops to guide them, later, bishops and priests. Deacons were what we would call social workers. In fact, we know of Rome that it had seven regions and seven deacons. It had twenty *tituli* (which means house-churches) and six cemeteries. Sometimes conflicts arose between presbyters and charismatics, Montanists, for example, around the year 200; consequently the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, from which our creed developed, had to be laid down. This creed represented the true tradition handed down by the Apostles. Practical rules of discernment between true and false prophecy arose quite early. In a very old document belonging to the first century, the *Didachè* we read:

"But not everyone that speaketh in the Spirit is a prophet. But if we have the ways of the Lord, by their ways then shall the false prophets and the prophet be known. And any prophet that orders a table in the Spirit shall not eat of it, else he is a false prophet. And every prophet that teaches the truth if he does not what he teaches is a false prophet. But every approved true prophet who enacts a wordly mystery of the Church but teaches not others to do what he himself doeth shall not be judged among you for he has his judgement with God. Even so did the ancient prophets: For whosoever shall say in the Spirit, " Give me money, or any such thing", ye shall not listen to him. But if he bid you, "Give others that of which they are in need," let no man judge him." (*Didachè* XI, 8-12)

One great problem was the case of lapsed Christians. Many faithful defected during persecution and sacrificed to idols. Later, during the Decian persecution in the third century, they obtained the *libellus*, a certificate that they had sacrificed to the gods. This caused a problem: should such people be received back into the Church? What sort of penance would be required? The controversy went on with Cyprian as one of the main theologians.

Christians prayed standing with uplifted hands, facing the east. By the year 200, they prayed in the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour, that is in the morning, at midday and in the afternoon. Then they extended their prayers to the early morning and to the evening: hence, lauds, terce, sext, none and vespers.

In the first century they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. They did not fast on Mondays and Thursdays to distinguish themselves from the Pharisees. Their fasting-food consisted of just bread, water and salt.

To conclude, the purpose of this talk was not simply to impart information. I began my lecture by saying that in the second century the Church was in search of an identity of its own. It conquered a pagan world which, however, believed in a divinity and had strong religious sentiments. Many Christians today seem to have lost their identity or are in search of a new identity. Our present task is to give witness to what we might call a "post-Christian" world, a world that is often agnostic or atheistic, which the pagan world was not. We study the situation of the early Church, to be able to translate it into 20th century - or

rather 21st century - terms, as it is only by living our Christian identity that we can renew our evangelical witness to contemporary society.

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SOURCES AND BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

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