

Chapter XVI: Conduct Towards The Christians, From Nero To
Constantine.--Part VI.

Although the policy of Diocletian and the humanity of Constantius inclined them to preserve inviolate the maxims of toleration, it was soon discovered that their two associates, Maximian and Galerius, entertained the most implacable aversion for the name and religion of the Christians. The minds of those princes had never been enlightened by science; education had never softened their temper. They owed their greatness to their swords, and in their most elevated fortune they still retained their superstitious prejudices of soldiers and peasants. In the general administration of the provinces they obeyed the laws which their benefactor had established; but they frequently found occasions of exercising within their camp and palaces a secret persecution, [144] for which the imprudent zeal of the Christians sometimes offered the most specious pretences. A sentence of death was executed upon Maximilianus, an African youth, who had been produced by his own father [144a] before the magistrate as a sufficient and legal recruit, but who obstinately persisted in declaring, that his conscience would not permit him to embrace the profession of a soldier. [145] It could scarcely be expected that any government should suffer the action of Marcellus the Centurion to pass with impunity. On the day of a public festival, that officer threw away his belt, his arms, and the ensigns of his office, and exclaimed with a loud voice, that he would obey none but Jesus Christ the eternal King, and that he renounced forever the use of carnal

weapons, and the service of an idolatrous master. The soldiers, as soon as they recovered from their astonishment, secured the person of Marcellus. He was examined in the city of Tingi by the president of that part of Mauritania; and as he was convicted by his own confession, he was condemned and beheaded for the crime of desertion. [146] Examples of such a nature savor much less of religious persecution than of martial or even civil law; but they served to alienate the mind of the emperors, to justify the severity of Galerius, who dismissed a great number of Christian officers from their employments; and to authorize the opinion, that a sect of enthusiasts, which avowed principles so repugnant to the public safety, must either remain useless, or would soon become dangerous, subjects of the empire.

[Footnote 144: Eusebius, l. viii. c. 4, c. 17. He limits the number of military martyrs, by a remarkable expression, of which neither his Latin nor French translator have rendered the energy. Notwithstanding the authority of Eusebius, and the silence of Lactantius, Ambrose, Sulpicius, Orosius, &c., it has been long believed, that the Thebaean legion, consisting of 6000 Christians, suffered martyrdom by the order of Maximian, in the valley of the Pennine Alps. The story was first published about the middle of the 5th century, by Eucherius, bishop of Lyons, who received it from certain persons, who received it from Isaac, bishop of Geneva, who is said to have received it from Theodore, bishop of Octodurum. The abbey of St. Maurice still subsists, a rich monument of the credulity of Sigismund, king of Burgundy. See an excellent Dissertation in xxxvith volume of the *Bibliothèque Raisonnée*,

p. 427-454.]

[Footnote 144a: M. Guizot criticizes Gibbon's account of this incident. He supposes that Maximilian was not "produced by his father as a recruit," but was obliged to appear by the law, which compelled the sons of soldiers to serve at 21 years old. Was not this a law of Constantine? Neither does this circumstance appear in the acts. His father had clearly expected him to serve, as he had bought him a new dress for the occasion; yet he refused to force the conscience of his son. and when Maximilian was condemned to death, the father returned home in joy, blessing God for having bestowed upon him such a son.--M.]

[Footnote 145: See the Acta Sincera, p. 299. The accounts of his martyrdom and that of Marcellus, bear every mark of truth and authenticity.]

[Footnote 146: Acta Sincera, p. 302. * Note: M. Guizot here justly observes, that it was the necessity of sacrificing to the gods, which induced Marcellus to act in this manner.--M.]

After the success of the Persian war had raised the hopes and the reputation of Galerius, he passed a winter with Diocletian in the palace of Nicomedia; and the fate of Christianity became the object of their secret consultations. [147] The experienced emperor was still inclined to pursue measures of lenity; and though he readily consented to exclude the Christians from holding any employments in the household or the

army, he urged in the strongest terms the danger as well as cruelty of shedding the blood of those deluded fanatics. Galerius at length extorted [147a] from him the permission of summoning a council, composed of a few persons the most distinguished in the civil and military departments of the state.

The important question was agitated in their presence, and those ambitious courtiers easily discerned, that it was incumbent on them to second, by their eloquence, the importunate violence of the Caesar. It may be presumed, that they insisted on every topic which might interest the pride, the piety, or the fears, of their sovereign in the destruction of Christianity. Perhaps they represented, that the glorious work of the deliverance of the empire was left imperfect, as long as an independent people was permitted to subsist and multiply in the heart of the provinces. The Christians, (it might specially be alleged,) renouncing the gods and the institutions of Rome, had constituted a distinct republic, which might yet be suppressed before it had acquired any military force; but which was already governed by its own laws and magistrates, was possessed of a public treasure, and was intimately connected in all its parts by the frequent assemblies of the bishops, to whose decrees their numerous and opulent congregations yielded an implicit obedience. Arguments like these may seem to have determined the reluctant mind of Diocletian to embrace a new system of persecution; but though we may suspect, it is not in our power to relate, the secret intrigues of the palace, the private views and resentments, the jealousy of women or eunuchs, and all those trifling but decisive causes which

so often influence the fate of empires, and the councils of the wisest monarchs. [148]

[Footnote 147: De M. P. c. 11. Lactantius (or whoever was the author of this little treatise) was, at that time, an inhabitant of Nicomedia; but it seems difficult to conceive how he could acquire so accurate a knowledge of what passed in the Imperial cabinet. Note: * Lactantius, who was subsequently chosen by Constantine to educate Crispus, might easily have learned these details from Constantine himself, already of sufficient age to interest himself in the affairs of the government, and in a position to obtain the best information.--G. This assumes the doubtful point of the authorship of the Treatise.--M.]

[Footnote 147a: This permission was not extorted from Diocletian; he took the step of his own accord. Lactantius says, in truth, *Nec tamen deflectere potuit (Diocletianus) praecipitis hominis insaniam; placuit ergo amicorum sententiam experiri.* (De Mort. Pers. c. 11.) But this measure was in accordance with the artificial character of Diocletian, who wished to have the appearance of doing good by his own impulse and evil by the impulse of others. *Nam erat hujus malitiae, cum bonum quid facere decrevisse sine consilio faciebat, ut ipse laudaretur. Cum autem malum. quoniam id reprehendendum sciebat, in consilium multos advocabat, ut aliorum culpa adscriberetur quicquid ipse deliquerat.* Lact. ib. Eutropius says likewise, *Miratus callide fuit, sagax praeterea et admodum subtilis ingenio, et qui severitatem suam aliena invidia vellet explere.* Eutrop. ix. c. 26.--G.----The manner in which the coarse and

unfriendly pencil of the author of the *Treatise de Mort. Pers.* has drawn the character of Diocletian, seems inconsistent with this profound subtilty. Many readers will perhaps agree with Gibbon.--M.]

[Footnote 148: The only circumstance which we can discover, is the devotion and jealousy of the mother of Galerius. She is described by Lactantius, as *Deorum montium cultrix; mulier admodum superstitiosa*. She had a great influence over her son, and was offended by the disregard of some of her Christian servants. * Note: This disregard consisted in the Christians fasting and praying instead of participating in the banquets and sacrifices which she celebrated with the Pagans. *Dapibus sacrificabat poene quotidie ac vicariis suis epulis exhibebat. Christiani abstinebant, et illa cum gentibus epulante, jejuniis hi et orationibus insisteban; hinc concepit odium* Lact de Hist. Pers. c. 11.--G.]

The pleasure of the emperors was at length signified to the Christians, who, during the course of this melancholy winter, had expected, with anxiety, the result of so many secret consultations. The twenty-third of February, which coincided with the Roman festival of the Terminalia, [149] was appointed (whether from accident or design) to set bounds to the progress of Christianity. At the earliest dawn of day, the Praetorian praefect, [150] accompanied by several generals, tribunes, and officers of the revenue, repaired to the principal church of Nicomedia, which was situated on an eminence in the most populous and beautiful part of the city. The doors were instantly broke open; they

rushed into the sanctuary; and as they searched in vain for some visible object of worship, they were obliged to content themselves with committing to the flames the volumes of the holy Scripture. The ministers of Diocletian were followed by a numerous body of guards and pioneers, who marched in order of battle, and were provided with all the instruments used in the destruction of fortified cities. By their incessant labor, a sacred edifice, which towered above the Imperial palace, and had long excited the indignation and envy of the Gentiles, was in a few hours levelled with the ground. [151]

[Footnote 149: The worship and festival of the god Terminus are elegantly illustrated by M. de Boze, Mem. de l'Academie des Inscriptions, tom. i. p. 50.]

[Footnote 150: In our only MS. of Lactantius, we read profectus; but reason, and the authority of all the critics, allow us, instead of that word, which destroys the sense of the passage, to substitute proefectus.]

[Footnote 151: Lactantius, de M. P. c. 12, gives a very lively picture of the destruction of the church.]

The next day the general edict of persecution was published; [152] and though Diocletian, still averse to the effusion of blood, had moderated the fury of Galerius, who proposed, that every one refusing to offer sacrifice should immediately be burnt alive, the penalties inflicted on

the obstinacy of the Christians might be deemed sufficiently rigorous and effectual. It was enacted, that their churches, in all the provinces of the empire, should be demolished to their foundations; and the punishment of death was denounced against all who should presume to hold any secret assemblies for the purpose of religious worship. The philosophers, who now assumed the unworthy office of directing the blind zeal of persecution, had diligently studied the nature and genius of the Christian religion; and as they were not ignorant that the speculative doctrines of the faith were supposed to be contained in the writings of the prophets, of the evangelists, and of the apostles, they most probably suggested the order, that the bishops and presbyters should deliver all their sacred books into the hands of the magistrates; who were commanded, under the severest penalties, to burn them in a public and solemn manner. By the same edict, the property of the church was at once confiscated; and the several parts of which it might consist were either sold to the highest bidder, united to the Imperial domain, bestowed on the cities and corporations, or granted to the solicitations of rapacious courtiers. After taking such effectual measures to abolish the worship, and to dissolve the government of the Christians, it was thought necessary to subject to the most intolerable hardships the condition of those perverse individuals who should still reject the religion of nature, of Rome, and of their ancestors. Persons of a liberal birth were declared incapable of holding any honors or employments; slaves were forever deprived of the hopes of freedom, and the whole body of the people were put out of the protection of the law. The judges were authorized to hear and to determine every action that

was brought against a Christian. But the Christians were not permitted to complain of any injury which they themselves had suffered; and thus those unfortunate sectaries were exposed to the severity, while they were excluded from the benefits, of public justice. This new species of martyrdom, so painful and lingering, so obscure and ignominious, was, perhaps, the most proper to weary the constancy of the faithful: nor can it be doubted that the passions and interest of mankind were disposed on this occasion to second the designs of the emperors. But the policy of a well-ordered government must sometimes have interposed in behalf of the oppressed Christians; [152a] nor was it possible for the Roman princes entirely to remove the apprehension of punishment, or to connive at every act of fraud and violence, without exposing their own authority and the rest of their subjects to the most alarming dangers. [153]

[Footnote 152: Mosheim, (p. 922--926,) from man scattered passages of Lactantius and Eusebius, has collected a very just and accurate notion of this edict though he sometimes deviates into conjecture and refinement.]

[Footnote 152a: This wants proof. The edict of Diocletian was executed in all its right during the rest of his reign. Euseb. Hist. Eccl. 1 viii. c. 13.--G.]

[Footnote 153: Many ages afterwards, Edward J. practised, with great success, the same mode of persecution against the clergy of England. See Hume's History of England, vol. ii. p. 300, last 4to edition.]

This edict was scarcely exhibited to the public view, in the most conspicuous place of Nicomedia, before it was torn down by the hands of a Christian, who expressed at the same time, by the bitterest invectives, his contempt as well as abhorrence for such impious and tyrannical governors. His offence, according to the mildest laws, amounted to treason, and deserved death. And if it be true that he was a person of rank and education, those circumstances could serve only to aggravate his guilt. He was burnt, or rather roasted, by a slow fire; and his executioners, zealous to revenge the personal insult which had been offered to the emperors, exhausted every refinement of cruelty, without being able to subdue his patience, or to alter the steady and insulting smile which in his dying agonies he still preserved in his countenance. The Christians, though they confessed that his conduct had not been strictly conformable to the laws of prudence, admired the divine fervor of his zeal; and the excessive commendations which they lavished on the memory of their hero and martyr, contributed to fix a deep impression of terror and hatred in the mind of Diocletian. [154]

[Footnote 154: Lactantius only calls him *quidam*, *et si non recte*, *magno tamen animo*, &c., c. 12. Eusebius (l. viii. c. 5) adorns him with secular honours. Neither have condescended to mention his name; but the Greeks celebrate his memory under that of John. See Tillemont, *Mémoires Ecclesiastiques*, tom. v. part ii. p. 320.]

His fears were soon alarmed by the view of a danger from which he very

narrowly escaped. Within fifteen days the palace of Nicomedia, and even the bed-chamber of Diocletian, were twice in flames; and though both times they were extinguished without any material damage, the singular repetition of the fire was justly considered as an evident proof that it had not been the effect of chance or negligence. The suspicion naturally fell on the Christians; and it was suggested, with some degree of probability, that those desperate fanatics, provoked by their present sufferings, and apprehensive of impending calamities, had entered into a conspiracy with their faithful brethren, the eunuchs of the palace, against the lives of two emperors, whom they detested as the irreconcilable enemies of the church of God.

Jealousy and resentment prevailed in every breast, but especially in that of Diocletian. A great number of persons, distinguished either by the offices which they had filled, or by the favor which they had enjoyed, were thrown into prison. Every mode of torture was put in practice, and the court, as well as city, was polluted with many bloody executions. [155] But as it was found impossible to extort any discovery of this mysterious transaction, it seems incumbent on us either to presume the innocence, or to admire the resolution, of the sufferers. A few days afterwards Galerius hastily withdrew himself from Nicomedia, declaring, that if he delayed his departure from that devoted palace, he should fall a sacrifice to the rage of the Christians.

The ecclesiastical historians, from whom alone we derive a partial and imperfect knowledge of this persecution, are at a loss how to account

for the fears and dangers of the emperors. Two of these writers, a prince and a rhetorician, were eye-witnesses of the fire of Nicomedia. The one ascribes it to lightning, and the divine wrath; the other affirms, that it was kindled by the malice of Galerius himself. [156]

[Footnote 155: Lactantius de M. P. c. 13, 14. Potentissimi quondam Eunuchi necati, per quos Palatium et ipse constabat. Eusebius (l. viii. c. 6) mentions the cruel executions of the eunuchs, Gorgonius and Dorotheus, and of Anthimius, bishop of Nicomedia; and both those writers describe, in a vague but tragical manner, the horrid scenes which were acted even in the Imperial presence.]

[Footnote 156: See Lactantius, Eusebius, and Constantine, ad Coetum Sanctorum, c. xxv. Eusebius confesses his ignorance of the cause of this fire. Note: As the history of these times affords us no example of any attempts made by the Christians against their persecutors, we have no reason, not the slightest probability, to attribute to them the fire in the palace; and the authority of Constantine and Lactantius remains to explain it. M. de Tillemont has shown how they can be reconciled. Hist. des Empereurs, Vie de Diocletian, xix.--G. Had it been done by a Christian, it would probably have been a fanatic, who would have avowed and gloried in it. Tillemont's supposition that the fire was first caused by lightning, and fed and increased by the malice of Galerius, seems singularly improbable.--M.]

As the edict against the Christians was designed for a general law of

the whole empire, and as Diocletian and Galerius, though they might not wait for the consent, were assured of the concurrence, of the Western princes, it would appear more consonant to our ideas of policy, that the governors of all the provinces should have received secret instructions to publish, on one and the same day, this declaration of war within their respective departments. It was at least to be expected, that the convenience of the public highways and established posts would have enabled the emperors to transmit their orders with the utmost despatch from the palace of Nicomedia to the extremities of the Roman world; and that they would not have suffered fifty days to elapse, before the edict was published in Syria, and near four months before it was signified to the cities of Africa. [157]

This delay may perhaps be imputed to the cautious temper of Diocletian, who had yielded a reluctant consent to the measures of persecution, and who was desirous of trying the experiment under his more immediate eye, before he gave way to the disorders and discontent which it must inevitably occasion in the distant provinces. At first, indeed, the magistrates were restrained from the effusion of blood; but the use of every other severity was permitted, and even recommended to their zeal; nor could the Christians, though they cheerfully resigned the ornaments of their churches, resolve to interrupt their religious assemblies, or to deliver their sacred books to the flames. The pious obstinacy of Felix, an African bishop, appears to have embarrassed the subordinate ministers of the government. The curator of his city sent him in chains to the proconsul. The proconsul transmitted him to the Praetorian

praefect of Italy; and Felix, who disdained even to give an evasive answer, was at length beheaded at Venusia, in Lucania, a place on which the birth of Horace has conferred fame. [158] This precedent, and perhaps some Imperial rescript, which was issued in consequence of it, appeared to authorize the governors of provinces, in punishing with death the refusal of the Christians to deliver up their sacred books. There were undoubtedly many persons who embraced this opportunity of obtaining the crown of martyrdom; but there were likewise too many who purchased an ignominious life, by discovering and betraying the holy Scripture into the hands of infidels. A great number even of bishops and presbyters acquired, by this criminal compliance, the opprobrious epithet of Traditors; and their offence was productive of much present scandal and of much future discord in the African church. [159]

[Footnote 157: Tillemont, *Memoires Ecclesiast.* tom. v. part i. p. 43.]

[Footnote 158: See the *Acta Sincera* of Ruinart, p. 353; those of Felix of Thibara, or Tibiur, appear much less corrupted than in the other editions, which afford a lively specimen of legendary license.]

[Footnote 159: See the first book of Optatus of Milevis against the Donatiste, Paris, 1700, edit. Dupin. He lived under the reign of Valens.]

The copies as well as the versions of Scripture, were already so multiplied in the empire, that the most severe inquisition could no

longer be attended with any fatal consequences; and even the sacrifice of those volumes, which, in every congregation, were preserved for public use, required the consent of some treacherous and unworthy Christians. But the ruin of the churches was easily effected by the authority of the government, and by the labor of the Pagans. In some provinces, however, the magistrates contented themselves with shutting up the places of religious worship. In others, they more literally complied with the terms of the edict; and after taking away the doors, the benches, and the pulpit, which they burnt as it were in a funeral pile, they completely demolished the remainder of the edifice. [160]

It is perhaps to this melancholy occasion that we should apply a very remarkable story, which is related with so many circumstances of variety and improbability, that it serves rather to excite than to satisfy our curiosity. In a small town in Phrygia, of whose names as well as situation we are left ignorant, it should seem that the magistrates and the body of the people had embraced the Christian faith; and as some resistance might be apprehended to the execution of the edict, the governor of the province was supported by a numerous detachment of legionaries. On their approach the citizens threw themselves into the church, with the resolution either of defending by arms that sacred edifice, or of perishing in its ruins. They indignantly rejected the notice and permission which was given them to retire, till the soldiers, provoked by their obstinate refusal, set fire to the building on all sides, and consumed, by this extraordinary kind of martyrdom, a great number of Phrygians, with their wives and children. [161]

[Footnote 160: The ancient monuments, published at the end of Optatus, p. 261, &c. describe, in a very circumstantial manner, the proceedings of the governors in the destruction of churches. They made a minute inventory of the plate, &c., which they found in them. That of the church of Cirta, in Numidia, is still extant. It consisted of two chalices of gold, and six of silver; six urns, one kettle, seven lamps, all likewise of silver; besides a large quantity of brass utensils, and wearing apparel.]

[Footnote 161: Lactantius (Institut. Divin. v. 11) confines the calamity to the conventiculum, with its congregation. Eusebius (viii. 11) extends it to a whole city, and introduces something very like a regular siege. His ancient Latin translator, Rufinus, adds the important circumstance of the permission given to the inhabitants of retiring from thence. As Phrygia reached to the confines of Isauria, it is possible that the restless temper of those independent barbarians may have contributed to this misfortune. Note: Universum populum. Lact. Inst. Div. v. 11.--G.]

Some slight disturbances, though they were suppressed almost as soon as excited, in Syria and the frontiers of Armenia, afforded the enemies of the church a very plausible occasion to insinuate, that those troubles had been secretly fomented by the intrigues of the bishops, who had already forgotten their ostentatious professions of passive and unlimited obedience. [162]

The resentment, or the fears, of Diocletian, at length transported him

beyond the bounds of moderation, which he had hitherto preserved, and he declared, in a series of cruel edicts, [162a] his intention of abolishing the Christian name. By the first of these edicts, the governors of the provinces were directed to apprehend all persons of the ecclesiastical order; and the prisons, destined for the vilest criminals, were soon filled with a multitude of bishops, presbyters, deacons, readers, and exorcists. By a second edict, the magistrates were commanded to employ every method of severity, which might reclaim them from their odious superstition, and oblige them to return to the established worship of the gods. This rigorous order was extended, by a subsequent edict, to the whole body of Christians, who were exposed to a violent and general persecution. [163]

Instead of those salutary restraints, which had required the direct and solemn testimony of an accuser, it became the duty as well as the interest of the Imperial officers to discover, to pursue, and to torment the most obnoxious among the faithful. Heavy penalties were denounced against all who should presume to save a prescribed sectary from the just indignation of the gods, and of the emperors. Yet, notwithstanding the severity of this law, the virtuous courage of many of the Pagans, in concealing their friends or relations, affords an honorable proof, that the rage of superstition had not extinguished in their minds the sentiments of nature and humanity. [164]

[Footnote 162: Eusebius, l. viii. c. 6. M. de Valois (with some probability) thinks that he has discovered the Syrian rebellion in

an oration of Libanius; and that it was a rash attempt of the tribune Eugenius, who with only five hundred men seized Antioch, and might perhaps allure the Christians by the promise of religious toleration. From Eusebius, (l. ix. c. 8,) as well as from Moses of Chorene, (Hist. Armen. l. ii. 77, &c.) it may be inferred, that Christianity was already introduced into Armenia.]

[Footnote 162a: He had already passed them in his first edict. It does not appear that resentment or fear had any share in the new persecutions: perhaps they originated in superstition, and a specious apparent respect for its ministers. The oracle of Apollo, consulted by Diocletian, gave no answer; and said that just men hindered it from speaking. Constantine, who assisted at the ceremony, affirms, with an oath, that when questioned about these men, the high priest named the Christians. "The Emperor eagerly seized on this answer; and drew against the innocent a sword, destined only to punish the guilty: he instantly issued edicts, written, if I may use the expression, with a poniard; and ordered the judges to employ all their skill to invent new modes of punishment. Euseb. Vit Constant. l. ii c 54."--G.]

[Footnote 163: See Mosheim, p. 938: the text of Eusebius very plainly shows that the governors, whose powers were enlarged, not restrained, by the new laws, could punish with death the most obstinate Christians as an example to their brethren.]

[Footnote 164: Athanasius, p. 833, ap. Tillemont, Mem. Ecclesiast. tom v

part i. 90.]