

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

The vague descriptions of exile and imprisonment, of pain and torture, are so easily exaggerated or softened by the pencil of an artful orator, [181a] that we are naturally induced to inquire into a fact of a more distinct and stubborn kind; the number of persons who suffered death in consequence of the edicts published by Diocletian, his associates, and his successors. The recent legendaries record whole armies and cities, which were at once swept away by the undistinguishing rage of persecution. The more ancient writers content themselves with pouring out a liberal effusion of loose and tragical invectives, without condescending to ascertain the precise number of those persons who were permitted to seal with their blood their belief of the gospel. From the history of Eusebius, it may, however, be collected, that only nine bishops were punished with death; and we are assured, by his particular enumeration of the martyrs of Palestine, that no more than ninety-two Christians were entitled to that honorable appellation. [182] [182a] As we are unacquainted with the degree of episcopal zeal and courage which prevailed at that time, it is not in our power to draw any useful inferences from the former of these facts: but the latter may serve to justify a very important and probable conclusion. According to the distribution of Roman provinces, Palestine may be considered as the sixteenth part of the Eastern empire: [183] and since there were some governors, who from a real or affected clemency had preserved their hands unstained with the blood of the faithful, [184] it is reasonable

to believe, that the country which had given birth to Christianity, produced at least the sixteenth part of the martyrs who suffered death within the dominions of Galerius and Maximin; the whole might consequently amount to about fifteen hundred, a number which, if it is equally divided between the ten years of the persecution, will allow an annual consumption of one hundred and fifty martyrs. Allotting the same proportion to the provinces of Italy, Africa, and perhaps Spain, where, at the end of two or three years, the rigor of the penal laws was either suspended or abolished, the multitude of Christians in the Roman empire, on whom a capital punishment was inflicted by a judicium, sentence, will be reduced to somewhat less than two thousand persons. Since it cannot be doubted that the Christians were more numerous, and their enemies more exasperated, in the time of Diocletian, than they had ever been in any former persecution, this probable and moderate computation may teach us to estimate the number of primitive saints and martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the important purpose of introducing Christianity into the world.

[Footnote 181a: Perhaps there never was an instance of an author committing so deliberately the fault which he reprobates so strongly in others. What is the dexterous management of the more inartificial historians of Christianity, in exaggerating the numbers of the martyrs, compared to the unfair address with which Gibbon here quietly dismisses from the account all the horrible and excruciating tortures which fell short of death? The reader may refer to the xiith chapter (book viii.) of Eusebius for the description and for the scenes of these

tortures.--M.]

[Footnote 182: Eusebius de Martyr. Palestin. c. 13. He closes his narration by assuring us that these were the martyrdoms inflicted in Palestine, during the whole course of the persecution. The 9th chapter of his viiiith book, which relates to the province of Thebais in Egypt, may seem to contradict our moderate computation; but it will only lead us to admire the artful management of the historian. Choosing for the scene of the most exquisite cruelty the most remote and sequestered country of the Roman empire, he relates that in Thebais from ten to one hundred persons had frequently suffered martyrdom in the same day. But when he proceeds to mention his own journey into Egypt, his language insensibly becomes more cautious and moderate. Instead of a large, but definite number, he speaks of many Christians, and most artfully selects two ambiguous words, which may signify either what he had seen, or what he had heard; either the expectation, or the execution of the punishment. Having thus provided a secure evasion, he commits the equivocal passage to his readers and translators; justly conceiving that their piety would induce them to prefer the most favorable sense. There was perhaps some malice in the remark of Theodorus Metochita, that all who, like Eusebius, had been conversant with the Egyptians, delighted in an obscure and intricate style. (See Valesius ad loc.)]

[Footnote 182a: This calculation is made from the martyrs, of whom Eusebius speaks by name; but he recognizes a much greater number. Thus the ninth and tenth chapters of his work are entitled, "Of

Antoninus, Zebinus, Germanus, and other martyrs; of Peter the monk. of Asclepius the Maroionite, and other martyrs." [Are these vague contents of chapters very good authority?--M.] Speaking of those who suffered under Diocletian, he says, "I will only relate the death of one of these, from which, the reader may divine what befell the rest." Hist. Eccl. viii. 6. [This relates only to the martyrs in the royal household.--M.] Dodwell had made, before Gibbon, this calculation and these objections; but Ruinart (Act. Mart. Pref p. 27, et seq.) has answered him in a peremptory manner: Nobis constat Eusebium in historia infinitos passim martyres admisisse. quamvis revera paucorum nomina recensuerit. Nec alium Eusebii interpretem quam ipsummet Eusebium proferimus, qui (l. iii. c. 33) ait sub Trajano plurimosa ex fidelibus martyrii certamen subiisse (l. v. init.) sub Antonino et Vero innumerabiles prope martyres per universum orbem enituisse affirmat. (L. vi. c. 1.) Severum persecutionem concitasse refert, in qua per omnes ubique locorum Ecclesias, ab athleticis pro pietate certantibus, illustria confecta fuerunt martyria. Sic de Decii, sic de Valeriani, persecutionibus loquitur, quae an Dodwelli faveant conjectionibus judicet aequus lector. Even in the persecutions which Gibbon has represented as much more mild than that of Diocletian, the number of martyrs appears much greater than that to which he limits the martyrs of the latter: and this number is attested by incontestable monuments. I will quote but one example. We find among the letters of St. Cyprian one from Lucianus to Celerinus, written from the depth of a prison, in which Lucianus names seventeen of his brethren dead, some in the quarries, some in the midst of tortures some of starvation in prison. Jussi sumus

(he proceeds) secundum praeceptum imperatoris, fame et siti necari, et reclusi sumus in duabus cellis, tam ut nos afficerent fame et siti et ignis vapore.--G.]

[Footnote 183: When Palestine was divided into three, the praefecture of the East contained forty-eight provinces. As the ancient distinctions of nations were long since abolished, the Romans distributed the provinces according to a general proportion of their extent and opulence.]

[Footnote 184: Ut gloriari possint nullam se innocentium premisse, nam et ipse audivi aliquos gloriantes, quia administratio sua, in hac parte meriti incruenta. Lactant. Institut. Divin v. 11.]

We shall conclude this chapter by a melancholy truth, which obtrudes itself on the reluctant mind; that even admitting, without hesitation or inquiry, all that history has recorded, or devotion has feigned, on the subject of martyrdoms, it must still be acknowledged, that the Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other, than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels. During the ages of ignorance which followed the subversion of the Roman empire in the West, the bishops of the Imperial city extended their dominion over the laity as well as clergy of the Latin church. The fabric of superstition which they had erected, and which might long have defied the feeble efforts of reason, was at length assaulted by a crowd of daring fanatics, who from the twelfth to the sixteenth century assumed the popular character of reformers. The church

of Rome defended by violence the empire which she had acquired by fraud; a system of peace and benevolence was soon disgraced by proscriptions, war, massacres, and the institution of the holy office. And as the reformers were animated by the love of civil as well as of religious freedom, the Catholic princes connected their own interest with that of the clergy, and enforced by fire and the sword the terrors of spiritual censures. In the Netherlands alone, more than one hundred thousand of the subjects of Charles V. are said to have suffered by the hand of the executioner; and this extraordinary number is attested by Grotius, [185] a man of genius and learning, who preserved his moderation amidst the fury of contending sects, and who composed the annals of his own age and country, at a time when the invention of printing had facilitated the means of intelligence, and increased the danger of detection.

If we are obliged to submit our belief to the authority of Grotius, it must be allowed, that the number of Protestants, who were executed in a single province and a single reign, far exceeded that of the primitive martyrs in the space of three centuries, and of the Roman empire. But if the improbability of the fact itself should prevail over the weight of evidence; if Grotius should be convicted of exaggerating the merit and sufferings of the Reformers; [186] we shall be naturally led to inquire what confidence can be placed in the doubtful and imperfect monuments of ancient credulity; what degree of credit can be assigned to a courtly bishop, and a passionate declaimer, [186a] who, under the protection of Constantine, enjoyed the exclusive privilege of recording the persecutions inflicted on the Christians by the vanquished rivals or

disregarded predecessors of their gracious sovereign.

[Footnote 185: Grot. *Annal. de Rebus Belgicis*, l. i. p. 12, edit. fol.]

[Footnote 186: Fra Paola (*Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, l. iii.)

reduces the number of the Belgic martyrs to 50,000. In learning and moderation Fra Paola was not inferior to Grotius. The priority of time gives some advantage to the evidence of the former, which he loses, on the other hand, by the distance of Venice from the Netherlands.]

[Footnote 186a: Eusebius and the author of the *Treatise de Mortibus Persecutorum*. It is deeply to be regretted that the history of this period rest so much on the loose and, it must be admitted, by no means scrupulous authority of Eusebius. Ecclesiastical history is a solemn and melancholy lesson that the best, even the most sacred, cause will eventually the least departure from truth!--M.]