

DIONYSIUS THE GREAT

The fourteenth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (247-264), whose letters dealt with the major religious issues of the time. Dionysius was born at an unknown date, probably in the last decade of the second century. The son of a wealthy pagan family, he was converted to Christianity at a mature age through the reading of an epistle of Paul. The story of his conversion is detailed in the HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS (Vol. 1, Pt. 1, pp. 175ff.) under HERACLAS, who was then still at the head of the CATECHETICAL SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA. His repudiation of the old pagan gods led to a breach with his family and the loss of his parents' great wealth.

After his acceptance of the gospel he went directly to Bishop DEMETRIUS I, who baptized him. Then he enrolled in the Catechetical School, where he completed his theological education under ORIGEN and Heraclas, whom he eventually replaced in the presidency of the school after the elevation of Heraclas to the throne of Saint Mark in 231. He became presbyter in 233, and, in his turn, was elected to the episcopate after the death of Heraclas (*Historia ecclesiastica* 6.35). At this time he appears to have been a man of some age. He remained as patriarch until his death in 264. His episcopate coincided with the reigns of [emperors](#) Philippus (244-249), DECIUS (249-251), Gallus (251-253), VALERIANUS (253-260), and Gallienus (260-268).

The years of his episcopate were full of troubles and persecutions, which are eloquently described in his letters and literary remains. In the year of his succession, riots broke out in Alexandria, during which the pagan population attacked the Christians and pillaged their homes. Soon after the riots were quieted, the relatively mild reign of Philippus was replaced by that of Decius, who inaugurated one of the most ferocious waves of Christian persecutions.

The prefect of Alexandria, Sabinus, at once set out to arrest the patriarch,

whom he pursued everywhere except in his house, from which he did not stir. Finally, after four days, the patriarch decided to flee from the city together with a group of Christian companions.

But they were arrested and brought back to Taposiris (*History of the Patriarchs*, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, p. 179).

In the meantime, Timotheus, the patriarch's pupil, managed to escape and came across a peasant on his way to a wedding party, to whom he recounted the story of the patriarch's arrest. The peasant and the wedding party then stormed the police quarters, making a lot of noise and shouting, whereupon the frightened soldiers took flight, and the group entered the place where the patriarch was resting in a linen shirt. He thought they were brigands and offered them his cloak, which was all that he possessed.

They beckoned him to rise and follow them. At first he resisted and offered them his head if they meant to kill him. On the contrary, they meant to save him. So they carried him hand and foot, placed him on a bare-backed donkey, and went away with him to a peaceful spot in the Libyan Desert, where he stayed until the persecutions abated. This dramatic tale was told by Dionysius in his letters, and he named as witnesses Gaius, Faustus, Petrus, and Paulus (*Historia ecclesiastica* 6.40. 179-80).

In an epistle to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, Dionysius recounted specific incidents depicting the horrible tortures to which the faithful were subjected at Alexandria during the persecutions of Decius. An elderly person by the name of Metras, who refused to obey his captors and worship their idols, was beaten, and his face and eyes were poked with sharp styli. He was dragged outside the city and stoned to death. A Christian woman by the name of Quinta was taken to a temple and ordered to pay homage to an idol. When she refused, they dragged her on the cobbled streets of the metropolis, beat her body against millstones,

flogged her, and took her to the same place as Metras outside the city, where they stoned her to death.

The houses of the faithful were plundered and their precious contents were ruined and set ablaze. The streets were strewn with broken articles and looked like a battleground. A certain Paul of Alexandria was murdered and received the martyr's crown with joy. Others followed willingly. Only a few recanted to escape a fearful fate. An aged virgin by the name of Apollonia had her bones fractured, her teeth broken, and was threatened with burning in a blazing fire. She responded by praying, and then zealously jumped into the fire and was burned alive. A man by the name of Serapion was arrested and tortured, his bones broken, and he was finally thrown from the top of a high building into the street.

All those who refused to render homage to the idols were systematically dragged, tortured, and burned alive. All this went on incessantly, day and night, without respite. A certain Julianus, who was old, arthritic, and unable to stand on his feet or walk, was taken with two Christians for torture. One of the two men recanted to escape the agony of torture and was spared. The other, named Cronin, remained in the faith. He and Julianus, with much reviling and beating, were carried on two camels through the city. In the end both were thrown into the blazing fire outside Alexandria, within sight of the populace. A military bystander who chided the mob for their behavior was seized, tried, and decapitated. A Libyan by the name of Macarius was also burned alive.

A certain [Epimachus](#) and Alexander, who remained long in chains, were tortured by severe flogging and had their skin scraped by a sharp implement before they were thrown into the fire. Four women, including a chaste virgin by the name of Ammonarium, were tried before the prefect and severely tortured. A very famous old woman by the name of Mercuria, and another called Dionysia, who was a mother of numerous children and who defied the prefect and refused to bow to the idols, were all put to the [sword](#) and died, along with others. A company of three men

and a youngster by the name of Dioscorus were tried. The men were killed, while the prefect tried to lure the boy and set him free in anticipation of getting him to recant. The boy did not recant, but simply awaited his turn for torture. An old man by the name of Theophilus, who stood trembling before the court, was almost frightened into lapsing, just as a group of legionaries named Ammon, Zenon, Ptolemy, and Anginus stormed the court shouting that they were Christians.

The prefect was taken by surprise and fled from what looked like imminent danger, while the captives in court were saved. Numerous Christians were cut to pieces by infuriated pagans in the cities and the villages. One such was Iskhiron, who worked for a pagan [governor](#) and refused to bow to the idols and was instantly killed by his master. Many Christians fled to the wilderness and either perished from hunger and thirst or were taken captive by the fierce nomads.

Finally, the dawn of a new era of peace began to break, and those who had lapsed for fear of torture and death started returning to the fold of the faithful. Consequently, the church faced the problem of the returned [apostates](#) and their acceptance back in the fold. Some zealots in Carthage, Rome, and Antioch hardened toward their acceptance, but Dionysius took the lead in a position of clemency toward all who repented and wished to return to their mother church. To this effect, he enjoined all his bishops and presbyters to welcome them. Furthermore, he circulated epistles to all the other bishops outside Egypt including Rome, requesting “the reception of those who had apostatized during the persecution of Decius.” In the end, his eloquent appeal prevailed over his brother bishops, and harmony reigned again in the church.

Contingent with the readmission of [apostates](#) was the problem of their rebaptism. Here again, Dionysius played a [prominent](#) role, in which he was supported by Stephen, bishop of Rome. In his epistles he professed moderation and self-restraint with all heretics and apostates; in other words he opposed the idea of rebaptism, and his views seem to have been

accepted by other bishops in spite of the obscurity of the *History of the Patriarchs* on this matter.

As soon as these controversies were settled and the peace of the church was reestablished, the atmosphere again became clouded by a new edict of persecution issued by Valerianus. This time, Dionysius was summoned by the prefect Aemelian for trial. He came with a number of clergy, and though some of his ardent companions perished in that encounter, Dionysius himself was only banished to a pagan district called Kefro in the Libyan Desert, where he succeeded in gaining converts. Later he was removed from Kefro to Collouthion in the district of Mareotis near Alexandria, and ultimately he made his escape to the metropolis.

Throughout the period, which was beset with immense hardships, Dionysius managed to save himself from martyrdom. This was counted against him by a certain Bishop Germanus, and Dionysius was constrained to come to his own defense in an epistle where he recounted the details of his arrest, trial, and exile, ultimately leading to his liberation and return to Alexandria at a moment when Valerianus was distracted by a barbarian invasion of the empire.

With the accession of Gallienus to the imperial throne, the church regained a breathing space. Paradoxically, the peace was reinforced by an outbreak of the plague, during which the pagan population was distracted from harassing the Christians. In fact, the Christians rendered a positive service to their enemies by helping to bury their dead and by comforting the sick. Furthermore, Gallienus issued orders for the return of churches and ecclesiastical properties to the bishops, who were then left to worship their own [God](#) undisturbed. At this point, the patriarch was advancing in years, and his health was failing under the weight of unremitting hardships. His episcopate was drawing to an end.

Nevertheless, he continued to handle church crises in [writing](#) by the issuance of his epistles, whereby he tried to solve all problems, both

national and international. Perhaps the most difficult problem he had to face was the scandalous affair of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, whose shadowy life was coupled with serious theological errors. A [council](#) at Antioch was convened by some seventy bishops, including those of Caesarea, Neocaesarea, Jerusalem, Tarsus, Pontus, Iconium, and Bostra, to consider the situation. The convened bishops wrote, inviting the participation of Dionysius. But the bishop of Alexandria was too old and too weak to appear in person, and consequently, he wrote to the council giving his views on the situation, which ended with Paul's deposition from the bishopric of Antioch.

Throughout his episcopate, Dionysius continued to sponsor the Catechetical School, where he had previously studied under Origen and over which he had presided after Heraclas. His successor as head of the school was Theognostus, who is known to have written a treatise entitled *Hypotyposesis* in seven books, a kind of dogmatic summa, with an elegant style and Origenist leanings. This work is unfortunately lost, except for a fragment of the second book discovered in the 1980s in a fourteenth-century manuscript at Venice. On the other hand, the most brilliant literary work surviving from that age belongs to Dionysius himself. In spite of his immense trials and heavy burdens, he was able to devote some of his time and energy to religious [writing](#) and theological controversies, mainly as part of his pastoral duties. This is revealed in a number of examples.

The spread of the heresy of SABELLIANISM in the Pentapolis, which he regarded as part of his diocese, called for his attention. Sabellius, a presbyter of Ptolemais, maintained that godhead was revealed in three functions and not three persons. Dionysius immediately wrote an epistle to refute this heretical teaching (*Historia ecclesiastica* 7.6). Another instance nearer home occurred under Nepos, bishop of Arsinoë, who wrote a book entitled *The Refutation of Allegorists* that gained tremendous popularity among the citizens and villagers of his see, who regarded it almost as a Gospel.

The book maintained that the statements in the book of Revelation were not allegorical. Dionysius became uneasy about the movement, which began to assume the shape of a schismatic sect. Consequently, he decided to go to Arsinoe himself to discuss the text with the priests and their congregations in an attempt to rectify the situation. For three days and three nights, he continued the [discussion](#) and was able to win the faithful back to his side; even Korakion, the leader of the group called Millenarians, ended by repudiating these errors. Out of these encounters, Dionysius later registered his thoughts in a treatise entitled “On the Promises.” This led him to discuss the authorship of Revelation, in which he maintained that the book was written by another John, not the evangelist.

The literary genius of Dionysius is best represented in his epistles sent to [councils](#) and the bishops of [Christendom](#) on important matters emerging in his lifetime. EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA has enumerated and summarized most of them in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. These epistles are historical documents of great importance in the ecclesiastical history of the third century. There is hardly a major movement in that age that does not figure in their texts. From the refutation of heresies to such burning questions as the PASCHAL CONTROVERSY, all were treated with great authority and theological objectivity.

There is hardly a [contemporary](#) bishop with whom Dionysius did not correspond. The epistles exchanged with the bishop of Rome reveal that he was [writing](#) to a peer and that Alexandria was not under the authority of Rome, nor did Rome assert any claims of superiority over Alexandria. His epistle to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, on the Alexandrian martyrs in the persecution of Decius is a masterpiece of historical recording.

Dionysius’ vast knowledge of Greek philosophy is demonstrated in a letter “On Nature” addressed to a spiritual son by the name of Timothy. Here he sets out to prove the order of the creation by divine providence against the Epicurean materialistic explanation of the universe and the atomistic

discussions of Democritus.

Another work ascribed to Dionysius by Eusebius is entitled *Refutation and Apology*. This was addressed to his namesake of Rome in four books, in which he dealt with the trinitarian doctrine. He sought to prove that the Son coexisted with the Father for all eternity just like the sun and the day, whose coexistence was also eternal and inseparable. Another work, *On Temptations*, addressed to a certain Euphranus, is known to have existed but is now lost. His *Letters*, most of which have been quoted by Eusebius, are considered masterly works of religious writing, and serve as basic historical documents of the age of persecutions. One letter was addressed to Novatian the antipope, trying to conciliate him and avoid schism.

Another letter, addressed to Basilides, bishop of the Pentapolis, answers his questions about the duration of Lent and the physical conditions necessary for the reception of the Eucharist. The aforementioned epistle to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, pleaded for leniency on behalf of the [apostates](#) who were victims of torture during the persecutions. Dionysius is possibly the first bishop to issue pastoral epistles to all the churches exhorting the faithful to observe the Lenten and Easter dates carefully. His epistle to Glavius, Domitius, and Didymas set forth a [canon](#) based on a cycle of eight years, with the Paschal celebration occurring at any time other than after the vernal equinox. In this way, he assumed a leading role in the Christian world of his day.

Dionysius is most highly revered in the Coptic church, and he is annually commemorated in the Coptic [SYNAXARION](#) on 13 Baramudah. He is recognized as one of the principal fathers of the whole church, and he is universally acclaimed as “Dionysius the Great.”

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