

MARTYRDOM

The voluntary submission to [death](#) for the sake of one's faith. The term "martyr" originally signified one who possessed firsthand knowledge of a matter to which one witnessed in public. In this sense, it was first used to describe the apostles who bore witness for Christ and the Resurrection (Acts 1:8, 22). Later the term came to mean one who professed a certain belief, a confessor. It has now come to stand for one who suffers torture and death in testimony to the [truth](#) of the [gospel](#) of [Jesus Christ](#) rather than recant and live.

The early Christians, in their boundless love for Christ, on the one hand, and their indifference to pain, on the other, made light of physical suffering and did not shrink from martyrdom. This unflinching attitude is best summarized by Tertullian: "Crucify us, torture us, condemn us, destroy us! Your wickedness is the proof of our innocence. . . . The more we are hewn down by you, the more [numerous](#) do we become. The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians" (*Apology* 50.12).

With the rapid spread of Christianity in the various provinces of the Roman empire, Christian values were interpreted as a serious threat to the traditions of a pagan society and to the emperor's authority. Moreover, those who embraced the new religion and refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods or emperors were made scapegoats for any major disasters that occurred.

By the time the age of [persecution](#) came to an end with the issuance of the Edict of Milan in 313 by Constantine the Great and Licinius, the Christians had suffered ten particularly savage outbursts of massacring under the emperors Nero (54-68), Domitian (81-96), Trajan (98-117), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Septimius Severus (193-211), Maximinus (235-238), Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-259), Aurelian (270-275), and Diocletian (284-305).

The [price](#) that the church in Egypt paid during this dark episode in the [history](#) of humanity was very heavy indeed. It has been estimated, though without strict historical substantiation, that the toll reached a million souls, men and women of all walks of life.

It is in the SYNAXARION that the [Coptic church](#) zealously preserves the memory of its sons and daughters who gladly laid down their lives for their mother church (see MARTYRS, COPTIC). Their stories are commemorated through the daily readings that give details of their fortitude and their unshakable adherence to their beliefs. These readings occur at a significant point of the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, immediately before the [Gospel](#) lections, so that the congregation may benefit from the martyrs' witness, which is held up for imitation.

Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, kept a record of these persecutions. The following eyewitness account gives an idea of not only the intense pain inflicted upon the victims but also the jubilant spirit in which they earned their crown of martyrdom:

And we ourselves also beheld, when we were at these places, many all at once in a single day, some of whom suffered decapitation, others the punishment of fire; so that the murderous axe was dulled and, worn out, was broken in pieces, while the executioners themselves grew utterly weary and took it in turns to succeed one another. It was then that we observed a most marvellous eagerness and a truly divine power and zeal in those who had placed their faith in the Christ of God.

Thus, as soon as sentence was given against the first, some from one quarter and others from another would leap up to the tribunal before the judge and confess themselves Christians; paying no heed when faced with terrors and the varied forms of tortures, but undismayedly and boldly speaking of the piety towards the God of the universe, and with joy and laughter and gladness receiving the final sentence of death; so that they sang and sent up hymns and thanksgivings to the God of the universe

even to the very last breath (Eusebius 8.9.4-5)

The memories of the martyrs are held in great [veneration](#) and esteem by the Apostolic Constitutions, which prescribe that “concerning the martyrs, we say to you that they are to be had in all honour with you, as we honour the blessed James the Bishop, and the holy Stephen our fellow-servant. For these are reckoned blessed by God, and are honoured by holy men.”

They are honored by both the church triumphant and the church militant. Saint John the Divine described the distinguished position accorded to them: “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; . . . Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer (Rev. 6:9, 11). They are equally honored by being mentioned in every possible occasion in church services: in psalms, doxologies, and benedictions; in prayers of the Morning Offering of Incense; and in various places of the Divine Liturgy. In all these prayers they are mentioned before the saints and are only preceded by the THEOTOKOS, the heavenly host, and the prophets.

Of special significance, however, is the fact that the Copts used the era of [persecution](#) and martyrdom as the *raison d’être* for establishing a calendar of their own. Taking 284, the first year of the reign of Diocletian, as its starting point, the Coptic Anno Martyrum calendar commemorates two things: a glorious episode in the [history](#) of the [Coptic church](#) and the man who was its archenemy and persecutor.

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