

People and Events that Shaped the Church

Rose Book *of*
**CHRISTIAN
HISTORY**

E. MICHAEL & SHARON RUSTEN

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INTRODUCTION

History is God's story, since "he makes everything work out according to his plan" (Ephesians 1:11). God is the author of history in the most literal sense of the word, and the plan of history that he is in the process of working out is the one that brings maximum glory to him. "For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

The purpose of *Rose Book of Christian History* is to identify and summarize the most significant events in Judeo-Christian history, starting with the era just after the apostles. We chose them in light of the effect they had on the people of that generation and succeeding generations, both good and bad.

Believing that the Jews continue to be God's chosen people and that they, along with the land of Israel, play a significant role in the unfolding of biblical prophecy, we have included the most significant Jewish dates of the last two millennia as well. We have also included significant events in Muslim history that have affected Christians or Jews. Each date is preceded by one or more symbols:

-  indicates a significance to Christian history, although it doesn't necessarily mean the people, institutions, or events described are Christian in and of themselves. Sometimes it can even mean the opposite. However, the event does impact the Christian church, for better or worse.
-  indicates a significance to Jewish history.
-  indicates a significance to Muslim history.

When a date or date range within an entry is preceded by "c." (*circa*), it indicates an approximation of the date. When a date is preceded by "r." (*regnavit*), it indicates the time period that person ruled or reigned in a particular office.

May you come to learn more about the God of history through the unfolding of the events recorded in these pages.

Mike and Sharon Rusten

The POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH

100–312

Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world. It confronted the false ideas of Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism and refuted their lies by appealing to the apostolic writings and to the orthodox bishops who guarded them. At the same time, Christians faced the persecuting power of Rome, and many dared to die heroically as martyrs, inspiring other believers to follow in their train. This seed of martyrs' blood, as the church father Tertullian called it, eventually bore abundant fruit in the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity.

Bruce L. Shelley

Era 1: The Post-Apostolic Church (100–312)

- Chinese invent paper c. 105

👤 **Ignatius of Antioch**, bishop and theologian, is martyred 110

✝️ Persecution under Emperor Trajan 112

- Roman Empire achieves greatest expansion 117

- Ptolemy proposes earth as center of universe 127

✡️ Bar Kokhba Revolt against Emperor Hadrian 132–135



Emperor Trajan

👤 **Marcion** begins false teaching against God's character in Old Testament 144

✝️ Controversy over date of Easter begins 150

👤 **Justin Martyr** defends Christianity against skeptics 150

👤 **Polycarp**, bishop of Smyrna, martyred 155

👤 **Irenaeus** elected bishop of Lyon;
later writes *Against Heresies* 177

👤 **Tertullian** begins to write,
defining and explaining
Christian theological
concepts 196

✡️ Compilation of the
Mishnah complete c. 200

✝️ Persecution under
Emperor Septimius
Severus 202–203

👤 **Origen** begins
writing systematic
theology 205



Ignatius of Antioch



Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna

✝️ Christian Event

✡️ Jewish Event

🌙 Muslim Event

👤 Key Person

Time Span

Gnostic heresy c. 100–200

Marcion heresy c. 140–180

Montanist movement c. 170–220

AD 100

AD 150

AD 200

✝ First church council in Carthage, North Africa 220

✝ Earliest known church built in Dura-Europos, Syria 232

● Germanic Goths begin invading Roman Empire 238



Ruins of ancient church in Dura-Europos, Syria

✝ Mani starts false teaching that will rival Christianity 240

✝ Christian persecution under Emperor Decius 250–251

✝ Council in Carthage on Christians who lapsed under persecution 251

✝ Cyprian writes about equality of bishops 251

● Bantu people expand into southern Africa 260

✝ First of several church councils in Antioch c. 264

👤 **Anthony**, father of monasticism, lives as a hermit 270

● Roman Empire divided into eastern and western administrative regions 285

● Nazca culture flourishes in Peru; Asians settle eastern Polynesia 300s

✝ Baptism of King Tiridates III and conversion of Armenia to Christianity 303

✝ The Great Persecution begins under Emperor Diocletian; thousands of Christians killed 303



Medallion of Emperor Diocletian



Seal of Mani, third century



Anthony the Hermit

Manichaean heresy c. 250–400

110 † Persecution Begins Under Emperor Trajan

Trajan was the son of the Roman governor of Asia and Syria. Proclaimed emperor in 98, he became the most militarily ambitious Roman ruler of all time. The first organized persecution of Christians by the Roman government began about 110 in Asia Minor. There in 112, Governor Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan regarding the “superstition” of Christianity that was spreading both in cities and rural areas. Pliny reported that whenever he was informed of a Christian, he would bring the person before his tribunal. If he or she admitted to being a Christian, the sentence was execution. Trajan replied to Pliny, indicating that Pliny was following the proper procedure. He added that Christians should not be sought out, but if reported, they should be punished unless they recanted and worshiped the Roman gods.

110 † Ignatius of Antioch Is Martyred

Ignatius was bishop (the officially appointed leader) of the church in Antioch (in modern southern Turkey) and is known for the seven letters he wrote under armed guard on his way to Rome to be put



By AD 100, Christian communities existed in small pockets within the shaded area.

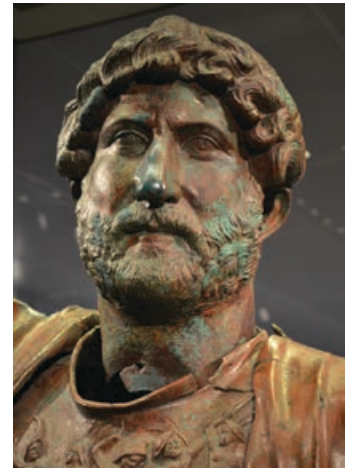
to death because of his faith. They were addressed to the churches at Philadelphia, Smyrna, Ephesus, Tralles, and Magnesia (all located in modern Turkey), to the church in Rome, and also to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. The letter to the believers in Rome urges them to refrain from intervening with the authorities to prevent his martyrdom. Ignatius's letters show a strong commitment to Jesus Christ and the truth of his physical birth, death, and resurrection. Ignatius was the first person apart from the New Testament authors to write of Jesus's virgin birth.

115–117 ☆ Jews Riot in Egypt, North Africa, and Cyprus

The Jewish position in Egypt deteriorated under the Roman Empire's rule. After Jews rioted in 41 and 66, they instigated a final rebellion from 115 to 117, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. This uprising took place not only in Egypt but also in Cyrene (in modern Libya) and on the island of Cyprus. The Roman response was the violent suppression of the Alexandrian Jews and the destruction of their historic synagogue. As a result, the Jewish community of Alexandria, which had been one of the largest outside Israel, went into permanent decline.

132–135 ☆ Bar Kokhba Revolts Shake Judea

In the early second century, the harsh Roman occupation of Judea led to a second war. The immediate cause was Emperor Hadrian's plan to rebuild Jerusalem and make it a Roman city dedicated to Jupiter, the supreme Roman god. This was too much for the Jewish people, who worshiped the one true God of heaven and earth. The revolt began in 132, led by Simon ben Kosiba, popularly known as Bar Kokhba, "Son of the Star." Bar Kokhba assumed the role of an ancient Judean king, but neither his personal popularity nor the support of the rabbis was enough to bring victory. Rome's revenge was swift; Bar Kokhba was killed in 135, and his troops were completely decimated. The Jewish population of Judea was deported and replaced with foreigners, and the province's name was changed from Judea to Syria-Palestine. The revolt was one of the darkest times in Jewish history.



Emperor Hadrian

144 † Marcion Is Excommunicated

Marcion, a prominent ship owner from Pontus in Asia Minor, was excommunicated from the church for immorality. He then developed his own unique theology and gained a large following that became a major threat to orthodox, or traditional, Christianity. He established churches throughout the empire, and his views remained influential for nearly two centuries. In Marcion's theology, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were separate beings. The God of the Old Testament created the world and the evil in it, and his religion revolved around law. In contrast, the God of the New Testament was the true God, the Father of Jesus and a God of love and grace. The

Scriptures Marcion embraced consisted of only ten letters of Paul and an edited version of Luke. In reaction to Marcion, orthodox Christianity was forced to define the true canon, or authoritative books, of Scripture.

150 ✝ Easter Controversy Begins

The date of Easter became a major controversy in the post-apostolic church. The question was first discussed about 150, when Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, visited the bishop of Rome (a title later known as “pope,” from the Greek word *páppas*, meaning “father”). Christians in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) wanted to commemorate the Lord’s Supper (Communion) on the same day as the Jewish Passover, with Easter being celebrated two days later, regardless of the day of the week. The Roman church, however, believed that Easter should always fall on Sunday. Twenty years later, the same argument broke out in the church in Laodicea (in modern Turkey). The controversy came to a head throughout the Christian world between 190 and 194, when it was discussed at many governing assemblies. Rome’s position finally prevailed and was officially adopted by the Council of Nicaea in 325.

150 ✝ Justin Martyr Defends Christianity

Born to Greek parents who lived in the Holy Land (modern-day Israel), Justin encountered an old man who used Old Testament prophecies to convince him of the truth of Jesus Christ. Already an educated philosopher, Justin became a devoted Christian. For the remaining thirty or so years of his life, he traveled, wrote, and evangelized. He became one of the first Christian apologists, explaining and advocating Christianity to others as a reasonable belief system. For Justin, all truth was God’s truth, so he incorporated Greek thought with Jewish prophecy, presenting Christ as the fulfillment of the Hebrew tradition. Around 150, in his *First Apology* (his second may not be genuine), he addressed the Roman emperor in a defense of the faith. At Justin’s martyrdom in 165, he demonstrated the conviction he had written earlier: “You can kill us but cannot do us any real harm.” He is known today as Justin Martyr.

155 ✝ Polycarp Is Martyred

Born in a Christian home in Smyrna (in modern Turkey), Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John and met other eyewitnesses of Jesus as well. He served the church as bishop of Smyrna. When civil authorities demanded that Polycarp deny his faith, his response was, “I have served Christ eighty-five years. How can I blaspheme my King? I am a Christian.” He was tied to a stake, and a fire was lit. Reportedly, Polycarp was miraculously untouched by the flames, so he was killed with a dagger and his body was burned. His followers collected his bones as relics.



Polycarp

170 † The Montanist Movement Begins

In 155, the pagan priest Montanus was converted to Christianity. He began prophesying that Jesus and the New Jerusalem would come soon to Pepuza, a city in Asia Minor, and that a unique outpouring of the Holy Spirit would lead up to these events. Considering his followers to be an elite group of Christians, Montanus instructed them to withdraw from the world. He called for special days of fasting and warned of coming persecution, which would sanctify the church for Christ's return. During this time, two of his prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, gave what were considered new revelations from God, supplanting Scripture. The church of Rome initially looked favorably on Montanism but then turned against it. The movement was forced underground and eventually faded away.

175 † Melito, Bishop of Sardis, Petitions the Emperor

Melito was the bishop of Sardis (in modern Turkey) during the reign of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180). At a time when being a Christian was a crime against the state, Melito wrote a petition to the emperor begging him to examine the charges that were being made against those who believed in Christ. Melito proposed to the emperor that Christianity be made the religion of the empire, since church and state were complementary works of God for mankind's benefit. There is no evidence of a response from the emperor. Melito's many visits to historic Christian sites earned him distinction as the first known Christian pilgrim. Melito was also the first Christian writer to list the books of the Old Testament and distinguish them from the Apocrypha.



Irenaeus

177 † Irenaeus Becomes Bishop of Lyon

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp and therefore a spiritual grandson of the apostle John. He grew up in Asia Minor and eventually moved to Lyon (in modern France), where he became an elder (presbyter) in the church. When the bishop of Lyon died in the persecution of 177, Irenaeus succeeded him. His jurisdiction included all of Gaul (modern France) and extended to the city of Vienna as well. His major literary

work, *Against Heresies*, refuted the false teachings of Gnosticism and Marcionism. Irenaeus followed the teachings of the apostle Paul more closely than the apostolic fathers after him. He had a strong biblical (rather than philosophical) basis for his theology and was the first theologian who wrote for the church. Above all, he saw himself as a shepherd of God's flock.

190 † Clement of Alexandria Leads Church School

Clement, a renowned Christian scholar, was born in Athens (in modern Greece). As a young man, he traveled to the centers of learning in the eastern Roman Empire searching for a teacher to instruct him in the Christian faith. In Alexandria, Egypt, he encountered a man named Pantaenus, the

founder of a Christian school. In about 190, Clement succeeded Pantaenus as head of the school, which became the official catechetical (church) school of Alexandria. Clement wrote three major books while in this post, which have survived. Clement adopted an allegorical method of interpreting the Bible, using Greek philosophy as a means of understanding Scripture. He taught Origen, who became the early theologian of the Eastern Church. Clement was forced to flee Alexandria in 202 during the persecution under Roman Emperor Septimius Severus.

196 † Tertullian Begins to Write

Tertullian, a lifelong resident of Carthage, North Africa, was educated in literature, rhetoric, and law. Around age forty, he professed faith in Christ and soon became a leading teacher in the church of Carthage. Tertullian began to write soon after his conversion, and thirty-one of his writings have been preserved. He was one of the first to express the doctrine of the Trinity, stating that God is one substance and yet three persons. Tertullian's writings demonstrate his legal mind. He sought for perfect order and opposed moral slackness in the church. Phrases such as "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" and "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" come from his works.

200 ☆ Judah the Patriarch Compiles the Mishnah

After the Romans crushed the Jewish Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135, an assembly of rabbis convened in the Galilee region and was named the "Sanhedrin" after the body by the same name that had ruled the Jews prior to the destruction of the temple. The Sanhedrin's leader was called the patriarch. This council's goal was to make their interpretation of Judaism the norm for succeeding ages. A major step in this process occurred in about 200, when Judah the Patriarch compiled the Mishnah, a record of the rabbis' discussions regarding proper interpretation and application of the law of Moses. The Mishnah is a collection of oral laws, traditions, and explanations of Scripture by Jewish teachers from as early as 300 BC. It was written in Hebrew and formed the core of the Jewish writings known as the Talmud.

202 † Persecution Begins Under Septimius Severus

Septimius Severus, a man of African descent, was the Roman emperor from 193–211. In 202, he enacted a law forbidding new conversions to Christianity. His motive was to unite all religions in worship of the sun. All gods would be accepted as long as their worshipers acknowledged that the sun god was supreme. The law produced violent persecution, especially in Egypt and North Africa. The church father Origen's father was beheaded in Alexandria, and in 203 a young woman named Perpetua and fellow Christians were killed by wild beasts at a public festival in Carthage. Many more unnamed believers were also martyred during this persecution.



Septimius Severus and family

205 † Origen Begins to Write

Origen, considered the greatest scholar of his age, was born into a Christian family in Alexandria, Egypt. After his father was martyred in 202, Origen's mother hid her son's clothes to prevent him from turning himself in to the authorities to be martyred as well. Origen lived an ascetic life, allowing himself only one coat and no shoes. A prolific writer, Origen authored more than two thousand works, including commentaries on almost every book of the Bible. His book *On First Principles* was the first systematic theology written. Origen was primarily responsible for establishing allegorical interpretation of the Bible as the standard method for Christians, from his time through the Middle Ages. Because he included many concepts from the Greek philosopher Plato in his teachings, he is considered a father of both Christian orthodoxy (traditional doctrine based on Scripture) and heresy (false doctrine contradicting Scripture).

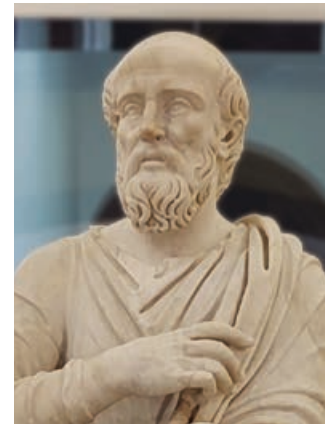
212 ☆ Jews Are Granted Roman Citizenship

Under the Sanhedrin's leadership, Jews in the Holy Land were able to work out a way to be accepted by the Roman government. They were treated as other small nations of the empire, except that they were excused from pagan observances. In 212, Emperor Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to the Jews, as well as to the other small nations of the empire. Yet in spite of peaceful relations with Rome, the Holy Land was impoverished, and the population declined as a result.

217 † Hippolytus Becomes First Antipope

Hippolytus was an elder and a teacher in the church of Rome. Although he was that church's most important theologian in the third century, he was passed over for bishop in favor of a deacon named Callixtus. Callixtus I served as bishop of Rome starting in 217. Believing Callixtus to be too lax on church discipline for mortal (serious) sins, Hippolytus withdrew from the church with a few followers and claimed that he was the true bishop of Rome, thus becoming history's first antipope.

He continued attacks on the succeeding bishops of Rome: Urban I and Pontian. Then in 235, under Christian persecution from Emperor Maximinus, Hippolytus and Pontian were exiled together to the island of Sardinia, where they came to an agreement over their differences. Both resigned their positions, and unity returned under the short reign of their successor, Anterus (r. 235–236), and then Fabian (r. 236–250).



Hippolytus

219 ☆ Rav Arrives in Babylon

Throughout the second century, the Jews of Babylon looked to the rabbis in the Holy Land for guidance, since the Sanhedrin patriarch there was considered the final authority in religious matters. Although

many rabbis had come to Babylon following the Bar Kokhba rebellion, Babylon did not become a center for Jewish scholarship until the arrival of Rabbi Abba Arika (popularly called Rav, meaning “Master”) in 219. A disciple of Judah the Patriarch, Rav introduced Babylonian Jews to the Mishnah. Rav founded an academy at Sura, while Samuel Yarhina’ah, a wealthy Babylonian scholar, established one at Nehardea that relocated to Pumbedita. These two schools became rivals to those that were declining in the Holy Land. They survived until the eleventh century as centers of Jewish scholarship.

220 † Carthage Becomes North African Center for Christianity

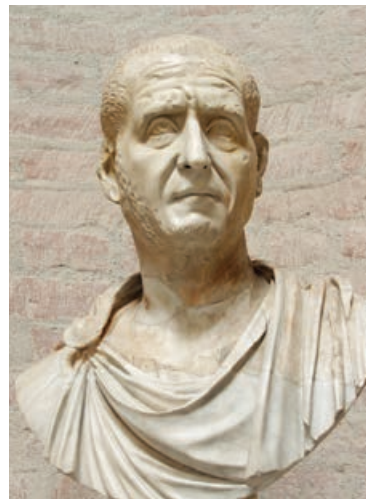
The city of Carthage, on the northernmost coast of modern Tunisia, became the Christian center for North Africa. In the West, Carthage’s influence was second only to Rome’s. Around 220, the first church council was held in Carthage, attended by seventy African bishops. By the time Cyprian became bishop in 248, the Carthage church was the largest in Africa. Church councils continued to be held in Carthage as late as 646.

232 † Earliest Known Church Is Built

Early Christians worshiped in homes, some of which were eventually adapted to serve as church buildings. In Dura-Europos, Syria, such a house was excavated, dating from 232. A single entrance in the north wall opened into a vestibule, and from there into a courtyard with a portico on the east side. In the northwest corner of the building, a room with a cistern served as a baptistry. Two rooms on the house’s south side had been combined into one, with a small platform serving as an altar. A small room off this larger one may have been used for the preparation of the Lord’s Supper, and a room on the west side of the courtyard may have been used for instructing believers in the basics of Christianity. Buildings such as this were the forerunners of every place of worship, from one-room churches to cathedrals.

240 † Mani Starts His False Teaching

Mani grew up in southern Babylonia in an aristocratic family. He claimed he had received spiritual “revelations” at ages twelve and twenty-four, which in 240 led him to proclaim the truth he felt he had received. His teaching, called Manichaeism, presupposed a conflict between light and darkness. It claimed that religious practices would release particles of light, which Satan had stolen from the world and imprisoned in the brain of man. Mani claimed that Jesus, Buddha, the prophets, and he himself had been sent to aid in this process. Manichaeism spread throughout the Roman Empire and as far as China, becoming a major rival to Christianity in many regions. Mani was imprisoned in Persia by a competing religious group known as Zoroastrians, and in about 276 he was executed.



Bust of Emperor Decius

250–251 ✚ EMPEROR DECIUS PERSECUTES CHRISTIANS

“Deliver us, Lord Jupiter! For I have delivered all of Rome into your hands and the hands of our ancient gods!” shouted Trajanus Decius, emperor of Rome, as stones and arrows showered around him. Decius’s Roman troops gradually succumbed to the fatal blows of the barbarian Goths. Decius fell at last—one dark form among many, trampled underfoot by panic-stricken horses in June 251.

At the time of his death, Decius had been emperor for less than two years. A native of Pannonia (in East-Central Europe), he came to power in a time when political turmoil threatened the Roman Empire. Decius sought to unite his subjects through forced submission to the ancient Roman gods. “Perhaps,” he reasoned, “the gods will favor us once more, give us final victory over the pestilent Goths, and restore the glory of the Empire.”

On January 3, 250, Decius published an edict commanding all citizens of the empire to sacrifice animals and burn incense to the Roman gods. Those who did were given certificates as evidence of their compliance, and those who refused were imprisoned or executed. Decius’s edict initiated the first universal Roman persecution of the Christian church. Untold numbers of believers suffered the loss of family, freedom, and life itself. Among those martyred were Fabian, the bishop of Rome, and the bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem.

When Decius died in battle, the persecution ended, but the lull revealed a spiritual war within the Christian community itself. A great controversy arose over the many believers who had sacrificed to the gods to save their lives, as well as those who had illegally obtained certificates without sacrificing. Thousands of these lapsed Christians begged to be received back into fellowship, and the church was divided over how to treat them.

Some bishops called for rigid excommunication from the church, and some demanded a general pardon. Eventually they agreed that those who had sacrificed to the gods should be readmitted only when dying. Those who obtained a false Roman certificate but had not sacrificed to the gods could be readmitted upon repentance (admitting and renouncing their sin) and penance (deeds done to compensate for the offense). No forgiveness was to be offered to the unrepentant. However, bitter dissensions over the matter continued.

When more persecution arose under Emperor Valerian in 257, a wider pardon was offered to those who had defected during the days of Decius. This was not the sign of a weakened standard for Christian fidelity, but rather a gracious opportunity for the shunned to stand where once they had fallen. Many returned to the fellowship of believers. Many, in turn, sacrificed their lives for Christ.

251 † Another Council Meets at Carthage

Between 249 and 251, during Emperor Decius's persecution of the church, many professing Christians recanted their faith while under pressure from Roman authorities. When Decius was killed in battle, the persecution abated. The church was then left with the problem of how to deal with the multitudes of Christians who had denied their faith but now desired readmittance. In response, Cyprian, the bishop of the North African city of Carthage (in modern Tunisia), called a church council in 251. They ruled that after a lengthy period of repentance and penance, the lapsed believers could be readmitted to the church. However, the strict requirements of this decision were eased by later councils.

251 † Cyprian Writes About Equality of Bishops

Born in 200 into a wealthy family in Carthage, North Africa, Cyprian professed Christ in 246. Two years later he was installed as bishop of the church of Carthage, the largest in Africa. Cyprian's most important treatise, *On the Unity of the Church*, argued for the equality of all bishops—an argument contrary to the bishop of Rome's claim of authority over other bishops. Cyprian is known for his statement, "There is no salvation outside the church."



Ancient ruins at Carthage, Tunisia

264–341 † Antioch Councils Meet

Beginning around 264, church councils began to meet in the city of Antioch (now located in southern Turkey), with councils in 325, 330, and 341 playing an important role in defining the nature of Christ. In 325, the members of the Antioch council were facing accusations from the Alexandrian Church of embracing a heresy called Arianism, taught by a priest named Arius, who denied the eternal existence of God the Son. The council members took measures to distance themselves from Arius and his supporters. At the same time, they endeavored to highlight Christ's eternal equality with the Father. Later councils served to further distance the church from two other controversies: (1) the Nestorian heresy, which split Jesus Christ into two distinct persons, one human and one divine, and (2) the Monophysite heresy, which denied that Jesus had both divine and human natures. The Antioch Councils influenced the decisions of the broader Council of Chalcedon in 451.

270 † Anthony Lives as a Hermit

Regarded as the father of monasticism (living under a religious vow), Anthony was born in 251 in Egypt, the son of wealthy parents. Shortly after his parents died, Anthony heard Matthew 19:21 read in church: "If you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor." In response, Anthony gave his property to the poor and initially placed himself under the supervision of an elderly Christian ascetic (someone who practices self-denial as a means of spiritual discipline). Living on bread and water once a day and sleeping on bare ground in a tomb, he was besieged by temptations but overcame them through prayer. He eventually was the first Christian to withdraw to the desert, crossing the Nile River and journeying to the east, where he ultimately settled on a mountain near the Red Sea. Even there he was sought out by many would-be hermits. Anthony organized them into colonies, beginning the monastic movement.

303 † The Armenian King Is Baptized

As a buffer nation between the Persian and Roman Empires, Armenia had a turbulent history. The great missionary to Armenia was Gregory the Illuminator. Traditional accounts say that Gregory was of Armenian aristocracy and escaped the Persian invasion by fleeing to Cappadocia, where he became a Christian. Returning to Armenia, he converted his relative, King Tiridates III, to the Christian faith and baptized him on January 6, 303. When the nobles of Armenia followed their king in professing the Christian faith, the people of Armenia did as well. Many pagan priests were converted, with many of them entering the Christian ministry. Gregory became bishop of the newly organized Armenian church. His son succeeded him as bishop and was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325.



Gregory the Illuminator

303 ✚ THE GREAT PERSECUTION BEGINS

When Diocletian became emperor of the Roman Empire in 284, Christians were encouraged because of rumors that his wife and daughter were believers. And in fact, during the first nineteen years of his reign, Diocletian was relatively tolerant of the church. In civil affairs, he had great organizational skills. To improve the management of the Roman Empire, he established two senior emperors called *Augusti* (himself and Maximian) and two junior emperors called *Caesares* (Galerius, his son-in-law, and Constantius Chlorus, the father of Constantine).

Gradually, life became more difficult for Christians. Deciding that religious unity would strengthen the empire, Diocletian published edicts in an attempt to eliminate Christianity and guarantee the supremacy of the Roman state religion. On February 23, 303, Diocletian decreed that all copies of Scripture were to be burned and all churches destroyed and their property confiscated. The next day, additional measures were announced: Christians who resisted would no longer have legal recourse and would be deprived of public office. Thus the Great Persecution began, although it was not uniformly enforced by the four emperors.

A third edict ordered the arrest of Christian clergy. This resulted in a state crisis where prisons filled up and real criminals were released. To deal with this problem, the next edict stated that Christians would be released if they made sacrifices to Roman gods. The guards could compel them to do so by any means possible. In early 304, an edict was posted insisting that everyone in the Roman Empire—clergy and laity alike—must sacrifice to the gods. Every Christian was put in jeopardy, and thousands were tortured and killed.

In 305, Diocletian and Maximian stepped down and relinquished their power to Constantius Chlorus (western empire) and Galerius (eastern empire), ending the persecution in the West, since Constantius Chlorus was not interested in enforcing the edicts. The persecution continued in the East until 311, when Galerius relented and issued an edict of limited toleration, granting freedom of worship if Christians did not disturb the peace. The years of the Great Persecution officially ended with the Edict of Milan, issued by Emperor Constantine in 313. It was a great historical event, for it granted religious liberty to Christians and pagans alike.



Coin of Diocletian (left)
and Maximian (right)