

Pliny the Younger and Trajan on the Christians

Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus and Bithynia from 111-113 CE. We have a whole set of exchanges of his letters with the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative political matters. These two letters are the most famous, in which Pliny the Younger encounters Christianity for the first time.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97

Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I

judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Trajan to Pliny the Younger

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

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in him. In the meantime, as a prisoner I am learning to desire nothing.

5. From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts, on land and sea, by night and day, chained amidst ten leopards (that is, a company of soldiers) who only get worse when they are well treated. Yet because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple; nevertheless "I am not thereby justified."⁷² (2) May I have the pleasure of the wild beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that they prove to be prompt with me. I will even coax them to devour me promptly, not as they have done with some, whom they were too timid to touch. And if when I am willing and ready they are not, I will force them. (3) Bear with me—I know what is best for me. Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling,⁷³ wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!

6. Neither the ends of the earth nor the kingdoms of this age are of any use to me. It is better for me to die for Jesus Christ than to rule over the ends of the earth. Him I seek, who died on our behalf; him I long for, who rose again for our sake. The pains of birth are upon me. (2) Bear with me, brothers: do not keep me from living; do not desire my death. Do not give to the world one who wants to belong to God, nor tempt⁷⁴ him with material things. Let me receive the pure light, for when I arrive there I will be a man. (3) Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God. If anyone has Him within himself, let him understand what I long for and sympathize with me, knowing what constrains me.

7. The ruler of this age wants to take me captive and corrupt my godly intentions. Therefore none of you who are present must help him. Instead take my side, that is, God's. Do not talk

72. 1 Cor. 4:4.

73. *mutilation, mangling*: so GHT(Sm)Amg [Lightfoot]; S^f A read *mangling and*; LS Eusebius omit.

74. *tempt*: the Greek witnesses are defective here. *Tempt* is Lightfoot's restoration, following the sense of S^f SmA; others, following L(Am), suggest *deceive*.

about Jesus Christ while you desire the world. (2) Do not let envy dwell among you. And if upon my arrival I myself should appeal to you, do not be persuaded by me; believe⁷⁵ instead these things that I am writing to you. For though I am still alive, I am passionately in love with death as I write to you. My passionate love⁷⁶ has been crucified and there is no fire of material longing within me, but only water living and speaking⁷⁷ in me, saying within me, "Come to the Father." (3) I take no pleasure in corruptible food or the pleasures of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who is of the seed of David; and for drink I want his blood, which is incorruptible love.

8. I no longer want to live according to human standards. And such will be the case, if you so desire. Do so desire, that you also may be desired! (2) With these brief lines I am making my request of you. Do believe me! And Jesus Christ, the unerring mouth by whom the Father has spoken truly, will make it clear to you that I am speaking truly. (3) Pray for me, that I may reach the goal.⁷⁸ I write to you not according to human perspective but in accordance with the mind of God. If I suffer, you will have wanted it; if I am rejected, you will have hated me.

9. Remember in your prayers the church in Syria, which has God for its shepherd in my place. Jesus Christ alone will be its bishop—as will your love. (2) But I myself am ashamed to be counted among them, for I am not worthy, since I am the very last of them and an abnormality.⁷⁹ But I have been granted the mercy to be someone, if I reach God. (3) My spirit greets you, as does the love of the churches that welcomed me in the name of Jesus Christ, rather than as a mere transient. For even churches that did not lie on my way (i.e., my physical route) went before me from city to city.

75. *believe*: so g(SmAAM); GHTLC read *be persuaded by*.

76. *love*: i.e., for the "world"; cf. Gal. 6:14.

77. *water living and speaking*: so the Greek MSS; the other witnesses vary widely. Lightfoot, suspecting here an ancient corruption, suggests that the original reading has been preserved in g: "living water welling up" (cf. John 4:10, 14). Cf. Schoedel (*Ignatius*, 185) for other parallels.

78. *goal*: so GHTLSmAAMC; gA (followed, with some hesitation, by Lightfoot, who brackets the words) add *through the Holy Spirit*.

sul, after many appeals, finally persuaded him to swear the oath and to offer the sacrifice. For this reason therefore, brothers, we do not praise those who hand themselves over,⁹ since the gospel does not so teach.)

5. Now the most admirable Polycarp, when he first heard the news, was not disturbed. In fact, he wanted to remain in town, but the majority persuaded him to withdraw. So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city, and there he stayed with a few companions, doing nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, for this was his constant habit. (2) And while he was praying he fell into a trance three days before his arrest, and he saw his pillow being consumed by fire. And he turned and said to those who were with him: "It is necessary that I be burned alive."

6. And as those who were searching for him persisted, he moved to another farm. Immediately, those searching for him arrived,¹⁰ and not finding him, they seized two slave boys, one of whom confessed under torture. (2) For it was really impossible for him to remain hidden, since the very persons who betrayed him were people of his own household. And the captain of the police, who just happened to have the same name—Herod, as he was called—was eager to bring him into the stadium, in order that he [Polycarp] might fulfill his appointed destiny of being made a sharer with Christ, while those who betrayed him received the punishment of Judas himself.

7. So, taking the young slave with them, on Friday about suppertime the mounted police and horsemen set out, armed with their usual weapons as though chasing after an armed rebel.¹¹ And closing in on him late in the evening, they found him in bed in an upstairs room in a small cottage; and though he still could have escaped from there to another place, he refused, saying, "May God's will be done."¹² (2) So when he heard that they had arrived, he went and talked with them, while those who were present marvelled at his age and his

9. *hand . . . over*: so sv(c); bmp read *come forward on their own*.

10. *arrived*: i.e., at the first farm.

11. Cf. Matt. 26:55.

12. Acts 21:14; cf. Matt. 6:10.

composure, and wondered why there was so much eagerness for the arrest of an old man like him. Then he immediately ordered that a table be set for them to eat and drink as much as they wished at that hour, and he asked them to grant him an hour so that he might pray undisturbed. (3) When they consented, he stood and prayed,¹³ so full of the grace of God that for two hours he was unable to stop speaking; those who heard him were amazed, and many regretted that they had come after such a godly old man.

8. Now when at last he finished his prayer, after remembering everyone who had ever come into contact with him, both small and great, known and unknown, and all the universal church throughout the world, it was time to depart, and so they seated him on a donkey and brought him into the city on the day of a great Sabbath.¹⁴ (2) Herod, the police captain, and his father, Nicetes, came out to meet him. After transferring him to their carriage and sitting down at his side, they tried to persuade him, saying, "Why, what harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and offering incense" (and other words to this effect) "and thereby saving yourself?" Now at first he gave them no answer. But when they persisted, he said, "I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me." (3) Thus failing to persuade him, they began to utter threats and made him dismount in such a hurry that he bruised his shin as he got down from the carriage. And without even turning around, he went on his way eagerly and quickly as if nothing had happened to him, and as he was led to the stadium, there was such a tumult in the stadium that no one could even be heard.

9. But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man." And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. And then, as he was brought forward, there was a great tumult when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. (2) Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were Polycarp.¹⁵ And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant,

13. *prayed*: m adds *facing the East*.

14. Cf. John 19:31.

15. *Polycarp*: so gE; m (followed by Lightfoot) omits.

saying, "Have respect for your age," and other such things as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the Genius¹⁶ of Caesar; repent; say, 'Away with the atheists!'" So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, "Away with the atheists!" (3) But when the magistrate persisted and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ," Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant,¹⁷ and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

10. But as he continued to insist, saying, "Swear by the Genius of Caesar," he answered: "If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the Genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing." (2) The proconsul said: "Persuade the people." But Polycarp said: "You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God, as long as it does us no harm; but as for these, I do not think they are worthy, that I should have to defend myself before them."

11. So the proconsul said: "I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind." But he said: "Call for them! For the repentance from better to worse is a change impossible for us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is evil to righteousness." (2) Then he said to him again: "I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind." But Polycarp said: "You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish."

12. As he spoke these and many other words, he was inspired with courage and joy, and his face was filled with grace, so that not only did he not collapse in fright at the things which were said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was aston-

16. *Genius*: i.e., the guardian spirit.

17. *have . . . servant*: so g; mE read *have served him*.

ished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the stadium to proclaim three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." (2) When this was proclaimed by the herald, the entire crowd, Gentiles as well as Jews living in Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship." Saying these things, they shouted aloud and asked Philip the Asiarch to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. But he said that it was not lawful for him to do so since he had already brought to a close the animal hunts. (3) Then it occurred to them to shout out in unison that Polycarp should be burned alive. For it was necessary that the vision which he received concerning his pillow be fulfilled, when he saw it on fire while praying, and turned and said prophetically to the faithful who were with him, "It is necessary that I be burned alive."

13. These things then happened with such swiftness, quicker than words could tell, the crowd swiftly collecting wood and kindling from the workshops and baths, the Jews being especially eager to assist in this, as is their custom. (2) When the pyre¹⁸ was prepared, he took off all his clothes and removed his belt; he also tried to take off his shoes, though not previously in the habit of doing this, because all the faithful were always eager to be the first to touch his flesh. For he had been treated with all honor on account of his holy life even before his gray hair appeared.¹⁹ (3) Then the materials prepared for the pyre were placed around him; and as they were also about to nail him, he said: "Leave me as I am; for he who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security which you get from the nails."

14. So they did not nail him, but tied him instead. Then he, having placed his hands behind him and having been bound, like a splendid ram chosen from a great flock for a sacrifice, a burnt offering prepared and acceptable to God, looked up to heaven and said: "O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have

18. *pyre*: so g; mE read *fire*.

received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, (2) I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undeceiving and true God. (3) For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom to you with him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen."

15. When he had offered up the "Amen" and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit the fire. And as a mighty flame blazed up, we saw a miracle (we, that is, to whom it was given to see), and we have been preserved in order that we might tell the rest what happened. (2) For the fire, taking the shape of an arch, like the sail of a ship filled by the wind, completely surrounded the body of the martyr; and it was there in the middle, not like flesh burning but like bread baking or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace. For we also perceived a very fragrant odor, as if it were the scent of incense or some other precious spice.

16. When the lawless men eventually realized that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they ordered an executioner to go up to him and stab him with a dagger. And when he did this, there came out a large quantity²⁰ of blood, so that it extinguished the fire; and the whole crowd was amazed that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect. (2) Among them most certainly was this man, the most remarkable²¹ Polycarp, who proved to be an apostolic and pro-

20. *large quantity*: so E; G(L) [Lightfoot] read *dove and a large quantity*. The reference to the dove is almost certainly a later addition to the text (possibly by the Pionius mentioned in the last paragraph of the epilogue; cf. Lightfoot, *AF* 2.3.390-93).

21. *remarkable*: so mEL; g adds *martyr*. Lightfoot's Greek text omits *martyr* with mEL, while his translation includes it.