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CHRISTIANITY TODAY SPECIAL ISSUE
Heard

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The Martyrs and #MeToo

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am a Christian,” declares Blandina, slave woman and martyr, to the Roman authorities. “I am a Christian,” asserts Perpetua to her pagan father, sealing her fate as a martyr. “I am a servant of the living God,” proclaims Thecla to the governor as he marvels at her testimony in the arena before she was to be eaten by wild beasts.

The voices of these female martyrs ring down through the centuries and sound notes of wisdom and encouragement to us today. In our current #MeToo moment, we hear the voices of persecuted women defining themselves not as victims but as agents. We find striking similarities to the ancient female martyrs and ascetics—bravery, willingness to face public shame, conviction that their words are important. But we also discover important differences between today’s ideas and the ancient female martyrs’ views on the ultimate goals of a life well lived.

BOLD TESTIMONY

The martyrdom accounts of women like Blandina, Perpetua, and Thecla reveal women who were extraordinarily bold. They resisted familial pressure and governmental orders to turn from their Christian faith. They unflinchingly testified to Christ, knowing that intense physical torture would be the outcome of their truthful, fearless answer. Their actions and the suffering they endured magnified their voices.

In 177 in Lyons, Blandina, a slave woman, was part of a small group of accused Christians, some of whom recanted their Christian faith—but not Blandina. She outlived all the others, undergoing numerous public tortures including scourging, a roasting chair, and being gored by a bull. The early church historian Eusebius wrote that as she was being tortured,

Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner. . . . They were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and

broken. . . . But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession. . . . exclaiming, “I am a Christian.”

Her steadfast faith impressed the crowd who claimed never to have seen a woman bear such cruelties.

From North Africa, Perpetua was a 22-year-old mother of an infant son. She was arrested in 203 because she refused to sacrifice in honor of the emperor and offer an oath of allegiance to imperial Rome. While imprisoned, she wrote a diary of her experience and recorded four visions. In the final vision, she took the form of a male wrestler who fought a fierce opponent and decisively defeated him. The symbolism was clear: Perpetua would face God’s archenemy, Satan, and, in Christ, defeat him. After the vision, Perpetua said, “I knew that the victory was awaiting me.” Her victory was to be a martyr’s bloody death.

Blandina and Perpetua were not bold for their own sake, out of a desire for self-affirmation, the promise of fame, or a moment in the spotlight. Their boldness was for Christ and for the sake of others. They sought to encourage their brothers and sisters in Christ, many of whom also faced hideous torture and death in a grue-

Do we speak about the dangers of wealth, the value of self-discipline, and the virtue of singleness for Christ as all trumpeting the values of Christ’s kingdom?

some spectacle. Perpetua led a small band of prisoners and incipient martyrs by encouraging them through her four visions that confirmed they would face the beasts and would win an eternal crown. After she was wounded by a bull in the arena, Perpetua told her fellow prisoners, “Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings.”

Blandina, too, encouraged her fellow Christians. The narrator of Blandina’s martyrdom states that as she was raised up on a stake, Blandina appeared to be hanging on a cross. Her fellow martyrs looked at her and saw Christ in his passion. Her example “inspired the combatants with great zeal,” reminding them “that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has fellowship always with the living God.”