



Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis

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CHAPTER

The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity

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1. If ancient examples of faith that attest the grace of God and cause the edification of man have been written down so that God may be glorified and man strengthened when those deeds are read aloud—by making those deeds, as it were, visibly present—then why should new documents not also be published that likewise serve either end? ii. Because in any case these in their turn will at some point be ancient as well and indispensable for those who come after us, even if at the present time they are held to be of less authority thanks to an unquestioning veneration of antiquity.

iii. But let that be the concern of those who judge the one power of the one Spirit according to epochs of the temporal world—though all more recent events ought for that very reason to be judged as greater, according to the superabundance of grace that has been decreed for the final stages of earthly time. iv. *For in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and their sons and daughters shall prophesy; and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out of my Spirit; and young men shall see visions, and old men shall dream dreams.*

v. And so we too, who both acknowledge and honour new visions in the same way that we do prophecies as being similarly and equally vouchsafed, and who count all the other workings of the Holy Spirit as serving the instruction of the Church (for which moreover this same Spirit was sent to administer all gifts among all people, *according as the Lord hath distributed unto each*), of necessity do we compile records of the new as well, and make them known through public reading for the glory of God, lest any weakness in our faith or loss of hope infer that the grace of divinity was to be found only among the ancients, whether in the gift of martyrs or of revelations; since God is always bringing to pass what he has promised, as proof for those who do not believe, and as a benefit for those who do.

p. 15 vi. So then *that which we have heard and handled declare we unto you, brothers and sons, both so that ye who were involved may recall the glory of the Lord and that ye who now come to know by hearing it read may have communion with the holy martyrs, and through them with our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs glory and honour forever. Amen.*

2. Arrest was made in the town of Thuburbo Minus of the young catechumens Revocatus and Felicity, his fellow slave, and of Saturninus and Secundulus. Among them was also Vibia Perpetua, who was well born, well educated, honourably married, ii. and who had a father, a mother, and two brothers, one of them also a catechumen, and an infant son at her breast. iii. She herself was about twenty-two years old. From this point on the entire narrative of her martyrdom is her own, just as she left it written out by her own hand according to her own intention.

3. While we were still under surveillance, Father kept trying to talk me into renouncing my faith: because of his love for me, he wanted to lead me astray. So I said: 'Father, do you see this container here, for instance: this pitcher or whatever it is?' 'Yes,' he answered. ii. I said, 'It can't be called anything other than what it is, right?' 'Right.' 'Well, that's the way it is with me. I can't call myself anything other than what I am: a Christian.' iii. That word upset Father so much that he lunged at me, as if to pluck out my eyes. But he only managed to shake me up. Then he left, defeated, and the ruses of Satan along with him.

iv. Over the next few days I thanked the Lord for Father's absence and I was relieved that he was not there. It was during this period of a few days that we were baptized, and the Spirit told me to ask for only one thing from the water: bodily endurance.

v. A few days later we were put in prison. I was terrified, because I had never been in such a dark place before. vi. What a ghastly day! Suffocatingly hot on account of all the people. Soldiers attempting extortion. Above all, I was tormented by anxiety for the baby. vii. But then Tertius and Pomponius, those saintly deacons who were ministering to our needs, arranged our transfer for a few hours—and for a price—into the better part of the prison, where we could have some relief. viii. So we left the dungeon and everyone was on his own for a while. As for me, I nursed the baby, who by that point was starving to death. Anxious for him, I spoke to Mother and tried to comfort Brother, and I asked them to take care of my son. I was devastated to see how devastated they were on my account.

ix. This was the kind of anxiety I had to live with for quite a few days. But then I was able to arrange for the baby to stay with me in prison, which instantly made me feel better—no more pain and anxiety for the baby's sake. And so for me the prison suddenly became a palace, so that I didn't want to be anywhere else.

p. 16 4. Then my brother said: 'My lady sister, you have clearly been found worthy—so worthy that you can ask for a vision and you will be shown what to expect: martyrdom or freedom.' ii. Since I knew that I could talk with the Lord, who had done such great things for me, I was able to give my brother a confident promise in return: 'I'll report back to you tomorrow.' So I asked for a vision and this is what I was shown.

iii. I saw a ladder made of bronze, huge, reaching all the way up to the sky—but narrow, so that people could only go up one at a time. There were iron weapons of all kinds stuck in the rails on both sides—swords, javelins, hooks, daggers, lances. If anyone climbed the ladder carelessly or without looking up, he would be torn up by these weapons, and pieces of his flesh would get caught in them. iv. At the foot of the ladder there was a serpent lying there, huge, waiting in ambush for people who wanted to climb up and frightening them off from climbing up. v. But Saturus climbed up, and he went first. (Afterwards he turned himself in to save us, because he was the one who had instructed us in the faith; but he was not there when they arrested us.) vi. When he got to the top of the ladder he turned around and said, 'Perpetua, I am here for you. But careful! Don't let the serpent bite you!' 'In the name of Jesus Christ,' I said, 'he will not hurt me.' vii. And down there at the foot the ladder, as if he were afraid of me, the serpent stuck his head out slowly and I, as if stepping on the first rung of the ladder, stepped on his head. And so I started climbing.

viii. Then I saw a wide open space, a garden, and in the middle of it a grey-haired man sitting down. He was dressed like a shepherd, tall, milking some sheep. People dressed in white were standing around him, thousands and thousands of them. ix. Raising his head, he looked over at me and said, 'Welcome, child.' And

he called me over and gave me a mouthful or so of the cheese that he was milking out. I cupped my hands and took and ate it. And the people standing around all said, 'Amen'.

x. Then I woke up with the sound of their voice in my ears, and I was still chewing on something sweet. Right away I told my brother. We realized that we were facing martyrdom, and at that point we gave up our hopes for this world.

p. 17 5. A few days later a rumour went around that our hearing was imminent. At this point Father came from the city. He was worn out with grief and came up to see me in order to lead me astray. ii. He said, 'My daughter, have pity on me—look at my grey hair! Have pity on me—I am your father! Or don't I deserve the name any more? Didn't I bring you up with these hands, so that now you are in the flower of youth? Didn't I put you first, before all your brothers? Don't disgrace me in front of everyone. iii. Think of your brothers. Think of your mother and your aunt. Think of your own son—if you are no longer with us, he won't be able to survive. iv. Enough with your pride! You'll be the ruin of us all. If something should happen to you, we will all have to constantly watch what we say.' v. Spoken like a dutiful father. Then he ↵ kissed my hands and threw himself at my feet and wept, and now he called me not 'daughter' but 'my lady.' vi. I felt dreadful for my father's misfortune: he was going to be the only one in my whole family who would not rejoice at my martyrdom. So I tried to comfort him with these words: 'Whatever happens up on that platform will be in accordance with God's will. You can be sure that we are not under our own control, but God's.' He went away heartbroken.

6. The next day we were eating lunch, when suddenly we were taken off to our hearing. We got to the forum, and right away a rumour went around the neighbourhood and so a huge crowd formed. ii. We went up to the platform. Everyone else was questioned and confessed their faith. Then it was my turn. Just then Father showed up with my son. He pulled me down from the steps and said, 'Offer the sacrifice! Take pity on the baby!' iii. The imperial agent Hilarianus had just been given authority to try capital offences as successor of the late proconsul Minicius Opimianus. He said: 'Your father has grey hair; your body is just a baby. Don't put them through this! Do it! Perform the sacrifice for the emperor's well-being.' iv. My reply: 'No! I won't do it!' Hilarianus: 'Are you a Christian?' My reply: 'Yes! I am a Christian!' v. Father stood there, still out to lead me astray. Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown out, and they beat him with a rod. I felt dreadful for what was happening to my father, as if I had been the one beaten. I felt just dreadful. What a pitiful old man.

vi. After that, he pronounced us guilty and sentenced us to combat with animals in the arena. Rejoicing, we went back down to the prison. vii. After that, since the baby was used to being breast-fed and to living with me in the prison, I sent the deacon Pomponius to Father as soon as I could, asking for the baby. But Father refused. viii. It was God's will, though: not only did the baby stop wanting my breasts but they did not become inflamed. And so I was not subjected to the torment of anxiety for my baby and sore breasts as well.

7. A few days later we were all at prayer when all of a sudden I shouted out the name Dinocrates. I was shocked, because I had never thought about him until then. And now that I recalled what had happened to him, I felt dreadful. ii. But I suddenly realized that I had been found worthy and that I should intercede for him. So I started a long prayer on his behalf, lamenting to the Lord. iii. And right away, that night, I was granted the following vision.

p. 18 iv. I see Dinocrates coming out of a place of shadows, and many others are in there too. He is extremely hot and thirsty. He looks dirty and pale. There is a wound in his face—the one he had when he died. v. (Dinocrates had been my brother according to the flesh, seven years old, killed by a disease that had disfigured his face with sores, so that everyone was quite horrified by his death.) vi. So I had been offering prayers for him; and now there was so wide a gap between us that neither of us could reach the other. vii. And then, where Dinocrates was, I saw a basin full of water. Its rim was higher than the boy ↵ was tall and

he kept standing on tiptoes, trying to get a drink. viii. I felt dreadful. The basin had water in it but because its rim was so high up, he was never going to be able to drink from it.

ix. Then I woke up. I realized that my brother was in great difficulty, but I was confident that I would be able to help him in his difficulty. So I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the garrison prison—our combat was to take place during the garrison games. (It was the emperor Geta's birthday.) x. I prayed for him day and night, groaning and weeping for a gift.

8. The day we were put in fetters I was granted the following vision.

I see the place I had seen earlier, and Dinocrates too—cleaned up now, dressed decently, refreshed, and where the wound had been, I now see a scar. ii. And I see the basin I had seen earlier, too, but now its rim was lower, down at the boy's navel, and water was flowing ceaselessly from it. iii. On the edge stood a golden goblet full of water. Dinocrates went up and started drinking from it; and the goblet never ran out of water. iv. Once he had his fill, he began playing in the water the way little children do, gleefully.

Then I woke up. And I realized that he had been released from his toils.

9. Then, a few days later, a junior officer named Pudens, who was in charge of the garrison prison, began to show us great respect because he realized that some great power dwelt among us. So he started letting people in to see us, quite a few of them, so that we might all find refreshment in each other's company. ii. But then, as the day for which the games were scheduled came closer, my father came in to see me. He was worn out with grief. He started plucking out his beard and flinging the whiskers on the ground, prostrating himself before me, cursing his old age, and saying the kinds of things that would move the whole of creation. iii. I felt dreadful. What an unhappy old man.

10. The day before our combat in the arena I saw the following vision. The deacon Pomponius had come up to the entrance of the prison and was knocking loudly. ii. So I went out and opened the door for him. He was wearing a loose white robe and had on a pair of elaborate sandals. iii. He said, 'We are waiting for you, Perpetua. Come!' And he took me by the hand and we started walking along some rough, winding paths. iv. Finally we made it to the amphitheatre—just barely, out of breath—and he brought me into the centre of the arena and said: 'Don't be afraid. I am here with you and suffering along with you.' Then he left. v. Then I saw a huge crowd, eagerly watching. But I knew that I had been sentenced to combat animals, so I was surprised that none were being let loose on me. vi. Instead an Egyptian came out as my opponent, hideous to look at, along with his assistants. He was the one who was going to fight me. Some handsome young men came to my side as well, to assist and support me. vii. And I was stripped down and became a man, and my assistants started rubbing me down with oil the way they do before an athletic contest. Over there I see him—the Egyptian—rolling around in the dust. viii. Then a man came out, huge, towering over the top of the amphitheatre, with a loose robe on—a purple tunic framed by two stripes in the middle of the chest—and elaborate sandals made of gold and silver. He was holding a staff like a gladiatorial trainer, as well as a green branch which had golden apples on it. ix. He asked for silence and then said: 'If the Egyptian beats her, he will kill her with a sword. If she beats him, she will be given this branch.' x. Then he withdrew. We went up to each other and started throwing punches. He kept trying to grab me by the feet, and I kept kicking him in the face. xi. Then I was floating in mid-air and started hitting him without really touching the ground. But when I saw that there was a lull, I put my hands together, interlaced my fingers, and grabbed his head. He fell down flat on his face and I stepped on his head. xii. The crowd began to shout and my assistants to sing in joy. I went over to the trainer and took the branch. xiii. He kissed me and said, 'Peace be with you, daughter.' And I headed out in glory, towards the Gate of Life and Health.

Then I woke up. xiv. And I realized that I was going to be fighting not with animals but with Satan. But I also knew that victory was mine.

xv. This is my account of what happened up to the day before the games. As for an account of the games themselves: someone else may want to write that up.

11. But blessed Saturus too left the following account that he himself composed of a vision that he had, which he wrote down himself:

ii. ‘“We had been martyred”’, (he said) ‘“and left our flesh behind”’, and we began to be taken eastward by four angels whose hands did not touch us. iii. And we did not go lying on our backs and looking upwards, but as if walking up a gentle hill. iv. And when we were free of the first world we saw an enormous light, and I said to Perpetua (for she was right beside me), ‘“This is what the Lord promised us: Now we’ve got it!”’

v. And while we were being carried by the same four angels, a great space opened up before us that was just like a park with rose trees and all kinds of flowers. vi. The trees were as tall as cypresses, and their leaves kept falling and falling. vii. And there in the park were four more angels brighter than all the others; and when they saw us they did us honour and said in wonder to all the other angels, ‘“Here they are, here they are!”’ And the four angels who were carrying us got afraid and put us down. viii. And on our own feet we went across along a broad street to an arena.

ix. There we found Iucundus and Saturus and Artaxius, who were burned alive in the same persecution as ourselves, and Quintus, who had become a martyr while still in prison. And we asked them where were all the others. x. The angels said to us: ‘“First come in and greet the Lord.”’

p. 20 12. And we came near a place whose walls were just as if they were made of light, and before the gate of that place stood four angels; and they went in and put on white robes. ii. And we went in and heard a voice chanting in unison, ‘“Holy, holy, holy,”’ over and over again. iii. And sitting in the same place we saw a kind of white-haired man who had snowy hair and a youthful face, but we did not see his feet. iv. And to his right and left there were four elders, and behind them stood all the rest of the elders, quite a few of them. v. And we went in and stood before the throne in wonder, and four angels raised us up and we kissed him, and he slapped us across the face with his hand. vi. And the rest of the elders said to us, ‘“Let us stand,”’ and we did and gave the kiss of peace. And the rest of the elders said to us, ‘“Go and play.”’ vii. And I said to Perpetua, ‘“You have what you want!”’ And she said to me, ‘“As happy as I was in my body, I thank God I am even happier here now!”’

13. And we went out, and in front of the doors we saw Optatus the bishop on the right and Aspasius the priest and teacher on the left, standing apart from one another and looking sad. ii. And they threw themselves at our feet and said, ‘“Reconcile us, since you have departed and have left us like this.”’ iii. And we said to them, ‘“Are you not our father and you our priest, that you throw yourselves at our feet?”’ And we were moved and embraced them. iv. And Perpetua began speaking Greek to them, and we took them aside in the park under the rose tree. v. And while we were speaking with them the angels said to them, ‘“Let them refresh themselves, and if you have any disagreements between you, forgive one another.”’ vi. And they said to Optatus, ‘“Correct your people, since they come to you like hooligans from the races arguing about their teams.”’ vii. And with this it seemed to us that they wanted to close the gates.

viii. And we began to recognize there many of our brothers who were also martyrs. All of us together inhaled a scent that was so satisfying I can’t describe it. Then I woke up, rejoicing.

14. These are the more important visions of the blessed martyrs themselves, Saturus and Perpetua, which they themselves recorded.

ii. But as for Secundulus, God called him to leave this world earlier, while he was still in prison, though not withholding grace sufficient to face the beasts: iii. But although his soul did not acknowledge the sword, his flesh surely did.

15. And as for Felicity, the Lord's grace touched her, too, in this way.

p. 21 ii. When she was in her eighth month (for she was pregnant when she was arrested), as the day of the spectacle approached she was very anxious that it might be put off because of her condition (since it is illegal for pregnant women to be made part of a punitive spectacle) and that she would pour out her holy and innocent blood at a later time together with other, real criminals. iii. And her fellow martyrs, too, became sad at the prospect of abandoning so good an ally to be (so to speak) a solitary fellow-traveller along the same road of hope. iv. And so with a single unified lament they poured out a prayer to the Lord three days before the event. v. Immediately after the prayer she was beset by pains, and when she began to suffer as she laboured to give birth, as was natural in a delivery during the eighth month, one of the prison guards said, 'If this is how you act now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts that you didn't care about when you decided not to sacrifice?' vi. And she answered, 'Now I am the one suffering what I suffer, but then another inside me will suffer for me, since I will also be suffering for him.' vii. And she delivered a girl, which one of the sisters raised for her as her own daughter.

16. Since, therefore, the Holy Spirit permitted and, by virtue of permitting it, willed that the sequence of the actual spectacle be written down, we, though unworthy to supplement the description of such glory, nevertheless serve as the executors of the most holy Perpetua's will, or rather as the trustees of her estate, by adding this one proof of her constancy and of the exaltedness of her soul.

ii. When the tribune was treating them with especial harshness because, on the basis of some warnings that he had received from some very foolish people, he was afraid that they would be stolen away from prison by certain magical incantations, Perpetua answered him face to face: iii. 'Why do you not just let us refresh ourselves, since we are especially distinguished wrongdoers, against Caesar no less, and are to fight on his very birthday? Is it not to your credit if we look well-fed when we are led out that day?' iv. The tribune recoiled and reddened, and he ordered them to be treated more decently; with the result that her brothers and all the rest had the opportunity to enter and refresh themselves with them, since even the warden of the prison was by now a believer.

17. On the day before the event as well, when in place of that last supper that they call the 'dinner of the free' they celebrated for all they were worth not a dinner of the free but a banquet of divine love, they taunted the common people with their usual determination, threatening them with God's judgement, insisting that they themselves were happy in their passion, ridiculing the curiosity of those who looked about them, as Saturus said, ii 'Tomorrow is not enough for you? Why are you so eager to see what you hate? Friends today, enemies tomorrow. But remember our faces well, so that you may recognize us on That Day.' iii. And so they all went away in astonishment, and many of them became believers.

18. The day of their victory dawned and they processed from the prison into the amphitheatre cheerfully, as if to heaven, with composed expressions, except perhaps for an excitement caused by joy and not by fear.

ii. Perpetua followed them with a steady gait, like a bride of Christ or the favourite of God, parrying the gaze of all with the strength of her own; iii. and Felicity too, rejoicing to have survived childbirth so that she might battle against the beasts, going from one blood-sport to the next, from midwife to gladiator, to bathe after childbirth in her second baptism.

p. 22 iv. And when they had been led to the gate and forced to don costumes—the men as priests of Saturn, and the women as devotees of Ceres and her daughter—Perpetua, a noblewoman to the end, adamantly refused. v. She said, 'The point of deliberately going this far was not to have our freedom taken away; the point of staking our lives was to avoid doing this kind of thing. That was our agreement with you.' vi. Injustice acknowledged justice, and the tribune gave in. They were led in as they were, without costume.

vii. Perpetua began to sing in joy, already stepping on the Egyptian's head. Revocatus and Saturninus and Satorus made threats against the crowd of spectators. viii. Then, when they came beneath the gaze of Hilarianus, with gestures and signs they spoke to him: 'What you do to us,' they said, 'God will do to you.' ix. At this the people, enraged, demanded that they be beaten with whips along the gamut of the hunters; and the martyrs were quite gratified to experience something of our Lord's sufferings.

19. But he who had said '*Ask, and ye shall receive*' had, when they asked, given them the end for which each one had longed. ii. For whenever they conversed amongst themselves about each one's prayer for martyrdom, Saturninus declared that he wanted to be thrown to all kinds of beasts—no doubt so that he might wear a more glorious crown. iii. And so it happened that in the actual spectacle, after going up against the leopards, Revocatus and he were also tortured on the platform by a bear. iv. Now Satorus loathed nothing more than a bear; but he was sure that he would first be finished off by a leopard in one bite. v. And so it happened that when he was being matched against a boar, it was the hunter who had tied him up to the boar who was instead gored by the beast and died a few days after the day of the spectacle, and Satorus merely got dragged about. vi. Then when he had been tied to a plank for a bear, the animal refused to leave its cage. And so for a second time Satorus was called back unharmed.

20. For the young ladies, however, the devil, in order to mimic their sex even in the matter of the beast, obtained an extremely fierce heifer, a quite out of the ordinary thing procured for that very purpose. ii. And so, stripped naked and hobbled by nets, they were brought out. The people were aghast as they looked upon them, the one a beautiful girl, the other a woman fresh from giving birth and with dripping breasts. iii. So they were called back and dressed in loose robes.

Perpetua was first to be thrown and she fell on her back. iv. And when she sat up, she rearranged the tunic that had been torn away from her body to cover her hips, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. v. Then she asked for a hairpin and tied back her disheveled hair; for it was inappropriate to suffer martyrdom with her hair in that state, lest she seem to be mourning in her hour of glory. vi. So she rose, and when she had seen the wounded Felicity she approached and gave her hand and raised her up. And they both stood together. vii. And after winning over the people's hard-heartedness they were called back into the Gate of Life and Health.

viii. There, after she was welcomed and as it were awakened from sleep (to such an extent was she in the Spirit and in ecstasy) by a catechumen named Rusticus, who was ever with her at that time, Perpetua began to look around ↵ and said to the astonishment of all, 'When,' she said, 'are we getting taken to that—what is it—that heifer?' ix. And when she heard what had already happened, she did not believe it, except she had noticed some signs of struggle on her body and on her clothing. Then she summoned her brother, who was also a catechumen, and addressed him saying, 'Stand firm, all of you, in faith; and love one another, and do not falter because of our sufferings.'

21. Likewise Satorus at another gate spoke to encourage a soldier, Pudens. 'After all,' he said, 'just as I thought and predicted, I have felt no beast right up to this point. And now you may believe whole-heartedly: watch me go out there and be consumed by a leopard in one bite.' ii. And right away, at the end of the spectacle, he was thrown to a leopard and with one bite was covered in so much blood that the people bore witness to his second baptism: 'Saved and bathed! Saved and bathed!' iii. Clearly he was saved who had so bathed.

iv. Then to the soldier Pudens he said 'Goodbye, and remember your faith and me; and let these things not undermine, but strengthen you!' v. And at the same moment Satorus asked for the little ring from Pudens' finger, put it into his own wound, and gave it to Pudens as a legacy, leaving it to him as a pledge and a reminder of his blood. vi. Then, practically dead, he was thrown together with the rest in the usual place for the final thrust.

vii. And when the people demanded that they be brought out to the middle of the arena, to make their eyes accomplices in murder to the sword that penetrated the victims' bodies, the martyrs got up by themselves and went to the place where the people wanted them, first kissing one another, so as to consummate their martyrdom with the rites of peace. viii. The rest of them received the sword without moving and in silence; especially Saturus, who was first to ascend to heaven, first to surrender his spirit; for he was waiting for Perpetua as well.

ix. Perpetua, however, so that she might taste some pain, shrieked when she was stabbed in a bony spot, and herself redirected the aimless hand of the inexperienced gladiator right at her neck. x. Perhaps such a great woman, who was feared even by an unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she herself had wished it.

xi. O bravest and most blessed martyrs, truly called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! And He who magnifies and honours and adores that glory should also read these testimonies, which are no less important than ancient ones for the edification of the Church, so that new acts of bravery as well may testify to the continuing work, even down to the present moment, of the Holy Spirit, ever one and the same, and of God the Father and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom renown and measureless power forever! Amen.