



# CATHOLIC HEROES OF THE FAITH

Leader's Guide for the DVD

## *The Saint Perpetua Story*



L E A D E R



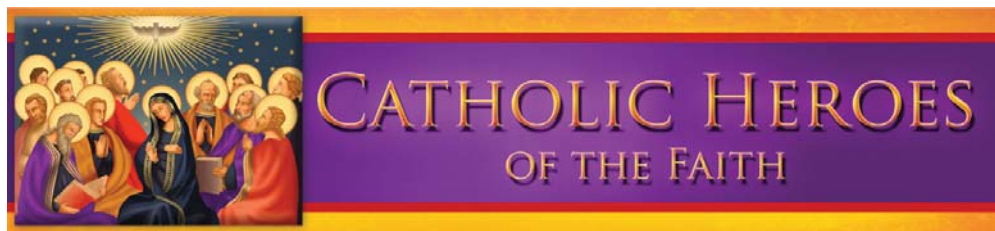
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## Introduction to the *Catholic Heroes of the Faith* Series



Kids have no shortage of heroes, from Hollywood celebrities to pop music artists to sports stars. But they are rarely people Catholic parents would want their children to know, much less imitate.

The heroes offered by popular culture usually teach children that physical perfection, financial success, sexual adventures, and fame are the most important things in life. They often teach children morals and values in direct opposition to the standards Catholic parents want to pass on to their children.

The Catholic Heroes of the Faith DVD series has been created to show children real heroes worth emulating. These heroes have lived truly great lives—lives marked by moral depth, strength of character, physical courage, and an unswerving commitment to Christ and His Church.

By seeing how these heroes struggled to serve Christ and His Church, and how they succeeded so gloriously, we are all challenged to live lives like theirs. Pope Benedict XVI has said of the Saints that we should look to their “shining example to reawaken within us the great longing to be like them—happy to live near God, in His light, in the great family of God’s friends. Being a Saint means living close to God, to live in his family. And this is the vocation of us all.” He continues:

“But how can we become holy friends of God? We can first give a negative answer to this question: to be a Saint requires neither extraordinary actions or works nor the possession of exceptional charisms. Then comes the positive reply: it is necessary first of all to listen to Jesus and then to follow Him without losing heart when faced by difficulties.”

It is our sincere desire that as children get to know these great Catholic heroes, they will be challenged to follow the greatest hero of them all, Jesus Christ. Learn more about this series at:

**[www.catholicheroesofthefait.com](http://www.catholicheroesofthefait.com)**



## Synopsis of *Catholic Heroes of the Faith:* *The Saint Perpetua Story*

In the year 202, the Roman emperor has decreed that there shall be no new Christians. Conversions are forbidden on pain of death. This “sect” is seen as bad news. They refuse to offer the required sacrifice to the emperor, and that looks like sedition. They must be stopped before others join them and upset the system!

In ancient Carthage, as all over the Empire, men and women still come to Christ, though they know they might be executed for doing so. They keep joining the small group of believers who gather under the cover of darkness to worship the one true God revealed in Jesus. Slave and free, rich and poor, old and young, all come together in faith to hear the Scriptures and share in the sacred meal, strengthening their bond with each other and their commitment to God.

Among the new believers is a privileged young mother named Perpetua. When the Roman soldiers swoop into the peaceful meeting, they arrest all the new believers, who are preparing for baptism. Perpetua is arrested along with her slave, Felicity, who is pregnant, and three others. Perpetua no longer sees Felicity as a slave, but as a sister in Christ.

Ancient prisons were horrible places: dark, stinking (there were no toilets), hot, crowded, and dangerous. Thrown into this prison, the group is given opportunities to offer the required sacrifice to the Roman emperor. Perpetua is separated from her baby, who is still nursing and may die without his mother.

By offering just a simple pinch of incense to the emperor as a god, Perpetua and her companions can escape the prison and return to their families and the comforts of the world. Everyone else does it, no matter what gods they worship. But the early Christians, though obedient to the government, refuse to do anything that looks like idolatry.

Through her diary, Perpetua leaves us a written record of their ordeal and the many ways the Lord brings comfort to them. They are encouraged through the visits of other believers. One, who may have been their catechist or teacher, even joins them in prison in order to share in their martyrdom. They are strengthened by God in many ways, including a vision confirming that they are to be martyred but will have victory over death and eternal life in Heaven.

Finally the prisoners are put on trial. Each one refuses to renounce his or her belief in God, and the Roman judge condemns them to be killed by wild beasts.

It is said that many in Carthage found Christ and entered the Church because of the witness of Saint Perpetua, Saint Felicity, and their companions. Saint Perpetua's story encourages each of us to make faith in God our highest priority, and not to be swayed by outside forces. Her faith and actions were radical in her time, and she continues to challenge believers today to walk more fully with God.





## Teaching Plan for *The Saint Perpetua Story*

**1. Preview *The Saint Perpetua Story* before showing it to your students.** (Watching the documentary “Saint Perpetua: Martyr of the Faith” is also recommended.) This will help you to recognize the major themes and teachable moments that occur throughout the video. In addition, you will gain a better understanding of the flow of the story and will be equipped to answer questions your students may have.

If you can, read Perpetua’s story of her and her friends’ imprisonment and trial. It ends with an account of their martyrdom written by someone else. It can be found at <http://www.catholicheroesofthefait.com>. The story is only a few pages long, but it illustrates how these early Christians lived and thought, and how bravely they faced death.

The major themes presented in this video and study guide are:

- Remaining faithful to God should be our highest priority, above wealth, comfort, and family—and even our lives.
- The early church spread through the work and lives of ordinary people.
- Having a strong love for God and being faithful to His Church helps us stand for our beliefs even when we are threatened with suffering and death.
- God brings us comfort and courage when we suffer and rewards our faithfulness with eternal friendship with Him in Heaven.

**2. Review the Supplementary Information:** The sections titled “Key People in Perpetua’s Life,” “The Ancient World of Perpetua,” and “Key Events in the Second Century” will fill in details of Perpetua’s life and world and prepare you to answer the kinds of factual questions children might ask.

The section titled “Relevant Catholic Doctrines,” will tie the story to the Church’s teaching and will help you explain to the children what is important about the story and how it relates to the Church today. The section titled “Quotes About the Martyrs” will give deeper insights into the subjects and into the Saints in general.

You can find these resources beginning on page 16. Viewing the documentary *Saint Perpetua: Martyr of the Faith*, available on DVD, is also an excellent way to learn more about Saint Perpetua’s amazing story and witness.

**3. Select and Prepare Teaching Material:** The four lesson plans lead children through the story of Saint Perpetua, teaching them something about the Bible, the early Church, evangelization, courage, and self-identity. All material is reproducible and designed to help children apply the teaching themes.

Special supplies are needed for activities and crafts in Sessions 1 and 4. If you plan to conduct the interview as part of Session 4, give your guest plenty of advance notice so he or she can arrange to be there and can prepare.



## Session 1 – A Humble Beginning

**Focus:** Christianity began as a small movement and spread through the world as people put their faith into practice. Some even died for Christ, but their witness brought even more people into the Church.

### OPENING PRAYER:

Begin with an Our Father and a Hail Mary, said together. Tell the children that they are praying for the courage to follow Jesus, no matter what.

### ACTIVITY: SPREADING THE FAITH:

Before class, prepare a batch of homemade dough (see page 8 for the recipe). Place the dough in a quart-sized zip bag and seal carefully. You will need the dough and some bright food coloring for this demonstration.

**Say:** *Let's imagine the dough represents all the people of the world and this food coloring represents the Christian faith. The Church started out small, with just a few people believing Jesus' message. (Add a few drops of food coloring to the dough and re-seal.)*

*If we lived right after Pentecost, this bit of color might represent how much of the world believed Jesus' message of salvation. (Pass the bag to a student, and have them knead the dough for a bit.) Over time, Jesus' message began to spread. (Continue passing the dough, allowing each student to knead it and spread the color a bit more. Add more food coloring if needed.)*

*At first the faith spread slowly, but soon it spread more rapidly. Of course, not all who heard of Jesus and His message believed in Him and entered the Church. Let's try to decide when to stop mixing our dough, in order to represent how much of the world believes in Jesus now. (Most researchers believe that about 1/3 of the world's population identify themselves as Christian.)*

**Say:** *Let's take a look at our dough. Is the colored portion a good representation of the percentage of Christians in the world today?*

### BIBLE CONNECTION:

Read the story of Jesus appearing to the eleven disciples on the mountain, found in Matthew 28:16-20. Explain the context, especially that Jesus is speaking to the men who will become the leaders — the first pope (Peter) and the first bishops — of His Church after He ascends to Heaven. Stress the “Great Commission,” which challenged believers then and now to spread the “Good News” of Christianity and to bring people of all countries and races into the Church through baptism. Mention that those listening to Jesus were everyday people — several were fishermen — but these believers began the work of evangelization so well that Christianity is now the world's largest religion.



**Ask:** *What are some of the churches in our diocese? Imagine how far Christianity had to spread to have so many churches all this way from Jerusalem!*

### **PREVIEW:**

Show video preview of *The Saint Perpetua Story*, found at the beginning of your DVD.

**Say:** *The next time we meet, we will see a video about Saint Perpetua, a young woman who lived a very long time ago, about 200 years after the time of Christ. Though it was a dangerous thing to do, Perpetua became a Christian. Her faith was put to the test when she had to make a difficult choice. Her example shows us one of the ways the early Christians fulfilled the Great Commission.*

Invite students to bring a friend next time and use the following project if desired:

### **EXPLORE AN IMPORTANT SYMBOL:**

Use the two worksheets based on the Ixthus, found on pages 3 and 4 in the Student Handouts. As students complete the two worksheets, **Ask:**

- *Why would the Christians use a symbol to help others find them?*

Two reasons: 1) Because they were often being persecuted for their faith and had to worship and meet in secret. 2) Because people always make up symbols for the things or people they value. They're somewhat like national flags.

- *How do you think Christians might have used this symbol in early church times?*

Two ways: 1) As a secret code to tell other believers where they were and to mark the homes in which they worshipped. They might have put them on the outside of the houses, on fence posts, in their meeting spots. 2) As a reminder of who they were and who they followed. Christians used such symbols the way people fly their country's flag or wear flag pins on their coats. And even the way football fans put their team's emblem on their cars.

- *What kind of symbols like the fish do you have in your home?*

### **INVITATION PROJECT:**

Explain that in the time of the early church, people wrote on papyrus, an early form of paper. Distribute 12X12 inch squares cut from brown paper bags. Have students crumple and smooth their pieces of paper several times to make them look weathered. Using black markers or black paint, have students draw an Ixthus on their paper. Simplify by omitting the Greek letters, if necessary. Have them also write the date and time of your next class.

**Say:** Use this paper as an invitation for a friend to join us next time we meet, when we will see *The Saint Perpetua Story*.



## CLOSING PRAYERS:

Begin with

*Lord, You have challenged us to spread the Gospel into “all the nations,” but sometimes it’s even harder to share the Good News with our own friends and neighbors! Help us to know if there is someone we could tell about you. Help us also to invite friends to our church and to our class. Amen.*

Close with the collect for Saints Perpetua and Felicity from the Commons for the Martyrs:

*Father, your love gave the saints Perpetua and Felicity courage to suffer a cruel martyrdom. By their prayers, help us to grow in love of you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.*

Then pray with the children: “Saint Perpetua, pray for us. Saint Felicity, pray for us.”

**Note:** In preparation for future lessons, save a copy of the Ixthus worksheets, the bag of dough and one of the invitations. Also, take time this week to invite a special guest for session 4 (someone who uses a diary or a journal and can share with your class). If your class will be making personal journals in session 4, purchase supplies and prepare a sample before that session.

## HOMEMADE DOUGH:

1 cup flour  
1 cup warm water  
2 teaspoons cream of tartar  
1 teaspoon oil  
1/4 cup salt

Mix all ingredients in a non-stick pan. Stir over medium heat until thick and smooth. Remove from pan and knead until blended smooth. Place in zip bag and seal well. NOTE: Purchased white play dough may be substituted, but be sure to knead it well before class, as it will not be as smooth as the home-made variety.





## Session 2: A Strong Identity

**Focus:** In this session, children will view *The Saint Perpetua Story* and will consider Perpetua's strong identity in Christ and how that made her so brave.

### OPENING PRAYER:

Begin with an Our Father and a Hail Mary, said together. Tell the children that they are praying for the courage to be like Perpetua and her friends and never turn their backs on Jesus.

### REVIEW:

Bring out the Ixthus worksheets from last time. Challenge students to remember what the symbols represent and what was discussed about the early church and the spread of faith. Be sensitive to any guests that have come today and share in such a way as to include them.

### ACTIVITY: IDENTITY QUEST

Prepare small paper tags with short "identities" that students in your class might have, such as: *daughter, son, brother, soccer player, pianist, artist, grandchild, friend, student, and volunteer*. Randomly attach these tags to students' backs with clothespins, so they cannot see what is on their own back.

*Say: Each of you has a tag on your back with an identity that could be true of someone your age. It is not an identity that you necessarily have personally. You must ask your classmates Yes or No questions and try to figure out your identity. This will be a "free for all" where you can roam around the room. You may take guesses on your identity at any time.*

End the activity when most of the students have figured out their identity. **Ask:** *How did it feel to not know who you are? Do you think you could be happy if you didn't know who you are?*

### BIBLE CONNECTION:

If time allows, read the story of the Church's first martyr, Saint Stephen, in Acts 6:8-15 and 7:54-60. You may want to summarize for them Stephen's long speech defending his faith, for which he was about to die. Stress the joy Stephen felt in dying for the Lord and his vision of Heaven being opened to him.

### PERPETUA'S STORY:

Use page 5 of the Student Handouts to help students connect with the young people they will meet in the video. **Say:** *This is a word for someone who is learning about the faith. Perpetua and her friends were Catechumens.*



### **Introduce the Video:**

**Say:** *Today we are going to see the story of Perpetua, a young mother who lived around the year 200 AD. Saint Perpetua knew who she was and she wasn't afraid to say it. She had a VERY strong sense of identity. As you watch, look for a time when Perpetua uses a vase to help her father understand who she is. Find out what one word she uses to describe herself.*

**Show the 30-minute program *Catholic Heroes of the Faith: The Saint Perpetua Story*.**

**Student Questions:** Allow students time to process the video and ask questions about it. **Ask:** *Did you notice the scene where Perpetua uses the vase to illustrate her point? What does Perpetua say she is? Why was that a dangerous thing to do?*

**Further Discussion:** Lead discussion using appropriate questions from the “Dig into the Story” and “Dig Deeper” sections (pages 6 and 7 in the Student Handouts). Refer back to these discussion questions as needed during the remaining two sessions.

**Parent Letter:** Distribute this letter to help parents understand the lessons you are sharing in class (page 15 in Leader's Guide).

### **CLOSING PRAYERS:**

Begin with:

*Lord, We thank you for Saint Perpetua's life and example. She knew who she was and she was not afraid of anything or anyone. She put serving you ahead of everything else. Thank you that she left a legacy through her writings, so we can know of her story. Help us to know what we believe and to be willing to always stand up for the truth. Amen.*

Then close with the collect for Saints Perpetua and Felicity:

*Father, your love gave the Saints Perpetua and Felicity courage to suffer a cruel martyrdom. By their prayers, help us to grow in love of you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.*

Then pray with the children: “Saint Perpetua, pray for us. Saint Felicity, pray for us.”

### **CLOSING:**

**Say:** *Next time we will explore a bit more about how we define ourselves and how we are known to others.*

**Note:** Refer to the answer key for answers to selected student pages.



## Session 3: *Who am I?*

**Focus:** Explore the values and beliefs that define us, and how we can be more like the first Christians.

### OPENING PRAYER:

Begin with an Our Father and a Hail Mary, said together. Tell the children that they are praying for the courage to follow Jesus, no matter what.

### REVIEW:

**Ask:** *Who remembers the one word Perpetua used to identify herself in our DVD last week? (Christian) Why was that a dangerous thing to do? Alternate Idea:* Use the coloring pages that are provided in the Student Handouts as a way of having the class review the story.

### ACTIVITY: WHO AM I?

**Say:** *Today we will think a bit about how we identify ourselves and what the early church was known for.* Pass out copies of the Student Page entitled *Who Am I?*, found on page 8 of the Student Handouts. Have students answer the questions, without putting their names on the pages. Collect the papers, shuffle them and then hand them back out in a random fashion. Challenge students to guess whose paper they have, based on the descriptions. **Ask:** *If you had to choose just one word to describe yourself, what word would you use? What word did Perpetua use to describe herself to her father? How important is it to know who you are and be ready to stand for your beliefs?*

### ACTIVITY II: CHARACTER COUNTS

Display the dough from the first activity in Session 1. **Ask:** *Can anyone explain what this dough represents? Who remembers how much of the world identifies themselves as Christians? (approximately 30%) Do you think the Christians of our time can be known by their actions and their lives? The believers in the early church became known in their society for some pretty remarkable characteristics.*

Distribute the worksheet *Character Counts* on page 9 in the Student Handouts and discuss the character traits that set the early Christians apart from others, while the students do the word search. **Ask:** *What sets Christians apart today? Are there things on this list that Christians are still doing? How do modern people learn about Christianity if they've never heard? Which characteristic from the word search is hardest for you to do?*

### BIBLE CONNECTION:

Read the story of Daniel and the fiery furnace, found in Daniel 6. Stress how Daniel was faithful to God, even when the laws of the land meant he might be put to death for following his beliefs. Draw parallels with Perpetua's story. **Ask:** *Are there times today when it is hard to obey what we know God wants us to do?*



## **CLOSING PRAYERS:**

Begin with:

*Lord, You died for our sins and you have called us to be your people. Yet sometimes we fail to even acknowledge you. Sometimes we live only for ourselves. Please forgive us and help us to make wise choices and to put you first in our lives. Amen.*

Then close with the collect for Saints Perpetua and Felicity:

*Father, your love gave the Saints Perpetua and Felicity courage to suffer a cruel martyrdom. By their prayers, help us to grow in love of you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.*

Then pray with the children: “Saint Perpetua, pray for us. Saint Felicity, pray for us.”

## **CLOSING:**

**Say:** *Next time we will interview a friend who uses journaling to record experiences and remember important events.*

Note: Refer to the answer key for answers to selected student pages.



## Session 4: A Lasting Legacy (Special Guest Interview)

**Focus:** The importance of recording our thoughts and experiences for the benefit of ourselves and others.

### OPENING PRAYER:

Begin with an Our Father and a Hail Mary, said together. Tell the children that they are praying that they will use their chances to tell others about Jesus and what he has done for them the way Perpetua did.

### REVIEW:

Use *Story Mix-Up*, found on page 10 of the Student Handouts, to help students review. Using the pictures on this worksheet, have a few students tell Perpetua's story to your guest.

### ACTIVITY, PART I: PRESERVING OUR STORIES

Hold up one of the invitations that was made from crumpled paper bag in session 1. **Ask:** *Who can remember what kind of paper Perpetua might have written on? (papyrus) We know of Perpetua's story mostly because she kept a diary. In her time most girls did not know how to read and write. In fact she is credited as the earliest Christian woman to have left a written legacy! Let's look at some other ways people throughout time have recorded their stories and the history of their time and place. Use page 11 of the Student Handouts to complete this activity. Ask: Why would it be a good idea to record our stories? Does anyone here keep a diary or a journal?*

**Journal Writer's Interview:** Invite someone who keeps a diary or a prayer journal to come and share about this with the class. Introduce your guest and then have the students use the interview questions (page 12 of the Student Handouts) to get the discussion going.

### BIBLE CONNECTION:

**Say:** *Did you ever wonder how the Christian story was passed down? Some people told others and they told others. Part of the story was told and retold in the celebration of the Mass. Finally, some people wrote down the stories and it became easier to pass them on to others.*

**Ask:** *What is your favorite story about Jesus? The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John took the time to record the life of Jesus, so we would know of the things He taught and did. Imagine if no one had written down Jesus' life story!*

Read the very last verse of the book of John (John 21:25). Imagine together the meaning behind this statement regarding the immense number of miracles and teachings that were never recorded.



## ACTIVITY, PART II:

Use the project idea on page 13 of the Student Handouts to lead students in making their own journals. Encourage them to use their journals to record their own faith story. As they do, they will see how faith grows over time.

## CLOSING PRAYERS:

Begin with:

*Lord, we thank you for the record of Saint Perpetua's life and faith and the lasting legacy she left. Help us to leave our own legacy of faith. Amen.*

Then close with the collect for Saints Perpetua and Felicity:

*Father, your love gave the Saints Perpetua and Felicity courage to suffer a cruel martyrdom. By their prayers, help us to grow in love of you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.*

Then pray with the children: "Saint Perpetua, pray for us. Saint Felicity, pray for us."

Dear Parents,

Today your child viewed a DVD from the *Catholic Heroes of the Faith* series depicting the life of Saint Perpetua, a young mother of Carthage who lived in the early Church and was martyred for her faith in Jesus.

In the Roman Empire at the dawn of the third century, it was dangerous to become a Christian, but that didn't stop Perpetua and many others from professing the faith and joining those who worshipped the one true God. Perpetua, her slave Felicity, and three other new believers were arrested and tried as Christians. When they refused to offer a small sacrifice of incense to the emperor of Rome, they were sent to the arena to be martyred.

Saint Perpetua's steadfast faith and peace are known because of the diary she kept, the earliest known writing by a Christian woman. Through her account we meet a woman who would not compromise her beliefs, accepted her slave as a "sister," trusted God with her child, and found great comfort in knowing her final home would be in Heaven.

Through Saint Perpetua's story, children find a hero who would not be moved by the winds of society. Worldly wealth, social status, comfort, and convenience were nothing in comparison to the joy of following the Lord. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,



## Key People in Perpetua's Life

(In order of appearance in Perpetua's diary)

**Revocatus, Felicitas, Saturninus, and Secundulus:** The story begins with the arrest of these four, who were described as “young catechumens” — new believers being instructed in the faith and awaiting baptism — and “fellow slaves.” Felicitas (Felicity in our language) is Perpetua's slave and Revocatus is Felicitas' husband. Felicitas is several months pregnant. Secundulus dies while in prison.

**Vivia Perpetua:** Also a catechumen, she is described as “respectably born, liberally educated, a married matron.” She has a child she is still nursing. She is about 22 years old.

**Perpetua's Father:** A respected man, of a higher social status. He was a pagan who repeatedly begged his daughter to give up her faith and save her life. Respectable as he was, he was “thrown down and beaten with rods,” by the Roman authorities, apparently in an attempt to make his daughter recant. After she is sentenced he refuses to let her see her son. Perpetua does not tell us what official position he held, if any.

**Perpetua's Mother:** Not much is known about her.

**Perpetua's Brothers:** Perpetua had two brothers. One is also a catechumen, but wasn't arrested. Another had died, but she sees him in a dream which is recorded in her story.

**Perpetua's Aunt:** She is mentioned briefly in the diary, but we know nothing about her.

**Tertius and Pomponius:** Deacons who ministered to the prisoners. They bribed someone to get in and to get their friends better treatment.

**Hilarius:** The successor to the deceased proconsul Minucius Timanianus, and the man who sent the Christians to their deaths.

**Dinocrates:** Perpetua's deceased brother, whom she sees in a vision suffering in a gloomy place, still bearing the wounds from which he died. After she prays for him, she has another vision in which she sees him healed and knows “that he was translated from the place of punishment,” understood by Catholics to mean Purgatory.

**Pudens:** A soldier and assistant overseer of the prison, “who began to regard us with great esteem.” He began to let the prisoners' friends in to see them.

**Saturus:** Joins the prisoners and is also martyred with them. He is thought to have been their teacher or catechist. He also has a vision of the martyrs entering Heaven.

**Jocundus, Saturninus, Artaxius, and Quintus:** Martyrs “who had suffered the same persecution,” who were seen by Saturus in his vision. (Saturninus is a different martyr from Perpetua's companion.)

**Opatus, the Bishop and Aspasius, the presbyter (meaning priest):** Also seen in the vision of Saturus.





# The Ancient World of Perpetua

## The Roman Empire

At the time of our story, the Roman Empire controlled over two and one half million square miles of land, from Britain in the west through what is now France, Germany, and Switzerland. To the south it covered almost all of northern Africa above the Sahara Desert. To the east it stretched through Macedonia, Palestine, and Arabia and on down the coast of Africa. The enormous amount of territory meant the need for control was also great, causing the leaders to become wary of threats to the security of the Empire. It was the greatest Empire ever known since the conquests of the Macedonian Alexander the Great 700 years before, and it lasted longer.

At the dawn of the third century, the Empire was under the military dictatorship of the Emperor Septimius Severus, who ruled from 193 to 211. The emperor faced many problems, including threats from the fierce German tribes in the west, the fearsome Goths in what is now Russia, and the Sassanids in Iran.

He also had the growing numbers of Christians to worry about. It has been estimated that in the year 200 there were about 220,000 Christians in the Empire. This was only about one-third of one percent of the population, but the number had been growing steadily despite every attempt to wipe out the young Church. The number would jump to an estimated 1.2 million in 250, and keep growing to an estimated 34 million and 56% of the population one hundred years after that.

## Why the Romans Feared Christians

Rome tolerated local religions, as a way of keeping peace in all the countries they conquered. As long as they thought of Christianity as a Jewish sect, the Church had some protection, but as the difference gradually became clearer and Christianity began to be treated as a separate religion, it lost that protection.

While the Empire was threatened by outside forces, the Christians were perceived as an inner threat to peace and unity because they did not worship the Roman gods, and in particular did not offer the simple act of worship to the emperor required of everyone. Even worse, these Christians worshipped a man the Empire had put to death. They claimed that God had raised this Jesus from the dead, proving that their God was more powerful than the Empire.

Romans thought Christians were “atheists” and their religion a superstition, because for the Romans, religion was a social institution and its observance demonstrated loyalty and unity. In the 3rd Century the Roman Philosopher Porphyry wrote: *How can people not be in every way impious and atheistic who have apostatized from the customs of our ancestors through which every nation and city is sustained? . . . What else are they than fighters against God?* Keeping the Empire together was crucial and any threat had to be dealt with harshly.



And the Christian religion itself offended many. As Jesus warned the disciples, “You will be hated by all for my sake” (Luke 21:17). The world will hate His disciples because “they are not of the world” (John 17:14). This proved true in many ways in the early Church.

Christianity was an exclusive religion in a world where everyone's gods were equal, and the Christians' claim to a unique truth angered many. Christianity's moral teaching was often felt to be a reprimand to the morals of the day, and the Christians' distance from normal pagan society offended many pagans and made them look suspicious. At times, wild rumors were spread about the Christians because people misunderstood Christian practices. Christians were said to be having secret cannibal feasts, for example, because they celebrated the Eucharist. Even the equality of people within the Church upset Romans for whom social divisions were essential to social stability and prosperity.

One fact is important to know to understand the story of Saint Perpetua and her companions. When the emperor forbade conversions to Christianity, he did not forbid those who were Christians from remaining Christians. This explains why, after the new believers are arrested, the two deacons and others can visit them in prison. Still, his ruling made being a Christian much more dangerous, because local officials or even local mobs could decide to expand his ruling to include Christians who had been believers before. The Christians who came to visit the prisoners were, in a way, painting a bull's eye on their back.

## Carthage

Perpetua lived in Carthage, an ancient city in North Africa. The ruins of Carthage are to be found in Tunisia, a country just across the Mediterranean Sea from the island of Sicily. Roman historians wrote that Carthage was founded by the Phoenicians, or “Sea People.” The Phoenicians were powerful traders who lived along the coast of the Mediterranean.

In the centuries before Christ's birth, Carthage became very powerful, and the major world power opposed to Rome. This rivalry resulted in a long struggle called the Punic Wars. One of their leaders, Hannibal, became so great that he actually invaded Italy. Eventually, the Romans, under Scipio the Younger, conquered Carthage in the year 149 B.C. The old city was destroyed and in 29 B.C. rebuilt by the Romans, who settled it with Roman colonists and traders from around the known world. At the time of Perpetua's story, Carthage was the second greatest city in the western part of the Empire, after Rome.

Carthage must have felt the effects of the political and ethnical unrest that troubled the Empire during Perpetua's short life. Persecutions of Christians in North Africa began after the emperor, Septimus Severus, issued orders that conversions to Christianity were unlawful. The emperor may not have been directly responsible for these terrible persecutions, because he let the Church in Rome at peace under his reign and he is believed to have had Christians in his household.

Local magistrates in Africa, fearful of any political unrest and of the growing power of the Christian Church, seem to have been the villains. Those in Carthage had reason to fear unrest, for Carthage was not very well protected. Most of the Roman army in Africa was in Numidia, and the city had only a few soldiers under the resident proconsul. They were little more than a local police force.



The trouble was the number of Christians was growing. They appeared to be dangerous revolutionaries, or the kind of people who became dangerous revolutionaries. Who would protect Carthage from them if they became a threat?

### **Living in Carthage**

The Roman way of life was dominant in Carthage, since Rome had re-founded the city as a Roman colony. The meticulously planned city was set out in a grid, with carefully placed public services like the baths. Roman government and law was rigorously enforced. As the major port in the southern Mediterranean, the city was now large, wealthy, and cosmopolitan.

Perpetua's father was well respected, and so was his family. They probably lived in a very comfortable house with all the amenities available in such a large city, including slaves. Wealthy people built villas like those in Rome and Pompeii. There were public baths, theatres, and everything to make urban life more pleasant. Poor people lived in much less comfortable conditions, but Perpetua, while probably not wealthy, was one of the fortunate ones.

The Church in Carthage seems to have been flourishing. The early second century Church Father Tertullian has left us some stories of the Church there. About forty years after Perpetua's death, the city would produce one of the major theologians of early Christianity, Saint Cyril of Carthage, who was bishop of the city.

The climate of Tunisia today is pleasant. Carthage, on the coast, had the advantage of the Mediterranean Sea creating moderate weather conditions. Summer, which runs from May through September, is hot and dry with a high of around 91°F; the winter, which runs from October to April, is cool and wet, with average temperatures between 43°F and 57°F and frequent rains.



## Important Events in the Second Century

- 96-180** Nerva (96-98), Trajan (98-117), Hadrian (117-138), Antoninus Pius (138-161), and Marcus Aurelius (161-180) ruled during the period known as the *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome). They were succeeded in 180 by Commodus, who was mad but left Christians alone. During their reigns, most persecutions were sporadic and done by local mobs and officials.
- c. 110** Saint Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, martyred in Rome. He was either the successor or the second bishop of Antioch after Saint Peter. The seven letters he wrote on his way to his martyrdom stress the importance of the bishop and the Eucharist.
- c. 140-c. 160** The heretic Marcion was making trouble for the Church. He rejected the entire Old Testament and much of the New, arguing that these did not reflect the God of Jesus. He was excommunicated in 144.
- 144** Building of Hadrian's Wall in Britain. This was to protect the Roman colonies from the wild hordes in the north (in what is now Scotland).
- c.150-211/16** Clement of Alexandria, an Early Church Father and one of the greatest of the early theologians.
- c. 155** Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, martyred. He may have known Saint John and others who had known the Lord.
- c.155-c.220** Tertullian, an influential Christian theologian. He may have been the one to preserve Perpetua's writing. He famously wrote "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" and "The more you mow us down, the more numerous we grow." Unfortunately, he died outside the Church, having joined an heretical group called the Montanists.
- 165** Saint Justin, one of the first Christian apologists (those who tried to show non-believers what Christianity is and why they should come to Christ), martyred.
- 177** Persecution in Lugdunum (now Lyons) and Vienne in Gaul (France). A total of 48 Christians died for their faith. This persecution was sanctioned by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic philosopher who disliked Christianity for its teaching as much as what he thought was its danger to society.
- 180** Twelve from Scillii in North Africa are martyred.
- c. 185** Martyrdoms in Asia under Proconsul Arrius Antoninus. In Lugdunum, Saint Irenaeus writes *Against Heresies*, one of the first substantial theological works.



- c. 180-187** Saint Perpetua is born. (The year of her birth depends on when she died, the dates for her death ranging from 203 to 209.)
- 193** Septimius Severus comes to the throne, bringing many changes. His rule is known as “the military dynasty” because he so favored the military. He was faced with the threat of Germans from the west, Goths in what is now Russia, and the Sassanid Empire in Persia (Iran).
- 202** Septimius Severus forbids conversions to Christianity. He was not himself an active persecutor, but many Roman officials, such as those in Carthage, were.
- 203 or 209** The martyrdom of Saint Perpetua. The traditional date of martyrdom as 203 is suspect, because Perpetua wrote of the upcoming birthday of Geta Caesar, who was not made Caesar until 209.
- 211** The Emperor Septimius Severus dies. Rome is plunged into civil war.



## Relevant Catholic Doctrines

The story of Saint Perpetua and her companions illustrates two important Catholic teachings, that on idolatry and that on martyrdom. They would not commit idolatry and so they died as martyrs. We will look very briefly at the two teachings.

All the teaching given here comes from the documents of the Second Vatican Council and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (second edition).

### **Idolatry:**

The martyrs in Carthage would not offer any sacrifice to the emperor, because that would make him an idol. Idolatry is treating as God something or someone that is not God. Christians are forbidden by the First Commandment from doing this. And it is important to remember that almost anything can be an idol, not just wealth or success, but even the care of our children, if we put them before God and choose to serve them rather than God. The unexpected blessing is that by putting God first, we actually become better parents.

In the case of Saint Perpetua and her friends, the Romans would argue that the sacrifice they required was simply symbolic, something like our Pledge of Allegiance. All the Romans wanted was evidence that the Christians weren't going to start a revolt. The Christians weren't, but they still saw the sacrifice for what it was: putting a man in first place rather than God. They refused, even though they knew refusing would bring them a very, very painful death.

Saint Paul included idolatry among "the works of the flesh," with other sins such as lust, jealousy, envy, and drunkenness (Gal. 5:19-21). The Church teaches that idolatry is bad for us. As the *Catechism* puts it, "Human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God. The commandment to worship the Lord alone integrates man and saves him from endless disintegration."

Our life only works right when it is oriented rightly, with every aspect of our lives working for the same end (God). Otherwise it is somewhat like driving a car with all four wheels badly out of alignment, all pushing the car in different directions. You will get somewhere, but not without struggle, delay, and eventual breakdown.

*For more on this, see the Catechism, sections 2852, 2097, 2112-2114, and 2129.*

### **Martyrdom:**

The *Catechism* defines what Saint Perpetua and her companions suffered "the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith." The martyr endures his death through courage and is united with his dying and risen Lord through love. It is Christ, in other words, who pulls him through the suffering and rewards him with His friendship in Heaven. The martyr doesn't die because he wants to die, he dies because in his particular situation that is the only way he can serve his Lord, and he dies not primarily to make a witness but to serve and to see God.



As the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, put it:

Since Jesus, the Son of God, showed his love by laying down his life for us, no one has greater love than he who lays down his life for him and for his brothers (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16, Jn. 15:13). Some Christians have been called from the beginning, and will always be called, to give this greatest testimony of love to all, especially to persecutors. Martyrdom makes the disciple like his master, who willingly accepted death for the salvation of the world, and through it he is conformed to him by the shedding of blood. Therefore the Church considers it the highest gift and supreme test of love. And while it is given to few, all however must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the cross amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks.

The Church calls the stories of the martyrs “the archives of truth written in letters of blood.”

*For more on this, see the Catechism, sections 957, 1173, and 2473-2474.*



## Quotes about the Martyrs

### Quotes from the Early Church:

“I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ].”

— Saint Ignatius of Antioch

“The farthest bounds of the universe shall profit me nothing, neither the kingdoms of this world. It is good for me to die for Jesus Christ rather than reign over the fartherst bounds of the earth. Him I seek, who died on our behalf; Him I desire, who rose again [for our sake]. My new birth is upon me.”

— Saint Ignatius of Antioch

“Eighty and six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How, then, could I blaspheme my King who saved Me? . . . I bless Thee for deigning me worthy of this day and this hour that I may be among Thy martyrs and drink the cup of my Lord Jesus Christ.”

— Saint Polycarp

“For Him, being the Son of God, we adore, but the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord we cherish as they deserve for their matchless affection towards their own King and Teacher. May it be our lot also to be found partakers and fellow-disciples with them.”

— The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

— Tertullian

“The more you mow us down, the more numerous we grow.”

— Tertullian

### Quotes from modern sources:

“When we read, we fancy we could be martyrs; when we come to act, we cannot bear a provoking word.”

— Hannah More (early nineteenth century Protestant writer)

“It is truer to say that martyrs create faith more than faith creates martyrs.”

— Miguel de Unamuno (Spanish Catholic philosopher)





# Answer Key for Selected Student Pages

## A Secret Symbol, p. 3

IXTHUS

## The Ixthus, p. 4

JESUS  
CHRIST  
GOD  
SON  
SAVIOR

## Say What, p. 5

CATECHUMEN (CAT + ECHO - O + UP - P + MEN)

## Story Mix-Up, p. 9

## Character Counts, p. 10

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+ + + + + L + + C + + + + + +
+ + + + + U A + + + + + + +
+ + + G + + R F + + + + + + E
+ + + + E + I + + P + + + + + V
+ + + + N + + + + I + + + + + I
+ + + + G + E + + + + H + + + + S
+ + + + + R + + + + S + + + + U
F A I T H F U L O + + + + R + + + L
+ + + + + + + L U + + + + O + C
+ + + + + + U + + S + + + + W N
+ + + + + F + + S + + + + + I
+ + + + + R + + + H E V A R B + +
+ + + + E + + + + A + + + + + +
+ + + Y + + + + R + + + + + +
+ + A + + + + + I + + + + + +
+ R + + + + + + N + + + + + +
P + + + + + + + G + + + + + +
    
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(Over, Down, Direction)  
 BRAVE (15, 12, W)  
 CARING (10, 1, SW)  
 FAITHFUL (1, 8, E)  
 GENEROUS (4, 3, SE)  
 INCLUSIVE (17, 11, N)  
 PRAYERFUL (1, 17, NE)  
 SHARING (10, 11, S)  
 WORSHIPFUL (16, 10, NW)

**Story Mix-Up**  
 These pictures of Perpetua's story are all mixed up.  
 Number the pictures in the correct order.

<b>3</b>  Perpetua is allowed to have her baby with her in prison.	<b>6</b>  The pastor decides to join the prisoners.
<b>8</b>  Perpetua is taken to the arena.	<b>4</b>  Perpetua explains to her father that she is a Christian.
<b>1</b>  The believers meet in secret to worship.	<b>7</b>  Perpetua records her experiences in a diary.
<b>5</b>  Perpetua will not make the sacrifice to the emperor.	<b>2</b>  The group of believers is diverse.

## Preserving Our Stories, p. 11

- 1 Verbal passing of stories
- 2 Hieroglyphics
- 3 Scrolls or papyrus
- 4 Books
- 5 Photos
- 6 Tape recording
- 7 Videos
- 8 Internet