

VIEWED WITH SUSPICION: HOW OTHERS SEE CHRISTIANS

I have slowly been making my way through a fascinating book by Robert Louis Wilken, an esteemed professor Emeritus of History at the University of Virginia. Hardly new, the premise of “The Christians as the Romans Saw Them” (1984) intrigued me enough to purchase a used copy online. He studied how Christians were viewed **through the lens** of several key Roman figures in the second, third and fourth centuries. Thus, not what **we** thought of them, but how **they** saw us Christians. Since fallen human nature does not radically change, such an historical study is perennially valid. A key section dealt with one Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, born in 61 A.D. Thankfully, his buddies called him **Pliny the Younger!** He was a Roman senator and provincial governor who had been dispatched to investigate this novel group of people who worshipped a strange god. That group was the nascent Catholic Church.

His impressions provide a front row seat into how a traditional Roman viewed this unusual new group. It describes how early Christian practices were interpreted, albeit falsely, and gives us strong indications as to why Christians would be so brutally persecuted. At one point, Pliny interviewed two Christian slave women. Having heard rumors about the strange ceremonies, he inquired further about the nature of Christian worship. In his report to the emperor Trajan, he admitted that he had not turned up any new information. All he found was a “**depraved superstition** carried to extravagant lengths.” Evidently, Pliny didn’t mince words! But he wasn’t the only one who employed such language. His close friend and historian **Tacitus** did the same thing. Be on guard— many today view Catholic beliefs with suspicion, including for having superstitious beliefs about the Eucharist and the saints.

We all know from world history class that Emperor **Nero blamed Christians** for the burning of Rome. They were a convenient scapegoat, but years later, Tacitus wrote that it was not for setting the fire (which they didn’t in fact!) that the Christians were killed, but because of their “antisocial tendencies” (literally, “hatred of mankind”). He also credited the savagery of Nero. But amazingly, he concluded: “it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the public interest” (*Annales* 15.44). At the time, the term **superstition** was used generically to refer to beliefs and practices that were considered foreign to the Romans, clearly the dominant culture. Too often, the term is *subjective*. Whatever some find to be strange, is sloppily and uncritically called superstition. Whether the religion of the Celts in the British Isles or the practice of the Germanic tribes in northern Europe, to the Romans these all appeared as superstitious. But it is defined by the Church differently.

Athletes are notoriously superstitious. Baseball fans may recall Texas Rangers 1B **Mike Hargrove**, nicknamed “the human rain delay” so long did he take between pitches, going through an elaborate **ritual** that included: adjusting his helmet, batting gloves, pulling each sleeve up an inch, wiping his hands on his uniform pants, knocking the dirt from both cleats, to name but a few. I’ll give him a pass, because it appears less a superstition than a compulsion. Superstition occurs when one attributes “the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand” (CCC # 2111). Superstitions attempt to **manipulate God** to do *our will* rather than honestly seeking to submit to *His will*. They exist in all cultures and in all eras, but in the first century the Christians were wrongly pegged.

While for Romans, the religion of the empire was seen as a **treasured patrimony** from the past which gave sustenance to the life of the state, Christians sacrificed their lives rather than offer incense to pagan Roman gods. It was inevitable that the new movement originating from Palestine would be seen as a dangerous innovation that needed to be held in check. As Wilkin notes: “...the Christians were seen as religious fanatics, self-righteous outsiders, arrogant innovators, who thought that only their beliefs were true.” As they began their Roman sojourn, the first Christians were a tiny minority; at its peak, ancient Rome was home to 1,000,000. Yet, by 313 A.D., Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. That is astounding!

The “money line” from Pliny reveals the **depth of belief** of Christians. Evidently, rumors were circulating that claimed that Christians were cannibals! While he expected to find evidence of crimes, his observations revealed

nothing of the sort. These are the observations of a non-Christian: “They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant versus ultimately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a God...after the ceremony it had been their custom to disburse and reassemble later to take food ordinary harmless kind.” Even a **broken clock is right twice** per day. Early Christians **did chant** verses to Christ as if to a God— Jesus Christ, true God and true man. And the food in which they partook, while appearing ordinary, was the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

- The “Archivum Secretum Vaticanum” was founded by Pope Paul V in 1612. Last week, Pope Francis dropped the word “secret” from the office. Good call! The word was saddled with unmerited connotations. It was common to employ the term *secretum* for the private archives, whether of princes, kings, or even popes. In truth, documents from the aforementioned papal archives have been available to researchers since the 17th century. May this change prevent people from mistakenly inferring that the Church is hiding historical documents in cavernous tunnels underneath the Vatican!
- Busted! I was spotted entering a Minneapolis liquor store at 11:00 AM last Saturday! Cross my heart, I rarely enter liquor stores, but an engaged couple had stumped me when announcing that their wedding was on the **Feast of Saint Bean**, Oct. 26. Who? Never heard of him! I learned that in 1056 A.D. he founded the diocese (now defunct) of **Mortlach**, Scotland. Guess what? Today’s successor to that town (Dufftown) is home to Mortlach Distillery. (Hey, we have Pig’s Eye Beer!) I couldn't resist, purchasing the only bottle of Mortlach Scotch I could find in the Twin Cities as a wedding gift!
- Do you see the mouse on the bulletin cover? **St. Martin de Porres** (†November 3, 1639) was the quintessential “mouse whisperer.” Much to the chagrin of his fellow Dominican Friars, he spared the lives of the rodents in the monastery by talking them into staying outside, where he fed them daily!
- The **90th anniversary** of the **stock market crash** took place this past week, Oct. 29, 1929. It certainly hit home to my father’s family. His father was an optician, but in tough times, people didn’t fill their prescriptions, etc. They lost their house and my grandfather never again regained home ownership. The resilient and frugal generation that arose from the depression became our greatest generation, taught us never to give up. My father worked his way through Catholic high school at Treacy’s Pharmacy/soda shop at Grand and Lexington.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector