

# The Life of the Church

## Learning our Church History

### Part 2 - Lyon

#### Continuing Persecution

Persecution didn't end with Polycarp in the early part of the second century. The record of his persecution, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, doesn't conclude with a cessation of violence towards Christians. We discover from the church historian Eusebius that persecution continued into the latter half of the first century and the early part of the second century. But we must remember what Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:18,

**And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**

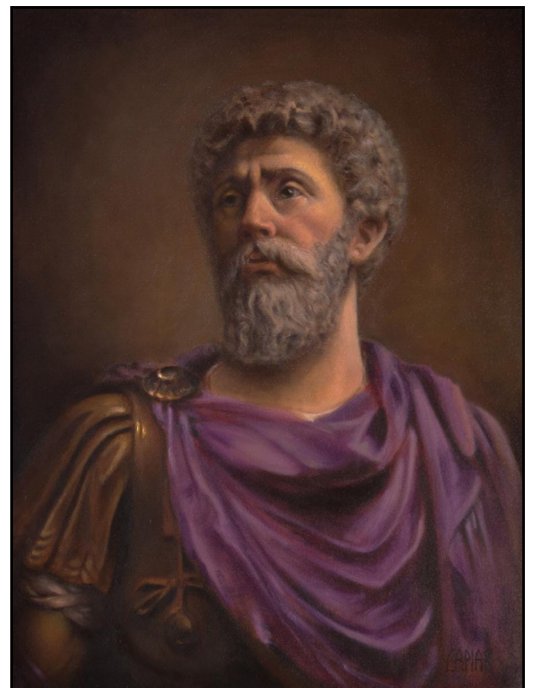
This promise from Jesus, as we will see in this study, held true as the church continued to grow. To see this we turn to the French city of Lyon.

Read: 2 Timothy 3: 10-17

#### Lyon

Early in the 100s, a church was started in Lyon in what was then Roman Gaul and under the control of the Roman Empire. From the beginning of the church, the local officials persecuted Christians. They hoped to eradicate Christians in their city and so harassed and persecuted them. But their efforts were to no avail. The Christians remained and thrived. By the time of the 170s, the local officials in Lyon stepped up their efforts and held nothing back in attempting to stamp out Christianity.

But the Roman officials in Lyon were out of step with the rest of the Empire. The 170s were not a time of intense Empire-wide persecution. Marcus Aurelius was Caesar and his background was philosophy and not military. This meant the direction of the Empire was one of the arts rather than conquest. He had turned his attention away from persecution and any persecution that did happen was more sporadic and intermittent. When it did happen it reflected more the attitudes of the local officials towards Christ than a policy of the Empire. In Lyon the local officials had run out of patience with the Christian community.

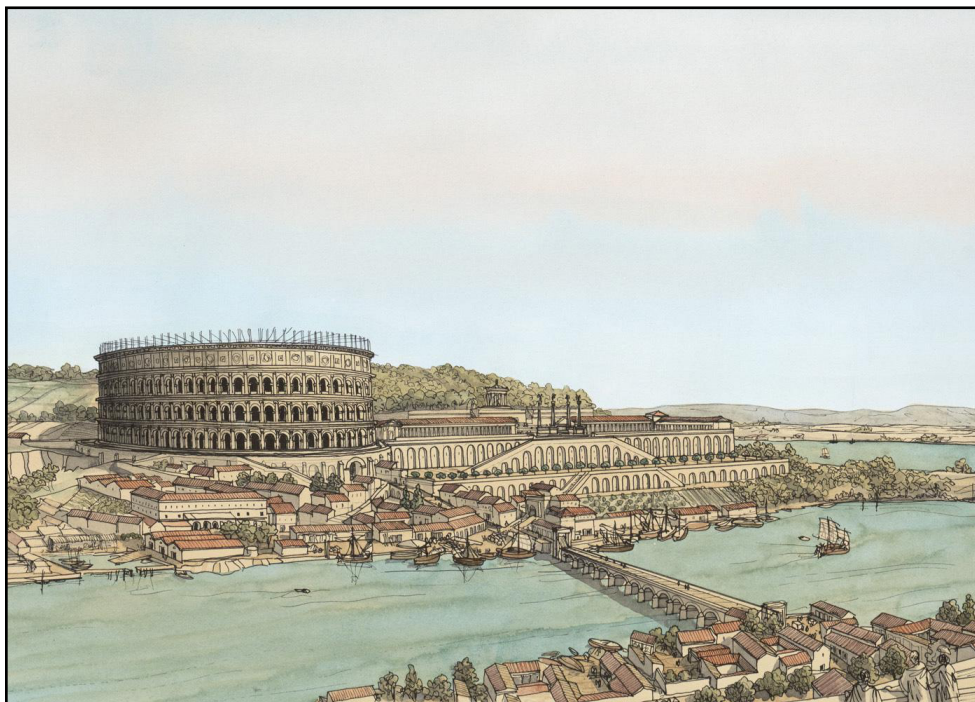


Marcus Aurelius, Caesar 161-180

#### Persecution in Lyon

Eusebius wrote down and preserved the record of the Christians at Lyon and of the persecution they faced in his book *The History of the Church*. Of the challenges faced by the Christians at Lyon he records,

*First of all, they endured nobly the injuries heaped upon them by the populous—clamours and blows and draggings and robberies and stonings and imprisonments, and all the things which an infuriated mob delight in inflicting on enemies and adversaries.*



*Lyon, AD100*

Among this list of persecutions, Eusebius mentions robberies. When Christians would leave their home in order to gather for worship, their neighbours would literally go into their houses and ransack and rob them.

The crucial moment came in 177. The officials of the city rounded up all the Christians together as one lot of criminals. They jailed them and after a time brought them into the amphitheatre. One by one, they called each Christian forward. The officials confronted them, demanding that they answer one question: "Are you a Christian?" Eusebius tells us that before this jeering mob and before these power-wielding officials, the Christians confessed. They confessed to no great crime against the Roman emperor or against the Roman Empire. They confessed to no great crime against their neighbours. They simply confessed that they were Christians, that they were followers of Christ. For this, they were tossed back into prison.

All of this was contrary to Roman law. They were imprisoned for a few weeks and treated harshly. This was an attempt to get them to recant their faith, which would shame and discredit them. A few did recant, but the vast majority maintained their confession and their conviction. And then the martyrdoms started. They would individually be brought into the arena. For the entertainment of the mob, they would be martyred. Eusebius tells us that there were forty-eight Christians in Lyon that were martyred. He goes on to say that the crowd watching *raged like wild beasts* against the Christians. One imprisoned Christian is recorded as saying,

*Even if they had before been moderate on account of friendship, they were now exceedingly furious and gnashed their teeth against us.*

One particular martyr in Lyon was called Blandina. Eusebius refers to her as a *noble athlete*. That's what Paul tell us in 1 Corinthians 9: 25-27

**Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.**

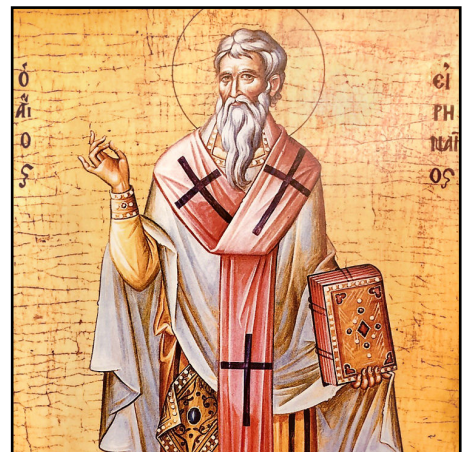


*Amphitheatre in Lyon*

Blandina stood in the arena before the crowd of raging beasts and simply said, “I am a Christian.”

### **Ireanaeus**

But that was not the end of the church at Lyon. The officials were not able to arrest all of the Christians. One in particular was a young elder named Ireanaeus, from Smyrna and ordained by Polycarp. He took a message, a plea for help really, to Rome. He met with the church there and worked with them to present his plea for mercy and intervention to the emperor himself, Marcus Aurelius. We have no evidence that Ireanaeus was able to have an audience before Marcus Aurelius and no evidence that he was able to present their case. By the time he returned to Lyon, these forty-eight people, these members of the community that he worshipped alongside of, had all been martyred. Ireanaeus simply stepped in and continued the church at Lyon. He would go on to be appointed bishop of Lyon. He wrote many books, including the influential *Against Heresies*. He made a strong case against the so-called Gnostic gospels, insisting that as there are but four directions, east, west, north and south, there are only four Gospels. Ireanaeus, too, ended his life a martyr.



### **Questions to Discuss**

1. In 2 Timothy 3: 12-13 Paul tells us that Christians will be persecuted. How are we seeing evil people and impostors going from bad to worse?
2. We may not have to recant our faith, but how do we shy away from faith in our everyday and what can we do to ensure we remain faithful to sharing the gospel?
3. Ireanaeus took a stand against the false teaching of gnosticism—secret knowledge. Do we still have gnostics today? If so, how do we identify them?

**Resources for this teaching series are available at [www.annalongpc.org/midweek](http://www.annalongpc.org/midweek)**