

# Blessed Are You

All Saints A  
Matt.5:1-12

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When it comes to All Saints, the Church has a wealth of stories about those who have gone before us in the faith. Some of the stories are rather fanciful and fantastic, and strain the credulity of a believer when reading them.

However, one story comes down to us in the form a long letter that was sent from Christians in Gaul (which is modern-day France) to the churches of neighboring countries and states, and is preserved word-for-word by Eusebius in his seminal *History of the Church* from the fourth century. I want to share that story with you today, because it truly shares, in an eyewitness form, the challenge that Christians faced in the early days of the Church.

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The time is 177 A.D. The place is Lyons and Vienne, two thriving Roman cities on the River Rhône in eastern France. Both cities give witness to the far-reaching spread of Christianity during the short century-and-a-half of its existence. Up until now, however, Christians in these cities had not known of the persecutions and troubles that other Christians had suffered in other parts of the Roman world.

For Roman citizens throughout the world had become increasingly suspicious and untrusting of Christians. Roman governors and tribunes themselves were generally not prone to hostility, but if the public they governed demanded it, they would torture and kill Christians for no other reason than that they were Christian.

So it was in Lyons and Vienne in 177. The atmosphere had suddenly become entirely intolerant and hostile toward Christians. They were accused of vile practices and sacrilegious rites -- from eating their own children to orgies of incest. And the stubborn refusal of Christians to acknowledge the traditional gods of Rome was an insult to all patriotic Roman citizens. The governors and tribunes in charge could no longer tolerate such blatant offense against the state. Christians were to be rounded up and made to acknowledge the Roman gods, or face the consequences.

Christians became a marked people. They were barred from public places -- houses, baths, the forum. Those known to be Christian by neighbors were subjected to verbal abuse, beatings, robbing, even stonings, dragging along the ground, and "everything that an infuriated mob normally does to hated enemies."\*

Those arrested were marched into the public forum and interrogated by the tribune and the city authorities in front of the whole populace. If they blatantly continued to confess Christ, they were locked up in jail to await the governor's examination. During their time of waiting, they were subjected to unspeakable tortures and humiliations.

Among those arrested and so tortured was Sanctus, a deacon from Vienne. With the greatest of determination, his persecutors had decided that they would break his defiant spirit and make him deny his Christ no matter how long it took. They strained every nerve in his body, using greater and greater torments against him until he has bruised and battered from head to toe. Still, all that Sanctus would say -- in Latin -- was, "I am a Christian." He would not give them name, race, birthplace, or any other information, except that he was a Christian.

After treating him mercilessly, when his tormentors could think of nothing else to do, they pressed red-hot copper plates against the most sensitive parts of his body. Still he did not yield, but would only say his Latin confession of faith: "I am a Christian." He was left in his cell, an emaciated lump of disfigured flesh, unable to stand even the mere touch of a hand.

After a few days, the authorities decided to try again -- this time putting his poor wounded and swollen body on the rack. To their amazement, rather than wounding him further, his body became erect and straight and recovered its former appearance and use of his limbs. Having still gotten nothing from Sanctus but his statement of faith, they put him in a dark, airless cell where many other Christians had already suffocated. Still, he did not die, but continued to confess his faith.

Another of those arrested at this time was a Christian woman named Blandina. Her greatest fear at the time of her arrest was that she would not be able to endure any hardship, but quickly lose her faith and deny her Christ. And yet God proved to be with her and filled her up with immeasurable strength. Every manner of torture and humiliation has hurled against her. Day after day they came for her. From morning till night they tortured and humiliated her, until those who tormented her were exhausted by their efforts and confessed that they were beaten. Nobody could believe that she was still breathing.

And yet Blandina seemed to grow in strength at every proclamation of her faith, finding "refreshment, rest, and insensibility to her sufferings in uttering the words: 'I am a Christian. We do nothing to be ashamed of.'"

At long last, Blandina was taken, along with Sanctus and others, to the public arena where the gladiatorial games were played. There, before a howling mob, they were again asked to deny Christ and embrace the gods of Rome. When they would not, they were again subjected to tortures and beatings as if they had never been punished before.

Blandina was bound to a pole, while wild beasts were unleashed upon Sanctus and another Christian named Marturus. Guards allowed them to be mauled severely, but not killed. Then they strapped the two men into iron chairs and held them over a huge fire until the iron burned white hot and burned them to death. Never once, however, did Sanctus ever cry out or say anything except what he had always been saying in Latin: "I am a Christian."

During the whole ordeal, Blandina remained miraculously untouched by the wild beasts. Indeed, as she hung from the pole, many thought her body looked like the shape of a cross. Seeing her uttering her quiet prayers, other persecuted Christians drew strength and confidence from her, seeing Christ in her and through her.

By the end of the day, Blandina was still unharmed. So they cut her down and threw her back in jail until another day. While there, she continued to give strength and encouragement to her Christian brothers and sisters.

Over the next few days, Blandina and others watched as more and more Christians were mauled to death and burned in the arena. The authorities hoped to break the wills of those who watched and get them to deny Christ. And certainly there were those who could not stand it and did deny Christ. But not Blandina.

On the final day, Blandina was again taken into the arena. With her this time was a Christian boy of 15 named Ponticus, along with many others. Again they were asked to deny Christ and embrace the Roman gods. And again they all refused. The crowd went wild and found no pity for either woman or youth. Every horror and punishment was inflicted, while they were asked again and again to deny Christ. They would not.

At every moment, young Ponticus searched the eyes of Blandina as he suffered. At every moment, she encouraged him on, and he grew in his strength and bravery, until finally "he gave back his spirit to God."

Blandina was herself the last to remain. She endured the whips. She endured the beasts. She even endured the burning chair. Still she was alive. Finally, they dropped her into a net and threw her to a bull. After several gougings and tosses, she too gave back her spirit to God.

Christians from the time, narrating the story of these martyrs in their circular letter, said of her: "Last of all, like a noble mother who had encouraged her children and sent them before her in triumph to the King, blessed Blandina herself passed through all the ordeals of her children and hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and exulting at her departure as if invited to a wedding supper...."

She was the last of 48 Christians to die for their faith in that place.

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When we are baptized, we know not what God may call us into in our lives, nor how God may use us for the sake of the kingdom. But to all, Jesus says the same.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God....

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

\*Eusebius (d.340 AD), *History of the Church*, Book 5, G.A. Williamson, trans., Penguin 1965, pp.192-202.