

A REPENTANT PAGAN EMPEROR

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

In recent articles, I have made reference to Trajan, the Roman emperor who was responsible for some of the fiercest persecutions ever experienced by the Christians. Outrageous as it may seem at first sight, even a person like Trajan could find mercy from God. How is this?

As the Fathers say, "Judge no man, because, often we have seen a man sinning, but we have not seen him when he repents and weeps over his sin in secret."

Saul, too, was a fanatical persecutor of the Christians, and yet, God, in His wisdom, picked him to become the chosen vessel and apostle of the nations: Saint Paul.

The Prophet Samuel anointed David, the youngest, most insignificant, and apparently least appropriate of Jesse's sons, to be king of Israel, because "God sees not as a man looks; for man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart" (I Kingdoms 16:7).

In connection with some of our previous articles, one of our clergy contacted me and told me of some information at the end of the account of the martyrdom of Saint Ignatius the God-bearer, the bishop of Antioch (A. D. 107). The information concerns the Emperor Trajan, and tells us the following:

Furthermore, when Emperor Trajan [who was in the east, waging war against the Persians at the time] heard the report of the virtues of the God-bearing Ignatius, and how he had courageously endured martyrdom with a gladsome and cheerful countenance, and that he even thanked the emperor for sentencing him to be thrown to the beasts, Trajan came to revere not only Ignatius, but also all Christians; for they abstained from shameful deeds and fasted, they prayed throughout the night and, as ones worthy of praise, fulfilled all the virtues. On account of this, the emperor *repented* [emphasis ours] for all his former acts against them and issued a decree that none of his governors or prefects should henceforth slay any Christian.

Wherefore, Ignatius proved to be of benefit to the Christians not only during his life, but even after his end did he become an occasion for the advance of piety, a comfort of the afflicted, a cause of disdain for this fleeting life, the renunciation of things harmful, the espousal of purity of life and the correction of error.

(From the Life of St. Ignatius the God-bearer,
Bishop of Antioch, + December 20, 107)

And what about Drosís,* Trajan's daughter who became a Christian and suffered martyrdom at his orders? Who knows what tears of remorse he might have shed as a father on her account?

Well, what can one say to this? Now we begin to understand why our Saviour taught us to love our enemies. It is not only because of the spiritual benefits that accrue to us, but also because our fiercest enemies might turn into friends!!

They might even find mercy from God....

"Judge no man before the time until the Lord come, Who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise from God.

(I Cor. 4:5)

* Celebrated on March 22.