



Pope St. Marcellus I

Born: 6 January 255 Rome, Roman Empire

Died: 16 January 309 (aged 54) Rome, Western Roman Empire

During the third century paganism and Christianity vied for supremacy in the Roman Empire. Hoping to stifle the Church completely, the emperor Diocletian in 303 began the last and fiercest of the persecutions. In time, Christian charity conquered pagan brutality, and as the Church attracted more and more members, the Roman government would be compelled to recognize its existence, but it was only after almost three hundred years, during which persecutions had forced Christian worship underground, that the Church would finally come out into the open after the Edict of Nantes in 313. It was still young and disorganized, vulnerable to heresy and apostasy, and needed a strong leader to settle questions of doctrine and discipline.

Such a leader came to the Chair of Peter in 304, when Saint Marcellus was elected pope. Saint Marcellinus, his predecessor, while being taken to torture, had exhorted him not to cede to the decrees of Diocletian, and it became evident that Marcellus did not intend to temporize. He established new catacombs and saw to it that the divine mysteries were continually celebrated there. Then three years of relative peace were given the church when Maxentius became emperor in 307, for he was too occupied with other difficulties to persecute the Christians.

After assessing the problems facing the Church, Saint Marcellus planned a strong program of reorganization. Rome then as now was the seat of Catholicism, and his program was initiated there. He divided the territorial administration of the Church into twenty-five districts or parishes, placing a priest over each one, thus restoring an earlier division which the turmoil of the persecutions had disrupted. This arrangement permitted more efficient care in instructing the faithful, in preparing candidates for baptism and penitents for reconciliation. With these measures in force, Church government took on a definite form.

Marcellus' biggest problem was dealing with the Christians who had apostatized during the persecution. Many of these were determined to be reconciled to the Church without

performing the necessary penances. The Christians who had remained faithful demanded that the customary penitential discipline be maintained and enforced. Marcellus approached this problem with uncompromising justice; the apostates were in the wrong, and regardless of the consequences, were obliged to do penance. It was not long before the discord between the faithful and the apostates led to violence in the very streets of Rome.

An account of Marcellus' death, dating from the fifth century, relates that Maxentius, judging the pope responsible for the trouble between the Christian factions, condemned him to work as a slave on the public highway. After nine months of this hard labor, he was rescued by the clergy and taken to the home of a widow named Lucina; this woman welcomed him with every sign of respect and offered him her home for a church. When the emperor learned that Christian rites were being celebrated there, he profaned the church by turning it into a stable and forced the Holy Father to care for the animals quartered there. In these sad surroundings, Marcellus died on January 16, 310. He was buried in the catacombs of Priscilla, but later his remains were placed beneath the altar of the church in Rome which still bears his name.