"Meliore cupiditate detentus": Christian self-definition and the rejection of marriage in the early Acts of the Martyrs

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Christians and the "civitas terrena": married martyrs

The Christian attitude towards marriage and sexuality in the early Acts of the Martyrs should be understood as part of the Christian attitude towards the religious aspects of ancient society. It is generally accepted that the earliest persecutions were chiefly caused by the pagan belief that the Christians jeopardised the "pax deorum" by refusing to worship the gods of the polis or the community they were supposedly a member of. Sacrifices and pagan cults in general were thought to buy off the goodwill and protection of the gods. By participating in the community-cults citizens secured the well being of their communities. By refusing to participate, the Christians in a sense withdrew from society because from the pagan point of view, atheism and anti-social behaviour went hand in hand. Christians were of course opposed to the religious aspects of ancient society, to paganism. But to a certain degree they were also opposed to society as such, even if it had been possible to separate ancient society and pagan cults. The eschatological fever of the first Christian communities resulted in numerous writings teaching the Christians to live in the world, but not to be of the world. To live in the "civitas terrena" but to focus on "the polis to come" (Hebrews 13, 14).


2 See G. E. M. DE STE. CROIX, "Why were the early Christians persecuted?" Past and Present 26, 1963, p. 6-31.
This attitude towards the saeculum resurfaces in the early Acts of the Martyrs. The Christians we encounter often refuse to identify themselves in the traditional manner. Their social identity has shifted entirely from being a member of the polis to being a member of the Church. This is why, during interrogations, they refuse to answer the questions regarding their name, descent and social status correctly. Stubbornly and to the ever-increasing frustration of the judges they answered to all such questions with a single: "Christians sumus." The principle sumus is expressed in the acts of the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne (1, 20: 68) with regard to the interrogation of Sancius: ώστε μήδε τό ίδιον κατεστίνην ούμα μήτε έθνους μήτε πόλεως ήκαί την μήτε είς δυσκολίας ή πειδοφοβίας είτε άλλα πρός παντες τέρματης απεκρίνεται τη γυμνασία φυλακής. Αλλά ο Ούθυνης είμι (i.e., "Christians sumus"). Agathonica seems to have applied this principle (1 Cor 7, 29: "that both they that have wives, be as though they had none") to having children. In both cases, "the earthly affairs", we are consciously ignored in favour of a complete identification with a religious movement focussed on the hereafter. In two passiones of bishops, Philox of Thymus and Irenaeus of Sirmium, we find the same theme of spiritual parenthesis linked to the rejection of spouse and children.

Irenaeus, the bishop of Sirmium (Pannonia), had already been tortured once when his family-members begged him to save his own life by obeying the order to sacrifice. Hinc puere pedes eius amplexatece diciat: Miserere tui et nostri, pater. Inde uxor lugens vultum et aetatem eius precaturae. Irenaeus was not impressed by the tears and laments of his friends and family-members. Sed (i.e., "no more capitulate detentus, sententiam Domini ante osculos habens quae dixit Si quis me negaverit coram hominibus, et ego negabro eum coram patre meo qui est in caelis") Mt. 10, 33, ornes ergo despiciam nullum eorum respondit. The Matthew-passage seems to be chosen to illustrate that only the heavenly family, Christianity as a transcendent social category, is relevant to the martyr. Irenaeus could not be bothered with the care for his wife and children: he had made the right choice and concentrated on what was really important. The earthly worries he had was "meliore capitate detentus" and, disdainfully, he even refuses to answer the members of his earthly family.

During the torture and execution following Papysius' refusal, a woman from the crowd got carried away. In the words of the text, she saw the glory (βοῖα) of the Lord, as Carpus had while he was being tortured. With a loud voice she declared that she was prepared to throw herself on the pyre. The unmanned crowd tried to dissuade her from this voluntary martyrdom. One of the arguments they used to convince the woman was probably also the reason the judge had inquired about Papysius' offering. This text (4, 20: 20) says: Επεί οὖν οὐδὲν τούτος διώκεται, ἡ θεοῦ σώματος τῶν πάνων προσήκοι, ἐγώ δὲ καὶ εὗρομαι. She threw off her cloak and jumped into the fire.

2 The remark by Musarillo (p. 189, nr. 4) is "It is noteworthy that a man with such a historic Greek name should have come from Nazareth,..." seems somewhat to have missed the point, when one considers that Corax was a gardener in Paphlagonia and ephes was remembered as the second bearer of this name. See also the passio Carpi, Papysius, and Agathonicus 3, p. 22. To ἔθνος and εὐαγγελίσται ἡμέρας Χριστιανοῦ For the "christians sumus" as a hagiographical cliché, see also Hippolyto Dejesis, Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires. SH 13b, Bruxelles, 1968, p. 184. Jan Bremmer, "Christians sumus." The early christian martyrs and Christ in, G. J. F. Bartels in (ed.), Erlebn. Märlings affére à A. A. R. Bartelsman. Stenbrugge, 1991, p. 11-20 treats the theme from an externalist point of view.

3 Passio Carpi... 28-32, p. 26: πάντες μεθελεῖν ὅτι νῦν ἐδίδομα ἀλήθειαν εἰς τόπον ἐπαρχεῖ καὶ πολέμιο ευνώτατον κατά τον θάνατον. The Latin version has made a few alterations. Here, the events are dated "tempore Decii imperatoris" (1, 28). The voluntary martyrdom has disappeared (?). The repeated condemnation by orthodox church leaders. G. E. Keckman in P. F. Feneley, Veritatis novissimae 3,1, p. 206. Musarillo chooses the meaning of lugentes... precabantur. ("Then the married women urged him to yield...") and reserves Reuinus' condemnation for the quotation on p. 296, nr. 2 and p. 297, nr. 4 Or "perhaps his "wife", following Reuinus. It seems more logical that, after his children, his wife also gives an "acte de présence." The reading, that deals with denials identified married Christian women, can not explain why the passes should be linked to Irenaeus' uxor: filli et parentes. (Perhaps the child of the passto 4, 2, nr. 296-298 in exactly the opposite order of appearance as in 3, 1: "Adventures vero parentes eius..."


elius promissiones intendens, omnia deliciosa nullam parentem absque eo se nosse aitque hubere fatetur." So, once again, the anti-familial tendency of the Christian martyr is legitimised by a gospel-text. It is interesting, by the way, that the passio quotes the more comprehensive and severe Luke (14:16-46), whereas the parallel in Matthew (10:35-39) does not mention "uxor" or "parents". 10

The pagan prefect confirms the good reputation of the judges in the so-called authentic Acts of the Martyrs. He tries to save the bishop's life for a last time, by insisting that he should sacrifice, if not for his own sake (Irenaeus was still a young man), then for the sake of his children. But once again Irenaeus refuses and the judge is left with no alternative. 11

The acts of Phileas, bishop of Thmuis (Egypt), are not only written at roughly the same time (306), they also include a number of almost verbal parallels with Irenaeus' rejection of his family. The Latin version is more complete than the original Greek text, published for the first time in 1964 from a papyrus fragment. 12 The interrogation of Phileas develops into a philosophical and theological discussion, but the text also contains a short passage concerning Phileas' responsibility towards his wife and children. The prefect Cucilianus questions the bishop about the existence of the suurephisos (the moral awareness, the conscience). When Phileas acknowledges its existence, Cucilianus then asks him why he doesn't follow his conscience in the case of his wife and children. Phileas answers that the suurephisos twowards God must come first, and he quotes Deut. 6, 5. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might." This inspires Cucilianus to ask Phileas exactly what god he is talking about and the discussion is brought back to a more philosophical level. Phileas also used a philosophical exemplum in his own defence. His own behaviour, his care for his soul runs parallel with the behaviour of the sage and "martyr", par excellence: "Phileas respondit: Non sacrificio, Animae meae parco. Quoniam non solum Christiani parvis animae suae verum etiam et gentiles, accipie exemplum Socratis. Cum ad mortem duceretur; adstante ei contigere et filius, non reversus sed promptius; filius vero filium filie."

But he prefet treats Phileas with a lot of respect. He was clearly a rich and respected citizen. Because Phileas' brother was actually a friend of the prefect, he was even prepared to release the bishop without further ado. Phileas refuses, but Cucilianus tries to bring him back to reason for their last time. 13 He draws the bishop's attention to the sorrow he is causing his wife: "Misera uxor tibi intioti." (6, 1; p. 350) The bishop replies that Christ is the saviour of all, and that his decision to die a martyr's death is final. In a dramatic scene all those present throw themselves as suppliants at his feet: "Advocati et officium una cum curatore et cum omnibus propinquis eius et plebs complectebantur rogantes eum ut sacrificaret uxor et curum susciparet liberae. Ille velut si saxo immodi unida adideret: garridentia dicta respersa, Deum in oculis habere, parentes et propinquos apostolos et martyres discipulos suos." (6, 4; p. 350) So, once again, a martyr rejects his natural family in favour of a spiritual sense of belonging, here presented by the traditional champions of Christianity: the apostles and the martyrs.

Herbert Musurillo thought that the martyrs rejected their family because they wanted to keep the other members further suffering. 14 It is not certain how far Musurillo meant by this. Maybe he was talking about the suffering felt by family members while they were watching or being forced to witness the torture of their husband, father or child. This argument could be supported by the passio Irenaei in which the martyr was indeed tortured in front of his family. Furthermore, this text explicitly offers a causal connection between this spectacle and the pleas by the family to sacrifice. 15 In Phileas' case however, the family is equally rejected, although any form of torture is clearly out of the question. We have seen that, for personal and social-political reasons, the judge treats the bishop with a lot of respect and benevolence.

A second possible explanation is that the martyrs tried to speed things up both for themselves and for their family. This could be why they avoided showing a normal interest let alone a moral adoration for their wives and children. They might have thought that any trace of affection could have inspired the judges to use the loved-ones in repeated attempts to persuade the arrested, attempts that could only become increasingly painful for all parties involved. This seems a very acceptable psychological motivation, but we have found not one explicit example of this happening in the couple of hundred Acts of the Martyrs that survive from Late Antiquity. The passio Perpetuae is a text where an affective concern on the part of the accused for his or her family members is combined with pleas "pro lapsis" (who? for whom? for what?) But in this text, the judge even had the family-member (the father) forcibly removed from the court. 16

A possible interpretation of Musurillo's explanation would be that the martyrs were trying to protect their relatives from a possible arrest. This is certainly wrong. From the Acts of the Martyrs and also from other sources documenting the persecutions, it has become very clear that in most cases the authorities limited their actions to an almost symbolic number of arrests. Fellow Christians (or even, of the arrested Christians and other fellow believers) seem to have interacted with the future martyrs without difficulties. They visited them in prison, encouraged them in their faith, and even interceded for them on their behalf. Although the destruction of their members must have been quite obvious, they were also members of the investigated group (the rest of the general sacrificial order issued by the imperial government, by Decius (249-250), the brother, one of the lawyers, shouted that Phileas wanted to appeal against the sentence. And even then Cucilianus believed that he was about to come to a compromise, but again the martyr refused every possible escape-route. (8, 1; p. 352)

10 11 12 13 14 15 16
Christians were never systematically sought out and prosecuted. The persecutions were almost always sporadic, local and temporary outbursts, in most cases started by the local population. The government got involved because they wanted to channel the unpredictable spiral of violence before it spun out of control, et filium infamin ad uterum," and "in the disobedience of a daughter towards her father." In the opening scene of the autobiographical part of the text, Perpetua has to confront her father for the first time. "Pro sua affecta" (3, 1; p. 106), the father tries to persuade her to sacrifice. Perpetua uses Socratic dialectic against her father. She asks him whether an "archeolus", a small jug, standing in the room can be called anything other than an "archeolus." She then concludes that by the same semantic logic she can only be called a Christian. Her father goes wild when he hears the word "Christiania" and he seems to be on the verge of poking her eyes out, but eventually, he leaves without further ado, "victus cum argumentis diaboli" (3, 3). A few days later, Perpetua and the others are incarcerated in the worst part of the jail: a frightening experience for a rich young lady who had never experienced such darkness. She was prepared for the claustrophobic heat of an overpopulated prison or the harassment by the guards. But above all, Perpetua writes (3, 6), "novissime macerabar sollicitudine infants ibi." By offering bribes, deacons manage to obtain a better place and a better treatment for the future martyrs. Perpetua is relieved that she is once again able to breastfeed her weak and almost starving baby and she expresses her concern when she asks her mother and her brother to take care of her son 21. But Perpetua continues to suffer from the concern for her child. The pain of being separated from her child only goes away when she receives permission to keep the baby with her inside the prison (3, 9; p. 110): "et usurpavii ut mecum infans in carcere maneret; et statim conveniui et relevata sum a labore et sollicitudine infants, et factus est mihi carborum subito praestrum, ut si penitus esset, simul a cunium aliquum, simul expressione et alioque expressione of Perpetua's emotions or a piece of convincing fiction by another (male?) author 22, is not really important from our point of view. It is clear that, when Perpetua is forced to choose between her feelings as a mother and her obedience to the heavenly Father as a Christian, she does not hesitate for one second.

Just before the official hearing, her father appears for the second time and starts making emotional appeals. He concludes that not one of her relatives will be able to go on with their lives when she dies, but this is especially true for her little son who is still breastfed: "aspice filium tuum qui post te vive non poterit. Depone animo, ne universos nos externeres." (5, 3-4; p. 120) In this scene, the normal gender hierarchy is turned upside down. Here, the woman, the man's pater familaris, gets on his knees for his daughter and kisses her hand. "Et lacrimarum me iam non nominabat sed dominum." 27 The traditional subservience of the woman, especially

20 Passio Perpetua 2, 1-2; p. 104-106 (ed. Amati); The Greek version has (hlabi) μετ' αυτής της και Ουδένα Περιπέτεια, ἡμέρας ἐν γνησίω εὐγένεια καὶ τραύματι πολιτείας γεμώτης τις εἴχαμεν. Αὐτής τῆς φιλοσφονίας καὶ μνήμης τῆς διδάσκαλος, αὐτὴν ὁ πατὴρ ὁ οἰκείος, καὶ τῆς ἅγιας αὐτῆς ἁγίωτος, οὓς ἐπερώτησαν τόλμητε, προσευχὴν ἐπεστίλλω. 21 The chapters 3 till 10 is generally accepted that she actually wrote this part herself. cf. P. Danneel, Women writers of the Middle Ages. A critical study of texts from Perpetua (1120) to Marguerite Perrenot, 1310/1360, Cambridge, 1984, p. 1; 22 Passio Perpetua 3, 5; p. 110: "ego infarnam lactassam iam innedia defecuntur; sollicita pro eo adhabuerunt extremae et tanta commutatae sunt materiam de lacte comemulada silicem..." 23 G. W. v. Boxerus, o. c. (int. cit.), p. 34 with further references (note 32) for the debate on this question. 24 Ibid., 5, 5; p. 112. Musil's translation is not entirely correct "he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman." The roman antithesis is the subservience of a "filia" towards her father and the subservience of "femina" towards a male martyr which is expressed in this hagiographic text: in a scene where a father calls his daughter "domina", "dame, mistresa". For the gender-aspects, see: J. de Vries, The suffering self. Pain and narrative representation in the early Christian era, London & New York, 1995, p. 107.
of a daughter towards her father, is transformed by the "virtus" of martyrdom into a position of dominance. Perpetua becomes "una grande dama," a "domina." 28

Perpetua deplores the fact that her father is the only member of her family who is not present in her "passio." (5, 6: p. 120-122) After a vain attempt to convince her father that the divine omnipotence and benevolence are at work in her martyrdom, he departs "contristatus." But the next day, during the interrogation of the prisoners in the forum, the father is once again present. When the judge asks her she is a Christian, the father intervenes with a combination of boldness and pathos (6, 2, p. 123): "et appetui pater ilico cum filio meo et extrai me de gradi diciens: Supplicia; miserere infantii." The procurator, Hilarianus, agrees with the father: "Parce, inepti, caris patris tui, parce infanti tuo, est filius meus, et tu cum sensum, non cunctatur et insecundum sanguinem fundatur." (6, 3, p. 124) But Perpetua refuses abruptly and firmly denies that she is a Christian. This concludes the interrogation as far as the procurator is concerned. The father, however, continues to try and persuade Perpetua, so Hilarianus has him thrown on the floor and beaten with rods. 29

Perpetua not only defies the authority of the state but also that of her father. The daughter, or the virtue of the female martyr, determine the course of the events and, as Judith Perkins remarked in her analysis of the interaction between suffering, power and gender in the Passio Perpetuæ: "again a father is subordinated because of a daughter's actions." 30 However, her stubborn refusal to obey her father and the procurator does not imply that she has become insensitive to the pain of her father: "Et doluit mihi cassus patris mei quasi ego fuisse percosse, sed dolui percella eius misera." (6, 5, p. 124) Although Perpetua rejected the argument of her responsibility towards her child and was condemned "ad bestias" as a Christian, the eco-document continues to express her concern for the well being of her baby. "Tunc quis consuen- errat a me infans mammas accipere et mecum in carceri manere, statim mitto ad patrem Pompeion diaconom, postulans infantem. Sed pater dare noluit." (8) Et quomodo Deus voluit, neque ille amplius mammam susineat, autiam etiam fessum, ne sollicitudine infantes et dolere mammam manerat." (6, 7-8, p. 114) God has taken care of "His" martyr and child. Perpetua no longer needs to worry about the nutrition of her child. Neither mother nor child had to endure any physical anguish because of their sudden separation. 31

At this stage, the virtus of Perpetua unfolds completely. She is granted the gift of vision, takes care, through her prayers, of her little brother in the afterlife, and inspires in one of the prison warders a fascination adequate for his whole life in the name of his conversations with her after his conversion. When her father tries to make her choose for this life, for the fourth time, there is absolutely nothing that can make Perpetua change her mind. Her father pulls his beard and throws his hair on the floor. He throws himself on the floor, and utters "verba quasi movere universum creaturam." Perpetua does not even mention her refusal: "ego dolebam pro infelici sancta eius." (9, 2-3, p. 134)

28 For the "virtus" of the martyrs, cf. 9, 1, p. 132: the conversion-story of the guard Pudera ("intelligentes magnam virtutem esse nobis," Sordat eayf."
The trial against the Egyptian (the devil of course): 10, 12, p. 136-138 where she will see herself in a completely gender-neutral role, for in her dream she will quite simply become a man to fight the Egyptian: "et expedita sum et facta sum mascula." We would like to point out here that the text is not of any importance, Cambridge, 1965, p. 53 suggested to interpret this passage as a subconscious projection of the concern for her own child on another child that is saved by her good cares from disease and misfortune. If we analyze this is correct (and we find it very acceptable) these chapters illustrate an additional aspect of Perpetua's motherly concern.

29 Cf. 7, 2, p. 126-8, 8, p. 132 (visions and prayers); 9, 1, p. 132-134 and 16, 4, p. 160 (conversion of the guard).
opposed to the other catechumens. Neither the Latin, nor the Greek version offer any additional evidence that Revocatus was the father of Felicitas’ child. He is never referred to as the father and has no input whatsoever concerning the fate of the child. Perhaps the father was simply not known, or perhaps it was another slave who did not have the means or the will to interact with the imprisoned Christians.

In the case of Perpetua two out of three of these explanations are unthinkable, but both are possible. There is no mention of a husband of Perpetua on this topic. He listed five parents not presented as a young widow, whose husband had died shortly after the conception of the child. Our only information reads that she was “matronaliter nupta.” (2, 1; p. 104) One could take the list of family members in the second half of that sentence “habens patrem et materem et fratres duos...” and the loss of reliability of the text. The possibility of being used for the absence of Perpetua’s husband was found it virtually impossible to decide between them. We have already discussed the possibility of a deceased husband as the least likely. If we can assume that Perpetua’s husband was in fact still alive, the remaining options depend very much on the text and the relationship between the text and reality. The first possibility is that the man was mentioned in the original text, but that he was deleted from it. In that case, the Acta presents an original version of the events in stead of adding a husband to the narrative. The Perpetua deleted the husband. This is of course a mere hypothesis by Dronke, but taken as a hypothesis, it could have happened either in an early or in a later stage of the tradition (the oldest manuscripts are probably from the tenth century). But why would this have happened? Dronke suggested that the husband might have been unsupportive, that he was either a pagan or a conformist Christian urging Perpetua to sacrifice. This seems an insufficient reason to delete the husband. We should only also ask ourselves why Perpetua’s father wasn’t deleted from the document? One could hardly call him supportive. Another possible reason is that the copyists deleted the husband due to the increased importance of virginal martyrs. Saints were no longer expected to interact with a husband. But then wasn’t the child deleted as well, why was Perpetua presented as “matronaliter nupta” and why was Felicitas still presented as pregnant? Maybe the numerous clashes with her father were originally clashes with two different characters: her father and the father of her child. This merely solves the problem: why wasn’t her father deleted and all the scenes transferred to the husband? If we assume that the version of the text we have is a reliable copy, and the husband never was mentioned by its author(s), then there are other possible explanations. The most rational solution according to Dronke, was that the husband was simply out of town the whole time. In our view, this would explain why the husband is not a character in the Perpetua. It might even explain why the author of the frame story omits any mention of the husband: in the Perpetua her father doesn’t mention the husband either: e.g. in his list of persons she should feel emotionally responsible for. But his physical absence can not explain why the ego-document written by Perpetua never mentions him. Perpetua focuses all her emotional energy on her child, on her dead little brother and on her own father. A young mother, “matronaliter nupta,” arrested, imprisoned and about to be executed while her husband was out of town, could reasonably be expected in any age and time to have missed her husband. All this seems to point in the direction of another explanation, an emotional or psychological explanation as the most reasonable one. It is also the only one that even Dronke found “most probable.” Perpetua had her own personal, emotional and psychological

Pseudo has been deleted. Perpetua now physically rejects her own child (6, 5-6: p. 286): “Pater vero eius iactans infan tum in col lum eius et ipec cum mater et marito tenen tes manus eius et lentes osculabantur dicentes (..) Ailla proiciens infan tum eoque repulit. (..)”

At least this text proves that it is not an anachronism to be puzzled by the absence of husbands-fathers in the Perpetua. Peter Dronke is a good starting point for the modern discussion of a husband. It is often possible reasons for the absence of Perpetua’s husband found it virtually impossible to decide between them. We have already discussed the possibility of a deceased husband as the least likely. If we can assume that Perpetua’s husband was in fact still alive, the remaining options depend very much on the text and the relationship between the text and reality. The first possibility is that the man was mentioned in the original text, but that he was deleted from it. In that case, the Acta presents an original version of the events in stead of adding a husband to the narrative. The Perpetua deleted the husband. This is of course a mere hypothesis by Dronke, but taken as a hypothesis, it could have happened either in an early or in a later stage of the tradition (the oldest manuscripts are probably from the tenth century). But why would this have happened? Dronke suggested that the husband might have been unsupportive, that he was either a pagan or a conformist Christian urging Perpetua to sacrifice. This seems an insufficient reason to delete the husband. We should only also ask ourselves why Perpetua’s father wasn’t deleted from the document? One could hardly call him supportive. Another possible reason is that the copyists deleted the husband due to the increased importance of virginal martyrs. Saints were no longer expected to interact with a husband. But then wasn’t the child deleted as well, why was Perpetua presented as “matronaliter nupta” and why was Felicitas still presented as pregnant? Maybe the numerous clashes with her father were originally clashes with two different characters: her father and the father of her child. This merely solves the problem: why wasn’t her father deleted and all the scenes transferred to the husband? If we assume that the version of the text we have is a reliable copy, and the husband never was mentioned by its author(s), then there are other possible explanations. The most rational solution according to Dronke, was that the husband was simply out of town the whole time. In our view, this would explain why the husband is not a character in the Perpetua. It might even explain why the author of the frame story omits any mention of the husband: in the Perpetua her father doesn’t mention the husband either: e.g. in his list of persons she should feel emotionally responsible for. But his physical absence can not explain why the ego-document written by Perpetua never mentions him. Perpetua focuses all her emotional energy on her child, on her dead little brother and on her own father. A young mother, “matronaliter nupta,” arrested, imprisoned and about to be executed while her husband was out of town, could reasonably be expected in any age and time to have missed her husband. All this seems to point in the direction of another explanation, an emotional or psychological explanation as the most reasonable one. It is also the only one that even Dronke found “most probable.” Perpetua had her own personal, emotional and psychological
Felix says a little prayer of thanks and concludes his life with a short "curriculum vitae" (30: p. 270): "Felix episcopus elevans oculos in caemum, clara voce dixit: Deus, gratias tibi. quinquaquinta et sex annos habeo in hoc saeculo. virginitatem custodivi, evangeli servavi, fideliter veritatem praedicationem." The passio of the Carthaginian martyrs Montanus and Lucius (set in the reign of Valerian but possibly written at a later date) contains yet another short, indirect indication of the Christian virginity-ideal. In his last speech, just before his execution, Montanus derides the idol-worshippers, encourages heretics to return to orthodoxy, and presses his fellow Christians to remain steadfast and follow the (his?) examples of courage. For the female virgins too, he had an edifying message (14, 6: p. 226-228): "virgines quoque singularis admonet ut sanctitatem suam suervat." It gets more interesting when we consider the passions that used virginity and marriage as a more or less central element in their narrative.

The oldest of these texts, the Passio Poleni et Lucii, is quoted by Justin Martyr (5: 165) in his second apology (II. 2). Justin refers to the case as an illustration of the unjust accusations Christians have to endure from immoral pagans. From our perspective the text is especially interesting as an illustration of the Christian ideal of a chaste marriage and of the antithetical Christian self-definition as a morally outstanding minority in a world of licentious and immoral pagans. An unnamed woman (γυνὴ τῆς Γ. I, p. 38) from Rome, married to an equally anonymous dignitary, was converted to Christianity. She gave up her licentious way of living and decided to take virginity as her guide. She also tried to convert her husband and threatened him with the prospect of eternal fire for all those who do not live in accordance with the principles of modesty and true reason. The spouses estranged from each other and the woman thought a marriage was no longer possible due to the unconquerable moral differences. At first, a divorce was avoided by her relatives who advised her to be patient. The husband left for Alexandria, but when news about his misconduct reached her, she gave him the repudium. The man should have rejoiced because his wife had stopped having affairs with servants and "hixels", had stopped drinking and even tried to get him on the right path but he merely reversed the charge. He probably argued that this was a "divortium sine causa". Casually, he also mentioned that his "ex" was a Christian. Apparently this was not enough to alarm the authorities, because the wife sent a "supplicatio" to the emperor, and she remained free. The husband then tried to vent his anger at the expense of a third party, and through his relations in military and legal circles, he managed to have the man who converted his wife to Christianity executed. The Passio Poleni et Lucii (2. p. 38; εἰπὲ ὅτι τὰς ὁπλικάς διδακτήρες ἐγώ, οὐκ ἔσησαν ἄνευ τὴν οἷαν, ὁταν ἄνοιξαν δρόμους φόβους ἔλεγεν τὰς ἑπτά κλιπές, τὸν τούτος τὴν τρίτης τοὺς καταστροφῆς τῆς τοῦ σκότους ἔφη, καὶ τὸν τούτος τοὺς ὅσα πότερα ἄνευ τοῦ τούτος τοὺς καταστροφῆς τῆς τοῦ σκότους. "

Cellbacy and martyrdom

The early Acts of the Martyrs also mention a number of Christians who lived as celibates. We have three texts where Christian celibates are only shortly mentioned. The passio of Marrianus and Iacobus (written shortly after 200) tells about two bishops, Agapitus and Secundinus, who inspired the actual martyrs of the passio. The text introduces them as "amicis spirituali dilectione concordes, alter et carnalis continentiae sanctitatis." (3. p. 196) of course: does what "carnalis continentiae sanctitatis" mean exactly in this period? Does it mean the bishop had remained a virgin, or should we understand it as a reference to his chaste marriage-life and a controlled attitude towards riches and pleasures? Without additional information this is impossible to say.

A second text (also from North-Africa) is just as short, but much clearer. Felix, the bishop of Tibiaca, is sentenced to death by the notorious proconsul Anullinus.

42 ARAIT, o.c. (CC 17), p. 31. 
43 A similar problem could be raised in connection with the newborn child of Felicitas who was entrusted to "quasdam soror" who raised the child as her own. (15; 7, p. 150) Clearly this child must have been considered the legal property of whoever owned Felicitas.
44 The text gives no details about the personal life of its actual subjects: Marrianus and Iacobus, a deacon and a lector, travelling through Numidia.
45 For the meaning of "continentia" we can refer to Henry Chadwick, RAC 5, n.s. "Erastatia," Stuttgart, 1900, col. 343-365. For the evolution of the "continentia" concept, see of course the essay by Hippolyte Delehaye, "Socinian. Essai sur le culte des saints dans l'antiquite." 1954 (s. 1927), SH 17 and the recent synthesis by Marc Van Utrecht, "Corinthe, l'amour et les fonctions du culte des saints. Quelques remer pour un debut reverto." Cassiodore 2, 1996, pp. 135-188.

47 Passio Poleni et Lucii 2, p. 38; εἰπὲ ὅτι τὰς ὁπλικάς διδακτήρες ἐγώ, οὐκ ἔσησαν ἄνευ τὸν οἷαν, ὁταν ἄνοιξαν δρόμους φόβους ἔλεγεν τὰς ἑπτά κλιπές, τὸν τούτος τὴν τρίτης τοὺς καταστροφῆς τῆς τοῦ σκότους. "
48 See, for example, the case of Marcus, the deacon who is accused of being a Christian by his neighbor, the centurion. He is put on trial and sentenced to death for his faith. However, the centurion is convinced of his innocence and releases him. The centurion is also converted to Christianity. This案例说明了这个时期的紧张关系以及基督教徒的不可预知性。
had become clear that the man was not interested in her conversion-attempts. Christianity did not come to send peace but the sword. "Think not that I come to send peace but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and the daughter against the mother, and the son against the father. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Mt. 10, 34-36; cf. Lk. 12, 51-53) Christianity as "a domestic trouble-maker" 39 was already at work in the passio of Perpetua where the conflict was one between generations, but here the Christian religion clearly incites discord between spouses.

Furthermore, the Passio Perpetui et Lauretula already contains all the basic narrative themes of the (predominantly later) Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In a linear chronology, the narrative elements could be summarised as follows. We have a rich, pagan couple. The woman is converted by a male Christian teacher. Her conversion causes the woman to break with her husband and reject the existing pagan sexual morality. The husband then tries to get his revenge through his relations in high circles andpunishes the male Christian teacher. What is missing is the miraculous aspect that allows the Christians to escape from several attempts on their lives, and the cryptic-erotic elaboration of the attraction between the converted woman and the male teacher. 50

The passio of Potamiana and Basiliades is preserved by Eusebius (H.E. VI. 5) but was probably written between 205 and 210. The interrogation, torture and death of Potamiana, and the conversion of the soldier Basiliades are not interesting from our point of view, although Musurillo (p. XXXIII) calls the passio "degenerate." In so far as it is the first mention of boiling pitch being used." Actually, the only interesting passage is the introduction: Potamiana appears to have been one of those early Christian house-virgins who chose an ascetic life-style within the framework of their society. She lived together with a group of Christian women and became quite famous in Alexandria, not only because of her martyrdom, but also because of her struggle for physical purity and her virginity, "threatened" by numerous potential lovers (1, p. 132, r. 4-5): μὴ ἐγγίση τὴς ὑπο- στήσεως σας πάντων ἑαυτής. Αὐτό ἀληθινόν ἔστε τάξιν παρήκτης. Although, naturally, she was very beautiful and intelligent, the passio does not yet include physical attacks on her virginity, by the different marriage-candidates, or by the judge and/or his assistants. Nevertheless, the old text mention a connection between her virginity-ideal and her arrest. That is exactly what Palladius will do when he inserted an alternative version of this passio in his Historia Lausiacae. He ascribes her arrest to a pagan "conspiracy" against her physical integrity. 51 The old passio does mention the feelings of hatred expressed by the pagan crowd: when the soldier Basiliades takes her away to be executed, he is forced to hold off an angry crowd, that tries to harass her and shock her by shouting scurrilous remarks 52. It is not unthinkable that this passage echoes a pagan hostility against the Christian virginity-ideal, although the context seems rather to parallel to an angry reaction to her insulting remarks regarding the pagan cults (2, p. 132, r. 11-13). In that interpretation, the crowd apparently thought that scurrilous remarks constituted the most effective strategy to affect or hurt the "defiled virgins" of Potamiana.

The three "pure and venerable women" from Thessalonica — Agapa, Irena and Chonia — who "were fulfilled by the Holy Ghost" and "had clothed themselves in virginitas", are not house-virgins in the ecclesiastical sense of the word, although they were three unmarried sisters still living at home. When the tetrarchic persecution started, they fled to a nearby mountain and, in the course of their action, they left behind birth-town, family, property and other possessions. (1, 2, p. 280) Their activities were centered on prayer, so their bodies dwell on a mountain, but their souls resided in heaven. (1, 3, p. 280) In fact, their flight from persecution brought them in a situation that could be called analogous to the way of life of the anchorites. 53 Nevertheless, this theme is not really worked out, since the following text already mentions their arrest. And, together with four other girls, they are brought before the prefect, Agapa and Chonia are immediately executed, the five others are taken to prison but the rest (λόφοι τῆς ἔκλυσες (4, 4, p. 286) Irena is called before the prefect for a second time, after some Christian books were discovered in her home. Irena denies that any member of her family had been aware of these concealed writings. She argues that the sisters had considered their own family-members (who had apparently remained pagan) as their worst enemies. They even had been accused of being the author of the murder of her, their domesticress, and they had miraculously preserved her purity. No one dared to report her, or even to address an insulting word to her 54. So the female martyr was simply burnt alive.

by Palladius in the first part (a provost and a threat to her chastity with probable erotic connotations for the ancient reader, in light of the traditions of the ancient novel) is structurally contrasted by the torture scene with the boiling pitch in the second part of § 3. Here the boiling pitch is no longer poured over her body drop by drop, it is Potamiana herself who asks to be let into the barrel centumire of centumire, as an illustration of the endurances Christ gives to his followers (3, 3-4, pp. 24-26).

50 Passio Potamianae... 3, p. 132, r. 16-17: ἢ τι στέφανον ἐστάλει σάπφος καὶ εὐπορίας ἐνυπήκοαι πιστοί.

51 The persecutions as a preparation for asceticism or asceticism as a continuation of the heroic time of the martyrs is a motif that has attracted the attention of numerous authors (F. Berton & R. Mardoux, Histoire des actes apocryphes des apôtres, Christianisme et monde païen, Genève, 1981, p. 49-67). Here, p. 65.


53 Palladius has an alternative version in the third chapter of his Historia Lausiacae (ca. 420 A.D.): G. J. M. Barlow, ed., Historia Lausiacae. Two de sancti (H. Milon, 1974, pp. 24-20). It is presented as a story that isdeus of Alexandria had heard directly from Antony. The changes Palladius introduced are typical of the growing influence of the novel-like anti-sexual erotics in the Christian biographical literature. First of all, Potamiaena is no longer an independent virgin who lived with her mother and rejected respectable marriage candidates. She is now the slave of a pagan master who has seduced her in a number of ways. (3, 1, p. 24: απολογίσῃσαν τούτῳ ἐν τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτῳ τούτوكالة. These changes must be related to the context of the time: the violence of the passages against women is not possible that Christians who took to the mountains or the deserts to hide from the authorities, learned to value this way of life and continued to live in this manner after the persecution had ended. Fundamental reading is still M. Miller, "Le martyre et l'ascétisme," Revue d'histoire et de critique d'histoire, 1925, 105-149. In contrast to the special cases, however, this book was also used as a reference by other authors.

54 Although these five, was also Eutychia, who was already taken to prison in 5, 7 because she was pregnant. Eutychia stated and testified that her husband had died seven months earlier. She related that two times how it is that she got pregnant if her man had died. The text contains no elements concerning the staging of her pregnancy or concerning the medical ideas of the time, so it is not impossible that Christians who took to the mountains or the deserts to hide from the authorities, learned to value this way of life and continued to live in this manner after the persecution had ended. Fundamental reading is still M. Miller, "Le martyre et l'ascétisme," Revue d'histoire et de critique d'histoire, 1925, 105-149. In contrast to the special cases, however, this book was also used as a reference by other authors.

55 The conviction: 5, 8, p. 290... εἰς παραγωγὴν γεννῶν οἴκον. The miraculous rescue 6, 2, p. 290. Bonnet, op. cit. (nt. 1), p. 53-54 refers to the honor of the sanctuary of seeing a naked Prophet with Felicitas. Similarly the message of piety for punishment by prostitution suggests that the civic interest in such exploitation of female martyrs may have been less than Roman officials anticipated.
In a text that is also dated to the early fourth century, the Acta Pionii, we find the same theme, but without the miraculous rescue. One of the fellow martyrs of the presbyter Pionius, Sabina, had smiled when Pionius had encouraged his prosecutors to convert to Christianity by threatening them with the prospect of the eternal fire. The pagans reacted furiously, because the smile was presumably inspired by an anticipated unholy glee. They tried to spoil Sabina’s good spirits by threatening to put her in a brothel (8, 6, p. 146): Σαμίνα δέ καί θηλήσας θηλέοις πάσην αὐτήν μακρὰν ἐπήριτε. Whether the threat was really carried out is not clear since the rest of the passio deals exclusively with Pionius’ fate.

The brothel-motif appears as an extra theme in the Christian self-definition. The way the pagan threat was put into words seems to indicate an awareness of the Christian sensitivity concerning this subject. Of course, we should never forget that even the “authentic” Acts of the Martyrs, and therefore also the pagan dialogues in those acts, were written by Christians. The Christians of the early fourth century used these texts to present themselves as the victims of the intolerantly licentious pagans.

**Conclusion**

Christianity was a movement that offered an alternative social identity. Christians were no longer (primarily) members of the “earthly polis” and they were supposed to reject all its aspects at least at a theoretical level. This is expressed in all the texts about married martyrs (Perpetua, Paphnutius, Irenaeus and Phileas). Confronted with their family (parents, spouses and children) they reject their earthly ties and obligations. They choose for their “spiritual” family and for the obligations connected to their Christian social identity. In daily life, there is no mention of a problematisation of sexuality (nor for clerics, nor for laymen), but in the crisis-situation of the persecutions other priorities prevailed.

We have also found a number of texts where the celibate life is shortly mentioned (Marianus, Felix and Montanus), and an equal number of texts that have made the rejection of sexuality and the family into a narrative element. (Ptolemaeus, Potamnius and Agapi). Here we have found analogies with the basic scheme of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the appearance “in nucleo” of the motif of the rejected “lover” as the reason for an arrest (“virginitas-martyrium”) and the brothel-motif as a threat to the physical integrity of the Christian virgin (also, in a sense, present in the passio Pionii).

In conclusion, we can state that the early acta and passiones express an anti-theitical Christian self-definition. The Christians are presented as virtuous and detached; the pagans as licentious and conformist. In addition, the texts, seen as a corpus, already contain all the elements of the Christian anti-sexual erotics we will find in the later, so-called “epic” passions: the rejection (by married people) of marriage and children, the rejection of marriage-candidates in favour of the virginity-ideal, the pagans as licentious individuals, the revenge of frustrated marriage-partners or pagans who react in an intolerant way upon the Christian refusal of other, sexually linked activities, the threat of deflowering in the brothel and the miraculous preservation of chastity.

In the post-nicene acta and passiones these elements will be combined into a very complex and paradoxical mixture of themes. Martyrdom equals eternal life. Virginity equals death of the desires. Choosing for the earthly life implies eternal death; and giving in to licentiousness means the “death” of virginity. One only has to look at the horizon lines to get the “disseitige” association between Eros and Thanatos. The number of virgin martyrs will increase dramatically, but in the early Acts of the Martyrs, marriage and sexuality in general are not rejected as bad or contrary to the faith. It is only in times of crisis that the martyr should be “mellior cupiditate detentus.”

**SUMMARY**

In the early Christian Acts of the Martyrs marriage and sexuality are rejected as part of the ties that bind the individual to society, to this world. Although a great number of martyrs were married and had children, the crisis situation of the persecutions revived the ethically-based rejection of the family we find in some New Testament writings. This is why several early martyrs deny having spouses or children “after the flesh”. The stock answer “Christianus sum” in interrogation scenes has a similar motivation: the Christians reject their normal social identity and present themselves solely as members of a Janssens-oriented religious group. But a few early Acta and Passiones of celibate martyrs already offer all the elements that can be found in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and will be elaborated in the so-called “epic” virginity-passiones.

**ABRÉGÉ**

Le refus du mariage et de la sexualité dans les Actes des Martyrs authentiques doit être lié au refus des liens qui rattachent l’individu à la société, à ce monde-ci. Un nombre considérable des martyrs sont présentés comme mariés, comme des parents, mais la crise des persécutions a revitalisé le refus de la famille qui, dans les écrits du Nouveau Testament avait une motivation d’ordre eschatologique. C’est la raison pour laquelle un bon nombre des martyrs étaient même devant les juges ou devant le public d’être mariés ou d’avoir des enfants. La réponse stéréotypée de ‘Christianus sum’ avait une motivation analogue. Les chrétiens reniaient leur identité sociale normale; ils voulaient se présenter uniquement comme les membres d’un group ret-jeux « sur l’au-delà. Mais dans ce même corpus on trouve aussi des textes sur des martyrs célibataires qui contiennent déjà tous les éléments qu’on retrouve dans les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres ou dans les passions tardives dites épiques, en combinant martyr et ascèse sexuelle, virginité et persécution.