

From Carthage to Nicaea: Martyrdom and the Legacy of Perpetua and Felicity in Confessing the One Faith

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Abstract

The Nicene Creed, since its conception, has been recognised as a defining statement of Christian orthodoxy. While the Council of Nicaea is often analysed in terms of its theological debates and political implications, less attention has been given to its connection with the earlier African Christian tradition, particularly the role of martyrdom in shaping understandings of public confession (confessio fidei). This paper explores how the North African martyr tradition, particularly the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity (203 AD), prefigured key Nicene concerns about Christian identity and the acts of faith as public declarations. This study considers the works of North African theologians such as Tertullian and Augustine, who developed theological reflections on martyrdom and perseverance in faith. By revisiting the African martyr tradition through a Nicene lens, the deep interconnections between early lived African Christianity and the broader ecumenical developments of the fourth century are recovered. In doing so, it invites renewed reflection on how historical martyr narratives continue to inform contemporary theological discourses on Christian unity and public witness.

Keywords: Nicene Creed; African Christianity; Martyrdom; Perpetua and Felicity; *confessio fidei*; Carthage; Early church; Theological identity

Introduction

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, written in early third-century Carthage in 203AD, is one of the most vivid narratives of Christian witness from antiquity. Although the narrative was composed a century before the Council of Nicaea (325AD), it functions as a theological testimony, demonstrated through visionary experience and radical identification with Christ in suffering. In this article, I argue that the theological world inhabited by the North African Martyrs, in which emerging Christology and piety were slowly shaping, helped lay the spiritual groundwork for the core expressions of the Faith, which would later be formalised in the Nicene Creed. Without collapsing the distinction between narrative theology and conciliar formulation, in this paper, I will explore how early third-century North African Christianity carried themes of divine identity, Trinitarian experience, ecclesial unity, and soteriology in ways that prefigure and perhaps contributed to the questions and categories that surrounded the Nicene

controversy. When situating the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity within the broader theological trajectory of Latin Christianity, especially as developed by figures such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and, eventually, Augustine, a case can be made that martyrdom in North Africa was also one of many bases of theological formation, alongside being a form of resistance. In tracing these connections, the lived theological instincts of a community whose suffering gave rise to some of Christian doctrine's earliest and most striking expressions of faith can be recovered.

The cultural and theological context of early North African Christianity

The setting of Perpetua and Felicity's narrative is equally important to its theological formation and impact as the content itself. Roman North Africa, where Carthage was situated (modern-day Tunisia), was considered central to the broader Roman Empire despite its distance and served as a nexus for trade and intellectual exchange. The city, founded in approximately 800 BC by Phoenician settlers from Tyre, was considered, from early in its existence, a sophisticated urban centre due to its trade connections and the presence of strong military and religious traditions. It was within this context that both the actual martyrdom within the text took place, as well as much of the theological thought which surrounded it (Salisbury, 1997:33).

Carthage, during Perpetua's life (200 AD), had grown into one of the most cosmopolitan and wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire, second only to Rome itself. The city's complex cultural heritage, which blended Punic, Roman, Hellenistic, and later Christian elements, created a rich local context for theological reflection that was also distinct from the more Hellenised or Latinised Christianity of the imperial centre itself (Salisbury, 1997:33–34).

An interesting aspect of Perpetua's character is her bilingual fluency in Punic (a Semitic language descended from the Phoenicians), which indicates that indigenous North African culture persisted in this area, even under Roman rule. This cultural continuity allowed early Christians in Carthage to be shaped by both the more typical Greco-Roman philosophical and legal traditions and by local cultural identities. As historian Joyce Salisbury notes, Perpetua was "not purely a daughter of Rome," and any interpretation of her martyrdom must account for her Carthaginian heritage (Salisbury, 1997: 33).

In this North African cultural setting, martyrdom came to be understood as both sacred participation and resistance, and Carthaginian religious imagination was already rife with long-standing emphasis on costly devotion, even to the point of sacrificial death. Additionally, while human sacrifice had long been rejected in Christian practice, the notion of offering one's life to a divine cause had deep roots in the region's religious consciousness (Akinboye, 2018:66). The early Christian martyrs, however, did not offer others in sacrifice but rather offered themselves, an act viewed as a union with Christ which, although an inversion, retained the seriousness and sacred gravity of the sacrificial act (Moss, 2012:17).

The historical identity of the city of Carthage was built on narratives of both greatness and destruction, which were born from its initial rise as a formidable maritime empire to its eventual annihilation at the hands of Rome and its assimilation into the empire. This cultural memory did not disappear with the fall of the Punic state in 146 BC, as one might think, but lived on both in the monumental Roman cityscape built on the original

Carthaginian ruins and in the self-understanding of its inhabitants (Tracy, 1942:151–152).

Roman accounts of Carthage from this time are often propaganda-driven; however, they do offer clues to how the Carthaginians were perceived by the broader empire. Ancient writers such as Livy and Plutarch describe the Carthaginians as stubborn, sullen, materially obsessed, and treacherous. Livy even went so far as to refer to Hannibal's promise to Roman captives sarcastically, saying he kept it "with true Punic reverence," by chaining them instead of releasing them (*Titus Livius (Livy), The History of Rome, Book 22, chapter 60*, no date).

Despite these sentiments from Roman writers, the people of Carthage were also commended for their perseverance. Even after utter destruction, they rebuilt themselves within the empire and found ways to retain their unique cultural identity as a North African state. Punic continued to be spoken even in elite circles well into the second and third centuries. The persistence of indigenous religious forms such as the worship of Saturn and Caelestis, and Roman analogues of Baal-Hammon and Tanit, is also indicative of Carthaginian traditions which had endured beneath Roman rule. Even names such as Fortunatus, Saturninus, and Datus, with the narrative of Perpetua, reflect an assertion of North African heritage (Salisbury, 1997:35–37).

Further in the narrative, one also sees depictions of the author's Carthaginian roots. The martyr's visions include recognisable Carthaginian symbols and spaces, even as they are framed in the apocalyptic language of Christian salvation. An example of this is found in the scenes wherein Perpetua dreams of a ladder guarded by a dragon or sees her deceased brother in a place of thirst; though these images she is showcasing a tradition of symbolic interpretation that had long been tied to sacred landscape, ancestors, and communal memory within North African cultures (Salisbury, 1997:37).

Though it is difficult to trace direct causal links between Carthage's intellectual culture and Perpetua's specific choices, several distinct elements of this environment, discussed above, strike one as having been influential. The cultural-theological setting in which Perpetua's martyrdom unfolded was thus not peripheral to later doctrinal developments but constitutive of the Church's understanding of *confessio fidei*. The multilayered identity of Carthage's culture and historical memory shaped a mode of Christian witness that was both public and sacrificial. In this world, to confess faith was not only to affirm doctrinal content but to embody it under threat. The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity stands, therefore, not simply as an isolated martyr text but as an early articulation of North African theological commitments, which will be discussed in the following section.

The narrative structure of the text

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity combines several narrative styles, such as editorial framing, narrator's comments, first-person testimony, and visionary accounts, all to form a unified literary whole. When examined, its architecture can be described as both narratively and theologically intentional. What follows is a brief examination of the narrative's structure to provide context for the subsequent discussion of the text's theological themes and their links to the formation of a proto-Nicaean theology.

A brief clarification of the textual basis is necessary at this point. The present analysis draws primarily on the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, or *The Passion of Perpetua and*

Felicity in English, in its longer Latin form. This follows from the manuscript tradition itself. Of the ten extant witnesses, nine are in Latin, and only one is in Greek, discovered in 1889 and published by J.R. Harris and S.K. Gifford in 1890. The Latin tradition, though preserved only in manuscripts no earlier than the ninth century, remains the dominant and most complete textual basis (Gold, 2018:18–20). This version is marked by its composite structure, including an editorial prologue, Perpetua's first-person prison diary, visionary material, and a concluding redactorial account. This text should be distinguished from the later, abbreviated *Acta Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*The Acts of Perpetua and Felicity*), which emerged in late antique North Africa, likely between the 4th and 5th centuries, and reflects processes of liturgical adaptation born of regional doctrinal developments and conflicts (Cobb, 2019:600–605).

The Latin *Passio* is generally regarded as the earliest recoverable form of the narrative, with the Greek version reflecting its subsequent transmission into the eastern Mediterranean. The relationship between these textual traditions has been heavily contested. While Harris initially argued for Greek priority, he later reversed his position, and the current scholarly consensus holds that the Greek text represents either a translation of a now-lost Latin exemplar or a heavily reworked version of the Latin rather than a strict translation. This is evident in the substantial divergences between the texts, including both expansions and omissions (Gold, 2018:18–20). By contrast, the *Acta*, which is often transmitted as abbreviated recensions, were widely received throughout the Middle Ages and shaped by later theological and ecclesial concerns, including those associated with Augustinian interpretation and North African controversies. The present study, therefore, engages the *Passio* as its primary textual basis, since it preserves the fuller narrative tradition within which the theological motifs under consideration emerge, and because the narrative dates to the time period whose theological developments are examined in the following.

Within this framework, the passion text opens with a preface by an anonymous editor, although it is likely written by a presbyter or local teacher. This introduction asserts the didactic value of martyrdom and defends the legitimacy of recording the events described in the text that follows (Cobb, 2019:600–605). This introduction, therefore, asserts the didactic value of martyrdom and defends the legitimacy of recording the events described in the text that follows. The point stressed here is that the acts recorded are divinely inspired and worthy of preservation for the edification of the church (Heffernan, 2012:2–3).

Following the introduction, the core of the text is Perpetua's diary. She is described as a 22-year-old Roman noblewoman and recent convert who is imprisoned alongside four male catechumens (Saturus, Saturninus, Revocatus, and Secundulus) and Felicity, a pregnant enslaved woman. Perpetua's account begins in prison and focuses on her spiritual resolve, her strained relationship with her pagan father, and her emotional separation from her infant son. Perpetua's refusal to recant the faith, despite repeated paternal appeals, is the driving motivation behind her theological agency and spiritual maturity over the course of this section of the narrative. The motif of familial severance becomes a narrative precursor to the ultimate renunciation demanded by martyrdom within the final portion of the text (Cotter-Lynch, 2016:14–17).

Perpetua then records four visions that depict her spiritual progression. The first of which is an account of her ascent on a perilous ladder guarded by a dragon, after which

she arrives at a pastoral paradise. Scholars consider this to be an allegory of the narrow path to divine reward through suffering (Heffernan, 2012:167). Following this vision, she sees her deceased brother Dinocrates suffering in a dark place; however, through her intercession, he is delivered. The efficacy of prayer and the porosity of the boundary between life and death are depicted here. Then there is a vision of gladiatorial combat. Perpetua's defeat of an Egyptian opponent after stating that she has now become a man to fight in her following vision is seen as symbolic of her battle not against suffering but against the devil himself. Some scholars, however, have also made the assertion here that this transfiguring of genders is also a later addition and attempt to "rectify" the gender norms at play here so that Perpetua may take part in the fight, rather than an actual transformation of her gender from male to female (Roberts, 2021:167). Nonetheless, the transfiguration here can also be indicative of the Martyrdom ideal of participation in Christ's passion and the victory of the resurrection (Castelli, 2004:66–67). Perpetua's final vision depicts an eschatological tribunal. Here, she stands in judgment and is welcomed into the divine court, reinforcing the Christological and judicial imagery central to early Christian eschatology (Heffernan, 2012:167).

Saturus, one of the men imprisoned with Perpetua in this text, also offers a parallel vision. His vision, after voluntarily going to his arrest, describes a celestial ascent guided by angels, culminating in beatific communion with the divine. Drawing on apocalyptic traditions (such as 2 Enoch and Revelation), his vision complements Perpetua's, affirming the theological theme of martyrdom as both imitation of Christ and passage to glorification (Heffernan, 2012:55).

The prison narrative also details other theologically relevant scenes from their confinement. Felicity, who was heavily pregnant at the time of her arrest, is shown fearing her lack of baptism, as well as experiencing anxiety over being excluded from martyrdom due to Roman legal prohibitions against executing pregnant women. Within the text, her premature delivery, followed by her inclusion among the condemned, is presented as providential. The martyrs present in the prison interpret this as a divine affirmation of her full participation in the ecclesial body despite being unbaptised (Cotter-Lynch, 2016:186–184).

In the final section of the text, the redactor recounts the execution in the amphitheatre. The male catechumens are exposed to wild beasts, while Perpetua and Felicity are subjected to a wild cow, which is considered a punishment laden with symbolic overtones of femininity and sacrificial spectacle. Despite the violence, which is described in this portion of the narrative, the martyrs are consistently shown to exhibit serenity and spiritual authority. Most notably, Perpetua assists a faltering young gladiator in delivering the fatal blow, an act which has been often attributed by scholars to be something of a Christological echo, signalling her peaceful acceptance of martyrdom and alignment with the passion of Christ (Heffernan, 2012:134).

The narrative's conclusion, particularly the depiction of Perpetua's assistance to the faltering gladiator, strengthens the theological motif of active participation in Christ's passion. This act exemplifies the Christian ideal of voluntary suffering and redemptive sacrifice, aligning with the proto-Nicene emphasis on the transformative power of martyrdom. The portrayal of Perpetua's serene authority in the face of death not only reinforces the Christological imagery but also serves as a theological statement on the nature of divine grace and human agency in the context of persecution (Cotter-Lynch,

2016:186–184). This thematic convergence highlights the text's role in shaping early Christian theological discourse, particularly concerning the nature of sanctity, suffering, and the eschatological hope inherent in martyrdom. This demonstration of voluntary sacrificial suffering and spiritual authority sets the stage for examining the text's proto-Nicene resonances, where themes of divine sonship, Trinitarian presence, unity, and early Christological formulation begin to emerge from within the martyr narrative for further investigation.

Before this can be done, however, it is important to note that *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* did not remain a fixed, unchanging report but was transmitted as a discursive, rhetorically shaped text within early Christian communities. The surviving tradition includes at least nine Latin manuscripts and a Greek version, with variations in title and content that reflect editorial and communal choices in different regions and periods. Some medieval manuscripts even shift the emphasis away from Perpetua's voice by foregrounding other martyrs' names or reordering the incipit, signalling multiple points of reception rather than a single authoritative *editio princeps* (Gold, 2018: 16–17). This variability indicates that the narrative was adapted to meet evolving expectations of what a martyr account should communicate, rather than remaining a static historical record.

The editor's prologue itself performs a strategic rhetorical function common to early martyrological literature in that it appeals to the text's didactic and spiritual value by framing the martyrs as paradigms for communal imitation and situating visionary experience as normative for *confessio fidei*. Such prefaces could perhaps be read as explicit invitations to read the narrative as a theological argument. This likely was a stylistic choice to ensure a reading that embeds the text in liturgical and pedagogical contexts rather than simply recording events.

By the late antique period, this shaping extended into the *Acta* recensions, which did more than abbreviate the Passion. These versions reworked narrative elements, such as the depiction of Perpetua's death, in ways that aligned with contemporary ecclesial sensibilities and reduced disruptive features of the older account. Such redactional choices reflect doctrinal and rhetorical priorities in reception, not merely textual compression. When taken together, the transmission history of the Passion suggests that early Christian theology was also produced in spaces where communal reading of a narrative and rhetorical framing could play a role in how *confessio fidei* was understood and reinforced across varied communities (Gold, 2018:19–20).

Proto-Nicene resonances in the narrative

While the earliest version of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, examined here, predates the Council of Nicaea by more than a century, its theological texture reveals anticipatory alignment with several core concerns that would later be formalised in Nicene orthodoxy. Though not systematic or dogmatically precise, the narrative reflects what may be called “proto-Nicene instincts” coming to life within the early North African Christian community. I will now draw on the narrative discussed above to examine the various theological themes that could be considered prefigurations of Nicene theology. The various themes will be listed and explained, with deeper explanations of their links to the council and reception among other North African theologians leading up to the council, following in the subsequent section.

Sonship, Divine Identity, and Participation in the Image of Christ

Perpetua's vision in which she becomes a male gladiator before entering the arena is one of the most intriguing images in this narrative. On the surface, it might seem like a strange choice in a text which centres on self-sacrifice; however, the vision here reflects a deeper theological premise than a simple inversion of gender to justify entering battle.

Importantly, Perpetua's gendered expression of transformation here is not necessarily a negation of her femininity. She continues to speak in the first person as a woman. Scholars have argued that, rather than signalling a literal transformation, her claim functions symbolically within a theological grammar of participation (Cotter-Lynch, 2016,:41–42). Her martyrdom, when viewed in this context, is a form of transformation into an empowered version of herself who was able to stand and fight in the arena against her Egyptian foe (who is presented as being symbolic of the devil). This is an image loaded with theological connotations and, as Salisbury notes, it could even be a symbol of "the dramatic change from catechumen to baptised Christian." (Salisbury, 1997: 109).

It is to this end that her transfiguration into the likeness of the Son does not come at the expense of the obliteration of her embodied self but through conformity to Christ's victorious suffering. In this way, "becoming male" marks not a shift in identity but a mode of participation in Christ's sonship. This category for the emerging Nicene tradition was not reducible to gender but referred to eternal relationality with the Father.

For the Nicene community, this Christocentric version of identity was not focused on asserting equality with the Father, but rather through conforming to the pattern of Christ's obedient suffering and triumph, in a manner which was modelled on the Martyrs. Perpetua's composed approach to her execution at the close of the passage, in which she steers the blade to her throat, is often considered to be a mirroring of Christ's autonomous offering: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17–18). In this, her death is staged as an active union with the crucified-risen Lord rather than a passive sacrifice (Cotter-Lynch, 2016: 42).

Pre-Nicene theology, especially in North Africa, considered martyrdom to be a form of ontological union with Christ. Cyprian termed it a "baptism of blood," positing that suffering for Christ can confer fullness of baptismal identity even in the absence of literal water (*Ante-Nicene Fathers: Beginning of Christianity to the Nicene Creed*, no date). Writing from a similar North African context, Tertullian framed martyrdom as a generative act: "the blood of the martyrs is seed of the church." Here, the deaths of the martyrs are not seen as an erasure but the Church's expansion through faithful embodiment of Christ's passion (Jacob, 2024:12).

Martyrdom, when viewed in this manner, is a sacramental enactment, where the martyr participates mystically in Christ's passion. Early Christians embraced this not as fashioning new theological categories but as living the *imitatio Christi* called for in Luke 6 and Matthew 5 with regard to turning the other cheek to one's enemies, thereby embodying the nonviolent suffering and resultant glory of Christ (*How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs | Christian History Magazine*, no date).

In light of this, one can perhaps draw the line that, even before the formal Nicene articulation of *homoousion*, she embodies the likeness of the human nature of the Son through freely offered suffering. Martyrdom becomes the space where divine sonship is assumed, with the past simply declared.

Revelation and Pneumatology

Charismatic Experience and Vision: Following on from the imagery of a Christ-like sonship through suffering, the narrative flows into another mode of participatory union, which is focused on the reception of the work of the Spirit. Perpetua's visions and those of Saturus are manifestations of the Spirit-led disclosure of divine reality. The text presents these visions as communal gifts, thus authenticating the Spirit's presence among these believers. In the opening preface, the author invokes Joel, affirming that in the eschatological era the Spirit would be poured "upon all flesh," that "sons and daughters shall prophesy," and the faithful would receive visions and dreams (*Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III*, no date).

Tertullian also endorses the shared legitimacy of dreams and visions as potential means of divine revelation. In *De Anima*, he considers sleep a state in which the soul remains active, and dreams carry prophetic weight and are directly related to communal edification (*Church Fathers: A Treatise on the Soul (Tertullian)*, 207 AD). The visions of Perpetua, which include her ascent to the arena, confrontation with the Egyptian, communion with deceased martyrs, and the reconciliation of ecclesiastical figures like Bishop Optatus and Aspasius, illustrate how revelatory experience functioned as a unifying, authoritative and Spirit-mediated source for the early Church (Heffernan, 2012:139–140).

This also aligns with the theory of the existence of a pre-Nicene Pneumatology, which was later drawn on by the council, where the Spirit is seen to sanctify, reveal, and unite believers with Christ in real time, even before formal Trinitarian definitions are codified. While later post-Nicene theologians like Basil the Great would articulate the Spirit's role in uniting the believer to the Father through the Son, here the Passion already exhibits a lived theology of Spirit-given authority and insight.

Ecclesiology and the Unity of the Church

The shared martyrdom which is described in the passion of Perpetua and Felicitas is also an indication of the beginnings of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church as a lived value, before formal creedal expression. Felicitas's prayer to deliver her child before the group's execution is not a display of maternal anxiety; rather, it is shaped as ecclesial fidelity and a refusal to partake in Christ's sacrifice outside the fellowship that shares it sacramentally.

Cyprian would later anchor this incarnate unity in doctrinal clarity. His statement "*Salus extra ecclesiam non est*" (there is no salvation outside the Church), and his assertion that one cannot have God as Father without the Church as Mother, emerge from precisely this logic that the Church is not an adjunct to salvation but is its vessel (Mills, 2021:31). The martyrs we read of in the Passion have already displayed this conviction in the formation of a community of believers in prison as they awaited their martyrdom.

This embodied unity can also be linked to the eventual Nicene articulations, which emphasised the Church as the locus of salvation and doctrinal integrity. Though the Creed would later define the Church's oneness and catholicity, the martyrs had already modelled it through their mutual prayers and shared resolve in the face of their unified sacrifice, thus prefiguring the Nicene categories. Martyrdom, when understood this way, becomes a generative act, constructing the Church as a visible and redemptive unity under Christ's head.

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, therefore, offers not only a witness to faith under persecution but also a theological landscape in which categories later made solid at Nicaea already appear in their initial forms. Sonship and conformity to Christ, pneumatic revelation and communal vision, and the unity of the Church through shared suffering each reveal an anticipatory grammar of doctrine embedded in lived experience and suffering. These themes were not yet the formalised dogma of creeds, but they circulated in North African Christianity as lived convictions. In this manner, that shaped how believers understood their identity in Christ and the nature of the Church itself. It is precisely within this setting that I now turn to the proto-Nicene and North African theologians who gave conceptual clarity to these instincts, developing a narrative tradition that bridged martyr memory with the doctrinal formulations that culminated in the Nicene faith.

The development from martyr theology to the Nicene formulation

The theological instincts embodied in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* were not isolated phenomena but emerged from and contributed to a broader North African Christian consciousness. In the generations following their deaths, North African theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and, eventually, Athanasius (though Egyptian, not Carthaginian) would continue to articulate the concerns that would become central to those discussed at the Council of Nicaea. This continuity demonstrates that early doctrinal development often arose from the testimony of local martyrs and theological reflection in communities under duress. Therefore, in the following, I will examine some of these theologians' engagement with these theological aspects born from the context of this narrative.

Tertullian offers an early systematic account of Christ's nature and the role of suffering in the Christian life, written in the same historical context as this martyrdom narrative, being a close contemporary of Perpetua. His works, such as *Adversus Praxean* and *Apologeticum*, defend the distinctiveness of the Son (as the Logos), while affirming the unity of God, which was the core tension at the heart of later discussions on Trinitarian doctrine at Nicaea. Specifically in *Adversus Praxean* 9, Tertullian formulates the "Rule of Faith" in proto-Trinitarian terms, distinguishing the Father, Son, and Spirit while resisting direct modalist combinations of the three persons. These analogical motifs prefigure the later-developed theological concept of perichoresis (mutual indwelling) within Trinitarian understanding. Notably for the purposes of this paper, however, his theology of the Logos is inseparable from his conception of the reality of suffering. Christ's passion is presented as the means by which the divine economy is disclosed (*Church Fathers: Against Praxeas (Tertullian)*, 213 AD). Tertullian's insistence in *Apologeticum* 50 that the Martyrs' own sacrifices were directly responsible for the growth of the church situates suffering as a revelatory participation in the divine mission, rather than as a simple act of witness. This theology is largely reminiscent of Perpetua's own visions of glory through affliction (Rankin, 1995:162–163).

Cyprian inherited this martyr-centred theology and developed it into an early ecclesiology amid renewed persecution. In his treatise *De unitate ecclesiae* ("On the Unity of the Church"), Cyprian insists that there can be no salvation outside the visible Church when addressing the validity of baptism administered by heretics^[1]_{SEP}. He thereby locates soteriological efficacy not in abstract faith alone but within the tangible

institutional body of the Church. He sees the Church as the ark of salvation, while insisting on visible unity bound by episcopal authority. This is a statement directly born from the chaos of the Decian persecution, during which debates raged over the readmission of lapsed Christians.

Here, he sees the Church as the ark of salvation, a singular, Spirit-bound body which is united under episcopal authority. This insistence on visible unity reflects the communal martyrdom of Perpetua's cohort, their shared fate across lines of class, and anticipates Cyprian's conviction that ecclesial identity is not optional but salvific (*Church Fathers: Treatise 1 (Cyprian of Carthage)*, 251 AD).

Although Athanasius wrote from the context of Alexandrian Egypt, his work both reflected and refined early martyr theology for the Nicene age. In *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei (On the Incarnation of the Word of God)*, Athanasius articulates a vision of salvation in which the Word assumes flesh to destroy death through death, which was a logic deeply rooted in the martyr tradition. In his theology, Athanasius also insisted that Christ's suffering is not a tragic necessity but the divine strategy for restoring humanity to incorruptibility. The martyrs, by willingly entering into suffering and death, thus participate in this redemptive process (Vincelette, no date, pp. 18–19). In *Letter to the Monks* and other anti-Arian polemics, Athanasius often draws on the memory of martyrs (including local examples) to support the full divinity of Christ: only a truly divine Christ can confer incorruptible life, and only such a Christ is worth dying for. Athanasius' polemics thus interweave martyr memory with doctrinal clarity on Christ's nature (Kelhoffer, 2011:596–597).

What becomes interesting at this point in the investigation is the manner in which the theological trajectories from the early perceptions were carried forward into the Council of Nicaea's very atmosphere. Accounts of the event describe bishops arriving at the council still bearing the scars of imperial persecution. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Life of Constantine*, speaks of confessors mutilated by torture, who stood as living testimonies to the faith they defended. Among them were figures like Paul of Neocaesarea, whose hands had been burned in the persecutions, and Paphnutius of Thebes, blinded and hamstrung during one of the final persecutions, yet present at Nicaea to take part in the doctrinal formation of the Imperial Church (Kelhoffer, 2011:589–591). These confessors, who were present, sat in communion with those who had gone before and embodied a line of theological inheritance rooted in flesh and sacrificial memory. Thus, the Council itself can perhaps be said to have become a living link between the church under threat and the church seeking unity.

The iconography of the First Ecumenical Council also offers insight into how martyrs and suffering were viewed at the time. Within one such icon, the inclusion of images relating to the tradition of St Peter of Alexandria invites particular interest in this regard. Peter, while imprisoned before his martyrdom, received a vision of Christ as a young man in a torn white garment. When he asked about the wound, Christ revealed that Arius had rent His body, the Church, by his false teaching. This vision, remembered in the conciliar iconographic tradition, situates Peter's death as a prophetic anticipation of Nicaea's central task: to heal division by confessing the true faith. The bishops' united act of holding the creed is thus the visual answer to Peter's vision, a mending of the torn garment through shared proclamation. This icon symbolises orthodoxy emerging from struggle, sustained by collective confession, and its imagery conveys the message that

doctrinal coherence requires both institutional affirmation and sacrificial witness (*The Iconography of the First Ecumenical Synod - Nicaea I in 325 (An Overview)* - *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America - Orthodox Church*, no date).

When read in light of the North African martyr tradition, this icon demonstrates how the memory of suffering and public confession informed the very grammar of Christian orthodoxy. Just as Perpetua and Felicity's deaths in Carthage were remembered as acts of faithful confession before hostile crowds, and as Cyprian and Tertullian framed martyrdom as the highest form of witness, so too the icon of Nicaea presents orthodoxy as truth validated in suffering. The bishops here all act as confessors whose authority derives from endurance. This Nicene icon, therefore, embodies the same trajectory traced in African Christianity of faith proclaimed in the face of division, sealed by witness, and made visible as unity before the world (*The Iconography of the First Ecumenical Synod - Nicaea I in 325 (An Overview)* - *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America - Orthodox Church*, no date).

From this brief examination of the theologians who wrote and contributed to North African doctrinal discussions, as well as the general remembrance of the Martyrs and suffering, it becomes clear that the trajectory from Perpetua and Felicity to Nicaea is one of theological continuity rather than direct influence. In the martyr texts, early Christians are grappling with divine identity, spiritual participation, and ecclesial solidarity through the lived experience of confrontation with imperial power and suffering. These aspects generated a theological grammar that thinkers like Tertullian, Cyprian, and Athanasius later codified in response to heresy and division, and in a manner that shows how martyrdom theology laid the foundations for the emerging vocabulary and constructs that found formal expression at Nicaea.

Conclusion

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity endures in historical memory as an embodied expression of early Christian faith that prefigures key doctrinal developments. Perpetua and Felicity are portrayed by this text as theological witnesses whose lives and testimonies exemplify a lived soteriology, an implicit Christology, and a charismatic ecclesiology that would only later be codified at Nicaea and beyond. Their visions, choices, and communal suffering demonstrate that the early Church did not separate theology from experience. Rather, the experiential knowledge of God, which for the early church was often forged through persecution and loss, was itself a form of theological reasoning. To revisit their narrative is to recover a mode of theology rooted in the realities of Roman North Africa.

Perpetua's first-person account remains among the earliest extant Christian writings by a woman, offering rare access to female theological agency in the pre-Constantinian Church. While not the focus of this paper, her spiritual authority within the text, evident in her visions and moral resolve, offers insight into a new facet of the early church's faith. This, in turn, supports the importance of acknowledging her relevance to the construction of a proto-Nicaean theology originating in North Africa.

This examination of the elements of Martyr theology, which later fed into the creed developed at Nicaea and its surrounding conversations, is valuable in so far as it also recognises the importance of lived theology alongside formal doctrine. The instinct to separate systematic theology from spiritual experience or practice often flattens the

richness of early Christian historical writing. As the lives of Perpetua and Felicity, and later thinkers like Cyprian and Athanasius, show, theology was often honed in communal suffering and prayer rather than in abstract speculation alone. Alongside this renewed attention to the lived aspects of theological development, geographical location and context find a renewed relevance. The social and spiritual influences of North Africa played a role in shaping key elements of Christian doctrine.

In recovering these elements of the Nicene history, our understanding of the pre-Nicene Church can be deepened, and modern assumptions regarding where theological authority resides can also be challenged. Martyrdom narratives like that of Perpetua and Felicity call for a renewed awareness that orthodoxy was not born in councils alone, but in the witness of those faithful to Christ, even unto death.

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