

The Catacombs of St Callixtus

The persecution ordered by the Emperor Nero in 64 AD resulted in the martyrdom of a large number of Christians. It was a hard trial for the young Church at Rome, which from that point on also had to undergo a terrible campaign of slander and insult among the population at large. Christians were labeled atheists because they refused to worship the Emperor, and they were considered a danger to the unity of the Roman Empire and enemies of the human race. They were credited with the most appalling atrocities: infanticide, cannibalism, and immorality of every kind. Tertullian (160-220) described the situation as follows: "They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise or send its waters over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straight away the cry is, 'Away with the Christians, to the lion!'"¹

Until the Edict of Milan brought peace in 313 AD, the Church lived with constant persecution. It is true that

¹ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 40, 12.

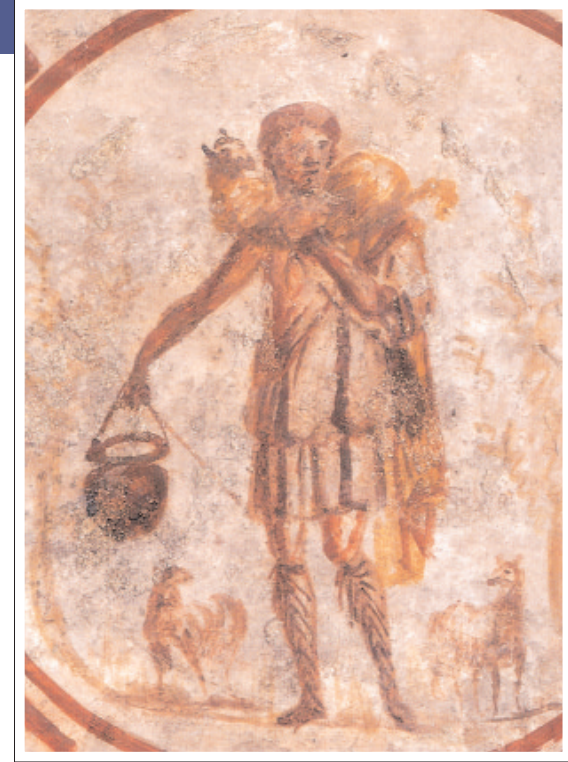


Image of the Good Shepherd on a vault in the Catacombs of St Callixtus, painted by the Christians of the 3rd century

this persecution was not always maintained at the same level of intensity, and that aside from certain specific periods, Christians led normal lives; but the risk of martyrdom was ever-present: a single denunciation by an enemy could initiate a trial. Every convert was aware that Christianity was a radical option that implied the pursuit of holiness and the

profession of faith to the point of laying down their lives if necessary. Among the faithful, martyrdom was considered a privilege and a grace from God - an opportunity of being fully identified with Christ at the moment of death. Together with this, the awareness of their own weakness led them to beg God for help to be capable of embracing martyrdom if the occasion arose, and to venerate as their models those who had achieved the martyr's palm. It is easy to imagine how it must have stirred the Christian community at Rome to hear details of the holy deaths of their brethren in the faith. Such accounts both consoled and strengthened the believers, and sowed the seed of new conversions. The relics of the martyrs were gathered up and buried devoutly, and from then on the faithful appealed to them as intercessors.

4th-century tomb with two images of the Good Shepherd



From the mid-fifth century BC, Roman law had ensured that cemeteries or necropolises ("cities of the dead" in Greek) were located outside the city walls. "No dead man may be cremated nor buried in the city."² Romans normally cremated the bodies of the dead, but there were also some families who had the custom of burying their family members on their own property, and this custom later became general under the influence of Christianity.

To begin with there was no separation, but Christian faithful and pagans were buried together. From the second century AD onwards, thanks to donations from some high-ranking Christians, the Church began to have her own necropolises, which the faithful began to call "cemeteries" (Greek *koimeteria*, from *koimáo*, to sleep), where the bodies of the faithful rested, awaiting the resurrection of the dead. This was how the Christian catacombs came into being. They were not, as is sometimes thought, hiding-places, or meeting-places for liturgical celebrations, but burial-places where the mortal remains of the brethren were kept. Originally the word "catacomb" denoted the area by the Appian Way between the tomb of Caecilia Metella and the city of Rome. In time it came to be used for any Christian underground cemetery. In the early centuries many of the martyrs were buried in the catacombs, and, together with the tombs of St Peter and St Paul, the catacombs became places of memory and veneration, very dear to the hearts of the Christians at Rome. When times were especially difficult, how often they must have gone there to implore God's help through the intercession of those who had proclaimed the Gospel with their blood! It was very natural for the faithful to wish to be buried there,

² Twelve Tablets, 10.1.



Crypt of St Cecilia

to await the resurrection in the company of other members of the Christian community and, if possible, close to the tomb of one of the Apostles or martyrs.

On the Appian Way

The Catacombs of St Callixtus are located just outside Rome on the Appian Way. This area began to be used for burials in the second century AD, and some of the local proprietors, who must have been Christians, allowed the bodies of their brethren in the faith to be buried there too. Around this time, there took place the burial of the body of the young martyr Cecilia, who had been greatly venerated from the

moment of her death. Belonging to a patrician family, Cecilia was converted to Christianity in her youth. Her father married her to Valerianus, whom she brought to the Faith, and the couple decided to live together virginally. Soon Valerian, who dedicated himself to gathering the remains of the martyrs and giving them burial, was discovered and beheaded. Cecilia was then denounced to the authorities. They tried to stifle her to death in the bath-chamber of her own house, and when she was unharmed by this means, she was condemned to be beheaded. Roman law permitted the executioner to give up to three strokes with the sword. Cecilia was struck three times, but did not die immediately. As she lay on the ground, before breathing her last, she found the strength to extend

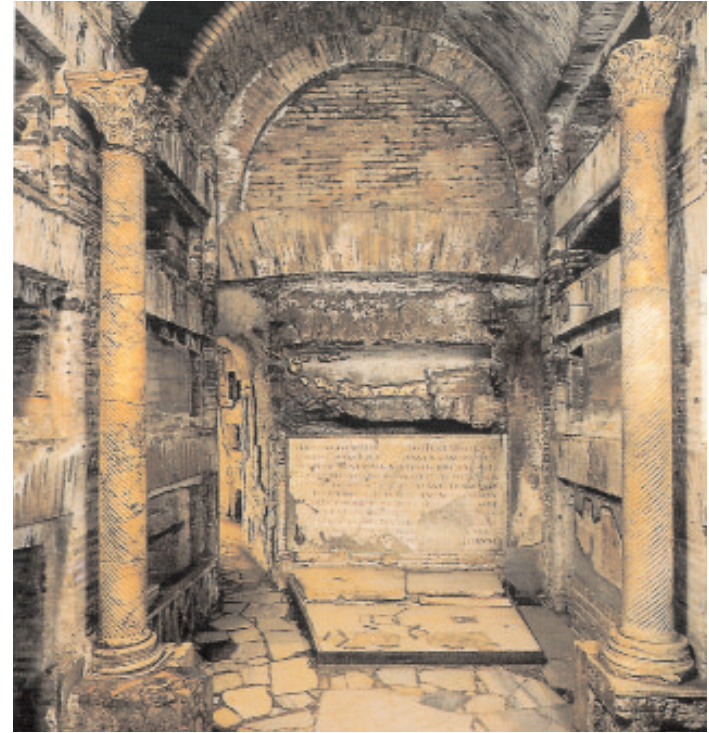
Where the tomb of the young martyr was, there is now a copy of a sculpture done by Maderno in 1600



three fingers of her right hand and one of her left, testifying her faith in God One and Three to the very last. When, centuries later, in 1599, the relics were inspected, St Cecilia's incorrupt body was found still in the same position. Maderno (1576-1636) immortalized this in a sculpture which is now in the Church of St Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, which stands on the site of the saint's own house, and where her body has lain since the ninth century. A copy of this sculpture is to be found in the Catacombs of St Callixtus, at the spot where she was originally buried.

In the third century this cemetery was donated to Pope Zephyrinus (199-217), who appointed the deacon Callixtus as its administrator. This was the first cemetery to be owned by the Church at Rome, and by the following century it housed the remains of sixteen popes, almost all of whom had been martyred. Callixtus worked as administrator of the catacombs for the best part of twenty years, before himself being elected pope to succeed Zephyrinus. During that time he enlarged and improved the main areas of the cemetery, particularly the Crypt of the Popes and the Crypt of St Cecilia.

Another martyr whose testimony deeply moved the Christian community was St Tarcisus, or Tarsicius. In the fourth century, Pope St Damasus engraved on St Tarcisus's tomb the exact date of his martyrdom: August 15, 257, during the persecution under the Emperor Valerian. The boy Tarcisus, an acolyte, used to take Holy Communion to imprisoned Christians. On August 15, 257 he was discovered and arrested, and his captors tried to force him to give up the Sacred Hosts he was carrying. He refused, choosing to be stoned to death rather than permit the Body of Christ to be profaned.



Crypt where the remains of six 3rd-century Popes were buried as well as several priests and deacons who were martyred with Pope Sixtus II. At the end is the epitaph composed by Pope St Damasus in the 4th century:

*Here lies gathered, if you seek it, a host of holy people.
The venerated tombs hold the bodies of the saints,
The court of heaven has taken their sublime souls to itself.
Here are the companions of Sixtus, who bore off the trophy from the enemy;
Here is a group of Popes who guard the altars of Christ;
Here lies the bishop who lived long in peace;
Here are the holy confessors that Greece sent;
Here are the youths and children, old men and their chaste grandchildren
Who preferred to keep their virginal purity.
Here I, Damasus, confess I would have liked to be buried
But that I feared to vex the holy ashes of the saints.*

With the Peace of Constantine (313), the catacombs continued to be burial sites, and also became places of pilgrimage. After the sack of Rome by Alaric in the fifth century, it became increasingly dangerous to venture outside the city walls, and visits to the catacombs became less and less frequent. In the ninth century it was decided to transfer the bones of the saints to churches inside the city, and during the Middle Ages, the catacombs fell into oblivion. They were never visited, and in many cases the knowledge of their whereabouts was lost.

Although interest in the catacombs revived from the fifteenth century onwards, it was not until the nineteenth century that the catacombs were again valued as holy places and treasures of Christianity. Giovanni Battista De Rossi, the founder of modern Christian archeology, who rediscovered the Catacombs of St Callixtus, relates in his memoirs how he persuaded Pope Pius the Ninth to visit the excavations. When they arrived at the Crypt of the Popes, De Rossi explained the inscriptions to him, and showed him the stone tablet that Pope St Damasus had had set there, with the names of the martyred successors of St Peter who had been buried there. It was at this point that Pope Pius fully realized where he was standing. His eyes shining with tears, he knelt down and spent some time absorbed in prayer. It was the first time for almost a thousand years that a Pope had set foot in the place that was sanctified by the blood of the martyrs.

July 4, 1946

Soon after his arrival in Rome, St Josemaría spoke of his desire to go and pray in the catacombs. Years

before, speaking to some of his spiritual sons in the Honduran Legation, Madrid, he had said to them, ***Don't you see that we're not alone? We can cry out like the first faithful in the silence of the Roman Catacombs: Dominus illuminatio mea et salus mea, quem timebo? The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? (Ps 26:1) Only thus can we explain the first Christians' truly heroic actions. Trusting firmly in God's help, without doing anything odd, they entered everywhere: into the forum, the palaces, even the Emperor's own house.***³

Early in the morning on July 4, 1946, St Josemaría went to visit the Catacombs of St Callixtus. The Founder of Opus Dei celebrated Mass in the Crypt of the Popes, and Don Alvaro del Portillo celebrated Mass in the Crypt of St Cecilia. Afterwards they visited the Catacombs of St Sebastian and the tombs of the Apostles.

From the very beginnings of Opus Dei, St Josemaría liked to cite the first Christians as exemplary models to explain the life of the faithful in the Work. He liked to call them ***our predecessors in the old and very new apostolate of the Work.***⁴ It has been calculated that the number of Christian graves in the Catacombs of St Callixtus is around five hundred thousand. Most of them are quite plain tombs, marked only by a simple carved image. From the fourth century onwards, once the persecutions had ended, inscriptions become much more common. These would include not only the name but also, as though to indicate the key to the person's life, their job. There were bakers, carpenters,

3. St Josemaría, AGP, P12, p. 32.

4. St Josemaría, Instrucción, 9-I-1935, no. 298.

tailors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, soldiers, and many others, clearly reflecting the variety of jobs done by Christians, who, as St Augustine said, mixed with other men and lived the same lives as everybody else, but inspired by "a different faith, a different hope, and a different love."⁵ St Josemaría loved to think about those predecessors in the faith who aimed for holiness in the middle of the world, and so acted as leaven in the mass of society. The love and veneration he felt for them often led him to cite them as an example in his preaching, saying for example, ***I have no other method for being effective than the first Christians had. There is no other, my children.***⁶

Throughout his life, the Founder of Opus Dei would frequently refer to paintings or carvings from the catacombs to illustrate subjects such as love for our Lady, fraternity, or union with the Holy Father, all of which were attested to by the faithful of the earliest centuries. However, if there was one image out of all of them that he loved especially, it would definitely be that of the Good Shepherd.

In the room where St Josemaría worked in Villa Tevere, Rome, there was a marble bas-relief with a reproduction of the Good Shepherd from the catacombs, and underneath it are inscribed some lines by the Spanish poet Juan del Enzina (?1469-?1530).

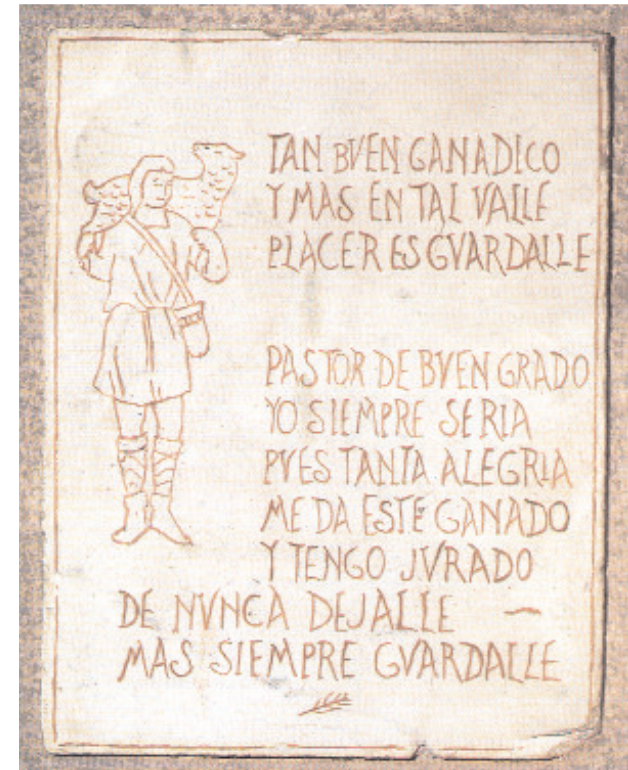
Such a good flock, / and still more in such a valley, / is a pleasure to guard. / And I have sworn / never to leave it, / but to guard it always.

St Josemaría told his spiritual children, ***From the very beginning, from the second of October 1928, I have felt impelled by God to love you, and to love***

5. St Augustine, *The City of God*, 54, 2.

6. St Josemaría, notes taken from his preaching, 29 November 1964.

7. St Josemaría, AGP, P18, p. 151-152.



Stone carving of the Good Shepherd

everything in your lives, with the love of a father and a mother. Nothing that concerns you is alien to me, and the same is true of those thousands of daughters and sons I have never met.⁷

He liked talking to them about the Good Shepherd to foster their apostolic concern for all souls. He said,



Statue of the Good Shepherd dating from the mid-4th century, now in the Vatican Museums

Lord, the need to help them is like a dagger in my heart. O Good Shepherd, go in search of them yourself, put them on your shoulders, bringing to life that beautiful scene illustrated in the catacombs. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, "he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And

8. St Josemaría, AGP, P18, p. 276.

when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' (Lk 15:5-6)⁸.

In his lifetime the founder of Opus Dei not only talked about the Good Shepherd - he also tried hard to be one, living out Christ's words, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*⁹ As the Prelate of Opus Dei testifies, St Josemaría "meditated on the Gospel scenes of the Good Shepherd throughout the whole of his life. He loved this image very much indeed, and wanted to get to know the sheep one by one, to give his life for them, to lead them to the best pastures, and never to fail to look after any that had got lost, or left behind."¹⁰

At the entrance to the Catacombs of St Callixtus, before going down the steps leading to the Crypt of the Popes, one can see a painting of the Good Shepherd. This is a copy of the fourth-century original, which is now in the Vatican Museum. There is another copy in Villa Tevere, near Opus Dei's prelatial church, Our Lady of Peace, where St Josemaría's mortal remains rest. The painting evokes so many things: Jesus Christ himself, the first Christians, the Pope, and all souls. St Josemaría once said, ***How tenderly Christ our Lord spoke about the Good Shepherd! How carefully he described him! He told us that the sheep followed the shepherd, and they loved him, and knew that they were being well looked after...***¹¹

9. Jn 10, 11

10. Javier Echevarría, Memoria del Beato Josemaría, Madrid, 2000, p. 329.

11. St Josemaría, notes taken from a get-together, 13 March 1955.