GOD'S WORK IN THE EARLY CHURCH

VOLUME 1

The First Witnesses

Eight Christians from the early church, from Ignatius to Patrick

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.

Revelation 12:11

WIM KAMPHORST

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The First Witnesses. God's work in the early church, volume 1

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The sources consulted are listed after each chapter. Stories known only from a person's own testimony or from later tradition, or that cannot be verified, are marked as such in the text and in the overview at the end of each chapter.

This book can be read and downloaded free of charge at whispermagazine.org.

Introduction: the roots

Every church in the Netherlands has roots that go further back than the Reformation, further back than the Middle Ages, all the way to the first centuries after Jesus. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, evangelicals and Pentecostals all read the same Bible that was copied and explained in those centuries. They all confess that Jesus is the Son of God, with words that were found back then. Yet many Christians know little about the people of that time.

This book is about eight of them. A bishop who traveled to Rome in chains and wrote letters along the way. An old bishop in Smyrna who said he had served his King for eighty-six years. A philosopher who went past all the schools of his day and ended up with Jesus. A young mother in Carthage who kept a diary in prison. An Egyptian farmer's son who sold everything and went into the desert. A bishop in Alexandria who was exiled five times because he held on to the truth that Jesus is truly God. A teacher from North Africa who wrote down his own conversion. And a Briton who was kidnapped by raiders and taken to Ireland as a teenager, and who later went back there to bring the gospel.

Facts first, especially here

More legends circulate about this period than about any other. For many of these people, we know their lives from accounts of martyrs and lives of saints, sometimes written down centuries later. I have always tried to show where a story comes from: from their own letters and books, from someone who knew them, or from a much later tradition. After each chapter you will find what is certain, what is known only from their own words or from later stories, and what is uncertain or disputed. The sources are listed there too. Many of the ancient texts can be read for free online in translation.

Dates are often uncertain for these people. Where scholars disagree, I say so.

Of all the churches

These people lived before the church split into East and West, and long before the Reformation. Christians from every church appeal to them, and sometimes in different ways. I have tried not to claim them for one church, and not to read later quarrels back into their time.

How you can read this book

The order is the order of time, from the beginning of the second century to the fifth century. Each chapter stands on its own. Read it with an open Bible beside you, and with a question in the back of your mind: what did God ask of them, and what is He asking of you?

Ignatius of Antioch: the prisoner who asked not to be rescued

On August 24 of a year we do not know exactly, a prisoner in Smyrna wrote a letter. Smyrna is present-day İzmir, on the west coast of Turkey. The man was guarded by ten Roman soldiers. In his letter he called them ten leopards and added that they only got worse when you were kind to them. The letter was for the Christians in Rome. They lived in the city where he was being taken to be thrown to the wild beasts.

What he asked of them is strange to read even today. He asked them to do nothing to get him released. The date is at the end of the letter, in the Roman way of counting: the ninth day before the Kalends of September. He also wrote that Christians from Ephesus would carry the letter, and that a man named Crocus was with him.

The prisoner's name was Ignatius. He was bishop of Antioch, one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire. Along the way he left behind seven short letters, and they are among the oldest Christian texts we have outside the New Testament. Of his youth we know nothing. Of his death we know less than you might think. But his

voice we do have, from his own pen, and that is what this chapter is about.

It begins in a city on a river.

Where the disciples were first called Christians

Antioch lay on the river Orontes, in the northwest of what was then the province of Syria. Today its remains lie beneath the city of Antakya, in the province of Hatay in Turkey. The city was founded around 300 BC by Seleucus I, one of the generals who divided up the empire of Alexander the Great. In Roman times it was the third city of the empire, after Rome and Alexandria. At its height perhaps more than half a million people lived there.

For Christians the city had a special ring to it. The book of Acts tells that Barnabas and Paul taught there for a year, *and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.* (Acts 11:26). In early tradition Peter is also connected with the city.

Ignatius became a leader in that church. Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote the first great church history around 325, calls him the second bishop of Antioch, after Evodius. In another place Eusebius puts it this way: Ignatius was the second in succession from Peter.

In those days a bishop was the leader of the Christians in one city. He worked together with elders, in Greek presbyters, and with deacons, who mainly cared for the poor. Christians later came to disagree deeply about exactly how such a church should be governed. Ignatius plays a large role in that discussion.

Stories about his early years are passed around, and you come across them in lives of saints and in sermons. He is said to have been the child whom Jesus took in His arms and set in the middle of the disciples. Peter himself is said to have appointed him as

bishop. He is said to have been a disciple of the apostle John, like his friend Polycarp. John Chrysostom, the famous preacher from Antioch, said at the end of the fourth century, on the memorial day of Ignatius, that the hands of the apostles had touched his head. I pass these stories on because you may know them. Not one of them can be traced to anything Ignatius' own time left behind.

The year of his birth is unknown. What we do have is the name he gave himself.

"Also called Theophorus"

Every letter begins in the same way: Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus. That Greek word means "God-bearer", or "one who is carried by God". An account of his martyrdom that was written down much later has him explain what he meant by it. In that account he stands in Antioch before the emperor Trajan himself, who asks who Theophorus is. Someone who carries Christ in his chest, Ignatius answers. Trajan asks whether he then carries the one who was crucified. Yes, says Ignatius, for it is written that God will live in them and walk among them. The emperor pronounces the sentence: he is to be taken in chains to great Rome and thrown to the beasts there, for the entertainment of the people.

Ignatius answers, so the story goes, with a prayer of thanks. He is glad that the Lord counts him worthy, in perfect love for Him, to be bound with iron chains like the apostle Paul. The account cannot have got such a conversation with the emperor from a reliable source, and it was written down centuries later. It does show how Christians remembered him: as a man who wore his chains as an honor.

Why was he arrested? We do not know. The magazine Christian History writes that he was probably charged with "atheism". In the

Roman world that meant refusing to honor the gods of the city and the empire. Eusebius places the events under the emperor Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117.

It is striking that Ignatius was not executed in Antioch. He was taken to Rome under guard. Why? The scholar Christine Trevett honestly concluded in 1989: we do not know.

Ten leopards

In the letter to Rome, Ignatius described his journey as a fight with wild beasts, from Syria to Rome, by land and by sea, by night and by day. He immediately explained that he meant his guards. He was chained to ten soldiers, he wrote, and when you treated them well, they only got worse. In J. B. Lightfoot's translation: "being bound amidst ten leopards, even a company of soldiers, who only wax worse when they are kindly treated." Eusebius copied that sentence into his church history around 325.

There is a dry humor in it. But Ignatius immediately gives it another turn. Through their ill treatment, he writes, I become more of a disciple. And a moment later, almost apologetically: that does not mean I am justified.

How he got from Antioch to Asia Minor, by land or by sea, is unknown. Part of the route can be read from the letters. He traveled by way of Philadelphia, now Alaşehir in Turkey, to Smyrna. From there he went to Troas, on the coast near the Dardanelles. From Troas he sailed to Neapolis in Macedonia, present-day Kavala in Greece, and traveled on to Philippi. What happened after Philippi, the letters no longer tell.

In various places Christians came to him. They sent delegates, brought him news and carried letters. Christian History notes that almost everywhere he met leaders of the local churches. Eusebius

writes that Ignatius traveled through Asia under strict guard and in every city encouraged the churches with sermons and warnings. He urged them to hold on to what the apostles had handed down. A condemned prisoner who is received like a guest: that says something about how the first Christians held on to one another.

With God's own voice

In Philadelphia something happened that Ignatius later described in his letter to that church. He was there together with the believers, and he suddenly cried out loud. "I spake with a loud voice, with God's own voice", he wrote (in Lightfoot's translation). What he cried out was a call to unity: listen to the bishop, to the presbyters and to the deacons.

There was division in the church that day, though Ignatius, by his own account, did not know it. Some suspected that someone had told him beforehand. He denied it emphatically. No human being had told him, he wrote. The Spirit had said it. It had sounded like a voice within him, and he had cried out what he heard.

That is how he told it himself, in a letter to the people who had been there. Here you see Ignatius as someone who understood God's voice in a concrete moment, in the middle of a gathering, without preparation. He had not prepared a sermon. He cried out what he heard.

In the same letter he describes a debate. There were people who appealed to old written documents, charters. If I do not find it in the charters, they said, I do not believe it in the gospel. Ignatius answered that his charter was Jesus Christ, with His cross, His death and His resurrection. He was a fiery man, and he did not avoid an argument.

A pile of letters in Smyrna

In Smyrna, Polycarp was bishop. According to Eusebius, Ignatius wrote four letters in Smyrna: to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia and Tralles, and to the church of Rome. Magnesia on the river Maeander and Tralles lay in the west of present-day Turkey. The churches had sent people. From Ephesus came bishop Onesimus and the brothers Burrhus, Crocus, Euplus and Fronto. In them he saw the whole church, he wrote, with the eyes of love. From Magnesia he names bishop Damas, from Tralles bishop Polybius.

What is in those letters? Two things, again and again.

The first is unity. Stay together, meet often, do nothing apart from the bishop and the elders. In the letter to Ephesus he compares a church of one mind to strings tuned on a lyre. He speaks of the one bread they break together, and calls it a medicine of immortality, an antidote so that you do not die but live forever in Jesus Christ. He also writes that they must pray without ceasing for people outside the church, for perhaps they will still repent. Against their anger they can be gentle.

The second is the question of who Jesus was. There were Christians who taught that Christ only seemed to be human. His suffering, they said, was an appearance. That movement was later given the name Docetism, from the Greek word for "to seem". Ignatius wrote fiercely against it: Christ was truly born, truly crucified and truly raised. In the letter to Smyrna he chooses an argument that comes close to home. "For if these things were done by our Lord in semblance, then am I also a prisoner in semblance" (in Lightfoot's translation). Why, he asks, have I given myself up to death, to the sword and to the beasts?

In the middle of all his certainty, the letter to Ephesus contains a sentence you would not expect. "I do not command you, as though

I were somewhat", he writes (in Lightfoot's translation). He called himself someone who was only beginning to be a disciple. And somewhere in between, a sentence for those who talk a lot about faith: "It is better to keep silence and to be, than to talk and not to be" (in Lightfoot's translation).

God's wheat

The letter to Rome is different from the rest. There are hardly any warnings in it against false teaching and almost nothing about bishops. It is the letter of a man on his way to his death, who is afraid that well-meaning brothers will stop him.

He begins hopefully. He hopes to see them and greet them, now that he is in chains for Christ Jesus. Then comes his request, and it makes the letter what it is. I do not want you to please people, he writes, but God. If you stay silent now, I am a word of God. If you want to save my life, I am only a voice. He asked them for nothing more than this: that he might be poured out as an offering to God, now that the altar was still ready.

Pray for me, he wrote, that I may be called a Christian and also be found one. Christianity shows its power, he added, when the world hates it. He knew the difference between Peter and Paul and himself. They had been free apostles, he was a condemned man. "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ]", he wrote (in Lightfoot's translation). He asked the Romans to lure the beasts, so that they would be his tomb and leave nothing of his body, and so that no one would be burdened by him. If the beasts hesitated, he wrote, he would urge them on himself.

Around 180, Irenaeus of Lyon was already quoting that wheat sentence, in a book against false teachers. He did not name the writer.

He only wrote that one of ours, condemned to the beasts, had said that he was God's wheat. It is one of the oldest traces of the letters outside the letters themselves.

Further on comes a passage that is quoted less often. "Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God", wrote Ignatius (in Lightfoot's translation). It is good for me to die for Jesus Christ, better than to rule over the ends of the earth. He compared his longing to a birth: the labor pains have begun. Only when I reach the pure light, he writes, will I truly be a human being. Whoever has God within him, he told his readers, will understand what I want and will feel with me. Do not hinder me from living, he begged, for living meant, for him, life with God after his death. "It is good to set from the world unto God, that I may rise unto Him" (in Lightfoot's translation), like the sun that sets.

I find this a hard letter. Ignatius does not force anyone to follow him. He only asks that his friends not stand in his way. How do you read someone who longs for death like this? Some readers hear a healthy courage in it, others something that looks like a death wish. Christian History writes that Ignatius wanted to follow Christ even in his dying. He saw the arena as the place where he would finally be a true disciple.

And you? What would you ask your brothers and sisters, if you knew where your journey would end?

Water that speaks

In the same letter there is an image I mentioned before. Ignatius wrote that his desire had been crucified. There was no longer any fire burning in him for the things of this world. What was in him, he called living water. That water spoke, he wrote, and from within it said one thing to him.

"Come to the Father" (in Lightfoot's translation).

He added a sentence about his food. Perishable food could no longer tempt him, and neither could the pleasures of this life. Bread of God he wanted, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ. And as his drink His blood, which is imperishable love.

A prisoner in Smyrna, among ten soldiers, on his way to an arena he had not yet seen. And inside him a voice like flowing water, calling him home. Whoever wants to know how the first Christians spoke about God's voice need look no further. That is how it came to them: as a voice that commanded nothing and called to a Father.

At the close he asked the Romans to pray for the church in Syria, which now had God as its shepherd in his place.

Good news in Troas

In Troas a message reached him from Antioch. The church there had peace and had regained its old strength. He wrote to the Smyrnaeans that their prayer had reached Antioch. What exactly had been going on, he does not write. Eusebius reports that Heros became bishop of Antioch after him. In every letter he had asked them to pray for the church in Syria.

He wrote three more letters: to the church of Philadelphia, to the church of Smyrna and to Polycarp personally. He asked all three to send someone to Antioch, to congratulate the church there. With him were Philo, a deacon from Cilicia, and Rhaius Agathopus. Burrhus from Ephesus, sent along by the Smyrnaeans and the church of Ephesus, had encouraged him in every way. He took the letter to Smyrna.

In the letter to Smyrna he wrote a sentence that took on great meaning centuries later. "Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there

let the people be" (in Lightfoot's translation). And he added: just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church. The Greek word katholikos means general or worldwide. According to Christian History, this is the oldest known use of the phrase "catholic church". For Ignatius it meant the whole church as opposed to the local congregation, long before there was any talk of a Roman Catholic Church alongside other churches.

In the same letter he said something about the false teachers that is less well known. They had no care for love, he wrote, not for the widow and not for the orphan. For Ignatius, right teaching and care for the weak belonged together. The same letter contains a scene he takes from somewhere: the risen Jesus telling Peter and the others to touch Him and see that He was not a bodiless spirit. They touched Him, Ignatius writes, and believed.

The letter to Polycarp is the most personal one. A bishop writes to a colleague. "Stand thou firm, as an anvil when it is smitten" (in Lightfoot's translation). A good athlete takes blows and wins. Be as prudent as a serpent, he writes, and always harmless as a dove. Do not forget the widows. Do not look down on slaves, men or women. He asked Polycarp to call a council and to send a reliable man to Syria, a courier of God. A Christian has no time for himself, he writes: his time belongs to God. At the end he apologizes that he cannot write to all the churches. He had to sail unexpectedly from Troas to Neapolis.

There his own words stop.

"If you know anything for certain"

The last trace of Ignatius comes from Polycarp. In a letter to the church of Philippi, he names the blessed Ignatius, together with Zosimus and Rufus, as an example of endurance that the Philip-

pians had seen with their own eyes. He writes that he was sending along with this letter the letters of Ignatius that he had. And he asks the Philippians to let him know if they had reliable news about Ignatius and his companions.

I find that a moving question. The friend who kept the letters did not know himself how it had ended.

What happened in Rome? Eusebius wrote around 325 that Ignatius became food for the wild beasts there. He put it cautiously, as something that was told. Christian History says it soberly: it is likely that he was killed, but not certain, and the details have been lost. The Encyclopaedia Britannica settles on a death in Rome around 110.

The details you often hear are from later. Chrysostom said at the end of the fourth century that Ignatius died in the middle of the theater, while the whole city sat above him. He saw in the jaws of the beasts an escort to a kingdom. Jerome is the first to mention lions.

The account of his martyrdom that I mentioned pretends to have been written by his traveling companions Philo and Agathopus, though its best manuscript comes from the tenth century. It tells of a sea voyage by way of Philippi and the Adriatic Sea, and how the Christians in Rome came out to meet him. They were afraid, and he asked them not to intervene. He knelt down with them, prayed for the churches, and was then given to the beasts in the amphitheater, on a feast day. Only the harder parts of his bones remained, it is told, and wrapped in linen they were taken to Antioch. The death on December 20 is in it too.

The story ends with a scene that I find beautiful. The writers stayed at home the night after his death, weeping and praying, and fell asleep. Some saw Ignatius standing beside them in a dream and embracing them. Others saw him praying for them. Still others

saw him dripping with sweat, as if he had just come from his work, standing by the Lord. They told one another, praised God and decided to remember the day of his death.

It is a legend, and it says something about the people who kept it. The Byzantine chronicler John Malalas, sixth century, even places the martyrdom in Antioch, at the time of a severe earthquake while Trajan was in the city. That earthquake really happened, in the year 115. So we have an early and unanimous tradition that he died in Rome, and around it stories that contradict each other.

Seven letters in three forms

You would think that at least the letters themselves are certain. It is not that simple, and the story of how they came back reads like a search.

For centuries, Christians in Europe read a collection of thirteen letters under the name of Ignatius. Six of them were forgeries, and the other seven had been heavily expanded, probably in the fourth century. That long form said something very different from the original.

In the sixteenth century came fierce criticism. John Calvin called the letters worthless. Many Protestants distrusted them because they put such strong emphasis on one bishop at the head of a church.

Then the detective work began. The Irish archbishop James Ussher, himself a Protestant, found a Latin translation of a shorter form and published it in 1644. In 1646 Isaac Voss published the Greek text of six letters. The Greek letter to Rome followed only in 1689, because it had been preserved in a manuscript inside an account of his martyrdom. This is the form with seven letters that Eusebius also knew. In the 1840s a Syriac form with only three letters appeared as well, published by William Cureton.

At the end of the nineteenth century, two Protestant scholars, Theodor Zahn and J. B. Lightfoot, showed in great detail that the seven letters were genuine. Their work shaped research for more than a century. Since 1979 the question has been open again, and a group of scholars, mostly German, holds the letters to be a forgery from the second half of the second century. Most scholars still consider them genuine. That is why in this chapter I have let Ignatius speak as their writer. Whoever wants to follow the precise debate will find it in the box.

Bones on their way home

According to Chrysostom, the remains of Ignatius were brought back to Antioch. Cities along the way carried them on their shoulders, he said in his sermon. They are said to have been buried outside the city gate. In the fifth century, according to a later historian, the emperor Theodosius II had them moved to a former temple of the goddess Tyche, which had become a church. When Antioch fell into Arab hands in 637, they are said to have been taken to the church of San Clemente in Rome.

What is certain is that Christians have never forgotten him. The Roman Catholic Church, the Anglicans, the Lutherans and the Syriac churches remember him on October 17, the old memorial day of Antioch. The Eastern Orthodox Church does so on December 20. Protestants who long distrusted him find in him words about Christ who truly became human. Catholics and Orthodox read in him how early the bishop was the center of the church. Pentecostals and evangelicals can read in him about a voice of the Spirit that sounded in the middle of a gathering. They all read the same seven letters.

Somewhere in Smyrna a man stood at a window and wrote a date under a letter. The ninth day before the Kalends of September. Someone took the letter to Rome.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Ignatius was an early bishop of Antioch (Eusebius around 325, Chrysostom at the end of the fourth century); he was taken to Rome as a prisoner and on the way wrote letters to churches in Asia Minor and to Rome (Eusebius; Irenaeus around 180 knew a sentence from the letter to Rome; Polycarp); there is an early and unanimous tradition that he died in Rome by wild beasts; the form with seven letters is the form Eusebius knew; the long form of thirteen letters is a later reworking.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: everything about the journey, the ten soldiers, the delegates, the cry with "God's own voice" in Philadelphia, the conversation about the charters, the longing for Rome and the news from Antioch comes from his own letters; the stories about the risen Jesus letting Himself be touched, in the letter to Smyrna, Ignatius himself cites without a source (Eusebius says he does not know where it comes from); the conversation with Trajan, the explanation of the name Theophorus, the sea voyage after Philippi, the date of death of December 20, the dream of the writers and the bringing back of the remains come from an account of his martyrdom handed down in a tenth-century manuscript; the theater and the return of the remains to Antioch come from Chrysostom; the lions from Jerome; the moving of the relics from later historians.

Unconfirmed: that he was the child Jesus took in His arms; that Peter appointed him (Theodoret, fifth century); that he was a disciple of John; that the hands of the apostles touched his head (Chrysostom); the reason for his arrest (Christian History names "atheism" as the probable charge) and why he had to go to Rome (Trevett, 1989: unknown); the year of his death (tradition places it under Trajan, 98 to 117; Britannica says around 110; proposals range from

around 110 into the 140s); the place of his death (Malalas, sixth century, names Antioch, during the earthquake of 115); whether he was actually killed; whether the relics in Rome are really his; whether the passages about Ignatius in Polycarp's letter are original, for some scholars hold precisely these passages to be a later addition, and then an important early piece of evidence for Ignatius falls away.

The debate about the letters: the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1910 already called the legend of the child a story without a good foundation, and the account of his martyrdom heavily reworked. The letters have been handed down in three forms. The long form (thirteen letters, six of them forged and seven reworked, fourth century) was the familiar one for centuries. In the sixteenth century Calvin called the letters worthless. Ussher (1644) and Voss (1646, with the letter to Rome only in 1689) brought the form with seven letters to light, and Cureton (1840s) the Syriac form of three, which is now usually regarded as a summary. Zahn and Lightfoot showed at the end of the nineteenth century that the seven letters were genuine. Since 1979 Robert Joly, later Reinhard Hübner and Thomas Lechner, have argued that they are a forgery from the 160s to 180s, written under the name of a martyr to strengthen the position of the bishop. Timothy Barnes did consider them genuine in 2008, but dated them to the 140s, because according to him Ignatius knew the teaching of a Gnostic teacher who was only active later; he held that Eusebius' dating under Trajan carries no authority. At a meeting in Benediktbeuern in 2017, German-speaking scholars set the positions side by side: one dates the letters around 170, another in the first quarter of the second century, a third points out that the quarrels about leadership sound like real quarrels with real people.

Interpretation: most scholars consider the seven letters genuine and date them somewhere between about 110 and 140. A serious

minority sees them as a forgery. In this chapter Ignatius is treated as the writer, with that note. His voice in Philadelphia is his own testimony; whoever wishes may believe him along with it. It remains the only account, written afterward, in a letter in which he also wanted to persuade that church.

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Polycarp of Smyrna: the old man who served for eighty-six years

The stadium of Smyrna was full. On a Saturday in February an old man was brought in. He had been arrested the evening before in an upper room of a farmhouse outside the city, brought into town riding on a donkey, and pushed out of a carriage along the way. Now he stood before the Roman governor, the proconsul of the province of Asia.

The proconsul offered him a way out. He had to swear by the spirit of the emperor and curse Christ. Then he could go. The old man answered: "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong" (in J. B. Lightfoot's translation). And he asked how he could blaspheme his King, who had saved him.

We know those words from a letter that the Christians of Smyrna wrote shortly after his death to the church of Philomelium, a small town farther inland. Outside the book of Acts, it is the oldest surviving account of a Christian martyrdom. Anyone who reads it notices that it was written by people who were there, or who knew the eyewitnesses. The writers also tell what they themselves experienced as miracles. I pass it on the way they wrote it down.

The old man's name was Polycarp. He was bishop of Smyrna, present-day İzmir on the west coast of Turkey. He lived at a time when the last people who had seen Jesus were dying. A boy who listened to him later became one of the great teachers of the church. Through that boy we know that Polycarp told stories about the apostle John.

To understand why the crowd in the stadium was calling out his name, we have to go back to that boy.

Written in a heart

His name was Irenaeus. Later he became bishop of Lugdunum, present-day Lyon in France. As a grown man he wrote a letter to an old friend, Florinus, who in his view had strayed from the teaching of the apostles. Eusebius of Caesarea, the first great historian of the church, copied part of that letter into his Church History around 325.

Irenaeus reminds Florinus of their youth. I remember the things of those days better than what happened only recently, he writes in essence, because what you learn as a child grows along with you. He still knows exactly where the blessed Polycarp sat when he spoke, how he came in and went out, how he lived, what he looked like and what he said to the people. He still remembers how Polycarp told about his time with John and with others who had seen the Lord, and how he passed on their words. Irenaeus listened eagerly, he writes, and wrote it down not on paper but in his heart. By God's grace he has called it up fresh again and again ever since.

I find this one of the most beautiful sentences from the early church. An old man tells. A boy listens. Half a century later that boy still knows it.

Irenaeus adds something. When Polycarp heard something that went against the teaching of the apostles, he put his hands over his ears. Then he would cry out: good God, for what times have You spared me, that I must hear this. And he would walk away from the place where he was sitting or standing. That is how Irenaeus remembered it, decades later, when he wanted to call Florinus back.

A city in the province of Asia

Smyrna was a port city on the Aegean Sea, in the west of what we call Turkey. In Polycarp's time it belonged to the Roman Empire. The Romans called this region the province of Asia. A proconsul governed it on behalf of the emperor, and he judged cases that carried the death penalty.

Churches like this had a bishop as their leader, together with a group of elders, who were called presbyters, and deacons. The word bishop meant overseer. In Polycarp's own letter you can see that he wrote together with the presbyters. He stood at the head, with others beside him.

The account from Smyrna shows how dangerous things could become for Christians. A crowd in the stadium began to shout. A local official went searching. The proconsul pronounced the sentence after someone had only said that he was a Christian. Whoever was willing to swear by the emperor and offer a sacrifice could go free.

The man who spoke with John

When was Polycarp born? No one wrote it down. His words in the stadium about serving for eighty-six years are often read as his age. If he died around 155 and was eighty-six, he was born around 69.

Irenaeus writes around 180 that Polycarp had been taught by apostles, had talked with many people who had seen Christ, and had

been appointed bishop of Smyrna by apostles in Asia. He had seen him himself in his early youth, he adds, for Polycarp lived a long time and died at a very great age, in a glorious and noble way, as a martyr. Tertullian, a Christian writer from Carthage in North Africa, wrote around 200 that the church of Smyrna kept a record that John had appointed Polycarp there. Jerome repeated it in 392.

For Irenaeus, Polycarp was a living bridge. Anyone who wanted to know what the apostles taught could go to Smyrna and listen to a man who had heard it from them.

"Stand firm as an anvil"

Around the year 107, perhaps a little later, a remarkable prisoner came through Smyrna. It was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, present-day Antakya in Turkey. He was being taken to Rome under guard to die there. The chapter before this one is about him.

Ignatius met Polycarp in Smyrna. Later, from Troas on the coast, he wrote him a personal letter. He suddenly had to sail on to Neapolis in Macedonia, and could not write to all the churches. He asked Polycarp to do it for him, and to send a reliable messenger to Syria.

The letter is full of advice from an older bishop to a younger one. Bear the weaknesses of all, Ignatius writes. Care for the widows. Keep the unity. And then that image: "Stand thou firm, as an anvil when it is smitten" (in Lightfoot's translation). A good athlete, Ignatius adds, takes blows and wins.

Polycarp could not know then how well that image would fit him.

A letter to Philippi

Shortly afterward Polycarp received mail from Philippi, a city in Macedonia near present-day Kavala in Greece. One of the first churches in Europe had started there, founded by the apostle

Paul. The Christians there had welcomed Ignatius and his fellow prisoners as they passed through. Now they asked Polycarp to send their letter on to Syria, and asked for the letters of Ignatius that he had.

Polycarp wrote back, together with the elders who were with him. His letter is the only writing of his that has survived. He begins warmly. It meant a great deal to him that the Philippians had supported prisoners, and that the root of their faith, which had been strong from the earliest days, was still bearing fruit. He writes briefly and practically.

He is modest about himself. He writes only because they asked him, he says. He cannot come close to the wisdom of the blessed Paul, who had sent them a letter himself. Whoever studies those letters carefully, he writes, is built up in faith, hope and love. He warns against the love of money, which he calls the beginning of all evil. He speaks about the widows, and calls them an altar of God. He is sharp toward people who deny that Jesus came in the flesh, or who deny the resurrection and the judgment.

He sends the letters of Ignatius along and asks whether the Philippians have reliable news about Ignatius and the people who were with him. So at that moment he does not yet know for sure how things ended for Ignatius. Elsewhere in the letter he already names him in the same breath as other witnesses, such as Zosimus and Rufus, who are now with the Lord, in the place due to them.

What touches me most is a chapter about a man named Valens. Valens had been a presbyter in Philippi and had misused his office, apparently with money. Polycarp is grieved about it, also about Valens' wife. He asks the church to see them as members who have gone astray and must be called back, and not to call them enemies. That is how you save the whole body, he writes. Shortly after that

he quotes Paul: *"Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath* (Ephesians 4:26). He asks them to pray for all the saints, for kings and rulers, and for their persecutors and enemies.

How do you deal with someone in your church who has betrayed trust? Polycarp did not choose the easy road of forgetting, and he did not choose casting them out either.

The last part of the letter has survived only in an old Latin translation. In it he recommends Crescens and his sister, who brought the letter. Jerome wrote in 392 that in his day the letter was still read aloud in the church services in Asia.

Two bishops, two dates for Easter

At an advanced age Polycarp made a long journey, to Rome. Anicetus was bishop there. The Christians of Asia celebrated Easter on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, the day of the Jewish Passover, on whatever day of the week it fell. In Rome the church celebrated it on a Sunday. Polycarp and Anicetus talked about it. Irenaeus tells what happened, in a letter he wrote around 190 to a later bishop of Rome, Victor, which Eusebius preserved.

Anicetus could not persuade Polycarp. Polycarp could not persuade Anicetus either. Each held to the custom he had received from those before him. And then Anicetus let Polycarp lead the Eucharist, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, in the church of Rome. He did it out of respect, Irenaeus writes. They parted in peace.

Irenaeus did not tell this for no reason. Victor wanted to exclude the churches of Asia because they held on to their date for Easter. Irenaeus held this story up to him: in earlier days two bishops could disagree and still stand together at the table of the Lord. I am writing this down for readers from very different churches. It seems to me a good story to keep.

"I know you"

In Rome, according to Irenaeus, Polycarp brought back many people who had been drawn away by teachers such as Marcion and Valentinus. Irenaeus tells of a meeting between the two men. Marcion asked Polycarp whether he knew him. Polycarp answered: "I do know you, the first-born of Satan." It is a hard word, and it is the same word Polycarp uses in his own letter for anyone who denies the resurrection. Irenaeus gave it as an example of how the apostles and their disciples refused to talk with people who twisted the truth.

Irenaeus also passes on a story he had from people who had heard Polycarp tell it. John is said to have gone into a bathhouse in Ephesus, seen Cerinthus sitting there, a teacher with deviant views about Christ, and left again at once without bathing. Let us flee, he is said to have said, or the bathhouse will fall down, for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside. It fits the picture of Polycarp stopping his ears.

The stadium calls

Back to Smyrna, a few years after the journey to Rome. The church's letter tells how things went from there, and the writers begin with what came before. A persecution had broken out, and the martyrs had held firm bravely. Some had been whipped until their veins and arteries could be seen, the writers say, and the onlookers wept with pity. Not one of them cried out. In those hours, the onlookers noticed, Christ's martyrs were hardly in the body anymore. The Lord stood beside them and talked with them. The fire of their executioners felt cold, the members of the church write, because they were looking at the fire that never goes out.

A young man, Germanicus, stood bravely before the wild beasts. The proconsul asked him to take pity on his youth. Germanicus pulled the beast toward himself, they write, to be freed sooner from this unrighteous life. Then the crowd, shaken by the courage of the Christians, began to shout: away with the atheists, find Polycarp.

A Phrygian, Quintus, had turned himself in and drawn others along with him. When he saw the beasts, he broke and offered sacrifice. The writers soberly add that they do not praise people who give themselves up, because that is not what the gospel teaches.

A pillow on fire

Polycarp himself wanted to stay in the city. At the urging of many, he went to a country house outside the city. There, according to the letter, he did almost nothing but pray, day and night, for everyone and for the churches throughout the world.

Three days before his arrest he saw in a vision, so the letter tells, his pillow on fire. He turned and said to the people with him: "It must needs be that I shall be burned alive" (in Lightfoot's translation). The writers saw it afterward as a prediction that came true.

When the searchers came closer, he went to another country house. They seized two boys from his household. One of them gave way under torture. So he could not stay hidden, they write, for his betrayers were his own household. A police official named Herod set out with horsemen, on a Friday around suppertime, armed as if they were coming for a robber, with the boy as their guide.

They found Polycarp in the evening in an upper room, where he lay resting. He could still have fled, but he would not. God's will must be done, he said. He went downstairs and spoke with the men. His age amazed them, and his calm. They wondered why such an effort was being made to seize so old a man. He had food and drink

brought for them at once, as much as they wanted, and asked for an hour to pray undisturbed.

It became two hours. He stood and prayed, so full of God's grace that he could not be silent. He thought of everyone he had ever met, small and great, famous and unknown, and of the whole church throughout the world. Those who heard him stood there amazed. A number of the soldiers were sorry, the church writes, that they had come to arrest such an old and godly man.

"Caesar is Lord"

He was brought to the city on a donkey, on what the letter calls the great Sabbath. Herod and his father Nicetes met him and took him into their carriage. They sat down beside him and tried to persuade him. What harm was there in saying "Caesar is Lord" (in Lightfoot's translation) and offering a sacrifice, they asked, and so being saved?

At first he did not answer. When they pressed him, he said: "I am not going to do what ye counsel me" (in Lightfoot's translation). They pushed him out of the carriage. He scraped his shin and walked on as if nothing had happened, hurrying to the stadium, where the noise was so great that no one could make out a word.

"Eighty-six years"

As he entered the stadium, according to the letter, a voice came from heaven, calling on him to be strong and to play the man. No one saw who was speaking, they write, but the believers who were there heard it. This too is an element known only from this account.

Then comes the interrogation. The proconsul, according to a later note Statius Quadratus, asks whether he is Polycarp. He must respect his age, swear by the fortune of the emperor, repent and say:

"Away with the atheists" (in Lightfoot's translation). Pagans called Christians atheists, because they did not worship the gods of the city. Polycarp looks at the crowd, waves his hand toward them, sighs toward heaven and says it: away with the atheists.

The proconsul presses him. Swear, and I will let you go. Curse Christ. Then comes his answer about the eighty-six years.

As the proconsul keeps pressing, Polycarp says that he is a Christian. If the proconsul wants to know what that means, he is willing to explain it, on a day of the proconsul's choosing. Persuade the people, says the proconsul. Polycarp answers that he considers the proconsul worth a conversation. Christians have been taught, he says, to honor the authorities appointed by God, as long as that does not harm them. Before the people he will not defend himself.

The proconsul threatens him with beasts. Call them, says Polycarp, for turning from the good to the bad is not possible for us. Then he threatens him with fire. Polycarp answers that the proconsul's fire burns for a season and is quickly quenched. He does not know the fire of the coming judgment, which waits for the godless. Why do you wait, he adds: do what you want.

While he says this, he is full of courage and joy, the letter writes, and his face shines with grace. He does not collapse under the threats. It is the proconsul who stands amazed.

A herald announces three times in the stadium that Polycarp has confessed to being a Christian. The crowd, pagans and Jews of Smyrna, screams that he is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians and the destroyer of their gods. They want a lion. Philip, the official who was in charge of the games, refuses: the animal fights are over. Then they want fire. The vision of the pillow had to be fulfilled, the church members write.

A fire like a sail

The wood came from workshops and bathhouses. The letter mentions Jews who eagerly helped. The account speaks about the Jews in Smyrna in harsh words. For a Christian reader today it is good to know that this is one account, from one church, at a time of tension between synagogue and church. It tells what they saw, not what all Jews thought.

Polycarp took off his outer clothes, loosened his belt and tried to untie his own sandals. That cost him effort, for every believer hurried to help him, to be the first to touch his body. He was honored for his life, they write, even before his martyrdom.

They wanted to nail him down. Leave me as I am, he said: He who gives me the strength to bear the fire will also let me stand without the security of your nails. They tied him, his hands behind his back, like a choice ram from a great flock, ready for an offering.

He looked up to heaven and prayed. The letter gives his prayer, and I give it in Lightfoot's translation:

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of Thy Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Thy presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou didst prepare and reveal it beforehand, and hast accomplished it, Thou that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son,

through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and ever and for the ages to come. Amen."

When he had said Amen and his prayer was finished, the men lit the fire.

What the eyewitnesses saw then, they write down with the words that it was given to them to see it. The flames formed an arch around him, like a sail filled with wind. He stood in the middle, not like burning flesh but like bread being baked, or like gold and silver glowing in the furnace. And they smelled a fragrance, like incense or some other precious spice.

Because the fire did not kill him, an executioner stabbed him with a dagger. According to the manuscripts, a dove came out, and so much blood that the fire went out. The crowd stood amazed. That is how great the difference is between the unbelievers and the chosen, the church members write. They called Polycarp a teacher of apostolic and prophetic character, bishop of the catholic church in Smyrna.

What should you do with stories like these? I pass them on as they were written, along with the writers. They say themselves that it was a wonder that was given to them to see.

Saturday, February 23, but which year?

At the end of the letter there is a date. Polycarp died on the second day of the month of Xanthicus, on the great Sabbath, at the eighth hour. Most editions add the Roman date of seven days before the Kalends of March: February 23. The proconsul was Statius Quadratus. The letter does not give the year. The box explains how scholars arrive at 155 or 156.

More precious than gold

Nicetes asked the proconsul not to release the body, so that the Christians could not honor it. Soon they will worship this man and leave the Crucified One behind, he is said to have said. The Christians could not understand that. Christ they worship, they write, because He is the Son of God. The martyrs they love as disciples and imitators of the Lord.

A centurion had the body burned. Afterward the Christians gathered up the bones. To them they were more precious than precious stones and finer than gold, they wrote. They laid them in a suitable place. There they wanted to gather every year to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, in memory of those who had fought the fight, and to train and prepare others.

This is one of the earliest testimonies of what later became the veneration of martyrs. They counted Polycarp as the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, together with Christians from Philadelphia, present-day Alaşehir. Of none of them was so much said as of him, they write, even by the pagans.

The letter went its own way. A certain Evarestus wrote it down. At the end it says how it was copied: by Gaius from the papers of Irenaeus, then by Socrates in Corinth, and later by a Pionius, who said that Polycarp had shown him in a vision where the text lay. Pionius copied it when the text was almost lost.

Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans still remember him on February 23. Churches without a calendar of saints know him mainly for his answer in the stadium.

What remained of him? One letter, a few memories of a disciple and an account of his death. It is not much. But somewhere in Lyon, around 180, sat a bishop who could still remember how an

old man in Smyrna sat when he told about John, and which spot in the room that was.

Eighty-six years, he said, and He has never done me any harm.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna in the first half of the second century; Ignatius of Antioch wrote him a letter from Troas (about 107 to 110); Polycarp wrote a letter to the church of Philippi, together with his presbyters, and sent the letters of Ignatius along with it; he visited Rome when Anicetus was bishop there, discussed the date of Easter with him, they did not agree and parted in peace (Irenaeus around 190, preserved by Eusebius around 325, and Jerome 392); he died as a martyr in Smyrna by burning, on a February 23 under the proconsul Statius Quadratus; his church wrote an account shortly afterward.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: his time as a disciple of the apostle John and his appointment by apostles (Irenaeus around 180, Tertullian around 200, Jerome 392; Polycarp himself does not mention John, so everything runs through Irenaeus and the tradition of Smyrna: an early and serious tradition, but one trail); the memories of Irenaeus of how Polycarp spoke and stopped his ears (one man, decades later, with a purpose: to call Florinus back); the words to Marcion; the story of John and Cerinthus in the bathhouse (tradition at second hand); the vision of the burning pillow, the voice from heaven, the fire that formed an arch and the fragrance (only from the account of his martyrdom); the Jewish part in the pyre (one account, from one church, at a time of tension); the Life of Polycarp by Pionius (probably fourth century; Lightfoot found it worthless as a historical source; what it says about his youth has not been used in this chapter).

Unconfirmed: the year of his birth (around 69 is a calculation, for the words about eighty-six years can also mean that he had been baptized eighty-six years earlier); the year of his death; the dove that came out of his side (all surviving manuscripts of the letter have it, Eusebius around 325 mentions only the blood; Lightfoot and others think the dove was added later, others that Eusebius left it out); whether the dating line at the end and some of the miraculous elements were added later; the proposal by Candida Moss (2010) that the account itself was written only around 200 or later; the year of the journey to Rome (Vatican News says the end of 154, no early source gives a precise date).

The year of his death: Eusebius, around 325, placed the death under the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, so after 161, and in his chronicle gave 166 or 167; Jerome followed him. In 1864 William Waddington worked out, with the help of a speech by Aelius Aristides, when Statius Quadratus was proconsul of Asia: 154 to 155. In 155, February 23 fell on a Saturday. Many scholars followed him. Others, through a different explanation of the great Sabbath, arrive at February 22, 156, still others at the 160s of the second century or even 177. There is one more knot: according to Eusebius, Anicetus did not become bishop of Rome until around 156 or 157, and then Polycarp can hardly have visited him in 154 and died in 155. In this book it says "155 or 156", because most scholars choose that, but it remains a calculation based on a closing sentence that some think was added later.

Interpretation: whether the voice, the fire and the fragrance were miracles from God is a question of faith. The account honestly says that it gives the experience of the believers, and the church historian Philip Schaff called it the oldest and simplest of all the acts of the martyrs, with a few features of legend. I believe the writers along with them.

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Justin Martyr: the philosopher who kept his cloak

Rome, around the year 165. A small group of Christians stands before the prefect of the city. The prefect's name is Quintus Junius Rusticus. He is no rough soldier. He is a Stoic philosopher and the teacher of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who mentions him with gratitude in his Meditations.

Rusticus first turns to one of them. "Obey the gods at once, and submit to the kings", he says, according to the record of the trial (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation). The man answers that no one who follows the commandments of Jesus Christ can be blamed. Then the prefect wants to know where the Christians meet. The answer is matter-of-fact. Christians meet wherever they choose, he says, because God is not bound to one place. When Rusticus presses him, he gives his address. He lives above a certain Martinus, near the Timiotinian bath. This is his second stay in Rome, and he knows of no other meeting than the one there. And when he is asked whether he is a Christian, he says: "Yes, I am a Christian."

The man's name is Justin. He was a philosopher, and in a sense he remained one all his life. He had gone through the great schools of

his time and found rest only with the prophets of Israel and with Jesus. He wrote to the emperor to defend the Christians. From his hand we have the oldest surviving description of a Christian Sunday service. The church later gave him a nickname that almost became his surname: Martyr, witness.

The record of that trial is called the Acta Justini, the acts of Justin. Who wrote it and when, we do not know. It has long been counted among the more reliable acts of the martyrs from the early church.

His story begins more than sixty years earlier, in a city with a new name.

A city with a new name

In the year 72, the emperor Vespasian gave a city in Samaria the name of his family: Flavia Neapolis, the new city of the Flavians. It lay about two kilometers, a little over a mile, from the Shechem of the Bible, which the Romans destroyed that same year. Today the city is called Nablus. It lies in the West Bank.

There, around the year 100, Justin was born. He later introduced himself to the emperor as the son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, from Flavia Neapolis in Palestine. He tells nothing more about his family. Priscus is a Latin name, Bacchius a Greek one, and historians assume he came from a Greek family.

He grew up in an empire that distrusted Christians. In his first letter to the emperor, Justin would say that he was writing on behalf of people from every nation who were unjustly hated, and that he was one of them himself. He was not nearly that far yet. First he looked for something else: truth about God.

Four teachers and a bill

What we know about his early years comes almost entirely from one source: his own book, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, which he wrote around 160. In it he tells how he went from philosopher to philosopher, the thinkers who in those days taught how to live well and how the world fits together.

First he went to a Stoic. After a while he noticed that he was learning nothing about God. The teacher did not know himself, Justin writes, and did not think such knowledge was necessary. He left.

Next came a Peripatetic, a follower of Aristotle. A sharp-minded man, Justin thought. After a few days he asked Justin to settle his fee, so that the time together would not be wasted. Justin did not consider that a real philosopher and left him standing.

The third was a Pythagorean. He first wanted to know whether Justin had studied music, astronomy and geometry. Without those subjects he could not begin, the teacher said. Justin had not studied them and was sent away.

At last he came to the Platonists, the students of Plato. A famous teacher had just settled in his city, and Justin spent as much time with him as he could. He made progress. Thinking about what cannot be seen took hold of him completely, he writes, and contemplating the ideas gave his mind wings. In a short time he thought he had become wise. So great was his foolishness, he adds himself, that he expected to see God at once. For that is the goal of Plato's philosophy.

I read this part with a smile. The teacher who starts talking about money right away, the teacher who first demands a preparatory course: these are people we recognize. Justin tells it to make a point, that is part of it. But he also shows who he was. A young man who

was not satisfied with half measures, and who kept asking. And he could laugh at himself, decades later.

A field by the sea

One day he wanted to be alone to think. He walked to a field not far from the sea. There he noticed that an old man was following him, at a short distance. Justin turned around and looked straight at him. Did he know him? No. Why was he looking at him like that, then, asked the old man. Justin answered that he was surprised, because he had not expected anyone in this place. Who the man was, Justin does not say. He does not name the place either.

He was a kind, gentle man, Justin writes, and they fell into conversation. The old man asked questions, and Justin answered as a Platonist. What is God? The being who always stays the same and is the cause of everything else. Can the mind see God? Yes, said Justin, the eye of the mind sees Him. Step by step the old man called that into question. Is there a kinship between us and God, so that our soul can see Him? A soul does not see God by its own power, he said. A soul is not immortal because it is so by nature. Only God is without beginning and without end. The soul lives as long as God wills that it live.

When Justin asked where he should look for the truth, then, the old man pointed him to the prophets. Long before the philosophers, he told him, there had been men who were older than all those famous thinkers. They were happy and righteous and loved by God. They spoke by the Holy Spirit, and what they said came to pass. They saw the beginning and the end of things. They proclaimed the Son of God, the Christ.

After that he said to Justin: pray, above all things, that the gates of light may be opened to you. For these things cannot be seen

or understood by everyone, only by someone to whom God and His Christ give understanding. He said much more, Justin writes, which he cannot repeat now. Then the old man went away. Justin never saw him again.

Have you ever had a conversation you cannot let go of? Someone you hardly knew, who said a few sentences and disappeared, and you kept thinking about it?

A fire in the soul

"Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul", Justin writes about the moment after that conversation (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation). Love came into him, he says, for the prophets and for the people who were friends of Christ. He thought over the words of the old man and came to the conclusion that this was the only philosophy that was safe and useful. In this way, and for this reason, he writes, I am a philosopher.

When and where it happened, he does not say. The Christian History Institute gives the year 132 as an estimate. Ephesus, in the west of present-day Turkey, is often named.

In another writing, his second apology, Justin tells something else that belongs to his conversion. When he was still a Platonist, he heard how Christians were slandered. But he also saw how they went to meet death without fear, and everything else that frightens others. People who lived only for pleasure would not receive death like that, he reasoned. Whoever loves pleasure does not want to die and tries to hide from the authorities. So the suspicions against Christians no longer added up for him.

What he did not do is striking. He did not take off his philosopher's cloak. At the beginning of the *Dialogue* he is addressed on the street as a philosopher, precisely because of that clothing. Eusebius, the

church historian who wrote around 325, says: "In the guise of a philosopher he preached the divine word" (in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translation). He had remained a philosopher, Justin said himself, because he had finally found the true philosophy.

Two days in the colonnade

That same book, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, opens with a meeting. Justin is walking in a colonnade one morning. A man comes toward him with a few others and greets him as a philosopher. His name is Trypho and he is a Hebrew. He has fled from the war that had recently been fought in Judea, and now lives mostly in Greece, especially in Corinth. He explains why he speaks to men in such a cloak: he expects a conversation with them to be worthwhile.

That war was the revolt of Bar Kokhba against the emperor Hadrian, from 132 to about 135. Rome crushed it. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman colony with the name Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were no longer allowed to enter the city. Justin writes in his first apology that during that war Bar Kokhba had only Christians punished, if they would not deny Jesus. For Jews and for Christians alike, these were painful years, in different ways.

Where the conversation took place, the *Dialogue* does not say. Eusebius writes around 325 that it was in Ephesus. The book describes two days of discussion, about the law of Moses, about the prophets and about the question of whether Jesus is the Christ. Trypho is no straw man. He answers that Justin has invented a Christ, and that he would have done better to stay with Plato, or else be circumcised and keep the law. In places the tone is sharp, on both sides. Justin promises to show that the Christian faith rests on more than empty stories, and the speakers walk to a place with stone benches to talk further, while the people around them mock.

The ending is warm. Trypho says they have found more than they expected, and asks Justin to remember them as friends. Justin is about to leave on a ship. They wish him a safe journey. He prays for them, that they may come to know the Christ.

Two men who disagree deeply with each other, and who part as friends. In the centuries after that, things between church and synagogue often went differently.

A school above the bathhouse

In the years when the emperor Antoninus Pius reigned, between 138 and 161, Justin lived in Rome. Eusebius writes that he flourished there. He taught there, in the manner of a philosopher: people came to him to listen and to ask questions. We know his address from the trial: above Martinus, near the bathhouse. There, he told the prefect, was the only meeting he knew. So it was a home, and also a classroom.

One of his students was Tatian. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, writes around 180 that Tatian was a hearer of Justin. As long as he stayed with Justin, Irenaeus said, he held no deviant ideas. After Justin's death Tatian went his own way and broke with the church. It is an honest detail. Even a good teacher does not control what a student does later.

At the trial one of the others, Euelpistus, said that he had learned the faith from his parents in Cappadocia, in the middle of present-day Turkey, and from the teaching of Justin. He liked to listen to Justin, he said.

"You can kill us"

Around the year 155 Justin did something few people dared to do. He wrote an open letter to the emperor. Such a defense is called

an apology. He addressed it to Antoninus Pius, to his sons, to the senate and to the whole Roman people. He put his own name and those of his father and grandfather under it.

His question was simple. Examine what Christians do, and punish them only if they have done something wrong. Whoever punishes a Christian for the mere word "Christian", he wrote, does wrong. He was not afraid of the outcome. "You can kill, but not hurt us", he wrote (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation).

He also described how the lives of Christians had changed. Once they had delighted in sexual immorality, now they loved purity. Once they had practiced magic, now they devoted themselves to the good and unbegotten God. Once everything had revolved around money and possessions, now they brought what they had together and shared it with those in need. Once they had hated people of other nations and refused to share their hearth with them, now they lived with them and prayed for their enemies. Those who hated them, they tried to persuade to live according to the good teaching of Christ.

He quotes the words of Jesus as Christians knew them: pray for your enemies and love those who hate you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other also. Let your yes be yes and your no, no.

Whether the emperor read the letter, we do not know. The letter survived, and with it a window onto the church in Rome.

On the day of the sun

At the end of his apology Justin does something unexpected. He tells the emperor what Christians actually do when they meet.

Someone who has been baptized, he writes, is brought to the brothers. Together they pray, for themselves, for the newly baptized and for people everywhere, that they may live well, keep God's commandments and be saved forever. Then they greet each other with a kiss. Next, bread and a cup of wine mixed with water are brought to the one who presides. He gives thanks to the Father, through the Son and the Holy Spirit, at length. The people respond with Amen. Deacons hand out the bread and wine to those who are there, and take it to those who could not be present.

About the ordinary week he writes that Christians from the city and from the countryside gather on the day the Romans called the day of the sun. There are readings from what Justin calls the memoirs of the apostles, or from the prophets, as long as time allows. Then the one who presides speaks to the people and urges them to put into practice what they have heard. They stand up together to pray. Again bread, wine and water are brought to the table, and the one who presides prays and gives thanks as well as he can. The people say Amen.

Whoever can spare it gives what he wishes. From those gifts the leader cares for orphans and widows, for the sick, for prisoners and for strangers. And they gather on Sunday, he explains, because on the first day God made the world, and on that day Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

It is the oldest surviving description of a Sunday gathering. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians recognize their Eucharist in it. Protestants and evangelicals recognize the Bible reading and the sermon, Pentecostals the standing up together to pray. When I first read it, I thought mostly about that last sentence on the gifts. A church without a building, in a city that did not want it, which still did not forget strangers and prisoners.

Seeds of the Word

Justin had a question that would not let him go. How was it that philosophers like Socrates had said so much that was true, long before Christ? His answer had to do with the name he liked best to use for Christ: the Word, in Greek Logos. Philosophers used that word too, for the reason in all things.

Justin taught that the Word had been scattered like seed over all people. Whoever said something true shared in it, but only in part. In Christ the Word had come fully. So in his first apology he could write that Socrates and Heraclitus, although they were considered godless, really belonged to Christ. And in his second apology he wrote that whatever had been said well by anyone anywhere belonged to the Christians.

It sounds grand. Yet he himself kept his distance from Plato. He wrote that Plato's teaching was not foreign to that of Christ, but did not agree with it in everything either. For himself he chose clearly. He wrote that he would "strive to be found a Christian", and that with all his strength (the phrase is from the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation).

He himself saw no contradiction. He had been a philosopher in order to find the truth, and he had found it.

A woman, a teacher and a Cynic

In Rome Justin saw up close what being a Christian could cost. In his second apology he tells of a woman. She herself had long lived an unrestrained life, until she came to know the teaching of Christ and became sober. She tried to persuade her husband to do the same. He kept on living his life and almost drove her away. Friends convinced her to stay a while longer, in the hope that he would change. When he became even worse in Alexandria, she sent him

a bill of divorce, so as not to share in his guilt. She had asked the emperor for time to settle her affairs, and received it.

The man accused her of being a Christian. Then he had her teacher, Ptolemaeus, arrested. A centurion who was a friend of the man questioned Ptolemaeus on one thing only: was he a Christian? Ptolemaeus, a lover of the truth, said yes. He lay in prison for a long time. When he stood before the judge Urbicus, he was asked the same question, and again he said yes. Urbicus had him led away.

A man named Lucius protested. What is the ground for this sentence, he asked Urbicus. This man has done nothing wrong. He has only confessed that he bears the name of Christian. Such a judgment does not fit the emperor Pius, nor the philosopher, the emperor's son, nor the sacred senate. Urbicus answered only: "You also seem to me to be such an one" (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation). "Most certainly I am", said Lucius. Urbicus had him led away too. Lucius thanked him, Justin writes: now he was freed from such rulers. After him came a third, who was also condemned. We know their names only from Justin.

In the same text he writes that he expects to become the victim of such accusers himself. He names one of them: Crescens, a philosopher of the Cynic school, who spoke openly against the Christians without knowing what he was talking about. A lover of boasting, Justin calls him. He had questioned him in public, and according to him it turned out that Crescens knew nothing about it. He offered to hold the conversation again in the presence of the ruler.

His student Tatian later wrote that Crescens had tried to have Justin, and Tatian himself too, sentenced to death. Eusebius concluded around 325 that Justin died through the schemes of Crescens.

Before the emperor's teacher

And so we are back in the courtroom, under the emperor Marcus Aurelius, somewhere between 162 and 168, the years when Rusticus was prefect of the city.

The record names six people besides Justin. Chariton said he was a Christian by God's command. Charito, the only woman, said she was a Christian by God's grace. Euelpistus was a slave of the emperor. He said he had been set free by Christ. Hierax came from Iconium in Phrygia, present-day Konya in Turkey. His parents had died, and he said that Christ was his true father and faith his mother. Paeon had received the faith from his parents. Liberianus said simply that he worshiped the only true God.

Rusticus asked Justin once more what he believed. Justin answered that he had come to know all the teachings, and had finally joined the Christians, even though they did not please those who held other opinions. He worshiped the one God who made all things, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God, of whom the prophets had spoken.

Rusticus tried once more. You are learned, he said in essence, and you think you know the true teaching. If you are scourged and beheaded, do you think you will go to heaven? Justin answered that he hoped, by persevering, to receive God's gifts. He knew that for all who lived this way, God's favor was kept until the end of the world. So you think you will receive a reward in heaven, asked Rusticus. I do not merely think it, said Justin, I know it and am fully persuaded of it.

The prefect came to the point. Now all of you together, sacrifice to the gods. No one who is in his right mind, said Justin, gives up godliness for godlessness. If you do not obey, said Rusticus, you will be tortured without mercy. That was exactly what Justin hoped for, he

answered: to be tortured for our Lord Jesus Christ and so be saved. That would give him confidence before the far more terrifying judgment seat of our Lord and Savior. The others said the same: "Do what you will, for we are Christians", and we do not sacrifice to idols.

The sentence came. Those who did not wish to sacrifice to the gods and did not wish to obey the emperor's command were to be scourged and beheaded, according to the law. They praised God, were taken to the usual place and were beheaded there.

Some later manuscripts say that Justin died from a cup of poison, like Socrates. The English translators of the church fathers already called that a later addition in the nineteenth century: Greeks liked to give a philosopher such a death.

Seven bodies

What remained? A few books. Eusebius listed a whole series around 325, but most have been lost. Two apologies and the *Dialogue with Trypho* still exist. Other writings that long went under his name are now considered not to be his.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, the Anglican Church and the Lutheran churches he is remembered on June 1. A church in Sacrofano, close to Rome, says it has his relics, and bones on Malta are also attributed to him.

What I find special about Justin is how ordinary his place was. No church building, no title. A room above a bathhouse, where anyone who wanted to could walk in with a question. A philosopher who kept his cloak, because he kept searching for truth and believed he had found it in Christ. Would you dare to explain what you believe to someone who does not want to hear it, with your name and address attached?

The record of the trial does not end with the prefect. It ends with a few believers whose names we do not know. Quietly they collected the bodies, seven in all, and laid them to rest in a suitable place.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): his origin in Flavia Neapolis (his own First Apology, repeated by Eusebius around 325); his stay and teaching in Rome under Antoninus Pius; Tatian as his student (Tatian himself and Irenaeus around 180); the First and Second Apology and the *Dialogue with Trypho* as his own works; the description of baptism and the Sunday service in the First Apology; the hostility of the Cynic Crescens (Justin himself and Tatian); death as a martyr in Rome under the city prefect Junius Rusticus (162 to 168), probably around 165.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: his journey through four philosophical schools, the old man by the sea and his conversion (only the *Dialogue with Trypho*, written down decades later in the form of a conversation; no one else saw the conversation by the sea); that the courage of Christians in the face of death made him think (Second Apology); the conversation with Trypho and the location in Ephesus (that location only in Eusebius); the case of the woman, Ptolemaeus, Lucius and the third man (Second Apology, only in Justin); the course of the trial, his address and the names of the six others (Acta Justini, anonymous and undated; several versions exist and scholars do not agree on which is the oldest).

Unconfirmed: the year and place of his conversion (about 132 and Ephesus are often named); that Crescens brought the charge against him (Tatian says he tried, Eusebius turns it into a certainty, and the record of the trial says nothing about it; quite possible, not proven); death by a cup of poison (a later addition); the relics in Sacrofano

and on Malta; whether Priscus and Bacchius point to ties with Rome (that remains guesswork).

Interpretation: whether the *Dialogue* is a literal record or a conversation worked out later is an open question among historians. The book is written as a literary dialogue. His teaching about the Word as seed among all nations is valued differently in the churches. Whoever wishes may read the conversion by the sea along with Justin himself; it remains his testimony.

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Perpetua and Felicity: the woman who wrote down her own imprisonment

In Carthage a father stands beside his daughter, who has been placed under guard, and pleads with her. He wants her to give up her faith. She points to a jug standing on the ground, an ordinary pot for water. She asks him whether he can call that thing by any other name than what it is. No, he says. Then she answers: "Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian" (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation). Her father becomes so angry that he flies at her as if he wants to tear out her eyes. Then he leaves.

We know this because the daughter wrote it down herself. Her name was Perpetua, she was about twenty-two years old and she had a little son whom she was still nursing. Her account of the days in prison has survived in a text called the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, the account of the suffering of Perpetua and Felicity. Two scholars who published a large book about it in 2012, Jan Bremmer and Marco Formisano, call her part "the first preserved autobiographical account written by an ancient woman". Shortly afterward

she died in the arena of Carthage, together with a pregnant young slave woman named Felicity.

Their names are still spoken today in the prayer of the church. But it began with what a young woman wrote down in prison.

A birthday in the imperial house

Carthage lay on the Mediterranean Sea, close to present-day Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. Around the year 200 it was one of the important cities of the Roman Empire, with an amphitheater for the games. North Africa had a lively Christian community at that time. Tertullian also lived in Carthage, a Christian writer who wrote in Latin. He lived in the same years as Perpetua and later mentioned her by name.

The emperor was Septimius Severus. Anyone who was a Christian and refused to sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor could be brought before a judge. The martyrs were to die at games in honor of the birthday of Geta Caesar, a son of the emperor. Tradition settles on March 7, 203. That the text mentions Geta without hesitation suggests it was written down quickly. After Geta's death in 211, his name was erased everywhere.

Three voices

Before we read on, you should know how this text is put together.

The Passio has twenty-one short chapters. The first two and the last eight were written by an editor. We do not know his name. He begins with a defense: the Spirit who worked in the time of the apostles is still at work. He quotes the prophet Joel, as Peter did on the day of Pentecost: *Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.* (Acts 2:17). New visions belong to the faith, he holds, and the stories of

recent martyrs may also be written down. He says that Perpetua left her story just as she had described it with her own hand and in her own way.

Then, in chapters three to ten, comes Perpetua herself, writing as "I". In chapters eleven to thirteen another prisoner, Saturus, tells a dream that, according to the editor, he wrote down himself. From chapter fourteen the editor takes over again. He tells of the birth of Felicity's child and of the deaths in the arena.

This means we have three voices. What Perpetua says about the prison is her own testimony. What is told about her death comes from someone else, who according to the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1909 was an eyewitness. In this chapter I will always say who is speaking.

Five learners and a man who gave himself up

The editor first names the people who were arrested. They were catechumens, learners who were being taught the faith and were preparing for baptism. Revocatus and Felicity, whom he calls his fellow slave. Saturninus and Secundulus. And Vibia Perpetua.

About her he gives more. She was of good birth, liberally educated and honorably married. She had a father, a mother and two brothers, one of whom was also a catechumen. About her husband the text says nothing more. It is often said that Felicity was Perpetua's slave, but the text does not say so. It only calls her the fellow slave of Revocatus.

Saturus was not arrested. He came forward of his own accord, Perpetua writes, because he was the one who had built them up in the faith.

The conversation about the jug took place while she was under guard. Her father went away disappointed, and his absence gave her a few days of rest, she writes. In those days the learners were baptized. Perpetua writes that the Spirit then told her not to pray for anything after that water except endurance of the body. So she already knew where it was heading.

Then came the dungeon. Perpetua writes that she was very afraid, because she had never experienced such darkness. It was hot because of the crowding. The soldiers pushed. And she was worried about her baby, who was hungry.

Two deacons of the church, Tertius and Pomponius, used money to arrange for the prisoners to be allowed into a better part of the prison for a few hours a day. There she nursed her child. She talked with her mother, comforted her brother and entrusted her son to them. Later she managed to have the child stay with her in the cell. She grew strong again, she writes, because she no longer had to worry. The dungeon became like a palace to her, and she would rather be there than anywhere else.

It is a sentence I cannot quite place, and perhaps I do not need to. A young mother in a dark cell, with her child close to her, who writes that she does not want to leave. She does not explain it. She simply says it.

A ladder with a dragon beneath it

Her brother asked her to ask God for a vision, so that they would know how things would end. Perpetua promised to do so. She knew, she writes, that she could speak with the Lord, for He had already shown her so much good.

She saw a bronze ladder of great height, reaching up to heaven, so narrow that only one person at a time could climb. On its sides were

iron swords, spears, hooks and daggers. Anyone who climbed carelessly was torn open. Under the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, meant to frighten those who climbed.

Saturus climbed up first and called down to her from above: Perpetua, I am waiting for you, but take care that the dragon does not bite you. He will not harm me, she said, in the name of Jesus Christ. The dragon raised its head, as if it were afraid. She stepped on it as if it were the first rung, and climbed.

At the top she saw a large garden. In the middle sat a man with white hair, dressed as a shepherd, milking sheep. Around him stood many thousands of people in white. He looked up and said: welcome, child. He gave her a mouthful of what he made from the milk. She received it in her cupped hands and ate it, and all who stood around said amen. Then she woke up, with something sweet still in her mouth.

She told it to her brother. They understood that it would mean suffering. From that moment they no longer had any hope in this world.

A father's gray hair

The rumor went around that they would be given a hearing. Her father came back from the city, worn out, and climbed up to her. He asked her to have pity on his gray hair. He reminded her that he had raised her to the prime of her life and had preferred her above all her brothers. He pointed to her brothers, her mother, her aunt and her little son, who could not live without her. If you are gone, he said, none of us will dare to speak again. He kissed her hands, threw himself at her feet and no longer called her daughter, but lady.

Perpetua writes that she grieved over his gray hair, because he alone of her family would not rejoice in her suffering. She told him that

what God wanted would happen, because we are not in our own power, but in God's. He went away sad.

One day they were taken away in the middle of a meal for the hearing. They were brought to the forum and a great crowd came. The others were questioned first, and they confessed. Then it was Perpetua's turn. Her father appeared with her little son, pulled her down from the platform and begged: sacrifice, have pity on the child. The procurator Hilarianus, who had received the power over life and death in place of the proconsul, told her to spare her father's gray hair and the child as well, and to sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors. She refused. "I am a Christian", she said.

Her father kept trying to talk her out of it. On Hilarianus' orders he was beaten with a rod. Perpetua writes that it hurt her as if she herself had been beaten. She grieved over his unhappy old age. Then Hilarianus pronounced the sentence: all of them to the wild beasts. They went back to the dungeon in good spirits, she writes.

She sent the deacon Pomponius to fetch her son. Her father refused to give him back. The child no longer wanted the breast, and she herself did not get a fever or pain from it, so that she no longer had to worry. God had arranged it that way, she writes.

What do you do with a father like that? I read these pages and I cannot condemn him. He was a man who did not want to lose his daughter. Perpetua does not condemn him either. She writes about him with sorrow, not with blame.

A boy by the water

One day, during prayer, Perpetua suddenly spoke the name Dinocrates. She was surprised herself. Dinocrates was her little brother, who had died at the age of seven from a disease that had eaten away at his face. She had not thought of him anymore. She

understood that she was allowed to pray for him, and she began at once.

That night she saw him. He came out of a dark place, hot and thirsty, with the sore still on his face, pale and filthy. Between them was a gulf, so that they could not reach each other. Next to him stood a basin of water, but its rim was higher than he was tall. He stretched himself to drink. She prayed for him day and night, with tears and sighs, that it might be given to him.

A few days later, while she was still in chains, she saw him again. Now he was clean, well dressed and refreshed. The sore had become a scar, and the rim of the basin came up to his navel. On it stood a golden cup of water that never ran empty. He drank, and then he went off to play, the way children do. She woke up and understood that he had been set free from his punishment.

This vision kept the church busy for centuries. Around 421 Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in present-day Algeria, wrote about someone who wanted to use the story of Dinocrates to prove that unbaptized children can enter paradise. Augustine rejected that. He pointed out that the story is not in the canonical books of the Bible, and that nowhere does it say the little boy was unbaptized. What stands out is the way he speaks of the writer: "the saint herself, or whoever it was that wrote the account" (in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translation).

The Egyptian in the sand

By now something had changed. Pudens, the adjutant in charge of the prison, began to respect the prisoners. He saw that there was great power in them. He let many visitors in, so that they could encourage one another. Her father came one more time, broken with grief. He pulled out his beard, threw it on the ground, threw

himself down and cursed his years. Perpetua grieved over his old age.

The day before the games Perpetua had her last vision. The deacon Pomponius stood at the door of the prison and knocked. He took her along rough, winding paths to the arena. Do not be afraid, he said, I am here with you and will struggle with you. Then he went away. She saw herself being brought to the arena, where a terrifying Egyptian was to fight her. She was stripped and found that she had become a man. Helpers rubbed her with oil, as before a contest. A man of enormous height, a kind of trainer, held a green branch with golden apples as the prize. He explained the rules: if she defeated the Egyptian, she would receive the branch. If he won, he would kill her with the sword.

They fought. She struck with her feet, he reached for her, she was lifted up and kicked him in the face, she rose above the Egyptian and put her foot on his head. The crowd cheered. The trainer kissed her and said: daughter, peace be with you. She walked in triumph to the Gate of Life. Then she woke up.

She understood, she writes, that she would not fight with wild beasts, but with the devil. Her last sentence about the vision is short: still, she knew that the victory was awaiting her.

Then she lays down her pen. This is what I did up to the day before the games, she writes. Whoever wishes may write down the rest.

What Saturus wrote down

Saturus also had a dream, and he wrote it down himself, says the editor. He and Perpetua had died and were carried toward the east by four angels, without the angels' hands touching them. They came into a great garden with rosebushes and all kinds of flowers. The trees were as tall as cypresses, and their leaves fell without ceasing.

There they met martyrs who had gone before them, among them Jocundus, Saturninus, Artaxius and Quintus. They came to a place whose walls seemed made of light. Angels put white robes on them. They heard a voice that cried without ceasing: holy, holy, holy. In the middle sat a gray-haired man with the face of a younger one, surrounded by elders. They were kissed and were told: go and play. Saturus said to Perpetua: you have what you wanted. She answered: thanks be to God. As I was glad in the flesh, I am even gladder here.

When they came outside, the bishop Optatus and the presbyter, the elder, Aspasius were standing there. They were at odds with each other. They threw themselves at their feet and asked Perpetua and Saturus to make peace. Are you not our father, and you our presbyter, the martyrs asked in amazement. They embraced them. Perpetua talked with them in Greek, under a rosebush. Then the angels came. They told Optatus that he must correct his people, who came to him as if they were coming back from the chariot races, quarreling about their teams.

It is an honest detail. Already in 203 the church of Carthage was not a perfect community. A bishop and an elder were at loggerheads, and a prisoner dreamed that the angels called them to order. What that disagreement was about, the text does not say.

Felicity and her daughter

From here on the editor tells the story. Secundulus died while still in prison. Felicity was eight months pregnant. She was afraid that she would not be allowed to die with the others, because the law forbade pregnant women to be executed in public. Then her blood would flow apart from the blood of the others.

Three days before the games the others prayed together with her. Right after the prayer her labor began. She was in great pain. One of the prison servants mocked her. If you suffer this much now, he said, what will you do later when you are thrown to the beasts? She answered: "Now it is I that suffer what I suffer; but then there will be another in me" (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation), who would suffer for her, because she too was going to suffer for Him. She gave birth to a daughter. A sister from the church took the girl in as her own child.

From Felicity herself we have not a single written word. Only this one answer, recorded by someone else. She was young, she was a slave, and her name stands in the title of the book beside that of a woman of rank.

The tribune who guarded the prison had become harsher. He had heard from someone that the prisoners might escape by magic. Perpetua spoke to him. Why did he not allow them any relief, she asked, when they were the most famous of the condemned, the prisoners of the Caesar himself, and were to fight on his birthday? Was it not in his own interest that they looked well? The tribune was taken aback and blushed, and had them treated more humanely. Family and friends were allowed to come to them. Pudens, the adjutant, had meanwhile come to faith himself.

On the evening before the games they ate their last meal, which they made as much like a love feast as they could. Curious people came to look. Saturus spoke to them. He told them to look carefully at their faces, so that they would recognize them on the day of judgment. According to the editor, many went home and came to faith.

The seventh of March

On the day of the games they went to the amphitheater, the editor writes, as if they were going to heaven, with shining faces. Perpetua walked in front, with a calm look, the step of a woman of Christ. According to the editor she was already singing, as if she were already standing on the head of the Egyptian.

They were supposed to put on costumes: the men as priests of Saturn, the women as women dedicated to Ceres. Perpetua refused. They had come here willingly, she said, precisely so as not to lose their freedom. They had given their lives so as not to do something like this. That was the agreement made with you. The tribune gave in, and they went in wearing their own clothes. When they came before Hilarianus, they said with gestures and nods: you judge us, but God will judge you.

What follows I will tell briefly. The editor wrote it down to show how the martyrs stood firm, and I want to leave it at that. Saturninus and Revocatus were sent against a leopard and a bear. Saturus was first set before a wild boar, but the hunter who had tied him up was himself gored. Then came a bear that would not leave its cage. For the women a wild cow had been made ready. Perpetua was thrown down. She pulled her torn clothing straight and pinned up her hair, for it did not suit a martyr to suffer with her hair hanging loose, as if she were mourning in her glory. Then she saw Felicity lying there and helped her up.

They were called back to the Gate. There a catechumen, Rusticus, received Perpetua. According to the editor she was so caught up in the Spirit that she looked around like a sleepwalker and asked when they were actually going to face that cow. She believed it only when she saw the marks on her body and her clothing.

She called her brother and the catechumen to her. She told them to stand firm in the faith and to love one another, and not to be made to stumble by what she had to endure.

Saturus was bitten by a leopard, and his blood flowed. The crowd shouted: well washed, well washed. He said goodbye to Pudens and asked him to remember his faith and not to be discouraged. He asked for his ring, dipped it in his wound and gave it back as a keepsake, a pledge of blood.

At the end the crowd demanded that the wounded be brought forward. They got up by themselves and went there. First they kissed each other, the editor writes, to complete their martyrdom with the kiss of peace. Then they died by the sword, without a sound. Saturus went first. The gladiator who had to kill Perpetua was young and inexperienced. His hand trembled. She guided that hand to her throat herself.

Why would a man make this up?

In 1889 a Greek version of the text was found in Jerusalem. For a while some scholars thought it was older. Today most assume that the Latin is the original.

The editor has often been taken to be Tertullian. The older patristics scholar Quasten thought there were reasons for that. Bremmer and Formisano think of someone who was close to Tertullian and shared his ideas, but was not Tertullian himself.

And then the biggest question: did Perpetua really write this herself? Most scholars say yes, with some caution. Bremmer and Formisano call her diary essentially genuine, but edited by the editor. The Latin scholar Vincent Hunink of Nijmegen, in the Netherlands, weighed the arguments and saw "no serious problem" in reading the text as her own work. According to

Hunink, the text says clearly that she wrote it with her own hand, and personal things like her fear in the dark and the heat in the cell are not the kind of details a man would invent.

I am not a Latin scholar. I read these pages and I hear a woman who, with a child at her breast, a father at her feet and a sentence hanging over her head, said what she had seen and what she believed. Most scholars who have studied it also think there is a woman behind it.

A name in the prayer of the church

The story spread quickly. Already in the years after her death, Tertullian named her in his book on the soul as "the most heroic martyr Perpetua". He referred to her vision of paradise, in which she saw only fellow martyrs. It is the oldest reference to the Passio that we have.

In the fourth century Perpetua and Felicity were in the calendar of the church of Rome. In North Africa their account was read aloud in church on their feast day. Augustine preached sermons on it. In one of them he said, as the old calendar of saints by Butler quotes him, that their feast drew more people every year than had ever watched their deaths. Later a large church was built over their grave in Carthage, the Basilica Maiorum. The French priest and archaeologist Delattre found an old inscription there with their names. He published about it in 1907.

Their names are, as Butler reports, in the canon of the Mass, the fixed prayer at the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church. Their feast day is March 7.

You do not have to become a martyr to gain something from Perpetua. But perhaps you know that conversation with the father. Someone who loves you and does not understand why you do what

you do. Someone who asks whether you could not call it something a little different.

Somewhere in Carthage a jug stood on the ground. A father looked at it and could not think of another name for it. Neither could his daughter.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the deaths of Perpetua, Felicity, Saturus, Revocatus and Saturninus in the amphitheater of Carthage at games for the birthday of Geta Caesar, traditionally on March 7, 203; the existence of the Passio with three voices (editor, Perpetua, Saturus); Perpetua being known early on to Tertullian; the veneration in North Africa and Rome from the fourth century; the sermons of Augustine; the Basilica Maiorum and the inscription Delattre found.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: everything about the imprisonment, the conversation about the jug, the hearing before Hilarianus and Perpetua's four visions comes from her own account; the dream about Optatus and Aspasius comes from Saturus; the birth of Felicity's daughter, the last meal, the conversion of Pudens and the events in the arena come from the unknown editor. The shorter later Acta are a reworking and add no independent testimony.

Unconfirmed: whether the editor was Tertullian (Quasten thought there were reasons for it, the Catholic Encyclopedia called it an unproven claim in 1909); whether the martyrs were Montanists, followers of a movement from Asia Minor that placed great value on new prophecies (Timothy Barnes argued in 1973 that the text was Montanist and withdrew that in 1982; there is nothing in it that clearly belongs to that movement; the editor defends in his intro-

duction the visions of his own time with the prophet Joel); the year (some scholars think of 204 or later); a general edict of Severus against conversion (only in the Historia Augusta, which historians trust little; it was probably local persecution); that Felicity was Perpetua's slave (the text does not say so); why Perpetua's husband is missing.

The debate about authorship: Bremmer and Formisano call Perpetua's part essentially genuine, but edited by the editor, so that her exact words cannot be recovered. Ross Kraemer and Shira Lander argued in 2000 that a man can also write as a woman, and that the text may have been shaped to fit the prophecy of Joel. Thomas Heffernan, who produced the major edition of the text in 2012, sees it more as notes than as a diary. Vincent Hunink (Nijmegen) sees no serious problem in reading the text as her own work.

Interpretation: most scholars consider Perpetua's part essentially genuine, but edited. A minority doubts her authorship. Whether her visions came from God is a question of faith that no historian can answer. I read them along with her, as she wrote them down.

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Antony the Great: the farmer's son who walked into the desert

It is somewhere around the year 270, in a village along the Nile. A young man of about twenty is walking to church. His parents died half a year ago. He has a house, a young sister and a good-sized piece of fertile land. On the way he thinks about the apostles, who left everything behind to follow Jesus.

As he comes in, the Gospel is being read. It is the story of the rich young man, and the words of Jesus to him: *If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor* (Matthew 19:21). The young man in the church hears it as if it were spoken to him. He goes outside and gives his land away to the people of the village.

That is how Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, tells it around the year 360 in his *Life of Antony*. Athanasius has his own chapter elsewhere in this book. Here he is mainly the man who wrote down the story of his friend. That story went all around the Christian world. Within a few decades of Antony's death it was being read in Latin, as far away as present-day Germany. Antony became the man whom monks in East and West point to as their first example.

He came from a village called Koma.

Koma, in the years of Decius

Antony was born around 251 in Koma, in Middle Egypt. The village is now called Qiman al-Arus and lies in the province of Beni Suef. The year is a calculation backward: at his death he said himself that he was almost a hundred and five.

Egypt was a province of the Roman Empire in those days. Antony spoke Coptic, the language of the Egyptian countryside. Later he needed an interpreter for visitors who spoke Greek. In Alexandria, the great port city on the Mediterranean where the bishop had his seat, people spoke and wrote Greek.

For Christians these were restless years. Between 249 and 251, Emperor Decius had Christians persecuted throughout the empire. Anyone who refused to sacrifice to the gods was in danger. Many Egyptian Christians fled into the desert at that time.

Athanasius writes that Antony's parents were Christians, of good family and well-to-do. As a boy he did not want to go to school to learn to read and write. He kept away from the other children and preferred to stay at home. He went to church with his parents, and there he listened so closely to what was read that he remembered it. He was not a difficult child, Athanasius writes. He did not ask for treats and did not long for what others had. He was content with what there was.

That picture of a simple boy who did not know his letters and yet kept everything he heard returns throughout the book.

Three hundred acres and a little sister

Antony was eighteen or twenty when his parents died. So Athanasius writes it. He says the land Antony inherited was three hundred

acres, good and fertile ground. After that church service Antony gave the land away to the villagers, so that it would no longer be a burden to him and his sister. He sold the rest of his possessions. The money went to the poor. A small part he kept aside for his little sister.

Soon afterward he went to church again. This time another word of Jesus was read: *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow* (Matthew 6:34). He no longer came in thinking that he could cover himself against the future. Right there during the service he gave away the last of it too. He placed his sister with women who had dedicated their lives to God, "known and faithful virgins," as the old English translation puts it. Even then there were Christians, men and women, who stayed unmarried and lived simply.

I want to pause for a moment at that little sister. Athanasius never once mentions her by name. We do not know what she thought of her brother giving everything away. What we do read is that worry about her kept tugging at Antony later. Athanasius counts that worry among the attacks of the devil. A modern reader may wonder whether it was not simply love.

How would you react if a Bible verse you have heard many times suddenly felt as if it were meant for you alone?

"God-beloved"

Antony did not go into the desert right away. First he lived at the edge of his own village. That was how people who wanted to give themselves to God did it in those days. They stayed close to home, in a hut or a small cell, and lived simply there. In a neighboring village lived an old man who had lived in solitude since his youth. Antony sought him out and learned from him. He also visited other

people who lived that way, and tried to take something from each of them.

Athanasius describes how he did it. From one he learned kindness, from another steadiness in prayer. In a third he admired that he never got angry, in a fourth his care for others. Whatever one person did well, he took along to the next. The result was a young man who carried the best of each of them with him.

He worked with his hands. What he earned he used for bread. The rest he gave away. According to Athanasius he prayed in silence, without ceasing, and he read so attentively that he forgot nothing. His memory became his book.

In the village he stood out. The people who saw him called him "God-beloved." Some spoke to him as a son, others as a brother.

The Greek word for this way of life is *askesis*, training. Antony began it around 271. The word monk comes from the Greek *monachos*, someone who is alone. Antony was not the first. Athanasius himself writes that there were already old men from whom he learned. But he became the best known.

"I was here"

Then Athanasius tells a series of stories that he himself sees as the heart of Antony's struggle.

Antony withdrew into a tomb, some distance outside the village. An acquaintance brought him bread at intervals of many days and shut the door behind him. In the night the demons came. They beat him so hard that he lay speechless on the ground, in more pain than any blow from human hands can give. When the acquaintance came the next day with bread and opened the door, he found him

lying there as if he were dead. He carried him to the village church. Many people from the area sat around his body, as at a wake.

Toward midnight Antony came to. He saw that everyone was asleep, except his friend. He had him come close and asked him to carry him back to the tomb. Without waking anyone.

There he lay again, too weak to stand. He prayed lying down. And the attacks came back. The demons filled the place with roaring, Athanasius wrote, in the shape of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, snakes, scorpions and wolves. Each animal did what was in its nature. The lion roared as if it were about to leap. The bull seemed to want to gore him. Antony felt the pain of their claws and horns, Athanasius writes, but his face stayed calm.

What he said has been handed down: "Here am I, Antony; I flee not from your stripes." And even if they added more, "nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ." He also said that if any one of them had real power, one would be enough.

Then the roof opened. A ray of light came down. The demons vanished. Antony's pain stopped, and his body was whole again. He understood that the Lord was there. Sighing, Athanasius tells us, he asked the light where it had been, and why it had not appeared at the beginning, so that his pain would have been taken away.

A voice came. "Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight." Because he had held firm and had not let himself be beaten, the voice went on, He would always be his helper. And He would make his name known throughout the whole world.

When Antony heard this, he stood up and prayed. He was stronger than before, says Athanasius. He was about thirty-five.

Where were You? People have asked that question since the first Christians. Antony got an answer, and it was not the answer he asked for.

Twenty years behind a closed door

Around 285 or 286 Antony went further. He walked into the desert, toward the east. On the way a silver dish lay on the path. He stopped and wondered where a dish in the desert could have come from. Nobody travels here, he thought, and no one loses a dish that size without noticing. He walked on, and the dish vanished like smoke. A little farther on lay gold. He saw it, Athanasius tells us, and walked past it as if he were going through fire. He did not look back.

He crossed the Nile to the east side. There stood an abandoned fort, full of snakes. He shut himself in with bread for six months. Twice a year new bread was let down over the wall. So he stayed, according to Athanasius, for almost twenty years.

Anyone who came to the wall heard noise. It sounded like a crowd shouting and beating on the gate, like wailing, like voices making threats. Visitors said later that they wondered whether there were soldiers inside. Antony called out to them that it was nothing. They should make the sign of the cross and go away calmly. The demons were only doing their best to frighten people.

More and more people came, even people who wanted to see him and could not get his door open. Around 305 or 306 his acquaintances could bear it no longer. They pulled the door loose by force.

Athanasius describes what they saw. Antony came out, he writes, like someone who had been initiated into the mysteries of God and was filled with the Spirit. For the first time they saw him again. His body was the same as twenty years earlier: not fat from lack of

exercise, not wasted from fasting. His soul too was calm. He was not sad, not carried away, he did not laugh and did not look gloomy. When he saw the crowd, he was not startled. He was completely in command of himself, like someone led by reason.

According to Athanasius, the Lord healed many of those present of their ailments through him. He set others free from unclean spirits. To people who were grieving he gave the gift of kind words. Others he reconciled with one another. Everyone got the same advice from him: hold nothing in this world higher than the love of Christ.

Meanwhile more and more people were heading into the desert to live this way. The desert was filled with monks, Athanasius writes: people who left their possessions behind and enrolled for a life in heaven. Antony became their father, the man they came to for advice.

"Live as if it is the first day"

His advice has been preserved. Athanasius puts a speech in his mouth, right after Antony came out, addressed to the monks standing around him. It begins with a sentence so simple that you almost miss it. The Bible is enough, he said, but it helps when we encourage one another.

Life on earth is short, he said, compared with eternity. What you leave behind here is nothing compared with what you receive. Many people think it costs a terrible amount to give up everything. But what is a house or a field worth next to heaven?

Then he says something that stuck with every monk. Let us live every day as if it were our first, he said. Then courage does not run out. One careless day can undo all the work before it. He mentioned Paul: "I die daily." If we live like that, Antony said, we do not sin.

Anyone who knows that he may stand before God tonight does not let himself be swept away.

He recalled the word of Jesus that the kingdom is within you. So you do not need to cross the sea or travel through deserts to become good. It begins within.

He knew a great deal about the demons. He said they can pose as friends, as angels, even as monks who bring food and give good advice. He taught the brothers to ask: who are you and where do you come from? A healthy appearance brings joy and peace, he said. A demonic one brings fear and confusion. And he warned that the gift of driving out demons is not the most important thing. What matters is how you live.

He also gave the brothers a habit: write down every day what you think and do, as if you had to read it aloud to others. Then you are ashamed of what you would rather hide.

His own courage was not an act. Later, on the inner mountain, according to Athanasius, he was surrounded one night by hyenas. They came closer. Antony told them that if they had received power against him, he was ready to be devoured by them. The animals drew back.

The mines of Alexandria

In 303, under Emperor Diocletian, the heaviest persecution the church had known until then began. Bibles were seized and burned. In Egypt it lasted, with interruptions, for almost ten years. Under Emperor Maximinus it flared up again in 311.

That year Antony went to Alexandria. According to Athanasius he wanted to go along with the martyrs, if it came to that. He did not give himself up. But he did visit the Christians who were in prison

and who had been sentenced to work in the mines. He served them and encouraged them. And when the governor forbade the monks to show themselves in the courtroom or in the city, Antony did something remarkable. He washed his garment, Athanasius writes, and the next day stood in a visible place, at the front, in white. He wanted the governor to see him.

Nothing happened. Athanasius is amazed at it himself: the governor left him alone.

On November 25, 311, Peter, the bishop of Alexandria, was beheaded. Athanasius mentions it in one sentence: when the blessed bishop Peter had borne his witness, Antony went back to his cell. He had not received his martyrdom. From then on, according to the *Life*, he wore a garment of hair against his skin, with a skin over it. He kept that on until his death.

A spring at the foot of the mountain

After his return it became too crowded around Antony. Visitors, the sick, people seeking advice. The work he had gone into the desert for no longer got done. According to Athanasius he heard a voice saying that he had to go to the inner desert if he was looking for real quiet. He joined a group of Saracens, Arab nomads who were traveling that way. They were glad to take him along. After three days and nights he came to a high mountain with a spring at its foot, clear, sweet and very cold. On the plain stood a few neglected palm trees.

Athanasius writes that Antony loved the place at once, "as though moved by God." It was the place the voice had sent him to. We date the journey to around 313. The mountain lies in the range along the Red Sea. The Monastery of Saint Anthony stands there now, a Coptic Orthodox monastery about 334 kilometers southeast

of Cairo. Some two kilometers farther on, high against the rock, is the small cave pointed out as his hermit's cell.

At first travelers brought him bread. The Saracens, who saw how seriously he took it, passed that way on purpose. Later his brothers sent it. Antony saw that it cost them effort. He asked one of the visitors for a spade, an axe and some grain. He found a small piece of ground, worked it, watered it and sowed. That way he had his own bread, so as not to be a burden to anyone. Later he also planted some vegetables, so that visitors would have something to eat after their long journey.

I find this one of the most beautiful details in the whole book. The great hermit standing in the desert soil with a spade, because he wants to spare his friends the hauling.

The wild animals came to the water, and they trampled his crops. Antony took one of them gently by the arm and asked why it did him harm when he did them none. He told them to go away, and in the name of the Lord not to come near this place again. After that they did not come anymore, Athanasius writes. The people who heard it believed it.

On a journey through the desert the water ran out. There was a camel with them, and a group of people who grew thirsty. Antony went down on his knees and prayed, Athanasius tells us, and at the spot where he knelt, water welled up. Everyone drank. The camel too.

A letter from the emperor

The world was changing fast. In 325 bishops from the whole empire gathered in Nicaea at the invitation of Emperor Constantine. They condemned the teaching of Arius, a priest from Alexandria who

taught that the Son was created and not eternal. In 328 Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria.

According to the *Life*, Emperor Constantine and his sons Constantius and Constans wrote to Antony as to a father. They asked for an answer. The monks around him were impressed. Antony was not. He told them not to be amazed that an emperor writes, because an emperor is only a man. Be amazed, he said, that God has given His law to people and has spoken to them through His Son.

At the urging of the monks he wrote back, because the emperors were Christians. He praised them because they worshiped Christ. He asked them to think of the coming judgment, to be merciful and to care for justice and for the poor. He wrote that Christ is the only true King.

Around the same time two Greek philosophers came to test him. Antony spoke with them through an interpreter. He did not speak Greek. Athanasius writes that he had not learned letters, but had a sharp and wise mind. Why, Antony asked, had they traveled so far to see a fool?

The philosophers said they had come precisely to visit a wise man. Then he asked them which came first, the mind or the letters. The mind, they said, for the mind invented the letters. Then whoever has a sound mind does not need the letters, said Antony.

After that he spoke about the cross. Where the sign of the cross is, he said, magic is powerless and sorcery has no strength. The philosophers left. They were amazed, Athanasius writes, and yet no one held it against him that he had spoken this way. Antony did not speak their language, and his answer got through anyway.

Down the mountain, into the city

In the stories of Athanasius, Antony comes to Alexandria twice. The second time, in 338, it was about Arius and his followers. They were saying that Antony was on their side. According to Athanasius this made Antony angry. At the request of the bishops he came down the mountain. In the city he said openly that the Son of God is eternal, not a creature, and that you should have no fellowship with the Arians.

What followed is an event that Athanasius tells with great awe. People came to him in great numbers. Pagans asked whether they could be baptized. The sick were brought to him. A mother begged him to help her daughter, at the gate of the city, and at his prayer in Christ's name the girl was healed. Antony said that healing comes through prayer and through the name of Christ, and not through him.

On another day, so Athanasius tells it, Antony had a vision. He saw mules standing around the altar of the Lord and kicking. He groaned. Children, he said, it would have been better to die than to see what is happening. He comforted the monks: the church would be restored. Two years later the Arians stormed into the churches.

Here I have to be honest about the narrator. Athanasius was the great opponent of the Arians. It suits him well that the most famous monk in Egypt stands so clearly on his side. That does not mean the visit was made up. It does mean we read its tone with some caution.

The conflicts of then are not the conflicts of now. Arians and their opponents fought over the question of who Jesus is. All the major churches of today, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal, confess with Nicaea that He is eternally God.

Many people wanted Antony to stay. A commander asked him to lodge in the city. Antony said that fish that come onto dry land die, and that monks who stay too long among people lose their stillness. He had to go back to the mountain.

"He who knows himself knows God"

There is a second Antony, and he comes from seven letters. They were probably written or dictated in Coptic. The original is largely lost. They survive in full in Latin, Georgian and Arabic. Around 392 Jerome already mentions a Greek translation.

Whether they are really by Antony is disputed. The church historian Samuel Rubenson argued in 1995 that they are genuine. In his view they show a man who was not an unlettered monk, but someone who thought along the lines of Alexandrian Christian thinkers such as Clement and Origen. Other scholars are less sure. At a study day in Bose in 2025 the speakers leaned toward accepting the letters, partly because the Coptic Church still uses them today.

The letters are about the Holy Spirit in the conscience, about self-knowledge, about following Christ and about the unity of the church. In the third letter there is a sentence that stays with you. In an English translation: "He who knows himself knows God."

Is it a contradiction, an unlettered Antony in the *Life* and a thinker in the letters? Perhaps not entirely. You can think deeply without being able to write yourself. But it shows how little we know for certain about the man behind the story.

There is also a third Antony. He comes from the *Apophthegmata*, the sayings of the desert fathers. They were collected in Greek, in Palestine, some hundred and fifty years after his death. Of the roughly one hundred and twenty sayings attributed to Antony, thirty-eight

are in the alphabetical collection. Not all of them are considered genuine.

The first is about a day when he could not go on. Antony was sitting in the desert, full of thoughts of discouragement and darkness. He asked God how he could be saved. Then he saw someone who looked like him: a man sitting at work, getting up to pray, sitting down again and braiding a rope, getting up and praying. It was an angel. Do this, and you will be saved, the angel said. Antony became glad and took courage. He did it, and he was saved.

Another saying goes like this. Antony saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world. He groaned and asked who could ever get through them. He heard a voice answer, in an English translation: "Humility."

In another saying he compares the brothers to a bow. If you stretch it too far, it breaks. The collectors kept such short words because monks passed them on to one another. They tell less about his life and more about how he taught others. And there too, it is all about keeping the right measure.

Yet another is about a doctor. In prayer Antony heard that he had not yet come as far as a doctor in the city. He went to look. The man gave all his spare money to the poor and sang the Sanctus every day. He turned out to be Antony's equal.

There is one saying that I find the sharpest. A time will come, Antony said, when people go mad. And whoever is not mad, they will call mad: you are not like us. This same Antony said that he no longer feared God, but loved Him, for love drives out fear.

You do not have to live in a desert to know how quickly you can stretch yourself too far. What is the bow in your life that is about to snap?

Two sheepskins

In 356 Antony went, as he usually did, to the monks on the outer mountain. He told them this was his last visit. He was, he said according to Athanasius, almost a hundred and five years old. Then he went back to the inner mountain.

He knew that he was going to die. In Egypt people kept the bodies of saints at home, in their houses. Antony did not want them to do that with him. Christ Himself, he said, was also laid in a grave.

A few months later he fell ill. Two monks had lived with him for the last fifteen years, because he was old. Athanasius does not give their names. Antony called them to him. He said that he was going, as Scripture says, the way of the fathers, because he sensed that he was being called by the Lord. He told them to stay alert. Live as if you die every day. Have nothing to do with those who split the church and nothing to do with the Arians.

And then the burial. He told them to bury his body and hide it under the ground. No one was to carry his body to Egypt. No one was to know where.

He divided his possessions. One sheepskin and a cloak were to go to Bishop Athanasius. The other sheepskin to Serapion, bishop of Thmuis. The hair garment was for the two monks themselves. As for the rest, he said, farewell, my children, for Antony is departing and is no longer with you.

When he had spoken, according to the *Life*, he lifted his feet, as if he saw friends coming. His face shone with joy. And he died. Tradition keeps January 17 as the day of his death. The two monks did what he had asked. They dug a grave and laid him in it. No one else, Athanasius writes, knows to this day where he is buried.

Athanasius adds that his eyes were clear to the end and that he had not lost a tooth, though they were worn down to the gums.

A book in a hut near Trier

Shortly after Antony's death, around 357 to 360, Athanasius wrote the *Life*. He did so at the request of monks outside Egypt, who wanted to know how Antony had lived and whether the stories about him were true. Athanasius writes that he had often seen Antony and had served him for a time. Before 374 Evagrius of Antioch translated the book into Latin. In 379 or 380 Gregory of Nazianzus called it a monastic rule in the form of a story. Fifteen hundred years later the German theologian Adolf von Harnack called it, on the contrary, the most harmful book ever written. So Christians have long held different views about this book.

How far it traveled, Augustine himself tells in his *Confessions*. In 386 he was still searching for his way. A visitor, Ponticianus, told him about two court officials who, on a walk near Trier, in present-day Germany, found a hut. People lived there who served God. On a table lay a book with the life of Antony. One of them began to read, was gripped by it, and said to his friend: what are we really looking for with all our work? Can we become more at court than a friend of the emperor? And how fragile that is. I have now, in this hour, become a friend of God. He decided to turn his life around.

Not long afterward Augustine was sitting in the garden by his house. He heard a child's voice calling: take up and read. He thought of Antony, he writes, who on entering the church heard a reading from the Gospel and took it as though the passage had been read on his account. Augustine opened the letters of Paul and read.

What was told about Antony later is often legend. Around 375 Jerome wrote a life of Paul of Thebes, a hermit who according to him went into the desert even before Antony. In it Antony visits the old Paul. A raven brings bread, lions dig the grave. Historians cannot check that. According to a much later tradition, his bones were found after all and ended up in France in the eleventh century, by way of Alexandria and Constantinople. That runs directly against his own wish and against the account of Athanasius.

A spade in the desert soil

Antony is remembered on January 17 in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches. The Coptic Church celebrates him on 22 Tobi. In the Red Sea mountains the monastery that bears his name still stands, with wall paintings of which the oldest date from the seventh and eighth centuries. More than a million visitors come every year.

Of his grave we know nothing. Of his cave we know roughly where it is. Part of his words has been preserved, and we do not know exactly which part. What is most certain is also the simplest. A young Egyptian heard a sentence of Jesus read aloud in a village church, and took it literally.

More than eighty years later two monks laid him in the ground, in a place that no one knows to this day. A voice had once promised him that his name would become known throughout the whole world.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Antony lived from about 251 to 356 and came from Koma (now Qiman al-Arus, Beni Suef, Egypt); already during his lifetime he became a well-known hermit and spiritual father of monks in the Egyptian desert; he died

in 356 at a great age; around 357 to 360 Athanasius wrote his *Life*, which was translated into Latin before 374 and read in East and West; Augustine describes how the story of Antony played a part in his conversion in 386; the Monastery of Saint Anthony in the Red Sea mountains bears his name. The background (persecutions under Decius and Diocletian, the death of Bishop Peter in 311, Nicaea in 325) is widely confirmed.

Only from the Life by Athanasius or later tradition: the church service with Matthew 19:21 and the giving away of three hundred acres; his little sister with the virgins; the time of learning with the old man; the demons in the tomb, the ray of light and the voice of the Lord; the silver dish and the gold; the twenty years in the fort and the healings after he came out; the speech to the monks; the hyenas; his work among the prisoners in Alexandria in 311; the journey with the Saracens to the inner mountain, the sowing of grain and the spring for the camel; the letter from Constantine and his sons; the conversation with the philosophers; the speech against the Arians in Alexandria and the vision of the mules; his last words, the secret burial and the sheepskins; his clear eyes and teeth. The *Life* is a hagiography, a life story meant to be admired and imitated, written by a bishop with his own church and theological interests. No other source from that time confirms the stories. What Athanasius says about his own dealings with Antony is his own testimony; the text on this point has come down to us with some uncertainty. The sayings from the *Apophthegmata* were collected a century and a half after his death and are not all genuine.

Unconfirmed: the years 285/286 (fort), 305/306 (coming out), about 313 (inner mountain) and 338 (Alexandria) come from modern reconstructions, not from Athanasius, who gives only ages and lengths of time; the connection of the fort with Pispir (now Dayr al-Maymun, province of Giza); the authenticity of the seven

letters (Rubenson defends them, others have doubts); the visit to Paul of Thebes (Jerome, legend); the discovery of his relics and their journey to France; the earliest founding date of the present monastery.

Where the sources differ or doubt exists: At a study day of the monastic community of Bose in 2025 it was pointed out that the tomb cannot be found anywhere, and that one of the letters attributed to Antony describes the struggle with evil much more soberly than the *Life*. The same study day summarizes recent studies by saying that the *Life* reflects the church, theological and ascetic interests of the bishop, also where it concerns Antony's attitude toward the Arians. Wikipedia, referring to older reference works, points out that Antony was not the first ascetic. The picture of the unlettered Antony in the *Life* stands next to the thinker in the letters.

Interpretation: whether the stories of demons and miracles describe events or spiritual struggle in picture language is a question that readers from different traditions answer differently. I tell them as Athanasius wrote them down, and I believe along with him that God does not abandon a person who seeks Him.

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Athanasius: the bishop who stayed in his seat

It was the night of February 8 to 9, 356, in Alexandria. In the church of Theonas part of the congregation was keeping vigil. The next morning there was to be a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Outside, soldiers moved around the building. Their commander was Syrianus, a general of the emperor. His men had swords, bows, spears and clubs.

"The General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers," the bishop wrote later. They surrounded the church so that no one could slip away unseen. Among the soldiers walked Arians. They were there to point out the bishop, because the soldiers did not know his face. For a bishop who knew they had come for him, this was the moment to flee.

He did not walk away. He felt he must not abandon his congregation. He sat down on his bishop's chair. He asked the deacon to read a psalm, and he had the congregation answer after each verse with the refrain of Psalm 136: *For His mercy endures forever* (Psalm 136:1). Then the people were to go home.

The soldiers broke the doors open and pushed forward. They took up positions around the sanctuary to seize him. Priests and church

members who were still there shouted that he must leave. He refused, as long as not everyone was gone. He stood up, asked for prayer and told them all to go first. It was, he wrote, "better that my safety should be endangered" than that any of them should be hurt. Only when most had gone did monks and a few clergymen take hold of him. They more or less dragged him along. In the crush he got out unseen.

Afterward he was glad, he tells us. He had not betrayed his people. He had sent them away first and could save himself afterward.

That is how he told it himself, a year later, in a defense. The number of five thousand soldiers we have only from him. That the attack took place is certain. His congregation wrote an official protest about it shortly afterward, and it has survived. It gives the date, the name of Syrianus, and what happened in the church. Soldiers shot arrows, trampled the crowd and killed virgins. The bishop himself, the people write, was seized and nearly torn apart. He fell down as if dead and disappeared. Where he had gone, they did not know.

That bishop was named Athanasius. He was about sixty at the time. It was the third time he had to leave his city, and it would not be the last. Five times he was sent into exile, by four different emperors. Of his forty-five years as bishop, he spent about seventeen in exile. He fought all his life for one conviction: that Jesus Christ is truly God. Every church that speaks the Nicene Creed today stands in his debt. And yet he is also one of the most disputed figures of the early church.

It began in the same city, around the year 300.

A boy on the beach

Alexandria lay on the Mediterranean Sea, in the north of Egypt. After Rome it was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire. Jews,

Greeks and Egyptians lived there. The Christian congregation was old, and its bishop was one of the most important leaders of the church in the East.

When exactly Athanasius was born, we do not know. Most scholars think of 296 to 298. One clue is that he never tells of the great persecution under Emperor Diocletian, which began in 303. As a boy he must have lived through it. Some place his birth a few years earlier, around 293.

There is a well-known story about his childhood. One day Bishop Alexander of Alexandria saw children playing on the beach. They were playing church. One of them was the bishop and was baptizing the others with seawater. That boy was Athanasius. Alexander looked into the matter, decided that the baptisms were valid, and took the boys under his care. The story comes from Rufinus, who wrote around 402, and was later taken over by Socrates and Sozomen. Sozomen begins it carefully with the words "it is said." Modern historians see great problems in it, among them the dates. It is a lovely story, but it is probably a legend.

We stand on firmer ground with Gregory of Nazianzus, who delivered a speech in praise of him around 379. According to Gregory, Athanasius received a good general education, but spent it mainly on the Bible. In his younger years he wrote two books that are still read: *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation of the Word*. Exactly when, scholars disagree.

A priest with a catchy song

In 319 Bishop Alexander made him a deacon. A deacon in those days was a helper of the bishop, with duties in the care of the poor and in worship. Athanasius became his secretary and confidant.

Around the same time a struggle began in Alexandria that would tear the whole church apart. A priest from the city, Arius, began to teach about who Jesus was. His own words survive in a letter to a bishop who was his friend. He wrote "that the Son has a beginning, but that God is without beginning" (in the old English translation). According to Arius the Son was made by God, before the creation of the world, as the highest of everything that exists. But He was not eternal, and He was not part of God's own being. Bishop Alexander summed it up in a letter: according to Arius there was a time when the Son of God was not.

Why was that such a problem? For Arius it was precisely a matter of reverence for God. There can be only one God, he thought, without beginning and without equal. Then the Son must be something else: high and glorious, but created. It was a thought that many people found logical. His teaching also circulated in a catchy song. You can imagine how that sounded on the quays of a port city: a melody you sing along with before you realize what the words say.

"He was made man"

Athanasius saw it differently, and he saw it from the question of how a person is saved. In *On the Incarnation of the Word* he explains it. He writes it to someone he calls Macarius, a "true lover of Christ." Humanity had fallen through sin into corruption and death. No created being could repair that. Only He who had made humanity could make it new.

He uses a picture that everyone understands. Suppose a portrait on a wooden panel has been damaged by stains from outside. Who can restore it? Only the one whose portrait it is. He must come back, so that the lines are drawn again. So it was with humanity, made in the image of God. The Word of God came back to renew humanity. Another picture: a great king enters a city and takes up residence

in one of the houses. Then the whole city is honored, and no enemy dares to attack it any longer. So the Word came in a body, to give that body up to death in the place of all.

Death he calls a defeated tyrant, bound hand and foot. Young men and girls who belong to Christ, he writes, laugh at it and even practice dying. The proof, he says, lies in what happens. Whoever does not believe it must deny the ordinary course of nature.

If Christ is only a creature, that whole story comes to a halt. Then a creature saved us, and we are still outside God. Athanasius summed up his faith in one sentence that is loved in the Eastern churches to this day: "He was made man that we might be made God" (in the old English translation). By this he did not mean that people become gods. The Orthodox Church speaks here of deification: through Christ, humanity shares in God's own life. Protestants and Catholics often use other words, but recognize in it the heart of the gospel.

I find it striking that this struggle began with a question that every believer asks. Who is Jesus, really? And what does that mean for you, when you pray, or when you die?

Nicaea, 325

The quarrel in Alexandria grew so big that Emperor Constantine stepped in. He was the first emperor to put himself behind Christianity, and he wanted peace in his empire. In 325 he called bishops together in Nicaea, present-day İznik in Turkey. It became the first great council, a church assembly for the whole church.

Athanasius was there as a deacon, at his bishop's side. The church historian Socrates, who wrote around 439, says that he argued fiercely against the bishops who supported Arius. He did not yet have a leading role. The council condemned the teaching of Arius

and drew up a creed. It says that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father. The Greek word was *homoousios*. Constantine had the books of Arius burned.

The council also settled something else. In Egypt there was a separate church group around Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis, the Melitians. Nicaea tried to bring them back. That succeeded only halfway. The Melitians would oppose Athanasius for the rest of his life.

A young bishop and a severed hand

On June 8, 328, Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria, as the successor of Alexander. He was about thirty. His opponents claimed later that he was too young and that seven bishops had ordained him in secret. That comes from the account of Sozomen, around 445, who presents it explicitly as a claim of opponents. Gregory wrote, on the contrary, that the people had chosen him, with the voice of the whole people, in an apostolic and spiritual way, without bloodshed or violence.

How he looked, Gregory tells in one sentence: angelic in appearance, still more angelic in spirit. Toward those who attacked him he was unbending as diamond, he writes. People who disagreed with one another he drew to himself like a magnet. When he rebuked, he did it with the tenderness of a father.

After that the accusations rained down. He was said to have imposed a tax on linen clothing on the Egyptians. That was refuted. One of his priests, Macarius, was said to have broken a communion cup in a village, belonging to a man who called himself a priest, Ischyras. And he was said to have murdered a Melitian bishop, Arsenius. As proof, his opponents carried around a severed hand.

Arsenius turned out to be alive. He was found in hiding. Athanasius later included in a defense the letters that prove it. One of them was from Emperor Constantine, who wrote to the bishops that they could see for themselves that the people they claimed had been killed by the sword were still among them. If the unrest continued, the emperor added, he would investigate the matter personally. Another letter was from Arsenius himself, who made peace with the church. A Melitian ally wrote that Arsenius was alive and had gone into hiding with them. According to those documents, Ischyras also withdrew his story.

What the papyrus says

Here I have to be honest, for this is not a simple story about an innocent man and lying enemies.

A papyrus letter from Egypt has been preserved, which now lies in London. A Melitian, Callistus, wrote it in May or June of 335. He tells how followers of Athanasius, drunk, together with soldiers attacked Melitian brothers. Four were put out of the city, bleeding. Others were thrown in prison. It is a letter from an opponent, but it was written in the very days, not years later.

Most of the stories about Athanasius we have from himself, and he wrote them to defend himself. That does not make them untrue. It does make them one-sided. In the fourth century church politics was not a friendly game, on any side.

In the middle of the street

In 335 a synod met in Tyre, in present-day Lebanon. It deposed Athanasius. He traveled himself to Constantinople, present-day Istanbul, and approached the emperor in the middle of the street. Constantine later wrote about it himself, in a letter to the bishops

of Tyre. At first he had not wanted to hear Athanasius and had almost had him removed. The bishop asked for nothing but a fair trial: that the synod appear before the emperor. Constantine agreed.

Six of the bishops came. They dropped the accusations about the cup and Arsenius. Instead they accused Athanasius of something new: he was said to have threatened to hold back the grain ships from Alexandria that supplied the new capital with food. Constantine grew angry and sent him to Gaul. That is how Athanasius tells it himself.

He left on February 8, 336, for Trier, now in Germany, and stayed there with Bishop Maximinus. When Constantine died in May 337, he was allowed to return. At the end of November 337 he was home again.

A prayer in Constantinople

While Athanasius was in Trier, the last chapter of Arius was playing out in Constantinople. He himself was not there. He tells it later in a letter to Serapion, on the testimony of Macarius, the priest who was present.

Emperor Constantine had summoned Arius. Arius swore that he held the true faith, but left out why Alexander had deposed him earlier. The emperor let him go with a warning: if your faith is right, you have done well to swear. The party of Eusebius wanted Arius to take part in the Lord's Supper in the church again the next day, and threatened to force it. It was Saturday.

Bishop Alexander of Constantinople did not want that. He lay down flat on the floor in the church and prayed that God would spare His church and take Arius away. Macarius lay beside him and heard him pray. While the party of Eusebius was still making

threats, Arius left the gathering to relieve himself. There he fell, and there he died, without having received the Lord's Supper.

Athanasius sees in this story God's judgment on the error. He adds that it is no reason to rejoice.

It did not last long. In March 339, with the support of Emperor Constantius II, another bishop was installed in Alexandria, Gregory of Cappadocia. Athanasius fled and went to Rome. There Bishop Julius of Rome stood behind him. A synod in Rome declared him the rightful bishop, and in 343 a church assembly in Serdica, present-day Sofia in Bulgaria, also acquitted him.

A river of people

Only on October 21, 346, did Athanasius arrive in Alexandria again. Gregory of Nazianzus describes how all Egypt came out to see him. The people gathered from every side, he writes, and formed one river. Fragrant ointments were poured out. That evening the city shone with light. Athanasius rode into the city on a colt.

These are words from a speech of praise, but that he came back is certain. Ten quiet years followed. They ended in the night of February 356, in the church of Theonas.

Among the monks

In the city the congregation would not be silenced. They refused to recognize another bishop. The weapons the soldiers had left behind in the church, they hung up as evidence, and when officials wanted to take them away, the people gave them up only when the matter was known everywhere. They filed an official protest. When they asked Syrianus to stop the violence, he had them beaten with clubs. They wrote that they were ready for martyrdom if persecution was ordered, and that they wanted to keep Athanasius, whom Emperor

Constantius himself had sent back to them with letters and oaths. They sent delegates to the emperor and asked ship captains to carry the news along. Another bishop, George, entered the city with a show of military force.

After that night Athanasius disappeared from sight. For almost six years he lived in hiding, mostly among the monks in the Egyptian desert. Soldiers searched for him, Gregory tells us. The monks would say nothing about it. They would rather offer their necks to the sword than betray him.

In these years he wrote a great deal. He wrote a history of the struggle with the Arians and defenses of his own conduct. And he wrote the life of Antony, the well-known monk from the Egyptian desert. Antony has his own chapter in this book. Athanasius says in his introduction that he had often seen him and had served him for a long time. He had, he writes, "poured water on his hands" (in the old English translation). The book was read throughout the Christian world and strongly shaped monastic life in East and West. At the end he tells that Antony, shortly before his death, left him a sheepskin and a cloak. Athanasius kept them as a precious gift, he writes.

It says something that the man who fled so often came to live in the desert among people who had gone to live there of their own free will. For them solitude was a choice. For him it was a necessity. He made a school of it.

The Psalms as a mirror

There is also a letter from Athanasius to a man named Marcellinus, about the Psalms. When he wrote it, we do not know. As you read it, you think of that night in the church of Theonas, where a psalm held the congregation together.

He explains why the Psalms are different from the other books of the Bible. Whoever reads, sings or hears them, he writes, recognizes the words as his own words. He is touched as if he himself were speaking. The Psalms become a mirror for the one who sings them, and in them he discovers the movements of his own soul.

A bishop who is sent away five times can make good use of such a book: a book in which his own fear is already written down, and his own trust too.

"A small cloud"

In 361 Julian became emperor. He had turned away from Christianity and wanted to restore the old Roman religions. He let the exiled bishops come back. On February 21, 362, Athanasius was back in his city. He held a synod there, which declared once more that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in being.

Julian had underestimated him. In the autumn of 362 a new order came, issued after complaints that Athanasius would ruin all of Egypt: Athanasius had to go. In a letter Julian called him a contemptible little man. According to Socrates, Athanasius told his friends that "it is but a small cloud which will soon pass away" (in the old English translation). He fled by boat across the Nile. When his pursuers asked whether anyone had seen him, they were told that he was not far away and that they would catch up with him if they hurried. They rowed on and never caught up with him. That story is in Socrates, written down almost eighty years later.

Julian died on June 26, 363. Athanasius returned.

The fifth time

The next emperor of the East, Valens, also supported the party of Arius. In October 365 Athanasius withdrew once more, to a country

house outside the city. Socrates writes that he hid for four months in the tomb of his ancestors. At the beginning of February 366 Valens let him return. After that he was not exiled again.

He was around seventy by then. How long can you keep standing when the wind keeps changing direction? Athanasius tried, with five departures and five returns.

The fountains of salvation

Every year the bishop of Alexandria sent an Easter letter to the churches of Egypt. In it he announced the date of Easter and wrote something to encourage or to warn. In his Easter letter of 367, the thirty-ninth, Athanasius wrote about something else: which books belong to the Bible.

He had a reason. Books with well-known names on them were circulating, claiming to be old and holy. Simple believers could not tell the difference. He set out in a row what the church had received. For the New Testament he named the four Gospels, Acts, seven letters of James, Peter, John and Jude, fourteen letters of Paul, Hebrews included, and Revelation. They are the twenty-seven books that now stand in almost every Bible. As far as we know, it is the oldest list with exactly these twenty-seven, though some scholars also point to Origen.

About those books he wrote: "These are fountains of salvation" (in the old English translation). Whoever is thirsty can be satisfied by the words in them. In these alone, he writes, the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. No one may add to them or take away from them. He quoted the words of Jesus: *You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.* (John 5:39).

He also named books that were not on the list but could be read by people who had just come to the faith. Among them were the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Judith, Tobit, the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas. About the Old Testament the churches later thought differently, and that is why a Catholic or Orthodox Bible has more books than a Protestant one. About the New Testament they came to agree. The list of Athanasius became everyone's list.

A bed in Alexandria

Athanasius died on May 2, 373, in Alexandria. He had himself still named Peter as his successor. After all those flights by night, he died peacefully, in his own bed.

The Creed of Nicaea, which he stood for all his life, is still spoken in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and many Protestant churches. An encyclopedia from 1907 called him the father of orthodoxy. Evangelicals and Pentecostals who worship Jesus as God stand on the ground he defended, even if they have never heard his name.

He was not a saint out of a picture book. He could be hard and shrewd, and about his methods his opponents were perhaps not always wrong. But on the question of what mattered to him, he never haggled.

I often think back to that night in the church of Theonas, to the people who had to choose between staying and running. The doors open, the soldiers come in. At the front a small man sits on a chair. Around him a congregation says, verse after verse, the same answer: for His mercy endures forever.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth around 296 to 298 (date uncertain); deacon in 319; present at Nicaea in 325 as a helper of Bishop Alexander; bishop of Alexandria from June 8, 328; deposition by the synod of Tyre (335); five exiles under Constantine, Constantius II, Julian and Valens (Trier 336-337, Rome 339-346, the Egyptian desert 356-362, 362-363, 365-366); the support of Julius of Rome and the acquittal at Serdica (343); the attack of Syrianus on the church in February 356 (also in the protest of his congregation); the Easter letter of 367 with the list of twenty-seven New Testament books; death on May 2, 373.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the details of that night in 356 (the psalm, the number of five thousand soldiers, his refusal to leave earlier, the monks who pulled him along and the Arians who pointed out the bishop among the soldiers); his meeting with Constantine in the street and the charge about the grain ships (the meeting is also in a letter from Constantine himself, the charge about the grain only in Athanasius); his dealings with Antony; the praise in Gregory of Nazianzus (a speech of praise: the election by the people, the return in 346 with the river of people, the monks who did not betray him); the "small cloud" and the flight across the Nile (Socrates, around 439); the four months in the family tomb (Socrates). The protest of the congregation is the voice of one party; it also says that the bishop was seized and fell down as if dead, which fits less easily with his own story of the monks who pulled him away. When the letter to Marcellinus about the Psalms was written is not known; I consulted it only through quotations in an article about the letter.

Unconfirmed: the boy who played bishop on the beach (Rufinus, around 402, probably legend); the claim that he was too young and was ordained in secret (a claim of opponents in Sozomen).

Where the sources differ or historians are divided: whether Athanasius himself used or approved violence against Melitians is disputed among historians. The papyrus of Callistus (335) shows that violence was charged against his followers in the very time itself. The historian Timothy Barnes judged harshly: in his view Athanasius systematically misrepresented important facts about his own career and did not shy away from dishonest means. Duane Arnold saw in the accusations mainly a political campaign to get rid of him, and in the synod that condemned him a show trial. Still others think that Athanasius did not send the drunken group himself, but that the letter does show that Melitians were beaten and imprisoned in his time.

Interpretation: whether the struggle of Athanasius was partly church politics, I cannot decide. The question he gave his life to was who Jesus is. I believe with him that the answer of Nicaea is right.

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Augustine of Hippo: the man who wrote down his own heart

It is the end of August 386, in a garden by a house in Milan. A man of thirty-one lies under a fig tree and weeps. He has left his friend Alypius sitting some distance away. Where Alypius sits lies a book with the letters of the apostle Paul.

Then he hears a child's voice from a house nearby. It sounds like a little song, the same words over and over: "Take up and read; take up and read." He does not know whether it is a boy or a girl. He gets up, walks back to Alypius, opens the book and reads the first lines his eye falls on. They are words from the letter to the Romans: *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.* (Romans 13:14). All doubt disappears, he writes later. It was as if light fell into his heart.

We know this scene from only one source: his own book, the *Confessions*, which he wrote around 397, eleven years after that afternoon. What happened in that garden, then, we have from Augustine himself.

That man became bishop of a port city in North Africa. Roman Catholics honor him as a doctor of the church. Martin Luther became a monk in a monastery named after him. Lutherans and Reformed Christians call him a father of the Reformation. He belongs to all of them.

It began in Thagaste.

A little cross on the forehead

Aurelius Augustinus was born on November 13, 354, in Thagaste, in the Roman province of Numidia. Today the place is called Souk Ahras and lies in Algeria. North Africa belonged to the Roman Empire and spoke Latin. More than forty years earlier, in 312, Emperor Constantine had become a Christian. The great persecutions were over, but far from everyone was a Christian.

In the house of Augustine you could see those two worlds side by side. His father Patricius was a pagan. His mother Monica was a Christian, and she was one with her whole heart. Possidius, a friend who later wrote his first biography, calls them parents of respectable standing. They belonged to the governing citizens of the little town.

Augustine tells in his *Confessions* that as a child he was marked with the sign of the cross. That made him a pupil of the church, a catechumen. When he became seriously ill as a boy, he himself asked for baptism. His mother got everything ready. He recovered, and the baptism was postponed.

Pears for the pigs

In his sixteenth year he and a group of boys stole pears from a tree next to the family's vineyard. The pears were not even tasty. They ate a few and threw the rest to the pigs. Why did they do it, then?

Augustine gives the answer himself: it was fun because it was forbidden.

Why does a bishop spend a whole chapter on a few stolen pears? For him it was about the question of where evil in a person comes from. There was no hunger, no need, no reason. He had done wrong because he wanted to. Anyone who reads the *Confessions* notices that he spares himself nowhere.

Around 371, at seventeen, he went to Carthage to study to be an orator. Carthage lay near present-day Tunis in Tunisia. He described the city later as a cauldron of wrong loves. He wanted to love and be loved, he writes, even before he had found anything worth loving. He went to the theater and wept over invented disasters, and later called that a cheap form of compassion. His father died in those years. According to Augustine, Patricius had come to faith at the end of his life. Monica had won him for God.

A woman without a name and a mother in tears

In Carthage Augustine began living with a woman. They did not marry. He wrote later that he had only one woman and that he stayed faithful to her. In 372 they had a son. They called him Adeodatus, which means: given by God.

About the birth Augustine wrote something honest. A child in such a relationship is born against the will of the parents, but once it is there, it compels love. He loved that boy.

Her name he never wrote down anywhere. We do not know what she was called, where she came from or what she looked like. She lived with him for about fifteen years, and we hardly know more. I find that hard to read. A woman who belonged with him for so long, and the mother of his only child, remains without a face in history.

When he was nineteen, Augustine read a book by the Roman writer Cicero, the *Hortensius*. The book changed his desires, he wrote. It moved him, but one thing was missing from it: the name of Christ. He also picked up the Bible, but it disappointed him. Compared with Cicero he found the style too simple. His pride was in that, he writes: the book was made for small people, and he thought himself great.

He joined the Manichaeans. That was a movement founded in Persia in the third century by Mani, with a teaching of two opposing powers. They were always crying "Truth, truth," Augustine wrote later, but their hearts were empty of it. For about nine years Augustine stayed with them, as a hearer, the lowest rank.

Monica was devastated. Augustine tells that in a dream she was standing on a wooden ruler. A radiant young man came to her and said that where she was, her son would be too. When she dreamed it, she told it to her son. She thought it meant that he would come to be where she was. Augustine answered: or rather that she would become as he was. She replied at once, he says. No, she said, he had not been told "where he is, you will be," but "where you are, he will be." He found her answer stronger than the dream itself.

She also went to a bishop and asked him to talk with her son. He refused. Augustine was still too full of himself, he said, and it was better to let him be convinced later. He told her that he himself had been a Manichaean as a child. She kept pleading, weeping. Then he sent her away with the words she would never forget: go now, it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish. She took it as if it came from heaven. That is how Augustine told it himself. Who that bishop was, he does not write.

A friend from his youth fell ill and was baptized while unconscious. Augustine joked about it. The friend looked at him in shock and

rebuked him. Shortly afterward he died. Augustine describes his grief in sentences that still hurt to read: everything he looked at was death.

In his twenty-ninth year the famous Manichaean teacher Faustus came to Carthage. He spoke beautifully, but his teaching did not convince Augustine.

In 383 Augustine left for Rome. The students in Carthage were too wild for him, and in Rome it would be better. Monica wept and wanted to hold him back. He lied to her. He said he was seeing off a friend who was waiting for a favorable wind. He sailed away. It stands in his own book, without softening.

In Rome he became seriously ill, with a high fever. He recovered. A year later the city of Milan was looking for a teacher of rhetoric. Symmachus, the prefect of Rome, had him give a trial speech and sent him north.

A bishop who read in silence

In Milan Ambrose was bishop. He received Augustine, so Augustine wrote, like a father. Augustine went to listen to his sermons. At first he saw in him mainly a friendly man. Then he noticed that what Ambrose said was much more solid than anything he had heard from Faustus.

Augustine noted a small detail about him. Whoever came in to see Ambrose often found him reading. His eyes moved over the pages, but his voice was silent.

Monica traveled after her son to Milan. She insisted that he marry. A girl was found, still two years too young to marry. Augustine became engaged to her.

Then came what I find the hardest part of his life story. The mother of Adeodatus was, in his own words, torn from his side, because she stood in the way of the marriage. She went back to Africa. There she promised God that she would never live with another man. Their son stayed with his father in Milan. Augustine could not wait the two years until the wedding and took another woman.

I am not going to pass judgment here on people who lived sixteen hundred years ago. But I do not want to forget her either. She is the one who, in this story, made a vow to God before Augustine did.

"Take up and read"

In the summer of 386 a fellow countryman came to visit, Ponticianus, an African who worked at the court. He told about Antony, an Egyptian monk who had left everything to serve God. He also told about two imperial officials near Trier, in present-day Germany. In a small hut they had found the life of Antony and read it, and on the spot decided to give up their careers.

Augustine listened and was ashamed. For years he had not wanted to see his own ugliness, he writes. Now God held it before his eyes. He remembered that at nineteen he had prayed for purity, with a condition attached: grant me chastity and continency, "but not yet." Ponticianus left, and Augustine broke down.

He flew into the garden, with Alypius at his heels. He was furious with himself, because he was not yet entering into the covenant with God, while his whole being cried that he must. He pulled at his hair, struck his forehead and clasped his knees. His body obeyed him without trouble. His will did not. He understood that his will was not whole. They were not two souls in him, as the Manichaeans taught, but one person who half wanted.

Then he describes his old loves. They tugged at his garment from behind and whispered: are you letting us go already? Will you still be able to live without us later? Facing them stood another woman, Continence, cheerful and not sad. She pointed him to the many men and women who had done it, and she asked why he thought he had to do it in his own strength. He blushed.

He walked away from Alypius, threw himself down under a fig tree, and let his tears go. "How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow?" Why not now? Why did this hour not put an end to his shame?

So he talked and wept, with a broken heart. Then came the voice from the house nearby, of a boy or a girl, in a singsong refrain: "Take up and read; take up and read." He stopped weeping. He searched his memory to see whether children sang such a song in their games, and found nothing. He understood it as a command from God to open the book and read the first line his eye fell on. He thought of Antony, who had been struck by a Gospel reading.

He ran back to the place where Alypius sat. He opened the book and read in silence: not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not read further. There was no reason to, he says. At that moment a light of calm fell into his heart, and all the shadows of doubt fled.

He closed the book, with his finger between the pages or a mark in it, and told Alypius with a calm face. Alypius wanted to see what he had read. He read further than Augustine: the next line, about the one who is weak in the faith. He applied it to himself and went along with his friend without hesitating. The two went inside and told Monica. She rejoiced, Augustine writes, and thanked God.

Historians have asked how literally this account should be taken. When Augustine wrote it down, he was already a bishop. Some

scholars, such as the German church historian Adolf von Harnack, thought that he pushed later insight back onto that afternoon. The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1907 rejects that explanation, because in the writer's view it does not fit the facts and the texts. What is certain: shortly afterward he withdrew, and the next year he was baptized.

Have you ever had a moment like that, when an ordinary sentence suddenly was about you? Augustine did not know where the child came from. He read what lay before him, and he did it.

His lungs gave him trouble, and he gave up his post as a teacher. The months after that he lived with a small group on an estate near Milan, in Cassiciacum. The house belonged to Verecundus, a friend who was not yet a Christian himself. Where exactly it lay, we no longer know. Monica was there, Alypius and Adeodatus. Their conversations, which Augustine wrote down, made the estate a small Christian school. He read the Psalms and wrote about how he was moved by them. On the advice of Ambrose he also began on Isaiah, but found it too difficult.

In the Easter night of April 24 to 25, 387, he was baptized in Milan by Ambrose. He tells how the hymns in the church touched him, so much that tears ran down his cheeks, and how good he felt as he wept. Alypius was baptized together with him, and Adeodatus too. Augustine writes of his son that he was barely fifteen and surpassed many learned men with his mind. Later he wrote a dialogue with him, *The Teacher*. All the thoughts the boy speaks in it were really his own, his father assures us.

A window in Ostia

About Monica he wrote a whole page. As a girl she had secretly tasted the wine she had to fetch for the family, until a maidservant

scolded her. That was enough to make her stop. With her husband Patricius, who was quick to anger, she put up without complaining. She waited until his anger had passed and then explained what she had meant. Other women with bruises came to her with their stories. She advised them to watch their tongues better. In the neighborhood she was known as a peacemaker: what she heard from two quarreling people, she passed on only in ways that could reconcile them.

After the baptism the group wanted to go back to Africa. In the autumn of 387 they were waiting in Ostia, the port of Rome, for a ship. One day Augustine and Monica stood together at a window that looked out on an inner garden. They talked about eternal life. They wondered what it would be like if the noise of the body fell silent, if the earth, the water and the air grew still, and even heaven were quiet. If everything fell silent, what would remain? According to Augustine, in that conversation they touched for a moment, with their whole heart, the Wisdom of God, and then they returned to ordinary words. Monica said that she herself had nothing more to expect from this life. What was she still here for? She had received what she had stayed for: her son was a Christian.

A few days later Monica fell ill. She told her sons not to worry about her body. "Lay this body anywhere, let not the care for it trouble you at all," she said, as Augustine wrote it down. She asked only that they remember her at the altar of the Lord, wherever they were. On the ninth day of her illness she died. She was fifty-six, he thirty-three. At first he held back his tears by force, he writes, and had to be ashamed that a death did such a thing to him. Later, alone on his bed, he let them go. He prayed for her sins and asked readers also to remember her and Patricius at the altar.

Here we have something that rarely happens with people from this time: a piece of stone that confirms the story. For her grave in Ostia

a former consul, Anicius Auchenius Bassus, wrote an epitaph. The text was already known from a medieval manuscript. In December 1945 children who were digging near the church of Santa Aurea in Ostia found a broken piece of that marble stone. Her remains have lain in the church of Sant'Agostino in Rome since 1430.

Seized in Hippo

In 388 Augustine returned to Africa. He sold what he had and went to live with friends in Thagaste as a small community, with prayer, study and shared possessions. Shortly afterward Adeodatus died. The sources usually say 388, some a few years later. Augustine writes only one short sentence about it: God took his life swiftly from the earth. He says no more. Perhaps he could not.

In 391 he was in Hippo Regius, a port city on the coast. Today that city is called Annaba, in Algeria. The bishop there, Valerius, was old and did not speak Latin well, because he was a Greek. He asked the congregation to choose a priest. Possidius tells what happened. The people seized Augustine, who was standing in the crowd, and brought him forward to be ordained. He wept.

Possidius knew Augustine for almost forty years and wrote his biography shortly after 430. He was a contemporary and a friend, and he admired him. You have to take that into account.

In Hippo Augustine started a monastery, where no one owned anything of his own. Valerius had him preach while he himself was present, something unusual in Africa. Because the old bishop was afraid that another city would take him away, he had him ordained as an assistant bishop in 395 or 396. Shortly afterward Valerius died. Augustine was now bishop of Hippo, and he stayed so until his death.

Too late did I love You

Around 397 he wrote the *Confessions*. It is a long prayer, addressed to God, in which he tells his life. The book begins with a sentence that is still often quoted: God has made us for Himself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Him.

He wrote it as a bishop. He knew that people also wanted to know who he was now, and he told that too. In the tenth book he asks the question that carries his whole life: "What then is it that I love when I love my God?" It is not bodily beauty, he answers, not a fragrance, not a sound, but a light and a food that no place or time can take away. And then comes the sentence: "Too late did I love You, O Fairness, so ancient, and yet so new!" (in the old English translation). You were within me, he writes, and I sought You outside. "You called, and cried aloud, and forced open my deafness." A bishop wrote down his own theft, his lies and his wrong loves, for everyone to read. In the same book he prays: "Give what You command, and command what You will."

"Compel them to come in"

The office of bishop brought him into conflicts from which he did not always emerge well. The greatest was about the Donatists. Since the beginning of the fourth century the church in North Africa had been torn apart. The Donatists thought the Catholic church had become unclean, because some of its leaders had betrayed the church in the time of the persecutions. They formed a church of their own next to the Catholic one.

Augustine wrote, preached and debated. In June 411 a conference was held in Carthage, ordered by the emperor. There were 286 Catholic and 279 Donatist bishops. The chairman was the imperial tribune Marcellinus, a friend of Augustine. The church historian

Philip Schaff, in the nineteenth century, calls that openly partisan. The ruling went in favor of the Catholics.

Then came laws. Donatist clergy were banished, ordinary members were fined, churches were seized. Augustine had first said that you can convince people only with words. Later he changed his mind and supported compulsion. He appealed to a sentence from a parable of Jesus about a banquet, where the master tells the servant to compel people to come in. He never wanted heretics put to death, however, as the Catholic Encyclopedia stresses.

The second great conflict was about Pelagius, a monk from Britain. Pelagius taught that a person can choose of himself to do good, and that Adam's sin does not work through in every person. Augustine saw it differently. A person cannot do without the grace of God. In 412 a synod in Carthage condemned the teaching of Pelagius, in 417 Bishop Innocent of Rome did so, and in 418 his successor Zosimus. With Julian of Eclanum, a follower of Pelagius, Augustine remained in debate for the last ten years of his life. That struggle sharpened his teaching on grace and election. The church of the Middle Ages built on it, and later so did Luther and Calvin.

Two cities

In 410 the Visigoths plundered Rome. Pagans said it was the fault of the Christians: the old gods had been abandoned, and now the punishment came.

Augustine answered in a book he worked on for twelve years, *The City of God*. It grew to 22 books and was finished in 426. There are two cities in history, he wrote, two kinds of people. The one city lives for itself and for what passes away. The other lives for God and His eternal truth. At the end, he wrote, the city of God will triumph.

Shortly before his death he read through all his own books once more and wrote a list of corrections, the *Retractations*.

Psalms on the wall

In the summer of 429 the Vandals, a Germanic people, crossed from Spain to Africa with the Alans. According to Possidius they destroyed cities and churches and killed clergy. Possidius writes that of the many churches only those of Carthage, Hippo and Cirta remained standing. That sounds like an exaggeration from someone who saw everything collapse. But that the land was devastated is certain.

Hippo too was besieged. In the city were Count Boniface with his troops and many refugees. The siege lasted, according to Possidius, almost fourteen months. Other sources speak of eighteen.

In that time he wrote to Bishop Honoratus that clergy may not abandon their congregation, unless others can continue their work.

In the third month of the siege he came down with a fever. Possidius tells that a man came to his bed with a sick relative. He had dreamed that he must go to Bishop Augustine so that he would lay his hands on the sick man. Augustine said that if he had such power, he would first have used it for himself. Then he laid his hands on him anyway, and the sick man was healed. We know this story only from Possidius. He does not write whether he saw it himself.

The last weeks Possidius describes simply. Augustine had the penitential psalms, psalms in which forgiveness is asked, copied out and hung on the wall. He read them from his bed and wept. The last ten days he wanted no visitors, only the doctors and whoever brought him food. He wanted to pray.

On August 28, 430, he died, in the seventy-sixth year of his life. He left no will. He owned nothing. He asked only that the library of the church be kept for those who came after him.

A library in a burning city

The Vandals later burned Hippo to the ground. The cathedral and the library were spared. That is how his books and letters were preserved, and more than three hundred fifty sermons that are considered genuine. He probably gave thousands. In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII named him a doctor of the church. On July 17, 1505, Martin Luther entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed Christians and evangelicals still read him, each with their own emphases.

I did not write this chapter to make a hero of him. He let the mother of his son go, and he supported compulsion against other Christians. He wrote down his own faults himself, and that is how we know them.

Possidius ends his book with a remark. Whoever read Augustine gained much from it, he writes. But whoever had seen him live in that city on the coast gained even more.

What his friend described last was an old man in bed in a besieged city. On the wall hung psalms. He read them, and wept.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth on November 13, 354, in Thagaste (Souk Ahras); studies in Carthage; son Adeodatus, born around 372; years among the Manichaeans; Rome (383) and Milan (384), where Ambrose was bishop; baptism in Milan in the Easter night of 387 together with Alypius and Adeodatus; death of Monica in Ostia in the autumn of 387 (also confirmed by her

epitaph, a piece of which was found in 1945); return to Africa in 388; ordination as priest in Hippo in 391; bishop from 395 or 396; the conference with the Donatists in 411 and the measures of compulsion afterward; the struggle with Pelagius and Julian; *The City of God* after the sack of Rome in 410, completed in 426; the siege of Hippo by the Vandals; his death on August 28, 430.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the pears, Monica's dream and the bishop's words about the son of her tears, the lie on the coast, the garden with the fig tree and the child's voice, the conversation at the window in Ostia and Monica's last words (all from the *Confessions*, about 397; also the struggle in the garden, the "old loves," Monica's wine and her peacemaking, Cassiciacum and the prayer "Give what You command"); these parts I checked for the final review in the Confessions, books 3, 5 and 9 (New Advent); the weeping at his ordination, the psalms on the wall and the healing on his deathbed (all from Possidius, friend and contemporary, shortly after 430); the journey of his remains to Sardinia and Pavia (later tradition).

Unconfirmed: the exact year of death of Adeodatus; the year of his consecration as bishop (395 or 396); the length of the siege (fourteen or eighteen months); the name and further life of the mother of Adeodatus; the extent of the destruction that Possidius describes.

Interpretation: whether the child's voice in the garden was a sign from God is a question of faith. Historians also discuss how much the bishop of 397 colored his own past. His later support for compulsion against the Donatists is viewed critically by historians from all churches.

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Patrick: the slave who went back to his kidnappers

They were still wearing their white baptismal clothes. On their foreheads the oil with which they had been anointed could still be seen. Then the soldiers came. Some were killed with the sword. The others were carried off to be sold as slaves.

The man who had baptized them sent a priest with a letter after the soldiers. He asked for the prisoners back, and for the loot. The soldiers laughed at the messengers.

After that he wrote a second letter, an open letter, for anyone who would listen. He no longer called the soldiers of a certain Coroticus fellow Christians. In his words they were "fellow-citizens of demons" (in the English translation of the Royal Irish Academy). He asked believers not to eat or drink with them and to refuse their gifts, until they repented and set the prisoners free.

We know this story only from that letter. It has been preserved, together with one other piece from the same hand: a look back on his life that he himself called his Confessio, his confession. They are the only two texts we have from him. They were written by a

man who later became the patron saint of Ireland, with a feast day on March 17. Around that man, over fifteen centuries, many stories have grown: about snakes, about a shamrock, about a fire on a hill. In this chapter I keep those stories apart. First Patrick himself speaks.

Who he was begins with his own first sentence. He calls himself a sinner, a simple man from the countryside, the least of all believers. And at the beginning of the letter he writes that he, an unlearned sinner, has become a bishop in Ireland. Everything he is, he says, comes from God.

A village with a name no one can find anymore

Patrick was born in Britain, the Roman part of present-day Great Britain. When exactly, no one knows. There is not a single year in his own texts. Historians say cautiously that he lived in the fifth century, and beyond that they cannot get with certainty.

His father was named Calpornius. He was a deacon in the church, and according to the letter to Coroticus also a decurio, a member of the town council. His grandfather Potitus was a priest. So Patrick came from a Christian family with some standing. In the letter he writes that he was born free and that he gave up that noble position for the sake of others.

The family lived in Bannavem Taburniae. Where that was has remained a riddle. Proposals have been made for Birdoswald near Hadrian's Wall in northern England, for Banwen in the south of Wales and for places in Somerset. None of them is convincing, writes the translator of the Royal Irish Academy. A seventh-century biographer, Muirchú, named a place Nemthor, which was later linked to Dumbarton in Scotland. That too is uncertain.

It was a world that was shifting. The Western Roman Empire was losing its grip. In 410 Rome was plundered, and around that time the Roman legions pulled out of Britain. Across the sea lay Ireland. That island had never been part of the empire. There were kings and tribal leaders, there were slaves, and there were raiders who came over the sea.

The grandson of a priest

Patrick did not have much faith as a boy, he tells us himself. He did not know the true God, he writes. His family did not listen to the priests who told them how they could be saved. It sounds strange from the mouth of the grandson of a priest. But he writes it down without detours.

Somewhere in those years he did something he was later ashamed of. What it was, he says nowhere. He does not even know for sure how old he was. God knows, he writes, perhaps he was fifteen. He confessed it later to a good friend, before he became a deacon. That confession would be used against him thirty years later.

Around his sixteenth year the raiders came. Patrick was taken along with thousands of others to Ireland, he writes. He did not yet know God, he writes. But God had protected him, even before he knew Him. He later saw it as a punishment that his people deserved, because they had turned away from God. Whether it was thousands of people, we cannot check. The number comes from him.

A hundred prayers in a day

In Ireland he became a herdsman. He tended the cattle of a master, for six years. What the master was called and where exactly it was, he does not write. Later biographers invented names and places for it. Patrick himself keeps it short.

What he does describe is what happened inside him. In that solitude his love for God grew, and reverence for Him. He prayed as many as a hundred times in one day, he writes, and almost as often at night. He rose before dawn to pray, in snow, ice and rain. He felt no cold, he writes, and there was no laziness in him, for the Spirit was burning in him.

Here I step forward for a moment. A boy of sixteen, torn away from his family, a slave with the cattle of a stranger. No complaints from that time appear in his text. He only tells that in those years he came to know God. What would you have said, if you had to write such a look back on the worst years of your life?

"Your ship is ready"

After six years he heard a voice in his sleep. First the voice said that he had fasted well and would soon go home. Shortly afterward came the second: his ship was ready. It was not nearby, he writes, but a good two hundred miles away, at a place where he had never been and where he knew no one.

He fled, away from his master of six years. He walked to the coast and indeed found a ship that was about to leave. The captain at first refused to take him along. Patrick walked away and began to pray. Before he had finished his prayer, he heard one of the sailors shout: come back, quickly, we will take you. They asked him to prove his friendship in a way that belonged to their pagan custom. He refused, out of reverence for God, and was allowed aboard anyway. They were pagans, he writes, men who did not know God.

After three days of sailing they came ashore. Then they traveled for twenty-eight days through uninhabited country. The food ran out, and the men grew weak. The captain asked him whether he, with such a powerful God, could do nothing about it. Patrick told

them to turn to the Lord with all their heart, for whom nothing is impossible, so that He would send them food. Then, he tells us, a herd of pigs appeared on the road, right before their eyes. They ate, and they regained their strength.

That night he was sleeping when it felt as if a huge rock fell on him. He could not move. He cried out "Helias," and when the sun rose, the weight fell off him. He believed that Christ had helped him: that is how he sees it himself. He saw it as an attack of Satan and a rescue by Christ. Where all this happened, in which land they went ashore, he does not say. Whether the story about the pigs was a miracle or a lucky meeting, I leave to the reader. Patrick knew what he saw in it.

He tells that later he was taken prisoner again. He heard that he would be held for two months, but on the sixtieth night he was free. About this too he gives no place or name.

A letter from Ireland

In the end he came back to his family in Britain. After everything he had been through, they begged him never to go away again.

Then came a dream. Patrick saw a man named Victoricus, with letters in his hands. Patrick read one. It was the voice of the Irish. One of those letters began with the words "The voice of the Irish." As he read, he heard people calling who lived by the wood of Voclut, near the western sea. They cried out as with one voice: "We beg you, holy boy, to come and walk again among us" (in the English translation of the Royal Irish Academy).

The wood of Voclut has never been found with certainty. Who Victoricus was, we do not know either. We have only Patrick's own account, written down decades later.

But this is the heart of his life. A man who had fled Ireland as a slave heard in a dream that the Irish were calling him back. His family wanted to keep him. Later he writes that many gifts were offered to him, with sorrow and tears, to hold him back. He did not accept them. He writes that he woke up afterward, deeply moved. I see a man who has not forgotten his kidnappers, and still wants to go back.

An unschooled man among scholars

How Patrick then became a priest and bishop he hardly tells. He mentions in passing that he became a deacon, and in the letter to Coroticus that he was a bishop in Ireland. Where he prepared, who ordained him and in what year he left: it is not there.

What is there is how he saw himself. He calls himself unschooled, a simple man of the land, a refugee. His words were, he writes, as it were translated into a foreign language. Others had received a good education. He had not, and he felt that as he wrote.

Scholars do not agree about his Latin. Christine Mohrmann found it to be the common speech, as spoken in Gaul in that century. David Howlett thought he saw a carefully thought-out structure, as in the Psalms. Kelly writes on the site of the Royal Irish Academy that there is no agreement.

Muirchú, who wrote about Patrick in the seventh century, knew more. According to him Patrick lived thirty or forty years with Bishop Germanus in Auxerre, in present-day France. That story stands far from what Patrick himself writes, and Britannica mentions at most a short visit to the Continent, and even that with reservations.

One had already been sent

Patrick was not the first bishop for Ireland. We know that from a source outside. Prosper of Aquitaine, a Christian writer in Gaul, kept a chronicle. Under the year 431 he noted that Pope Celestine had ordained a man named Palladius and sent him as the first bishop to the Irish who believed in Christ. Prosper wrote this around 447.

It means that there were already Christians in Ireland in 431. Perhaps they were slaves from Britain, as Patrick himself had been one. Perhaps traders. The source does not say.

What became of Palladius, later lives tell each in their own way. He is said to have been badly received, to have founded a few churches, to have left or died. The Catholic Encyclopedia sets those versions side by side and they do not fit together. The Irish historian T. F. O'Rahilly proposed in 1942 that later many stories about Palladius were put under Patrick's name. That theory has not been proved.

The Irish annals, yearbooks that were put together only from the sixth century on, have Patrick arrive in 432. Historians think this date was meant to make Patrick greater and Palladius smaller. For his death the same annals give 457, 461 or 492 and 493. The historian E. A. Thompson found none of those dates reliable. I therefore do not give them as fact. Patrick worked in Ireland, somewhere in the fifth century, and there I leave it.

To where no one lived anymore

About his work in Ireland Patrick writes like someone looking back in amazement. A people who, according to him, had served only idols had become the people of God. He speaks of many thousands of people whom he had baptized. That number comes from him and was counted by no one else.

He describes sons and daughters of Irish leaders who became monks or gave their lives to Christ as virgins. One of them was a noblewoman whom he baptized himself. Fathers opposed this and persecuted their daughters, Patrick writes. Slave women who became believers lived under fear and threat.

He traveled to regions where no one had ever been to baptize, as far as places where no one else lived. He calls it the work of God. He compares himself to a fisherman: God had sent him to catch people. He quotes the words of Jesus: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations* (Matthew 24:14). For someone in the fifth century, Ireland was the edge of the known world. There he stood.

The work was dangerous. He mentions twelve times that his life was in danger. He gave gifts to kings and paid judges, together as much as the price of fifteen people, he writes. That did not stop everything. Once he was taken prisoner and put in irons. On the fourteenth day he was set free.

He can only give thanks, he writes, and he asks who he is, Lord, and what his calling is.

He kept his hands clean of money. When women laid their jewelry on the altar, he gave it back. Anyone who could show that he had ever let himself be paid was welcome to say so, he writes. Then he would give it back, and more.

He would gladly have seen his family in Britain again, and the brothers in Gaul. But he felt bound by the Spirit, he writes, and stayed.

Thirty years later

Why did Patrick write his Confessio? The answer lies in a painful history. A number of senior men in the church, clergy in Britain,

questioned his fitness to be a bishop. They brought up something he had done as a boy, the sin of his fifteenth year. He had confessed it long ago. Now, thirty years later, it came up on the table.

Who had told it? A very dear friend. The man to whom he had said it in confidence and who had then forgiven him wholeheartedly. Patrick was not present when it was discussed.

He writes about it without hatred, but with grief. That a friend to whom he had entrusted his soul said this openly hurt him most. In a dream he was told that God did not approve of him losing his good name this way. He did not defend himself in his Confessio with arguments. He told his life. See what God has done, is the gist. That was his defense.

How that case ended, we do not know. Nor who the senior men were. Kelly points out that the Confessio is more than a defense: it is also a song of praise, a confession of what God did.

White clothes

The letter to Coroticus was probably written earlier than the Confessio, but when exactly, no one knows. Britannica puts it somewhere between 451 and 496, because Patrick still calls the Franks pagans.

Who Coroticus was is also uncertain. He may have been a ruler of Strathclyde, the area around Dumbarton in present-day Scotland, or a Welsh prince named Ceretic. Patrick calls his soldiers allies of the apostate Scots and Picts. The painful thing for Patrick was that these were people from his own side: Christians from Britain who sold Christians from Ireland.

He sets a picture against it. In Gaul, he writes, Christians sent men with large sums of money to the Franks to buy back baptized pris-

oners. Coroticus did the opposite. He killed them or sold them to peoples who did not know God.

A former slave who stands up for people who are being sold as slaves. It is his own past that is writing along here. He now calls himself a slave of a foreign people, voluntarily, for the sake of Christ. The same people, he adds, who once took him prisoner.

At the end he asks whether the letter may be read aloud, even in the presence of Coroticus himself. He hoped the man would repent and let the captive women go. Whether that happened, we do not know.

Snakes, a shamrock and a fire on a hill

After his death Patrick disappeared from view. Around 613 the Irish monk Columbanus wrote a letter to Pope Boniface IV about Christianity in Ireland, and in it he does not mention Patrick. Only in the second half of the seventh century did Muirchú and Tírechán write about him. Muirchú did so at the request of Áed, bishop of Sletty. They wrote about a century and a half after Patrick's death, perhaps later. Their texts are preserved in the Book of Armagh, in a copy from 807.

In Muirchú are the great scenes that are now best known. Patrick lighting a fire on Easter eve, while King Lóegaire at Tara had forbidden anyone to light a fire before his own. The druids who fight against him and die. The party of Patrick turning into deer before the king's soldiers. Armagh, in present-day Northern Ireland, which he receives from a man named Dáire. His death on March 17, at the age of a hundred and twenty. Tírechán tells that he fasted forty days on the mountain now called Croagh Patrick. These are stories from hagiography, lives of saints that were written to honor, not to check.

The story of the snakes comes much later. Muirchú does not mention them. Ireland also never had snakes, says Nigel Monaghan of the National Museum of Ireland. A Roman writer, Solinus, already noted that in the third century. The story that Patrick drove them into the sea appears for the first time in Jocelin of Furness and Gerald of Wales, in the twelfth century.

The shamrock, with which Patrick is said to have explained the Trinity, comes later still. The first mention is in the diary of Thomas Dineley from 1681. The story was printed only in 1726, by the botanist Caleb Threlkeld, who called it a common tradition.

And then the prayer known as Patrick's Breastplate. It is a beautiful text. Linguists date it, on the basis of the Irish, to the beginning of the eighth century, long after Patrick. It stands in an Irish hymn book from the eleventh century, which adds that Patrick sang it when Lóegaire laid an ambush for him. Patrick did not write it.

Whoever loves those legends does not have to throw them away. They tell how the Irish later looked at their saint. But they are not his.

His last words

Where Patrick died, and when, we do not know. Muirchú has him buried in Dún Lethglaisse, present-day Downpatrick in Northern Ireland, and tells of a fight between tribes over his body. Britannica mentions Saul, nearby. That his grave lies in the cathedral of Down has never been proved.

His feast day is March 17, and Ireland honors him as its patron saint. I notice that his Confessio touches Christians from very different churches. Whoever reads him finds a man who knew the Bible and came to know God personally.

He himself does not end his Confessio with a victory. He asks the reader who gets his text in hand not to think that what happened came through him. He hopes no one thinks that his ignorance did anything great, for it was a gift of God, he writes. He wants the reader to believe that, and nothing else. And then, as his last sentence, the words of an old man who knows that his time is short: "And this is my confession before I die" (in the CCEL translation).

After that nothing more, except that one sentence. A herdsman who prayed in the snow, a bishop at the edge of the world, and a pile of parchment that was still being copied centuries later, until it came to us.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the Confessio and the letter to Coroticus are accepted by historians as Patrick's own texts; he lived in the fifth century and worked as a bishop in Ireland; in 431 Pope Celestine sent Palladius as the first bishop to the Irish Christians (Prosper of Aquitaine, around 447); Ireland lay outside the Roman Empire; Muirchú and Tírechán wrote in the second half of the seventh century, and their texts are in the Book of Armagh (copy from 807).

Only from own testimony or later tradition: his family (Calpornius, Potitus) and Bannavem Taburniae; the kidnapping around his sixteenth year with thousands of others; six years as a herdsman and a hundred prayers a day; the voice about the ship, the journey, the pigs and the night with the rock; the dream of Victoricus; the thousands of baptized (his own number); the fourteen days of imprisonment; the accusation after thirty years; the murder of the newly baptized by the soldiers of Coroticus. From later hagiography: the stay with Germanus in Auxerre, the Easter fire and Lóegaire, the deer, Armagh as a gift from Dáire, the

forty days on Croagh Patrick, the death on March 17 at the age of 120 and the fight over his body.

From his own writings (Confessio and letter, translation McCarthy, confessio.ie): the two voices about the ship and about the fasting, the sailors who called him back, the pigs, "Helias," the sixty nights, "The voice of the Irish," the prayer "Who am I, Lord," and the sentence "And this is my confession before I die." No one else can confirm these stories. I consulted the texts through summaries and short quotations of the English translation; the sentences here that stand without quotation marks are my own retelling.

Unconfirmed: all the years of his life (432 as arrival; 457, 461 or 493 as year of death); the location of Bannavem Taburniae, the wood of Voclut and his grave; who Coroticus was; O'Rahilly's theory that stories about Palladius were attached to Patrick.

Legend, not from Patrick: driving out the snakes (twelfth century); the shamrock as an explanation of the Trinity (first mention 1681, printed 1726); St. Patrick's Breastplate (early eighth century).

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Afterword

A bishop with ten soldiers around him. An old man who would not blaspheme his King. A philosopher who searched for the truth. A young mother with a diary. A farmer's son in the desert. A bishop who had to flee again and again. A teacher in a garden in Milan. A slave who went back of his own free will to the land of his kidnappers.

They lived so long ago that about some of them we know almost nothing for certain. From others we have their own words. What they shared was that they held on to their faith when that was dangerous, or when it would have been easier to let it go.

We stand on their shoulders, whatever church we sit in. Perhaps this book helps you to see that.

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. (Revelation 12:11)