



Sts. Perpetua and Felicity

Facts

Feastday: March 7

Patron of mothers, expectant mothers, ranchers and butchers

Death: 203

Sts. Perpetua and Felicity were Christian martyrs who lived during the early persecution of the Church in Africa by the Emperor Severus.

With details concerning the lives of many early martyrs unclear and often based on legend, we are fortunate to have the actual record of the courage of Perpetua and Felicity from the hand of Perpetua herself, her teacher Saturus, and

others who knew them. This account, known as "The Passion of St. Perpetua, St. Felicitas, and their Companions," was so popular in the early centuries that it was read during liturgies.

In the year 203, Vivia Perpetua, a well-educated noblewoman, made the decision to follow the path of her mother and become a Christian, although she knew it could mean her death during the persecutions ordered by the Emperor Severus. Her surviving brother (another brother had died when he was seven) followed her leadership and became a catechumen as well, meaning he would receive instruction from a Catechist in the Catholic Christian faith and be prepared for Baptism.

Her pagan father was frantic with worry and tried to talk her out of her decision. At 22-years-old, the well-educated, high-spirited woman had every reason to want to live -- including a baby son whom she was still nursing. We know she was married, but since her husband is never mentioned, many historians assume she was already a widow.

Perpetua's answer was simple and clear. Pointing to a water jug, she asked her father, "See that pot lying there? Can you call it by any other name than what it is?"

Her father answered, "Of course not." Perpetua responded, "Neither can I call myself by any other name than what I am -- a Christian."

This answer upset her father and he attacked her. Perpetua reports that after that incident she was glad to be separated from him for a few days -- even though that separation was the result of her arrest and imprisonment.

Perpetua was arrested with four other catechumens, including two slaves, Felicity and Revocatus, and Saturninus and Secundulus. Their instructor in the faith, Saturus, chose to share their punishment and was also imprisoned. Perpetua was baptized before taken to prison. She was known for her gift of "the Lord's speech" and receiving messages from God. She tells us that at the time of her baptism she was told to pray for nothing but endurance in the face of her trials.

The prison was so crowded with people that the heat was suffocating. There was no light anywhere and Perpetua "had never known such darkness."

The soldiers who arrested and guarded them pushed and shoved them without any concern. Perpetua had no trouble admitting she was very afraid, but during all this horror, her most excruciating pain came from being separated from her baby.

The young slave, Felicity was even worse off, for Felicity suffered the stifling heat, overcrowding, and rough handling while being eight months pregnant.

Two deacons who ministered to the prisoners paid the guards to place the martyrs in a better part of the prison. There, her mother and brother were able to visit Perpetua and bring her baby to her.

When she received permission for her baby to stay with her she recalled, "my prison suddenly became a palace for me." Once more her father came to her, begging her to give in, kissing her hands, and throwing himself at her feet. She told him, "We lie not in our own power but in the power of God."

When she and the others were taken to be examined and sentenced, her father followed, pleading with her and the judge. The judge, out of pity, also tried to get Perpetua to change her mind, but when she stood fast, she was sentenced with the others to be thrown to the wild beasts in the arena.

Perpetua recanted how her brother spoke to her, "Lady sister, you are now greatly honored, so greatly that you may well pray for a vision to show you whether suffering or release is in store for you." Perpetua, who spoke to the Lord often, told her brother she would tell him what happened the next day.

While she prayed, Perpetua was shown a golden ladder of the highest length, reaching up to heaven. On the sides of the ladder were swords, lances, hooks and daggers so that if anyone did not climb looking up on Heaven, they would be severely injured. At the bottom of the ladder laid a large dragon to try to scare those journeying up away from Heaven.

Perpetua first saw Saturus go up. After he reached the top of the ladder he said, "Perpetua, I wait for you, but take care that the dragon does not bite you." To which she replied, "In the name of Jesus Christ, he will not hurt me," and the dragon put his down his head.

Perpetua traveled up the ladder and saw a beautiful vast garden with a tall man with white hair dressed like a shepherd and milking sheep. "Thou art well come, my child," he said to Perpetua, giving her some of the curds from the milk. She ate and all those around her said, "Amen."

Perpetua woke from her dream with a sweet taste still in her mouth. At once, she told her brother what happened and together, they understood they must suffer.

Meanwhile, Felicity was also in torment. It was against the law for pregnant women to be executed. To kill a child in the womb was shedding innocent and sacred blood. Felicity was afraid that she would not give birth before the day set for their martyrdom and her companions would go on their journey without her. Her friends also didn't want to leave so "good a comrade" behind.

Two days before the execution, Felicity went into a painful labor. The guards made fun of her, insulting her by saying, "If you think you suffer now, how will stand it when you face the wild beasts?" Felicity answered them calmly, "Now I'm the one who is suffering, but in the arena, another will be in me suffering for me because I will be suffering for him."

She gave birth to a healthy girl who was adopted and raised by one of the Christian women of Carthage.

The officers of the prison began to recognize the power of the Christians and the strength and leadership of Perpetua. In some cases, this helped the Christians: the warden let them have visitors -- and later became a believer. But in other cases, it caused superstitious terror, as when one officer refused to let them get cleaned up on the day they were going to die for fear they'd try some sort of spell.

Perpetua immediately spoke up, "We're supposed to die in honor of Ceasar's birthday. Wouldn't it look better for you if we looked better?" The officer blushed with shame at her reproach and started to treat them better.

There was a feast the day before the games, so that the crowd could see the martyrs and make fun of them. But the martyrs turned this all around by laughing at the crowd for not being Christians and exhorting them to follow their example.

The four new Christians and their teacher went to the arena (the fifth, Secundulus, had died in prison) with joy and calm. Perpetua in usual high spirits met the eyes of everyone along the way. We are told she walked with "shining steps as the true wife of Christ, the darling of God."

When those at the arena tried to force Perpetua and the rest to dress in robes dedicated to their gods, Perpetua challenged her executioners. "We came to die out of our own free will so we wouldn't lose our freedom to worship our God. We gave you our lives so that we wouldn't have to worship your gods." She and the others were allowed to keep their clothes.

The men were attacked by bears, leopards, and wild boars. The women were stripped to face a rabid heifer. The two were thrown out and attacked, but the crowd cried out they had had enough. The women were removed and clothed again. Perpetua and Felicity were thrown back into the arena to face the gladiators.

Perpetua called out to her brother and other Christians, "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another. Do not let our sufferings be a stumbling block to you."

Perpetua and Felicity stood side by side and were killed by sword at Carthage in the Roman province of Africa.

Sts. Perpetua and Felicity are the patron saints of mothers, expectant mothers, ranchers and butchers. Their feast day is celebrated on March 7.

In Their Footsteps:

Perpetua said that she couldn't call herself any other name but Christian. Write down a list of names and designations that people could call you. Is Christian high on that list? How can you help make your name as Christian be more important? Live today as if that was the only name you could be called by.

Prayer:

Saints Perpetua and Felicity, watch over all mothers and children who are separated from each other because of war or persecution. Show a special care to mothers who are imprisoned and guide them to follow your example of faith and courage. Amen

St. John of God



Facts

Feastday: March 8

Patron of Booksellers

Birth: 1495

Death: 1550

From the time he was eight to the day he died, John followed every impulse of his heart. The challenge for him was to rush to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit gave him, not his own human temptations. But unlike many who act impulsively, when John made a decision, no matter how quickly, he stuck with it, no matter what the hardship.

At eight years old, John heard a visiting priest speak of adventures that were waiting in the age of 1503 with new worlds being opened up. That very night he ran away from home to travel with the priest and never saw his parents again. They begged their way from village to village until John fell sick. The man who nursed him back to health, the manager of a large estate, adopted John. John worked as a shepherd in the mountains until he was 27. Feeling pressure to marry the manager's daughter, whom he loved as a sister, John took off to join the Spanish army in the war against France. As a soldier, he was hardly a model of holiness, taking part in the gambling, drinking, and pillaging that his comrades enjoyed. One day, he was thrown from a stolen horse near French lines. Frightened that he would be captured or killed, he reviewed his life and vowed impulsively to make a change.

When he returned he kept his spur of the moment vow, made a confession, and immediately changed his life. His comrades didn't mind so much that John was repenting but hated that he wanted them to give up their pleasures too. So they used his impulsive nature to trick him into leaving his post on the pretext of helping someone in need. He was rescued from hanging at the last minute and thrown out of the army after being beaten and stripped. He begged his way back to his foster-home where he worked as a shepherd until he heard of a new war with Moslems invading Europe. Off he went but after the war was over, he decided to try to find his real parents. To his grief he discovered both had died in his absence.

As a shepherd he had plenty of time to contemplate what God might want of his life. When he decided at 38 that he should go to Africa to ransom Christian captives, he quit immediately and set off for the port of Gibraltar. He was on the dock waiting for his ship when he saw a family obviously upset and grieving. When he discovered they were a noble family being exiled to Africa after political intrigues, he abandoned his original plan and volunteered to be their servant. The family fell sick when they reached their exile and John kept them alive not only by nursing them but by earning money to feed them. His job building fortifications was grueling, inhuman work and the workers were beaten and mistreated by people who called themselves Catholics. Seeing Christians act this way so disturbed John that it shook his faith. A priest advised him not to blame the Church for their actions and to leave for Spain at once. John did go back home -- but only after he learned that his newly adopted family had received pardons.

In Spain he spent his days unloading ship cargoes and his nights visiting churches and reading spiritual books. Reading gave him so much pleasure that he decided that he should share this joy with others. He quit his job and became a book peddler, traveling from town to town selling religious books and holy cards. A vision at age 41 brought him to Granada where he sold books from a little shop. (For this reason he is patron saint of booksellers and printers.)

After hearing a sermon from the famous John of Avila on repentance, he was so overcome by the thought of his sins that the whole town thought the little bookseller had gone from simple eccentricity to madness. After the sermon John rushed back to his shop, tore up any secular books he had, gave away all his religious books and all his money. Clothes torn and weeping, he was the target of insults, jokes, and even stones and mud from the townspeople and their children.

Friends took the distraught John to the Royal Hospital where he was interned with the lunatics. John suffered the standard treatment of the time -- being tied down and daily whipping. John of Avila came to visit him there and told him his penance had gone on long enough -- forty days, the same amount as the Lord's suffering the desert -- and had John moved to a better part of the hospital.

John of God could never see suffering without trying to do something about it. And now that he was free to move, although still a patient, he immediately got up and began to help the other sick people around him. The hospital was glad

to have his unpaid nursing help and was not happy to release him when one day he walked in to announce he was going to start his own hospital.

John may have been positive that God wanted him to start a hospital for the poor who got bad treatment, if any, from the other hospitals, but everyone else still thought of him as a madman. It didn't help that he decided to try to finance his plan by selling wood in the square. At night he took what little money he earned and brought food and comfort to the poor living in abandoned buildings and under bridges. Thus his first hospital was the streets of Granada. Within an hour after seeing a sign in a window saying "House to let for lodging of the poor" he had rented the house in order to move his nursing indoors. Of course he rented it without money for furnishings, medicine, or help. After he begged money for beds, he went out in the streets again and carried his ill patients back on the same shoulders that had carried stones, wood, and books. Once there he cleaned them, dressed their wounds, and mended their clothes at night while he prayed. He used his old experience as a peddler to beg alms, crying through the streets in his peddler's voice, "Do good to yourselves! For the love of God, Brothers, do good!" Instead of selling goods, he took anything given -- scraps of good, clothing, a coin here and there.

Throughout his life he was criticized by people who didn't like the fact that his impulsive love embraced anyone in need without asking for credentials or character witnesses. When he was able to move his hospital to an old Carmelite monastery, he opened a homeless shelter in the monastery hall. Immediately critics tried to close him down saying he was pampering troublemakers. His answer to this criticism always was that he knew of only one bad character in the hospital and that was himself. His urge to act immediately when he saw need got him into trouble more than a few times. Once, when he encountered a group of starving people, he rushed into a house, stole a pot of food, and gave it to them. He was almost arrested for that charity! Another time, on finding a group of children in rags, he marched them into a clothing shop and bought them all new clothes. Since he had no money, he paid for it all on credit!

Yet his impulsive wish to help saved many people in one emergency. The alarm went out that the Royal Hospital was on fire. When he dropped everything to run there, he found that the crowd was just standing around watching the hospital -- and its patients -- go up in flames. He rushed into the blazing building and carried or led the patients out. When all the patients were rescued, he started throwing blankets, sheets, and mattresses out the windows -- how well he knew from his own hard work how important these things were. At that point a cannon was brought to destroy the burning part of the building in order to save the rest. John stopped them, ran up the roof, and separated the burning portion with an axe. He succeeded but fell through the burning roof. All thought they had lost their hero until John of God appeared miraculously out of smoke. (For this reason, John of God is patron saint of firefighters.)

John was ill himself when he heard that a flood was bringing precious driftwood near the town. He jumped out of bed to gather the wood from the raging river. Then when one of his companions fell into the river, John without thought for his illness or safety jumped in after him. He failed to save the boy and caught pneumonia. He died on March 8, his fifty-fifth birthday, of the same impulsive love that had guided his whole life.

John of God is patron saint of booksellers, printers, heart patients, hospitals, nurses, the sick, and firefighters and is considered the founder of the Brothers Hospitallers.

In His Footsteps:

When you feel the urge to serve, help, or pray do you act on it or argue yourself out of it? Today if you feel an impulse to do good, do it immediately as John of God would have done without thinking of how practical or how embarrassing it might be.

Prayer:

Saint John of God, help us to act out of love as soon as we feel the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Help us learn to fight the little voices in our heads and hearts that give us all sorts of practical reasons to wait or delay in our service of God. Amen



Frances was born in the city of Rome in 1384 to a wealthy, noble family. From her mother she inherited a quiet manner and a pious devotion to God. From her father, however, she inherited a strong will. She decided at eleven that she knew what God wanted for her -- she was going to be a nun.

And that's where her will ran right up against her father's. He told Frances she was far too young to know her mind -- but not too young to be married. He had already promised her in marriage to the son of another wealthy family. In Rome at that time a father's word was law; a father could even sell his children into slavery or order them killed.

Frances probably felt that's what he was doing by forcing her to marry. But just as he wouldn't listen to her, Frances wouldn't listen to him. She stubbornly prayed to God to prevent the marriage until her confessor pointed out, "Are you crying because you want to do God's will or because you want God to do your will?"

She gave in to the marriage -- reluctantly. It was difficult for people to understand her objection. Her future husband Lorenzo Ponziani was noble, wealthy, a good person and he really cared for her. An ideal match -- except for someone who was determined to be a bride of Christ.

Then her nightmare began. This quiet, shy thirteen year old was thrust into the whirl of parties and banquets that accompanied a wedding. Her mother-in-law Cecilia loved to entertain and expected her new daughter-in-law to enjoy the revelry of her social life too. Fasting and scourging were far easier than this torture God now asked her to face.

Frances collapsed from the strain. For months she lay close to death, unable to eat or move or speak.

At her worst, she had a vision of St. Alexis. The son of a noble family, Alexis had run away to beg rather than marry. After years of begging he was so unrecognizable that when he returned home his own father thought he was just another beggar and made him sleep under the stairs. In her own way, Frances must have felt unrecognized by her family -- they couldn't see how she wanted to give up everything for Jesus. St. Alexis told her God was giving her an important choice: Did she want to recover or not?

It's hard for us to understand why a thirteen-year-old would want to die but Frances was miserable. Finally, she whispered, "God's will is mine." The hardest words she could have said -- but the right words to set her on the road to sanctity.

St. Alexis replied, "Then you will live to glorify His Name." Her recovery was immediate and complete. Lorenzo became even more devoted to her after this -- he was even a little in awe of her because of what she'd been through. But her problems did not disappear. Her mother-in-law still expected her to entertain and go on visits with her. Look at Frances' sister-in-law Vannoza -- happily going through the rounds of parties, dressing up, playing cards. Why couldn't Frances be more like Vannoza?

In a house where she lived with her husband, his parents, his brother and his brother's family, she felt all alone. And that's why Vannoza found her crying bitterly in the garden one day. When Frances poured out her heart to Vannoza and it turned out that this sister-in-law had wanted to live a life devoted to the Lord too. What Frances had written off as frivolity was just Vannoza's natural easy-going and joyful manner. They became close friends and worked out a program of devout practices and services to work together.

They decided their obligations to their family came first. For Frances that meant dressing up to her rank, making visits and receiving visits -- and most importantly doing it gladly. But the two spiritual friends went to mass together, visited prisons, served in hospitals and set up a secret chapel in an abandoned tower of their palace where they prayed together. But it wasn't fashionable for noblewomen to help the poor and people gossiped about two girls out alone on the streets. Cecilia suffered under the laughter of her friends and yelled at her daughters-in-law to stop their spiritual practices. When that didn't work Cecilia then appealed to her sons, but Lorenzo refused to interfere with Frances' charity.

The beginning of the fifteenth century brought the birth of her first son, Battista, after John the Baptist. We might expect that the grief of losing her mother-in-law soon after might have been mixed with relief -- no more pressure to live in society. But a household as large as the Ponziani's needed someone to run it. Everyone thought that sixteen-year-old Frances was best qualified to take her mother-in-law's place. She was thrust even more deeply into society and worldly duties. Her family was right, though -- she was an excellent administrator and a fair and pleasant employer.

After two more children were born to her -- a boy, Giovanni Evangelista, and a girl, Agnes -- a flood brought disease and famine to Rome. Frances gave orders that no one asking for alms would be turned away and she and Vannoza went out to the poor with corn, wine, oil and clothing. Her father-in-law, furious that she was giving away their supplies during a famine, took the keys of the granary and wine cellar away from her.

Then just to make sure she wouldn't have a chance to give away more, he sold off their extra corn, leaving just enough for the family, and all but one cask of one. The two noblewomen went out to the streets to beg instead. Finally Frances was so desperate for food to give to the poor she went to the now empty corn loft and sifted through the straw searching for a few leftover kernels of corn. After she left Lorenzo came in and was stunned to find the previously empty granary filled with yellow corn. Frances drew wine out of their one cask until one day her father in law went down

and found it empty. Everyone screamed at Frances. After saying a prayer, she led them to cellar, turned the spigot on the empty cask, and out flowed the most wonderful wine. These incidents completely converted Lorenzo and her father-in-law.

Having her husband and father-in-law completely on her side meant she could do what she always wanted. She immediately sold her jewels and clothes and distributed money to needy. She started wearing a dress of coarse green cloth.

Civil war came to Rome -- this was a time of popes and antipopes and Rome became a battleground. At one point there were three men claiming to be pope. One of them sent a cruel governor, Count Troja, to conquer Rome. Lorenzo was seriously wounded and his brother was arrested. Troja sent word that Lorenzo's brother would be executed unless he had Battista, Frances's son and heir of the family, as a hostage. As long as Troja had Battista he knew the Ponzianis would stop fighting.

When Frances heard this she grabbed Battista by the hand and fled. On the street, she ran into her spiritual adviser Don Andrew who told her she was choosing the wrong way and ordered her to trust God. Slowly she turned around and made her way to Capitol Hill where Count Troja was waiting. As she and Battista walked the streets, crowds of people tried to block her way or grab Battista from her to save him. After giving him up, Frances ran to a church to weep and pray.

As soon as she left, Troja had put Battista on a soldier's horse -- but every horse they tried refused to move. Finally the governor gave in to God's wishes. Frances was still kneeling before the altar when she felt Battista's little arms around her.

But the troubles were not over. Frances was left alone against the attackers when she sent Lorenzo out of Rome to avoid capture. Drunken invaders broke into her house, tortured and killed the servants, demolished the palace, literally tore it apart and smashed everything. And this time God did not intervene -- Battista was taken to Naples. Yet this kidnapping probably saved Battista's life because soon a plague hit -- a plague that took the lives of many including Frances' nine-year-old son Evangelista.

At this point, her house in ruins, her husband gone, one son dead, one son a hostage, she could have given up. She looked around, cleared out the wreckage of the house and turned it into a makeshift hospital and a shelter for the homeless.

One year after his death Evangelista came to her in a vision and told her that Agnes was going to die too. In return God was granting her a special grace by sending an archangel to be her guardian angel for the rest of her life. She would always be able to see him. A constant companion and spiritual adviser, he once commanded her to stop her severe penances (eating only bread and water and wearing a hair shirt). "You should understand by now," the angel told her, "that the God who made your body and gave it to your soul as a servant never intended that the spirit should ruin the flesh and return it to him despoiled."

Finally the wars were over and Battista and her husband returned home. But though her son came back a charming young man her husband returned broken in mind and body. Probably the hardest work of healing Frances had to do in her life was to restore Lorenzo back to his old self.

When Battista married a pretty young woman named Mabilia Frances expected to find someone to share in the management of the household. But Mabilia wanted none of it. She was as opposite of Frances and Frances had been of her mother-in-law. Mabilia wanted to party and ridiculed Frances in public for her shabby green dress, her habits, and her standards. One day in the middle of yelling at her, Mabilia suddenly turned pale and fainted, crying, "Oh my pride, my dreadful pride." Frances nursed her back to health and healed their differences as well. A converted Mabilia did her best to imitate Frances after that.

With Lorenzo's support and respect, Frances started a lay order of women attached to the Benedictines called the Oblates of Mary. The women lived in the world but pledged to offer themselves to God and serve the poor. Eventually they bought a house where the widowed members could live in community.

Frances nursed Lorenzo until he died. His last words to her were, "I feel as if my whole life has been one beautiful dream of purest happiness. God has given me so much in your love." After his death, Frances moved into the house with the other Oblates and was made superior. At 52 she had the life she dreamed of when she was eleven. She had been right in discerning her original vocation -- she just had the timing wrong. God had had other plans for her in between.

Frances died four years later. Her last words were "The angel has finished his task -- he beckons me to follow him."

In Her Footsteps:

Do you have a spiritual friend who helps you on your journey, someone to pray with and serve with? If you don't have one now, ask God to send you such a companion. Then look around you. This friend, like Frances' Vannoza, may be near you already. Try sharing some of your spiritual hopes and desires with those closest to you. You may be surprised at their reaction. (But don't force your opinions on others or get discouraged by lack of interest. Just keep asking God to lead you.)

Prayer:

Saint Frances of Rome, help us to see the difference between what we want to do and what God wants us to do. Help us to discern what comes from our will and what comes from God's desire. Amen