

"Church History is Black History"



Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas were two North African Christian women martyred for their Christian faith in 203 A.D. Most of what we know about them come from the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, an early third-century source that included Perpetua's own prison diary (making her the first woman diarist in antiquity).

Perpetua and Felicity were young women in their twenties. Still going through catechism, they had not yet been baptized when they were arrested along with several other male catechumens in Carthage, North Africa (modern day Tunisia). Perpetua was a 22-year-old noble woman, married and mother to a nursing infant. Felicitas was an enslaved woman arrested with a fellow enslaved Christian named Revocatus. After their arrest, Perpetua, Felicity and their other fellow Christian's prayed for "perseverance of the flesh."

Their testimony endures as powerful and luminary evidence of courageous faith embodied by African Christian women of color confronting empire and slavery with unwavering confession. Their testimonies bear witness that in Christ, a person of nobility and a slave were both equals in their humanity and dignity as image bearers, and by virtue of their justification by faith, both equal in status before God through Christ (just as Paul taught in several of his New Testament epistles). Since Christianity was viewed as treasonous by the Roman government, their common faith warranted them the same treatment by the Roman government, regardless of their differing social statuses: Perpetua a Romanized African elite, and Felicitas a slave.

While in prison awaiting death, Perpetua resisted both the emotional pleas of her father to spare her own life for the sake of her infant, by offering sacrifice to the Emperor, and the power of the Roman governor with a simple, unwavering confession: "I am a Christian," choosing loyalty to Jesus over the expectations of family, class, and Roman citizenship.

Felicitas, doubly vulnerable as both enslaved and pregnant, insisted on sharing her sisters' martyrdom, refusing any legal delay that would have spared her—for a time—at the cost of her solidarity in Christ, prayed to give birth before her martyrdom, and after having just given birth in prison through intense labor, answered a mocking guard: "Now it is I who suffer; then there will be another in me who will suffer for me, because I am to suffer for him," echoing the mystery of Christ suffering in and with His people.

Their hour of death which occurred on March 7, 203 A.D. in Carthage's amphitheater during imperial games for Emperor Geta's (one of the sons of Septimus Severus) birthday celebrations, is praised by the narrator of the *Passion*, portraying their death not as defeat but as triumph!

In Perpetua and Felicitas we see African women whose faith is not merely confessional but living and fiercely embodied: nursing children, enduring contractions, confronting wild animals, guiding the sword with their own hands. Their lives proclaim that the Spirit falls on "sons and daughters... servants and handmaids," fulfilling the promise that African women, including the poor and enslaved, stand at the very heart of Christ's redemptive story. Their courage invites the whole church today to listen to African women's voices, to resist systems that treat their bodies as expendable, and to join them in confessing Christ with a hope that overthrows fear—even in the face of beasts, prisons, and death.

A generation later, Augustine of Hippo preached annual sermons on their feast (e.g., Sermon 280), praising Perpetua and Felicity as women whose "femininity of the body" was overshadowed by the "virtue of the mind" in their steadfast confession of Christ and their victory over the serpent.

An Essay by Damon Richardson, Founder of Urban Logia Ministries

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