

Saint Pionius

St Pionius was a priest of the church of Smyrna; he was exceedingly learned, and inflamed with the love of Jesus Christ, and a zeal for the conversion of souls, which was successfully exercised in the conversion of many infidels and abandoned sinners.

In his time, that is, about the year 250, the persecution of Decius was raging, and the saint by continual prayer prepared himself for martyrdom, in case such should be his lot. One day, as he was engaged in prayer with Asclepiades and Sabina, two pious Christians, it was revealed to them that, on the day following, they would be arrested for the faith; they therefore made an offering of their lives to Jesus Christ, and placed halters about their necks in order to signify to the soldiers that they were ready to undergo martyrdom.

On the following morning, Palemon, the guardian of the temple, came with a troop of soldiers, and said to them:

“Are ye aware of the orders of the emperor, that ye are all to sacrifice to the gods of the empire?”

Saint Pionius answered:

“That which we know is the order of God – which is, not to sacrifice to any but himself, the sovereign Lord of all.”

Upon this reply they were all arrested and led into a great square, where St Pionius, turning to the enemies of the faith, said that they were vainly rejoicing on account of the apostasy of some few bad Christians, and protested that no species of torture would ever compel him to adore those whom they impiously called gods.

Palemon said to him:

“And why wilt thou, Pionius, regardless of life, deprive thyself of the beautiful light of the day which thou enjoyest?”

The saint replied:

“This light is beautiful, but there is another light more glorious, and a life more estimable, to which Christians aspire.” The people called upon him to sacrifice, but Saint Pionius answered:

“Our resolve is to persevere in the faith.”

The people desired that the saint should speak in the theater, in order that they might all hear him conveniently, but some told Palemon that if he gave him liberty to speak, a tumult might follow; he therefore said to Pionius:

“If thou wilt not sacrifice, come with us at least to the temple.”

The saint said:

“Our entrance into your temple cannot benefit your gods.”



“Then,” said Palemon, “thou wilt not be persuaded?”

Saint Pionius replied:

“Would to God I could persuade ye all to become Christians.”

Some of the idolaters exclaimed:

“Thou canst never induce us to that; we would rather be burned alive.”

The saint replied:

“But it will be worse for you to burn eternally after death.”

Palemon, who was anxious to save the life of Pionius, ceased not to importune him; but the saint resolutely answered:

“Thou hast orders to persuade or to punish me; thou canst not persuade, therefore punish.”

Hereupon Palemon, being enraged, asked:

“But why wilt thou not sacrifice?”

Saint Pionius: “Because I am a Christian.”

Palemon: “What is the God whom thou adorest?”

Saint Pionius: “I adore the Almighty God, who, having made all things, created us also, as I have learned from Jesus Christ.”

Palemon: “Sacrifice to the emperor at least.”

Saint Pionius: “I shall never sacrifice to a man.”

The judge then judicially inquired his name, and to what church he belonged.

The saint replied: “I am a Christian, and belong to the Catholic Church.”

His companions gave the same answer, and they were all sent to prison. On the road thither, some of the idolaters observed that many Christians had sacrificed.

The saint answered: “Each one is master of his own will; my name is Pionius.”

By this he meant to encourage the others to imitate his example, and remain constant in the faith.

When they came to the prison, many Christians offered them refreshments, but Saint Pionius said: “I have not time to think of anything but the martyrdom which awaits me.”

The guards, seeing so many Christians coming to visit the saint, brought him and his companions to a more remote and obscure place, for which they gave thanks to God, as their more solitary confinement enabled them to commune more freely with God.

Notwithstanding the change, however, many Christians, who had abandoned the faith on account of the violence of the torments, came to Pionius, who wept over their fall, and exhorted them to do penance, and hope for pardon, through the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Palemon then arrived with a troop of soldiers, and orders from the proconsul to take the confessors to Ephesus. The saint desired to see the order, but the commanding officer put a halter round his neck, and dragged him so violently as almost to suffocate him. He was thus led to the square; and when the martyrs arrived at the temple, they cast themselves on the ground in order not to enter, but the soldiers dragged them in, and placed them erect before the impious altar. They there met Eudaemon, the unhappy Bishop of Smyrna, who had miserably sacrificed to the gods, and the idolaters vainly hoped that they might be moved by this example to prevaricate also. One of the idolaters wished to place on the head of St Pionius a crown which had been worn by one of the apostates, but the saint broke it into pieces, and cast it from him. Not knowing what to do to pervert the confessors, they brought them back to prison, and while Pionius was entering, one of the soldiers smote him on the head. The saint bore it with patience, but God chastised his assailant by causing not only his hand but his side to become swollen and inflamed, so that he could not breathe.

After some days, the proconsul arrived at Smyrna, and having summoned Pionius, asked him to what sect he belonged.

The saint replied: "I am a priest of the Catholic Church."

The proconsul rejoined: "Then art thou a doctor and a professor of folly?"

Pionius: "No, but of piety."

Proconsul: "And what of piety?"

Saint Pionius: "Of that piety which has for its object the God who made heaven and earth."

The proconsul then commanded him to sacrifice, but the saint replied: "I have learned to adore one only living God."

The tyrant then ordered him to be tortured, during which having in vain importuned him to sacrifice, he finally condemned him to be burned.

In proceeding to the place of execution, St Pionius walked quickly and with joyous countenance; having arrived at the place, he undressed without assistance, and offered himself to be nailed to the stake, after which the pagans exclaimed:

"Repent, O Pionius; promise to obey, and thou shalt be saved."

But he replied: "I have not felt the pain of the nails; I desire to die, that the people may know that death shall be followed by resurrection."

The pile having been fired, the saint closed his eyes, so that the spectators thought he was already dead, but Saint Pionius was only praying; he opened his eyes, and having concluded the prayer with the usual "Amen," placidly gave up the ghost, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my soul."