

“Book X Letters 96 and 97: Gaius Pliny to the emperor Trajan and reply.” In Pliny the Younger [G. Plinius Caecilius Secundus], *The Complete Letters*, translated by P. G. Walsh, 278–279 and n.96.1–96.10, 368–369. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. (Reformatted with endnotes as footnotes.)

[About 110 CE, the Roman emperor Trajan appointed the distinguished senator and writer Pliny “Secundus” (the Younger) as governor of Bithynia, a province on the southern coast of the Black Sea that was suffering from the effects of its previous governor’s corruption. What Pliny faced in trying to straighten out and run this province and his obligation to refer even very petty matters to the emperor is revealed through their correspondence.]

**Letter 96: G. Pliny to the emperor Trajan**

**late 111**

It is my regular custom, my lord, to refer to you all questions which cause me doubt, for who can better guide my hesitant steps or instruct my ignorance? I have never attended hearings concerning Christians,<sup>1</sup> so I am unaware what is usually punished or investigated, and to what extent. I am more than a little in doubt whether there is to be a distinction between ages, and to what extent the young should be treated no differently from the more hardened; whether pardon should be granted to repentance; whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name<sup>2</sup> which should be punished.

In the meantime, this is the procedure I have followed, in the cases of those brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians. If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished.<sup>3</sup> Others similarly lunatic were Roman citizens, so I registered them as due to be sent back to Rome.

Later in the course of the hearings, as usually happens, the charge rippled outwards, and more examples appeared. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods after me, and with incense and wine made obeisance to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought in together with images of the gods for this very purpose, and who moreover cursed Christ (those who are truly Christian cannot, it is said, be forced to do any of these things), I ordered to be acquitted.

Others who were named by an informer stated that they were Christians and then denied it. They said that in fact they had been, but had abandoned their allegiance, some three years previously, some more years earlier, and one or two as many as twenty years before. All these as well worshipped your statue and images of the gods, and blasphemed Christ. They maintained, however, that all that their guilt or error

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<sup>1</sup> This celebrated letter, together with number 97, provides detailed evidence from a non-Christian source of the growth and practice of Christianity in the Greek-speaking provinces of the East as early as 90. Tacitus (*Annals* 15:44; cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2) describes how Nero made Christians the scapegoats at Rome for the great fire of 64, and executed some of them. Probably from then onward they were proscribed as a subversive group. But Pliny’s ignorance of indictments at Rome on this count indicates that such trials were infrequent.

<sup>2</sup> *the crimes which cling to the name*, that is, “homicide or sacrilege or incest or treason” (see Tertullian, *Apology* 2). These were accusations traditionally leveled against subversive sects from the time of the Bacchanalia (186 BCE: Livy 39.8–18) onwards.

<sup>3</sup> *contumacia*, willful disobedience to a judicial command, was in Roman eyes a crime; see Letter 57.2. But Roman citizens had the right to appeal to the emperor against decisions of provincial governors, who tended to dispatch them to Rome for formal trial.

involved was that they were accustomed to assemble at dawn<sup>4</sup> on a fixed day, to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to avoid acts of theft, brigandage, and adultery, not to break their word, and not to withhold money deposited with them when asked for it. When these rites were completed, it was their custom to depart, and then to assemble again to take food, which was however common and harmless. They had ceased, they said, to do this following my edict, by which in accordance with your instructions I had outlawed the existence of secret brotherhoods. So I thought it all the more necessary to ascertain the truth from two maidservants, who were called deaconesses,<sup>5</sup> even by employing torture. I found nothing other than a debased and boundless superstition.

I therefore postponed the inquiry, and hastened to consult you, since this issue seemed to me to merit consultation, especially because of the number indicted, for there are many of all ages, every rank, and both sexes who are summoned and will be summoned to confront danger. The infection of this superstition has extended not merely through the cities, but also through the villages and country areas, but it seems likely that it can be halted and corrected. It is at any rate certain that temples which were almost abandoned have begun to be crowded, and the solemn rites which for long had been suspended are being restored. The flesh of the victims, for which up to now only a very occasional buyer was found, is now on sale<sup>6</sup> in many places. This leads me readily to believe that if opportunity for repentance is offered, a large crowd of people can be set right.

**Letter 97: Trajan to Pliny**

**late 111**

You have followed the appropriate procedure, my Secundus, in examining the cases of those brought before you as Christians, for no general rule can be laid down which would establish a definite routine. Christians are not to be sought out. If brought before you and found guilty, they must be punished,<sup>7</sup> but in such a way that a person who denies that he is a Christian and demonstrates this by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, may obtain pardon for repentance, even if his previous record is suspect. Documents published anonymously must play no role in any accusation, for they give the worst example, and are foreign to our age.

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<sup>4</sup> The weekly gathering was on the day after the Jewish sabbath. The description of the liturgy suggests a much simpler ritual than that recounted by Justin Martyr fifty years later. This included scripture-readings, a sermon and the Eucharist (*First Apology* 67). The reference to assembling again to take food probably refers to the *agape* (see I Corinthians 11:17 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> *deaconesses*: cf. Romans 16: 1.

<sup>6</sup> *flesh of the victims*: in Roman sacrifices, the more inedible portions were burnt, and the rest was sold.

<sup>7</sup> This clearly answers Pliny's initial query. It was the name "Christian" itself which was to be punished.