



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Spring 1984 | Vol. X, No. 1

---

## THE REALITY OF ST. CECILIA: AN HISTORICAL NOTE

*Warren H. Carroll*

---

*Dr. Carroll argues here in favor of the Catholic tradition that St. Cecilia, who is still honored in the Canon of the Mass, was indeed an early martyr of the Church and that her fifth century Acts are an accurate account of her life and death.*

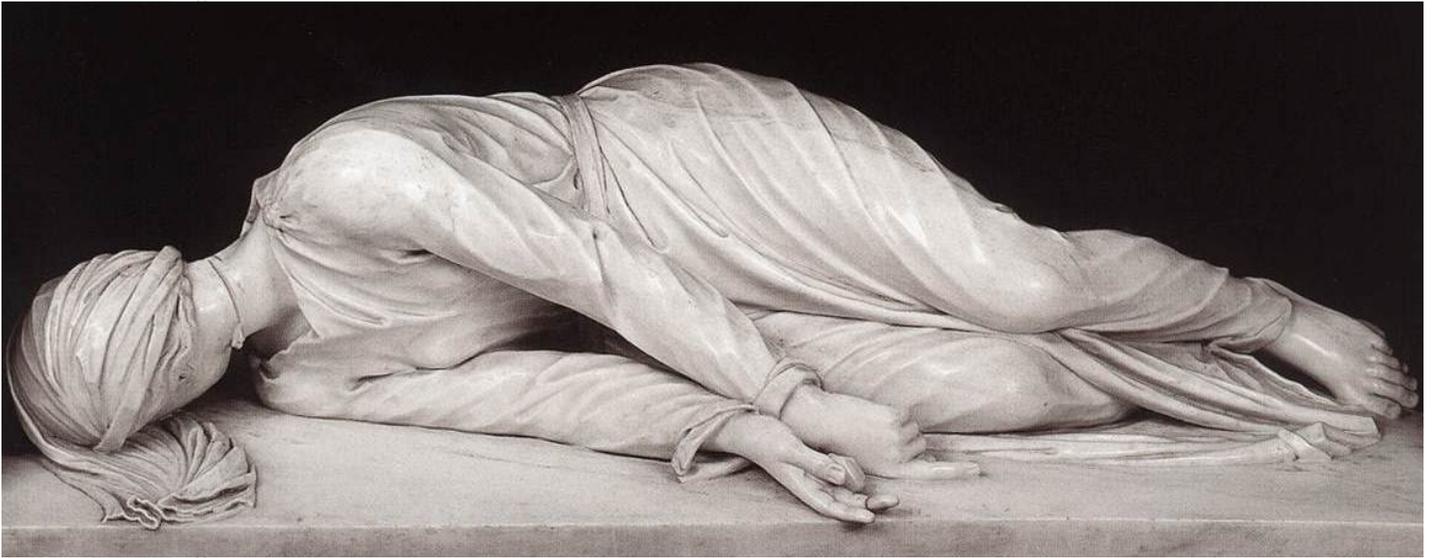


ONE OF THE FINEST STORIES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM IS THAT OF ST. Cecilia of Rome. Cecilia, a girl small in stature and strikingly beautiful, a descendant of one of the noblest and most ancient Roman families and a secret Christian vowed to virginity, was married on the orders of her parents to Valerian, a young pagan. On their wedding night she revealed to him her Christian faith and her vow. He consented to go to the Bishop of Rome, Pope Urban I, personally for instruction in the faith and was soon baptized, together with his brother Tiburtius. The two men began to teach their new faith openly and were summoned before the prefect of the city of Rome, Turcius Almachius, to be questioned about it. They confessed Christ, converted Maximus, one of the prefect's subordinates, and were martyred by the sword by order of the prefect and taken by Cecilia to be buried in the catacomb of Praetextatus on the Appian Way. Maximus was then likewise condemned, beaten to death by blows to the head with leaded whips, and buried near Valerian and Tiburtius. Cecilia's own faith was now well known and the prefect would soon proceed against her; before her arrest, she gave her large house to the Church. Confronting the prefect, clad in a robe of gold and silk, she refused to deny Christ and to sacrifice to idols. The prefect warned her that he had the power of life and death.<sup>1</sup> She replied:

You well know that you have only the power of death. You can take away life from those who enjoy it, but you cannot return it to the dead. Say then, that the emperors have made you a minister of death, and nothing more. . . . Christ alone can save from death, and deliver the guilty from eternal fire.<sup>2</sup>

Wishing to avoid the public execution of a member of so distinguished a family, the prefect unsuccessfully attempted to have her killed by suffocating heat and steam in her bath. He then ordered her beheaded, but the abashed executioner could not fully carry out his task, though he left her deeply cut in the neck and bleeding copiously. Her admirers gathered about her, applying linen cloths to stanch the flow of blood. They remained with her three days, until she died in peace and joy, her witness to Christ fulfilled. Pope Urban buried her in the catacomb of Callistus, still clad in her robe of gold and silk, with the linen cloths which had absorbed her blood at her feet.<sup>3</sup>

Soon afterward Pope Urban was himself martyred and buried in the catacomb of Praetextatus near his martyred converts Valerian, Tiburtius, and Maximus.<sup>4</sup>



This account of St. Cecilia's martyrdom is taken first of all from her *Acts*, written about 500 and therefore more than 250 years later than the events they describe, though very possibly based on more nearly contemporary documents.<sup>5</sup> So beautifully was the story told that it brought about a great increase in devotion to St. Cecilia; she was included among the select few saints mentioned in the canon of the Mass. Historical criticism has looked with growing disfavor upon this story during the past three hundred years, until today it is impossible to find a single recognized historical authority writing in any language who upholds it as a reliable account of actual historical events. Its date, in particular, has been universally rejected. Even those who still see some historical truth in the *Acts* of St. Cecilia insist that she did not live and suffer her martyrdom during the pontificate of Urban, in the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus, though her *Acts* (Unlike the *Acts* of many martyrs which are only loosely tied, if at all, to other dateable historical events) state explicitly that this was when she lived and suffered. Prosper Gueranger himself, the great defender of the historicity of St. Cecilia in the nineteenth century, toward the end of his life abandoned the defense of the chronology given in her *Acts*.<sup>6</sup>

Like many of the other Acts and Passions of martyrs in the early Christian centuries, St. Cecilia's have been thrown out of court as largely or entirely mere romance. While it is admitted that a house belonging originally to someone of the family of the Caecilii was an important early property of the Church in Rome, it is argued that Alexander Severus was not a persecutor; that the name of the persecuting prefect in the *Acts* of St. Cecilia, Turcius Almachius, is not Roman; that no mere girl would have been allowed to defy the prefect of Rome with long

speeches such as her *Acts* report; and that writers of the fourth century, such as Pope Damasus, St. Ambrose and Prudentius, who have much to say of other martyrs, never mention Cecilia.<sup>7</sup> Though the *Acts* of St. Cecilia contain relatively little of the miraculous and nothing of the magical or absurd, the narrative as it stands, meeting this battery of objections, inevitably arouses doubts in the critical historian even of strong and orthodox faith.

But in the case of St. Cecilia we are not dependent on the later, romantic narrative of her martyrdom alone for concrete evidence about her. Her small cypress-wood coffin<sup>8</sup> has been twice opened: once by Pope Paschal I in 821 and a second time by Cardinal Sfondrato in 1599. On both occasions her body was found incorrupt, lying just as it had lain when she died, with the blood-soaked linens at her feet, dressed in a robe of gold and silk, all exactly as her *Acts* tell us. On the second occasion the sword wounds in her neck were seen and reported. On both occasions the sarcophagus containing the body of Valerian, Tiburtius and Maximus was also opened, displaying two skeletons remarkably similar (Valerian and Tiburtius were brothers) with the head removed from one of them, and a third skeleton in which the skull had been severely damaged by blows of heavy objects, matching the account of Maximus being beaten to death by leaded whips applied to the head. The sculptor Carlo Maderna carved an unforgettably lovely replica of St. Cecilia's body exactly as he saw it lying in the coffin in 1599, as he testifies in an inscription on the statue itself. The first opening of the coffin was witnessed by Pope Paschal I, as the contemporary historian Anastasius, known as "the librarian," testifies. The second opening was witnessed by the first great modern Catholic historian, Caesar Baronius; by Cardinal Sfondrato; by the Bishop of Iserna;

by James Buzzi, canon of the congregation of the lateran; by the Jesuit priests Peter Alabona and Peter Morra; and later by Pope Clement VIII in person.<sup>9</sup> To quote Baronius, though the “very light” silken coverings upon her body were not removed, “these, when pressed down, showed the position and posture of the body.” When Pope Clement VIII viewed it, he “recognized each and every member through the covering cloths.”<sup>10</sup>

The presence of the Church’s most distinguished living historian at the opening of St. Cecilia’s coffin in 1599 is an event unique in the history of hagiography. Critical twentieth century historians who have attempted to deal with Baronius’ circumstantial report in any detail have had to allege or imply that he and the others were in such a state of “pious exaltation” that they could not distinguish an incorrupt body under the cloths from a skeleton, and did not even see that the head was missing! (Anastasius’ much earlier account indicated that St. Cecilia’s head was detached in 821; at that point he must have been in error.)<sup>11</sup>

As in the case of the Holy Shroud of Turin and the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion, the physical remains discovered in the tomb of St. Cecilia confirm her *Acts* at every point where they could confirm them. Paul Allard, the great French historian of the martyrs,

sums it up: “Rarely has a document of this nature undergone a test more conclusive, and emerged from it better justified.”<sup>12</sup> So complete is the confirmation that it establishes a powerful presumption in favor of the *Acts* on the issue of chronology as well. In light of the accuracy of the *Acts* as thus confirmed, the “argument from silence” by fourth century writers and deductions from our limited knowledge of the personal involvement of emperors of this period in the persecution of Christians (we know that such persecutions were periodically carried out whether encouraged by the reigning emperor or not)<sup>13</sup> should not be allowed to prevail.

This evidence, so widely ignored-not to say suppressed-by today’s historians of the early Church,<sup>14</sup> most emphatically calls for a re-evaluation, not only of the historical reality of the passion of St. Cecilia, but also of the entire pattern of instant, automatic dismissal as historically worthless of all Acts and Passions of the martyrs not demonstrably contemporary or near-contemporary with them. We can and should learn from the opening of the coffin of St. Cecilia that a romantic style of writing and the intrinsically romantic nature of the events reported by these narratives of martyrdom by no means preclude the possibility that solidly factual historical sources were used by their authors to obtain all the essential information they report.



## NOTES

1 Prosper Gueranger, *Life of Saint Cecilia*, Virgin and Martyr (Philadelphia, 1866), pp. 28-31, 52-122.

2 Ibid., pp. 122-123.

3 Ibid., pp. 123-130; H. Quentin, “Saint Cecile,” *Dictionnaire d’Archeologie chretienne et de liturgie* (DAC), II (2), 2713-2721. Gueranger and Quentin both quote extensively from the Acts of St. Cecilia in the original Latin; the English translation of Gueranger’s work provides much the largest body of quotations from this document available in English.

4 There has been much historical and archeological confusion and prolonged controversy over the correct location and attribution of the graves of Cecilia, Valerian, Tiburtius, Maximus, and Pope Urban I. The principal relevance of the controversy to this history concerns the historical accuracy of the tradition of the burial of these martyrs as later recorded in the *Acts* of St. Cecilia had been moved from the catacomb of Callistus by 821 when it was rediscovered by Pope Paschal I in the catacomb of Praetextatus. See H. Leclercq, “Cecile, Crypte et Basilique de Sainte,” DAC II (2), 2753-2756, and Louis Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis, Texte, Introduction et Commentaire* (Paris, 1892), I, 64-65. Roman tradition, the later *Acts* of Pope St. Urban I, the *Acts* of St. Cecilia and the *Liber Pontificalis* all agree in placing the grave of Pope Urban I in the catacomb of Praetextatus near the graves of his martyred converts (cf. Duchesne, op. cit., p. xciv). Discovering an inscription reading “URBANUS E[piscopos]” (Bishop Urban) in the catacomb of Callistus in the same area where many of the subsequent third century Popes were buried (it has come to be known as the “papal crypt”), the great archeologist de Rossi developed a theory that Pope Urban I was buried in

the catacomb of Calistus with his immediate successors and that the Urban buried in the catacomb of Praetextatus was a simple bishop, also honored as a martyr. His theory has been widely accepted. But two strong arguments may be made against it: (1) none of Urban's predecessors were buried in the "papal crypt," the first certain burials there having been carried out by Pope Fabian of his predecessors Pontian (Urban's immediate successor) and Anteros (Ludwig Herding and Engelbert Kirschbaum, *The Roman Catacombs and Their Martyrs*, 2nd ed. [Milwaukee, 1956], p. 41), so there is no real evidence that the practice was established at the time of Urban's death, leaving us only with the evidence of the inscription, which cuts both ways since the Urban buried in the catacomb of Callistus could have been the simple bishop, and the Pope could have been buried in the catacomb of Praetextatus as tradition and our other sources state; (2) epigraphic evidence indicated that the lettering on the "URBANUS" inscription in the catacomb of Callistus is considerably later in date than the third century (J. P. Kirsch, "Urban I, Saint, Pope," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1908)). Kirsch concludes: "it seems necessary to accept the testimony that Pope Urban is buried in the Catacomb of Praetextatus while the Urban lying in St. Callistus was a bishop of later date from some other city." (ibid. Though Kirsch dismisses the *Acts* of St. Cecilia as "purely legendary" (ibid.), his own data actually provide an impressive confirmation of the historical accuracy both of the *Acts* of St. Cecilia and of the *Acts* of Pope St. Urban I. The authenticity of the latter in particular, long almost universally denied, is well defended by Gueranger, *St. Cecilia*, pp. 131-137.

5Gueranger, *St. Cecilia*, pp. 139-158; Quentin, "Sainte Cecile," DAC 11 (2), 2719-2720. The earliest date Quentin considers possible for the composition of the *Acts* of St. Cecilia is 486. As Gueranger points out, the careful preservation by the Church of contemporary written accounts of the martyrs is clearly attested by Pontius in his very early life of St. Cyprian, the great martyr bishop of Africa.

6Prosper Guerange, *Saint Cecile et la Societe Romaine aux deux premiers siecles*, 8th ed. (Paris, 1897), II, 84. Of the many alternative datings proposed, the most widely accepted has been that drawn from Adon of Vienne, writing more than three centuries after the probable date of composition of the *Acts* of St. Cecilia, who says she was martyred during the joint reign of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus toward the end of Marcus Aurelius' life - that is, about the time of the great martyrdom. (See Paul Allard, *Histoire des Persecutions pendant les deux premiers siecles*, 2d ed. [Paris, 1892], pp. 427-429.) In a learned and brilliant analysis, the French scholar g. Quentin has shown that Adon's principal and probably only sources for the information he gives on St. Cecilia were her *Acts* of St. Cecilia; he suggests that she was martyred in the Diocletianic persecution of 304-312 (Quentin, "Sainte Cecile," DACII [2], 2722-2725).

7Hippolyte Delehaye, *Etude sur le Legendier romain, les Saintes de Novembre et de Decembre* (Brussels, 1936), pp. 77-88; Quentin, "Sainte Cecile," DACII (2), 2729-2731; Allard, *Persecutions pendant les deux premiers siecles*, pp. 434-435. The name of the prefect, Turcius Almachius, is half Roman - Turcius is a known Roman name, though a rare one; Almachius is not. The surname may have been corrupted in the tradition or by an early copyist of the *Acts* (the only place it appears), or - following the edict of Emperor Caracalla in 216 extending citizenship to all free provincials - non-Romans may by this time have begun to hold high office even in the city of Rome itself.

8Cecilia's stature has been excessively reduced by those who have taken the length of her coffin - 4 feet 3 inches - to represent her full height. The body was found in a curved position, and some contraction had very likely taken place (though the usual physical and anatomical laws and probabilities obviously do not entirely govern in the case of bodies which remain incorrupt for more than a thousand years). Still, her stature was probably slightly below five feet, not at all uncommon for a woman of that time, especially if (as is probable) she was in her middle teens at the time of her martyrdom.

9Gueranger, *St. Cecilia*, pp. 198-217, 221-228, 265-302; H. Leclercq, "Cecile, Crypte et Basilique de Sainte," DAC 11 (2), 2749-2753. The principal accounts are those of Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici, Tomas Quartusdecimus* (820-863) (1868 ed.), Year 821, 1-20, pp. 12-16, and of Antonio Bosio, *Historia passionis sanctae Caeciliae* (Rome, 1600), a very old and rare book of which I have not been able to obtain a copy. However, Gueranger includes numerous lengthy quotations from it, both in the original Latin and in English translation, in his pages cited. The differences between Baronius' and Bosio's accounts, of which much is made by critics, do not appear major, and may readily be explained by the simple fact that Baronius was an eyewitness to the opening of the coffin while Bosio, a contemporary, was not present. For the statement of Maderna the sculptor, see *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, edited and supplemented by Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (Westminster, Md., 1956), IV, 404, though the editors cast doubt on the veracity of Maderna and Baronius in reporting what they actually saw, in a manner that, in the absence of concrete evidence of falsification, seems to me both unwarranted and reprehensible. Maderna's statue and inscription may be seen today in

the Basilica of St. Cecilia by any visitor to Rome. Leclercq, loc. cit., col. 2752, explains the devices in use in the early medieval period by which the lower portion of Cecilia's coffin could readily have been moved without disarranging the body.

10Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici, Tomus Quartusdecimus*, Year 821, 16 and 19, pp. 15-16. I am much indebted to my colleague, Professor William Marshner, chairman of the Theology Department at Christendom College and an outstanding Latin scholar, for his careful translation of Baronius' Latin in these decisive phrases describing the examination of the body of St. Cecilia, which are fundamental in establishing the accuracy of the reported findings.

11Delehaye, *Legendier romain, Saints de Novembre*, pp.94-95; H. Quentin, "Sainte Cecile," DAC 11 (2), 2735-2737. The diametrical opposition of the views of Quentin and Leclercq on the authenticity and reliability of the observations of Cecilia's incorrupt body in 1599, in successive articles in the DAC, is truly remarkable. The weight of expert and intelligent testimony by the distinguished witnesses of that opening of her coffin appears to me overwhelming. However, there is clearly a contradiction with Anastasius' ninth century history in the matter of St. Cecilia's head. Baronius' attempts to explain it away (*Annales Ecclesiastici, Tomus Quartusdecimus*, Year 821, 11, p. 15) are unconvincing. Gueranger suggests that the relics later venerated as Cecilia's, including the head, were mostly from Tiburtius, whose head was not found at the examination in 1599, pointing out that it was customary in the ninth century to remove parts of a saint's body as relics when it was found, and that Anastasius would therefore have expected this to have been done with St. Cecilia's body, leading him to assume that some of Tiburtius' relics were hers (St. Cecilis, pp. 224-226). The critic Quentin (loc. cit.) cites Gueranger's explanation and admits that it is possible, but clings to his conclusion that the eyewitnesses of 1599 did not notice that the head of the body at which they were so intently gazing, was missing. With all due respect to the great French scholar, this conclusion seems simply incredible. Eight people do not view a body so carefully and reverently without noticing that its head is missing, and Baronius explicitly testifies that Pope Clement VIII personally determined that every member of her body was intact (see Note 10, above).

12Allard, *Persecutions pendant les deux premiers siecles*, p. 439: "Rarement un document de cette nature a subi une e/preuve plus concluante, et en est sorti mieux justifie/."

13Emperor Hadrian said nothing to encourage persecution of Christians, and in fact attempted to discourage it by his rescript to Minucius Fundanus, yet Pope Telesphorus was martyred in Rome during his reign; Antonius Pius was never a persecutor and Christians in general suffered less during his reign than in any other of nearly comparable length, yet St. Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna while he was Emperor; Marcus Aurelius certainly did not order and would never have approved the hellish tortures inflicted on the martyrs of Lyons in 177, yet they were inflicted on his authority.

14e.g., the astonishingly inadequate statement on this matter in one of the best and most orthodox histories of the early church, Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church* (New York, 1949), I, 402: "The Passion which represents Cecilia as the virgin spouse of Valerian, brother to Tiburtius, is only a late romance; but the account it gives of the death of Cecilia, condemned to be suffocated in the bath of her own house, and finally decapitated [this is erroneous; St. Cecilia's *Acts* clearly specify that she survived three days with deep wounds in the neck, but definitely not decapitated], has been at least partially confirmed by remarkable archeological discoveries" - but the nature of these "remarkable discoveries" is never specified! Information about this whole subject is extraordinarily difficult to come by, and almost totally unavailable in English. (One noteworthy exception is Horace K. Mann in his very comprehensive *The Lives of the Popes in the Early Middle Ages*, III, 150-153, with reference to the exhumation by Pope Paschal I, but also including a summary of the exhumation of 1599.) It would seem that there has been a reluctance, even on the part of orthodox historians, to "get involved" in the controversy, though the available evidence strikingly demonstrates the accuracy of a great martyr's *Acts* which the usual canons of critical scholarship would have dismissed. (and, despite the evidence, generally still dismisses) as unhistorical.