

The Martyrs of Ancient Rome **A Unit Study**

by Maureen Wittmann

When my children and I studied Ancient Rome, we spent an entire year on the subject. We completely immersed ourselves in the history of the Romans. We also immersed ourselves into the history of the Church, as the birth of the Catholic Church falls right in the middle of the Ancient Roman era. In addition to all the books on Roman history and culture, we read about the early saints and popes, particularly those who were martyred. Studying biographies of the saints gives us a peek into the world in which they lived and died. We are introduced to the heroes and villains of their era. I can't think of a more exciting way to share history with our children.

Recently, I got a peek at [History Links'](#) new Rome unit. There I learned that the martyrs of this age considered themselves to be *athletes of the faith*, training for heaven. They prayed for their persecutors, realizing that the battle was against Satan, not man. Many Romans were moved by their example and Christianity was able to spread across the empire. Our children will also be moved by their example.

The Romans began their persecutions of the Christians with Nero. In 64 AD a fire broke out near the Circus Maximus, raging for ten days, with ten of the fourteen districts being destroyed. When the blame began to fall on Nero, he found an easy scapegoat with the Christians. My children were curious as to why the Christians were easy targets. I found the answer in the text [Church History](#) (TAN). The author, Fr. John Laux, includes actual transcripts and letters that give the reader insight to the workings of Roman government. Christians were not tolerant of pagan religions. Because they viewed the heathen deities as evil, the Christians were labeled narrow-minded bigots (sound familiar?). Christians held their meetings in secret, opening them up to exaggerated rumors. They did not purchase pagan images, animals for sacrifice, donate money to the pagan churches, and so on. This made them hated by the populace, businessmen, and pagan priests.

The persecutions continued, off and on, for centuries. The Romans believed in the absolute power of the State, even in matters of faith. A Christian following his conscience of course would not bow down and provide offerings to the Roman gods. This kept the fires of hatred toward the Christians burning.

I often tell my children that they must stand up for what is right, even if it means standing alone. Reading stories about St. Cecilia, St. Polycarp, St. Justin, and so on reinforce that lesson. I did not find an abundance of books on the individual Roman Martyrs, but I did find some treasures in compilations. Neumann Press' *Heroes of God's Church* includes biographies of saints from Roman to modern times, but there was plenty to choose from the Roman era to make it worth my purchase (we are now using it in our study of the Middle Ages). A search through your home library may turn up such a treasure.

Bishops being martyred under Trajan, St. Ignatius fighting heresy in the early Church, the persecutions in Lyons, St. Justin using arguments of philosophy to persuade the Emperor

Aurelius to validate Christianity – these are all events worth further study in our homeschools. The Saints impact history in a way that is still felt today and we would be remiss not to share their stories with our children.

Puzzles:

If you go to www.puzzlemaker.com you can make all kinds of fun puzzles to reinforce your lessons. For example, you could make a word search puzzle with the names of the first ten popes or Roman martyrs. Or you could make a crossword puzzle on facts learned about the Early Church. Better yet, have the children create the puzzles.

Roman Martyrs

AGATHA	LAWRENCE
AGNES	LUCY
CECILIA	PAUL
DENIS	PERPETUA
FELICITAS	PETER
IGNATIUS	POLYCARP
JANUARIUS	SIXTUSII
JUSTIN	URBANII

Resources:

All age groups:

[*Catholic World History Timeline and Guide*](#) by Marcia Neill (RC History): Provides a chronological look at history through the eyes of the Church, from Creation to the modern age. Includes all of the Popes and many of the Saints and Martyrs.

History Links Rome Unit ([Woolly Lamb](#)): The Rome unit is a three volume set: The *Roman Republic* unit focuses on government and daily life in Ancient Rome, The *Pax Romana* unit focuses on the Life of Christ and Apostolic Age, and the *Roman Empire* unit focuses on the development of the early Church - saints, popes, martyrs, doctrines, heresies, development of sacraments, etc.

High school and adult:

[*The Spear*](#) and [*The Restless Flame*](#) by Louis de Wohl (Ignatius): Louis de Wohl wrote his novels based on the lives of the Saints many years ago, but they are still exciting and enjoyable to read today.

[*Church History*](#) and [*Introduction to the Bible*](#) by Father John Laux, M. A. (TAN): These two texts cover a lot more than the beginning of the Church. Reading the section on the New Testament in *Introduction to the Bible* and the chapters on the birth of the Church and the Roman Martyrs in *Church History* will give a good look into Ancient Rome.

[*Europe and the Faith*](#) by Hilaire Belloc (TAN): Gives insight to impact of the Church on the history of Europe. 089555464X

[*Christ the King, Lord of History*](#) by Anne Carroll (TAN): Catholic high school history text that includes ancient history. An accompanying [workbook & study guide](#) also available, as well as an [answer key](#).

The Mass of the Early Christians [*The Mass of the Early Christians*](#) and [*The Fathers of the Church*](#) by Mike Aquilina (Our Sunday Visitor): Read about the early Christians in their own words. These books are personal favorites of mine.

Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs by Cardinal Wiseman ([Lepanto](#)): The story of Christian martyrs under Diocletian, such as Sts. Sebastian, Agnes, and Tarcisius.

Grade school and middle school:

[*The Old World and America*](#) by Rev. Philip J. Furlong, Ph.D. (TAN): Catholic middle school text that includes ancient history.

[*The First Christians: The Acts of the Apostles*](#) by Marigold Hunt (Sophia): The author motivates the reader to go to the Bible to learn more about the Early Church. A nice read aloud.

[*St. Athanasius*](#) by F. A. Forbes (TAN): Chronicles the life of St. Athanasius who was the Bishop of Alexandria and a doctor of the Church.

Heroes of God's Church ([Neumann](#)): Compilation of biographies of the saints, each approximately ten pages long.

Founders of Freedom ([Neumann](#)): Catholic history text for middle school that includes ancient history.

Contact information to order directly from publishers:

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Maureen Wittmann and her husband Rob homeschool their seven children in Michigan. Mrs. Wittmann is a contributing editor to Heart and Mind (www.heart-and-mind.com), as well as the author of For the Love of Literature: Using Living Books in the Classroom and Home [[Ecce Homo Press](#)] and The Catholic Homeschool Companion [[Sophia Institute Press](#)].

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