

Pliny Epistles 10.96 and 97

(Richard Hooper tr.)

GAIUS PLINIUS TO THE EMPEROR TRAJAN:

I consider it, master, a duty to consult with you on all matters concerning which I have experienced any doubts. For who can better direct my hesitation or instruct my ignorance?

I have never taken part in an investigation of the Christians; thus I do not know how or to what extent they should be punished or examined. Nor have the following points caused me inconsequential uncertainties: should age make some difference, or should there be no distinction between the youngest and the more mature; should clemency be granted to repentance, or should it be of no benefit to one who has wholeheartedly been a Christian to have ceased; should the name of Christian itself, if without offense, or should the offenses necessarily attaching to the name be punished?

Meanwhile against those who have been denounced to me as Christians this is the policy I have followed: I asked them if they were Christians. Those who concurred I asked a second and a third time with threats of capital punishment. Those who persevered I ordered to be handed over. For I had no doubt, whatever they were confessing, that stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy should be punished. There were others exhibiting similar mental instability whom, because they were Roman citizens, I directed to be sent on to Rome. Presently as a result of this very procedure—as often happens—the accusations becoming more prevalent, several varieties have come to light.

An anonymous list was posted containing the names of many people. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians I thought should be dismissed, if they first invoked the gods in my presence and sacrificed with incense and wine to your image (which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose together with the statues of the gods) and moreover cursed Christ, which those who are truly Christians can, it is said, in no way be forced to do. Others named in the list admitted that they had been Christians but presently denied it; they had been once, but had given it up, some three years since, others several years ago, one even twenty years ago. All of these also worshipped your image and the statues of the gods and cursed Christ.

However, they insisted that this was the sum of their fault and error, that they were accustomed to convene of a given day before dawn and sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as if to a god, and to bind themselves by oath not for the purpose of some crime, but so as not to commit theft, or brigandage, or adultery, or to betray an oath, or to withhold something held in trust. It was thereupon their custom to disperse and to join together again to breakfast, but on common and harmless food. They had even ceased doing this since my edict which, in accordance with your orders, forbade secret societies. I am all the more inclined to believe this since, in search of the truth, I tortured two of their serving girls—whom they call “deaconesses” (*ministrae*). I found nothing other than perverse and immoderate superstition.

I have therefore suspended my investigations and turned to you for advise. It seems to me that the affair is worthy of your notice, especially because of the number of those endangered; for many of every age, or every rank, and of either sex are called and will be called into danger. The contagion of that superstition has infected not only the cities, but the villages and farms as well, though I believe it can be halted and corrected. Certainly it is generally agreed that the all but deserted temples have once again begun to be filled and that the long interrupted sacred ceremonies are being performed and that the victims are being fattened, for which hitherto only an occasional buyer could be found. From which circumstance one may surmise that the common throng of humanity can be improved if only given an opportunity for repentance.

TRAJAN TO PLINY

My dear Secundus, you have acted as you should in conducting the trials of those denounced to you as Christians. Indeed, no form could be devised which could be considered universally applicable. They should not be sought out; if they should be denounced and convicted, they must be punished, but nonetheless one who has denied that he is a Christian and has proven his denial by his actions—that is, who has sacrificed to our gods—though suspect in the past must nonetheless obtain mercy through his repentance. Anonymously posted lists should have no place in any trial. Such would be a bad precedent and unworthy of these times.⁹