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# The Great Persecution

*The Proceedings of the Fifth Patristic Conference,  
Maynooth, 2003*

EDITED BY

D. Vincent Twomey SVD  
and Mark Humphries



FOUR COURTS PRESS

Set in 10.5 pt on 12.5 pt Bembo for  
FOUR COURTS PRESS LTD  
7 Malpas Street, Dublin 8, Ireland  
e-mail: info@fourcourtspress.ie  
http://www.fourcourtspress.ie  
and in North America by  
FOUR COURTS PRESS  
c/o ISBS, 920 N.E. 58th Avenue, Suite 300, Portland, OR 97213.

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A catalogue record for this title  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-84682-161-5

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Printed in England  
by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wilts.

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## Editors' preface

### THE GREAT PERSECUTION, AD 303: A COMMEMORATION

The Great Persecution begun by the emperor Diocletian and his tetrarchic colleagues in AD 303 ranks as one of the most traumatic experiences of the early Church, not only on account of the sufferings experienced by Christians at the time, but also in terms of its subsequent reverberations. While emperors had persecuted Christians before, this new purge caught the Church off guard: following the persecutions instigated under the emperors Decius and Valerian in the mid-third century, Christianity had enjoyed a period of relative peace during which the Roman state generally held back from suppression. For Christians who lived through the trauma, this sudden reversal demanded explanation. Eusebius of Caesarea, the great pioneer of ecclesiastical historiography and a contemporary of the persecution, observed that the renewal of repression could be regarded as a divinely ordained punishment for a Christian community that had become complacent through the preceding decades of peace (*HE VIII* 1, 7-2, 3). That Christians of the early-fourth century should look inwardly to explain the horrors that engulfed them gives some indication of their sense of shock. The significance of this Great Persecution was to be amplified, however, by events that followed soon after it. Just as the repressive measures were begun by imperial command, so too were they ended when, in 313, Diocletian's successors Constantine and Licinius wrote to provincial governors ordering that the Christians (and, indeed, all men) should once again enjoy freedom to worship as they saw fit. This proclamation was accompanied furthermore by an event of such seismic significance that it could barely have been imagined when the persecution began just ten years earlier: for one of the authors of this proclamation of religious freedom, Constantine, was evidently sympathetic to Christianity. Hence, in no small measure the significance of the Great Persecution accrues from its location at a pivotal moment in history: here, on the eve of the Constantinian revolution that set in motion the emergence of a Christian Roman empire, came the last great effort by the pagan Roman authorities to expunge Christianity from its midst.

This last point hints at other reasons for asserting the significance of the Great Persecution. Imperial repression of the Christians had begun early, under Nero, and so only a generation after Christ's ministry on Earth. But Diocletian's persecution seems to represent something very new in the style of Roman measures against Christianity. One reason why this persecution is described as 'great' is the evidence for the grim thoroughness with which it was pursued in the Levant, Asia Minor, and Africa. As such, this purge of the Church might be regarded as emblem-