

The Emperor Diocletian had ordered Christians under pain of death to deliver up the Holy Scriptures to be burnt. This persecution had already raged a whole year in Africa, during which time a certain number of Christians had betrayed the cause of their Master, but many more had defended it with their blood. In Abitina, a city of proconsular Africa, Saturninus, a Christian priest, was celebrating the holy mysteries one Sunday when the magistrates with a troop of soldiers broke in upon them and seized forty-nine men and women. Among them were the priest Saturninus with his four children, namely, Saturninus the younger and Felix, who were both lectors, Mary, who had consecrated herself to God, and Hilarion, a little boy. Besides these the names are recorded of Dativus and another Felix, who were senators, Thelica, Emeritus, Ampelius, Rogatian and Victoria. Dativus and Saturninus with his children headed the procession of captives who were led before the magistrates. When questioned they confessed their faith so resolutely that the very judges applauded their courage. (It made amends for the apostasy of Fundanus, Bishop of Abitina, who had a short time previously yielded up the sacred books to be burnt; it was recorded, however, that on that occasion a sudden violent storm had extinguished the flames.) The prisoners taken at Abitina were shackled and sent to Carthage, the residence of the proconsul, and during their journey they sang hymns and psalms to God, praising His name and rendering Him thanks.

The proconsul first examined the senator Dativus, asking him who and what he was and whether he had attended the assembly of the Christians. He replied that he was a Christian and worshipped with Christians. The proconsul asked who presided at these meetings and in whose house the assemblies took place, but, without waiting for an answer, ordered that Dativus should be racked to make him confess. Thelica when questioned as to their ringleader replied at once, "The holy priest Saturninus and all of us with him". Emeritus boldly acknowledged that the assemblies took place in his house, and in reference to the Holy Scriptures said to be kept there replied that he kept them in his heart. In spite of torture they one and all made profession that they were Christians and that they had been present on Sundays at the "collects", that is to say, the celebration of the liturgy. Women were as brave as men in enduring suffering and in proclaiming Christ. One young girl, named Victoria, distinguished herself particularly. She had been converted when very young and had vowed herself to the Lord, although her pagan parents had insisted upon betrothing her to a young nobleman. To escape from him she had jumped out of a window on her wedding-day and, escaping unhurt, took shelter in a church where she consecrated herself to God. The proconsul, because of her rank and for the sake of her brother who was a pagan, tried hard to induce her to renounce her faith, but she persisted in repeating, "I am a Christian". Her brother Fortunatian undertook her defence and tried to prove that she was a lunatic and that she had been enticed away by the Christians; but Victoria, fearing lest she might lose the crown of martyrdom, made it clear by the good sense of her answers that she was in her right mind and that she had elected to be a Christian of her own free choice. Asked whether she would like to return with her brother, she said she could acknowledge no fraternal relation with those who did not keep the law of God.

St Saturninus and his children all made a noble confession of faith, including Hilarion, who was little more than a baby. "I am a Christian", he said, "I have been at the 'collects'. I went of my own accord; nobody made me go." The judge, who was sorry for him, tried to frighten him by threatening him with childish punishments, but the little boy only laughed. Then the governor said, "I will cut off your nose and ears". Hilarion answered, "You may do it, but anyhow I am a Christian". When the proconsul ordered them back to prison Hilarion cried out with the others, "Thanks be to God". It appears that they all died in prison, either from the length of their confinement or from torture and the hardships they had undergone.

The "acts" of these martyrs are undoubtedly genuine, though it seems possible that some recensions of the text have been modified by transcribers in sympathy with the Donatists. See P. Monceaux, "Les Martyrs Donatistes" in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 48 (1913), pp. 146–192. The text of the acts will be found in Ruinart; in the *Acta Sanctorum*, February, vol. ii; and in Migne, PL., vol. viii, cc. 705–715.

From the old edition of *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, corrected by the new edition.