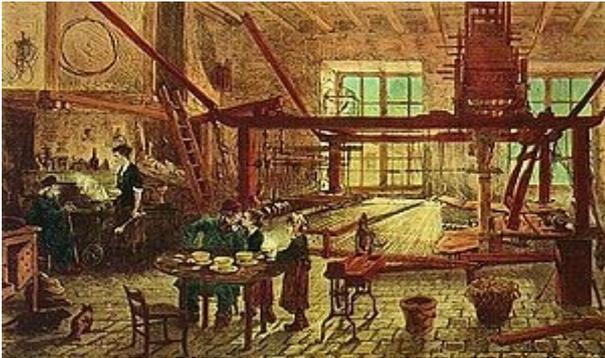


11. THE CONGREGATIONS OF LYONS AND VIENNA

In the south of France, on the great river Rhone, lies the industrial city of Lyons. Not far from Lyons is another city called Vienna. Both are ancient cities. At the time of this story, both were thriving industrial centres. Today, Lyons is the Silk City. Large silk mills employ thousands of people. This



Silk weavers in Lyons

silk industry started many centuries ago, and though they didn't have the modern machines we have today, they could still produce the most beautiful silk at that time. Therefore, it is not surprising that both Lyons and Vienna were prosperous cities.

The wealthy ladies of Rome preferred to dress in silk garments. That looked dignified and showed prosperity and wealth. That's why Lyons developed strong trade connections with Rome, the great metropolis. And not only with Rome, but it also extended to other large cities of the Roman empire. They went to Egypt, and even to Smyrna, in Asia Minor.

At that time, Smyrna was also a prosperous city with many wealthy businesspeople. Their wives loved and wanted the silk materials made in Lyons as well, and so a thriving trade existed between the two cities.

As we know, Smyrna had a flourishing Christian church with Polycarp as their minister. Sailors from Smyrna had brought the gospel to Lyons and Vienna. How amazing are God's ways! Who would ever think that Christianity could be brought from faraway Smyrna to Lyons and Vienna in the south of France? ... But that is how

large, flourishing Christian congregations were instituted in those two French industrial cities.

The first minister of Lyons came from Smyrna and was a student of the God-fearing Polycarp. This created a strong bond between the Christian congregations of Smyrna and Lyons and Vienna. They corresponded with each other and shared their experiences and challenges. They supported and encouraged each other as much as possible.

When the terrible persecution raged in Smyrna during which Polycarp died the martyr's death, the congregations at Lyons and Vienna still enjoyed peace and prosperity. At that time, the Christians there were still left alone. Would the persecution come to those two French cities?... Many hoped it would not. Maybe they asked the Lord if He would spare them. Possibly there were even some who were counting on it that they would not be persecuted. But their hopes were not realised, because ...

PERSECUTION STARTS

"Move on, you have no business here. Go away!" A resident of Lyons, who is quietly walking past the large and busy marketplace, is rudely grabbed, and shoved aside. The onlookers laugh mockingly. But why is this person not allowed to walk there? What did he do? Did he steal something from one of the markets, and is he caught out? ... Is that why the other shoppers are angry with that man? No!

That ill-treated man has not done anything wrong.

But why then is he being shoved away so rudely? Simply because he is a Christian.

In both Lyons and Vienna, persecution has erupted. The people rejected the Christians and no longer tolerated them. That man was not the only one getting that sort of treatment. Oh no, those scenes are daily occurrences. The people of Lyons and Vienna increasingly became more hostile towards the Christians. At the marketplaces, in the shops and wherever Christians showed themselves, they were insulted

and jeered at most rudely. The people beat and ill-treated them with the greatest contempt, banning them from society.

They were not safe anywhere. Even their homes were targeted. Sometimes a furious mob would force their way into their houses and smash everything to pieces. Other times their homes were utterly plundered.

Dark days began for the Christian congregations at Lyons and Vienna. And? ... Did the Christians abuse them back?

Did they defend themselves against such nasty treatment?

Did they retaliate?

No, they endured all this with great humility.

Because of that, their enemies became more rude and insolent in their actions. Instead of repenting, their rage and cruelty increased. Finally, terrible persecution was a daily reality in Lyons and Vienna. The Christians suffered severely!

Slandering gossip is spread about the Christians at Lyons and Vienna, and ... it is believed! People said:

"Those Christians are horrible people; when they meet, they do terrible things. They slaughter loving, innocent children, catch the warm blood in cups, and they all drink from that blood with enjoyment. They even eat the flesh of those children! Those Christians are the worst brutes. They are disgusting monsters. Away with them! Such people may no longer live; annihilate them!"

But these were all big lies. Not one word of that slanderous gossip was true. Christians do not kill children. They do not eat the flesh nor drink the warm blood of innocent children. What they did do during their services is to celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and wine. Then the minister would solemnly pronounce:
"Take eat, this is My body." Then he would take the cup and say:
"This cup is the New Testament in My blood. Drink you all of it."

'Almighty God can gather all those specks of dust again from wherever they may be. He does not lose sight of the tiniest bit of ash! He will bring those together on the last day'.

But the pagans did not understand that. Do you know who mainly spread those false stories? The slaves, some of whom worked for Christians! They said that it was true because they had seen it themselves! People believed that nonsense. And so hatred and resentment grew in the hearts of the people. They could not tolerate such things! They violently forced their way into the homes of the Christians made prisoners of men, women and children and dragged them before the Roman governor. Then the people loudly demanded that they must be put to death! When the governor asked the Christians if the accusations were correct, they declared their innocence, but they were not believed! The governor would threaten them to confess, and when they refused, he would have them tortured most horribly. No pen can describe what the Christians at Lyons and Vienna had to suffer. They were tied to the rack and tortured without pity. Soldiers burned them with red-hot irons or roasted them alive on red-hot metal chairs. They were pulled apart, flogged till their backs were bloody shreds and finally killed. Christians who were Roman citizens were beheaded, and non-Roman citizens were thrown to the wild animals in the arena.

The pagans made sure that the Christians were not even buried. That was too good for them! They fed the bloodied dead bodies to the dogs who devoured them, or they burned the corpses and scattered the ashes onto the Rhone River. They sneeringly mocked:
"Let us see if the God of the Christians is able to raise their bodies from that scattered ash again."

The Christians often spoke about the coming resurrection, and now their enemies wanted to make that resurrection impossible. Those fools! But they knew no better. God knows where every speck of dust is. Just as a competent watchmaker can assemble the original watch from a bag full of small cogs, screws and springs, so the Almighty God can gather all those specks of dust again from wherever they may be.

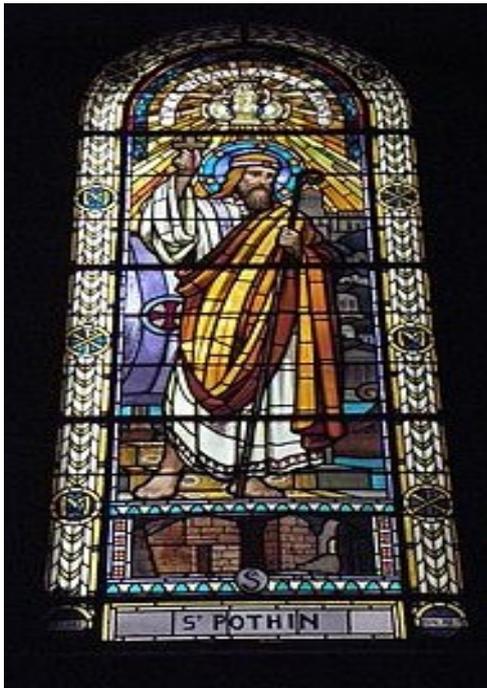
He does not lose sight of the tiniest bit of ash! He will bring those together on the last day. On that day, these martyrs will receive their bodies back in perfection.

But whatever the pagans tried; they were unable to force the Christians to deny their Saviour. They faced death heroically. Of course, some did deny Christ, but they were Christians in name only! In a weak moment, true Christians sometimes succumbed under the most terrible tortures, but later they tearfully repented and confessed their guilt. The congregations in Lyons and Vienna richly experienced God's irresistible grace, and His name was honoured in this. We will mention a few examples.

Listen...

THE MINSTER OF LYONS

One of the first martyrs was the aged minister Pontius of Lyons. He was over ninety, but when the



Stained glass window depicting Bishop PONTIUS. 87 – 177 AD

church was oppressed, he remained faithful to his task. Whenever possible, he encouraged and comforted the martyrs. When men and women were hauled out of their homes and dragged before the Roman governor, he accompanied and encouraged them. He pointed to the crown of

victory, which awaited them. This aroused the rage of the people, and very soon he was taken prisoner himself. The shouting crowd delivered him to the governor, making all sorts of threats. Look, there stands the honourable old man.

“Are you a Christian?” asks the judge.

Freely the old teacher answers: “Yes.”

He is not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; neither does he fear the fury of the raging crowd. The governor asks him:

“Who really *is* the God of the Christians?”

Fearlessly the aged bishop answers:

“You will know when you believe.”

The governor flushes angrily, for he takes these words as an insult.

“Take him away,” he commands furiously. That command is promptly obeyed. Rough hands grab the old minister and without mercy shove him along. The crowds punch his head, back and shoulders. He is kicked and beaten. The maddened crowd yells and screams. They hurl all sorts of objects at him. Bruised and bleeding, he finally arrives at the gloomy prison. His enemies show no pity; nor do they respect his age. Exhausted, he falls on the hard stones of his cell. They will throw him to the wild animals, at least, that is the intention of his wicked, cruel torturers. But God decided differently. Before the governor could take him to the arena, the aged man died. The abuse demanded too much of his strength. God took his faithful servant to Himself before the enemies could hurt him even more.

SANCTUS

Another time a certain Sanctus is arrested and brought before the governor. He was a deacon for the congregation at Vienna. He also fearlessly confessed that he was a Christian. At the trial, they asked his name, where he was born and in which city he lived. But he did not answer any of those questions. The only thing he said was... 'I am a Christian.'

They tortured him for hours and hours; his whole body became one big wound. The horrific pain

completely twisted his body out of shape. Finally, tired of torturing him his tormentors threw him into a cell. A few days later, when his many wounds were just beginning to heal, they started abusing him again. That was cruel; even worse, it was devilish. But God supported Sanctus.

After enduring hours of torture, they brought him back to his cell, and, against all expectations, he recovered from all the terrible wounds inflicted on him.

When his enemies saw that he remained steadfast despite all the terrible torture, they finally threw him to the wild animals. There he was soon released from his suffering.

The number of those who inherited heaven's glory through a martyr's death is so high. That number is only known to God. Yet I want to tell you one more story.

Listen ...

BLANDINA¹

"I am a Christian, and we don't do anything wrong!"

Who is saying that? ...

Just look.

There lies a young girl. Her name is Blandina. She is only 15 years old. She is surrounded by some men who have been torturing her for *hours*.

Torturing?

Why?

What has she done wrong?

She has not done anything wrong, but she is a Christian! She has turned her back to the pagan gods, that's why she is taken prisoner! No, Blandina is not rich or famous. She is a slave. The Lord directed things in such a way that her mistress was a Christian. Most likely, her mistress often talked to her about the God of the Christians. The Lord blessed those simple means. That poor slave also learned to know the Lord Jesus as her Saviour. However, when persecution erupted in Vienna, she, together with her God-fearing mistress, was taken prisoner. The pagans picked on her to be horribly tortured. Because she was a slave and a young girl, they thought she

would be an easy victim who would soon denounce Christianity.

We know already that pagans spread the lie that Christians ate the flesh and drank the blood of young children. They interrogate this delicate girl to make her say that the Christians did all those repulsive things at their meetings. What a victory that would be! The Christian congregation at Vienna was afraid that Blandina would not be able to endure the pain, and that she would become unfaithful. She had been a Christian for such a short time! Her mistress, who was tortured as well, but had firmly confessed her faith, was also worried about Blandina.

"Blandina can never endure that sort of pain." she said anxiously.

And?

To everyone's surprise, what everyone was worried about, and what the pagans already counted on, did *not* happen!

Her torturers are busy with her for hours. They wipe the sweat from their foreheads and become so tired they must take turns. But every time they ask that young martyr if those Christians really did those terrible things, the answer of that brave girl is always:

"I am a Christian, and we don't do anything wrong."

The men become furious. They stamp on the ground; they clench their fists, torture her some more, even worse than before, but ... her answer remains the same:

"I am a Christian, and we don't do anything wrong!"

Finally, her enemies give up, and they take Blandina back to prison. She is condemned to death. Together with many other Christians, she will be thrown to the wild animals.

IN THE ARENA

One day the large amphitheatre is full of thousands of curious people who are eagerly waiting for the next show. A few Christians enter the arena.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gp4upp1hnZ0>

They calmly walk to the centre of the arena and remain standing there. Just a few more painful moments and they will be in heaven. Will the cages immediately be opened, to allow all the wild animals to come roaring out and attack their victims? No, not yet. Look, there come some men, carrying a cross. They dig it in the ground in the centre of the arena. On that cross, firmly bound, they hang a young girl. Who is she?



Blandina, 162 – 177 AD

That young girl is ... Blandina, the brave slave.

The pagans are furious because they could not make Blandina deny her faith. In blind hatred, to make up for their disappointment, they will make Blandina die a worse death than the other Christians.

Soon chunks of flesh will be torn from her body by the hungry animals who will have to jump up to get at her. When all is ready, the cages are opened. The crowd watches in deathly silence. A few horrific moments and the Christians standing in the centre of the arena are killed. Now those fierce animals will attack Blandina. At least, that's what everyone expects. But they are mistaken. What they anticipated did not happen.

To everyone's amazement, the beasts of prey run around her with bloodied muzzles, but they do

not notice her. And Blandina? ... Does she shake and tremble? ... No! With her eyes raised to heaven, she calmly awaits death. However, death does not come for her yet, because men drive the wild animals back to their cages and Blandina hangs there untouched. Her enemies loosen her and to take her back to prison.

But the pagans do not see it as a miracle.

The next day, soldiers bring more Christians into the arena to be devoured. Hanging on the cross again, Blandina must watch it all again. Her torturers hope that she will become afraid and deny her Saviour. But that does not happen. Her faith allows her to see the glory that waits for her; it fills her with heavenly joy and removes all fear.

BLANDINA AND PONTICUS

Finally, the day arrives when the last Christian prisoners are to be put to death. But this time Blandina is not alone; a 15-year-old boy named Ponticus is with her. Ponticus is also a Christian. The enemies feel sorry for him because he is still so young. They offer him his freedom if he forsakes Christianity, but he firmly refuses! Would we be so brave?...

They place Ponticus next to Blandina, hoping that through that terrible scene, Ponticus will become afraid and deny Christ. But Blandina encourages him. She points him to the eternal crown of glory prepared for him. When the last Christians are finally killed, Ponticus must enter the arena alone. Look, there stands the fifteen-year-old boy. No, he does not fear death. He knows that Jesus has redeemed him with His blood. Once more Ponticus looks at Blandina. She, for the last time, points... up!

The young martyr smiles... but not for long, for a roaring lion jumps at him. Ponticus casts his eyes up to heaven; one horrific moment, and ...the young boy is with his Saviour. His torn, bleeding body lies in the arena, but he no longer feels pain or sorrow.

Now it is Blandina's turn. Peacefully she enters the arena. The audience had noticed that she

encouraged Ponticus, so they yell and scream and demand her death; they know no mercy!

Soldiers chase her around the arena, lashing her with a whip. Then they wrap her in a net and send a furious bull into the arena. Snorting and fuming, the mad bull goes for her. He lifts her with his horns, hurls her high in the air, catches her and throws her up again. But then that furious animal tires of it. He no longer looks at his victim but runs wildly around the arena. With great difficulty, the keepers chase the foaming and sweating animal back into his cage, and when the servants finally get to Blandina, lying there bleeding and broken, they discover she is still alive. Now they end it. A man, armed with a sword, goes to her, and kills her.

That is how Blandina died a heroine. The devil suffered defeat, but God's grace conquered. Blandina is 'above' where she carries the palm branch of victory. Now she sings praises to her King. By her courage and perseverance, she set an example to other Christians. God's grace is stronger than death.

The pagans at Vienna had to acknowledge that they had suffered defeat! Their evil plans had



Blandina thrown by the bulls.

utterly failed! But when Christ appears on the clouds of heaven, those cruel pagans will also be summoned before God's fearsome judgment seat. Then *they* will flee away trembling, but Blandina, young, delicate Blandina, will enter the joy of her Lord, to forever praise and glorify Him.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the gospel come to the cities of Lyons and Vienna?
2. Which lies were spread about the Christians?
3. How were these lies related to the Lord's Supper?
4. List three cruel means of torture for the Christians of Lyons and Vienna.
5. How did the persecutors mock the resurrection of the body?
6. Who was Blandina?
7. Why did her persecutors torture her so severely?
8. How did Blandina encourage Ponticus?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Cremation occurs more and more frequently in our country. Why do we insist on burying the dead wherever possible?
2. God gives His people 'the grace to die' only in their dying hour, strengthening them through their last moments. Show how this was true for Blandina.