

Baarlan – A Martyr

An obscure country life, which this saint had led from his childhood, in a village near Antioch, in manual labour, which he sanctified by a heroic spirit and practice of Christian piety, prepared him for the crown of martyrdom. He was imprisoned for his zealous confession of the name of Christ and when he was called to the bar, the judge laughed at his rustic speech. In spite of his anger the judge could not but admire exceedingly Barlaam's greatness of soul, his virtue, and his meek constancy, which even gathered strength by his long imprisonment. He was cruelly scourged; but no sigh, no word of complaint was extorted from him. He was then hoisted on the rack, and his bones in many parts dislocated. Amidst these torments, such was the joy, which was painted by his countenance, that one which would have judged he had been seared at some delicious banquet, or on a throne. The prefect threatened him with death, and caused swords and axes fresh stained with the blood of martyrs to be displayed before him. But Barlaam viewed them without being daunted, and, without words, his meek and composed countenance spoke a language which he confounded and disconcerted the persecutors.

He was therefore remanded in prison, and the judge, who was ashamed to see himself vanquished by an illiterate peasant, studied to invent some new artifice or torment, resolving to revenge his gods, whom he thought injured by the saint's constancy. At length he flattered himself that he had found out a method by which the martyr should be compelled, in spite of all his resolution, to offer sacrifice. Barlaam was brought out of prison, and an altar with burning coals upon it being made ready for sacrifice, the martyr's hand was forcibly held over the flames, and the incense with live coals was laid upon it, that, if he shook the coals off his hand, he might be said to offer sacrifice by throwing the incense into the fire upon the altar. The saint, fearing the scandal and very shadow of the crime, though by throwing off the fire to save his hand, he could not be reasonably be esteemed to have meant to sacrifice, kept his hand steady whilst the coals burnt quite through it, and so, with the incense, dropped upon the altar. At such an instance of fortitude the taunts and scoffs of the heathens were converted into admiration. God, soon after this victory, called his soldier to himself, to crown him with glory.

Alban Butler, The Lives of the Saints, Dublin, 1833, volume 2, pp 903-3