

TONO VAL RONDONE

*THE
MARTYRS*

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Other Books by Tono Rondone

Letters to My Children

Pop Goes the Weasel

Hurdy Gurdy Man

tales from the tattva tower

***The Green Eyed Monster* (short stories)**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF *The Martyrs*

Tono V. Rondone has a *magna cum laude* degree in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin - Madison and twenty years of professional writing experience. His work has been published in the *San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner* and various national magazines.

Mr. Rondone has traveled extensively in the United States, living and working in New York City, San Francisco, New Orleans and Phoenix, Arizona. He was a West Point Cadet during the Vietnam War era. Besides professional writing gigs, he's been a cab driver, a waiter, a retail sales associate, a trucker, a multi instrumentalist, singer and songwriter, a recording and performing artist, and a fine arts painter. In addition to his fourth literary novel, *The Martyrs*, Mr. Rondone has written a non-fiction book entitled *Letters to My Children*, a collection of short stories entitled *The Green Eyed Monster* and three other literary novels: *Pop Goes the Weasel*, *Hurdy Gurdy Man* and *tales from the tattva tower*. He currently lives in Las Vegas, Nevada and is the father of three daughters.

**To my mother,
Valene,
for the gift of painting, books and music,
with love.**

Part One

“The rich virtues of patience flow forth everywhere, rising like a fountain that has a single name and gushing forth in myriad streams through the many ways of glory. Nothing that does not arise from this source can be of such importance to us in our actions for increasing our praise. It is patience that commends us and preserves us before God. It is this that restrains anger, bridles the tongue, governs the mind, guards the peace, regulates discipline, curbs the onrush of desire, calms the violence of pride, quenches the fires of hatred, controls the power of the rich, comforts the poor, maintains the integrity of virgins, keeps widows chaste, ensures the singleness of love in those who are married, makes us humble in prosperity, courageous in adversity and gentle toward insults and injuries.”

—Cyprian of Carthage

*“And I looked and, behold, a pale horse,
and his name that sat on him was Death.
And power was given unto him
over the fourth part of the earth,
to kill with sword, and with hunger,
and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”*

—The Apocalypse of John

I

That somewhere in Syria, or perhaps North Africa, a boy child was born into the third century after the coming of Jesus Christ does not matter much in the scheme of things. Perhaps few simple human births are fortuitous, and fewer still human births divine. So say the unenlightened ones. Others may argue that each human birth is a miracle. They will say that it takes millions of years of evolution to produce one human being, and no one will object. But how do we come to measure each human birth? How do we gauge the importance of a single act of genesis? To ponder and to seek the answer is our quest.

*Poor Pagan baby, a boy child, mid wifed by
Elanor; daughter of Andrew. It did not live. Stillborn,*

they said. Later, the stryges stole the body away from the grave in the night.

Another sought the life force, the new seed which he himself had not the talent to create, much less summons, no courage in his emblazoned heart. Boil, boil, in the dirty oil ink of the magi, Bosphomet! The fearsome goat of Mendes.

One day life will be grand, a fulfillment of all that is possible. For now, they can only imagine, in godless supplication.

How to deal with the world? How to control the forces, lest they control you? We may learn how to construct a horse cart, but forget how to go to the moon in our minds.

We must burst forth with every essence of our beings, but to do this, we must await for the return of our egos. Our destination seems nowhere, our emanations everywhere. And they all terminate in us. Are not all the same?

A girl child too is born, this one in 275 A.D., the daughter of a high priest of a Pagan temple in the city of Antioch, in Syria, on the Mediterranean Sea, a thriving center of Persian civilization at the outskirts of the Roman Empire.

So let us invoke divine intervention, constraint and other imponderables; let us give praise to the oneness that is in us and that we are in.

Urn turned in the house of the pale Justina, a young Pagan virgin. As she grew, she prayed at the altar of virulent gods she never understood, yet often feared. But fear of the gods and the consequences of your thoughts and deeds is a good thing, is it not?

The house of Justina bore resemblance to any dwelling of that early period, except that Justina's parents were high priest and priestess in the temple of Apollo, a Pagan cult attached to the Greek pantheon of gods. They

thought to carry on the tradition of an ancient culture already in the tomb, and the opulent temple dedicated to Apollo was tended to daily by the beautiful Justina. As she replaced the burned down candles, changed the flowers put there in honor of Athena or Hecate, or cleaned up the ashes in the censer, she would look up at the statues of the gods and wonder, deeply yearning for peace, love and understanding.

But it was not forthcoming. Why? It was not a matter of neglect or restraint. Nothing, seemingly, was left undone. Yet something was amiss, because no manna was forthcoming, no god answered the prayers of miserable Justina, poor of spirit and deeply birthed into sin.

There was a copper beacon that seemed to beckon her from the courtyard next to her own, a single metal cross on top of the Christian church steeple next to her ancestral domicile. Sometimes she would stare at it high against the azure sky, a shiny flaming rod raised in praise of a god called the Father. Justina seemed to float to it, transfixed, lucid, and then the refrains of passages from the Gospels rang in her ears, chanted sweetly by the church deacon only next door.

—Justina, come in from the yard and let us begin our evening ritual. Your father is ready.

—*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs are the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those whom mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God . . .*

—Justina! Why are you tarrying? We cannot keep the goddess Aphrodite waiting!

Justina's mother, Cledonia, and her father, Aedesuius, were not rich, nor were they poor; he was a wheelwright, and she wove simple cloth from which equally simple clothing was made. Theirs was a typical

stucco-and-tile townhouse in the populated town of Antioch, the last major Roman colonial city in the East before arriving in the fabled Alexandria in Egypt. Extra money for slaves — a necessity and a sign of social status — was garnered from their priestly activities, for they kept an elaborate altar and tended to the oblations to the god Apollo and the goddess Aphrodite, whom in those times was called Astarte. For this, donations could be gotten from other neighborhood Pagan families, those too busy or too unschooled to placate the gods with prayer and ritual themselves.

These were a people of myth and superstition, steeped in the traditions of mysticism and magic. They were simple folk, unencumbered by technology and vast diversions. The Greek gods, or their Roman counterparts whom they worshipped, were long dead, yet their mortified images were still revered out of ignorance and complacency.

In Jerusalem there are seven gates. One of these gates is called The Eye of the Needle. That is because it is so low that only a man may pass through it. But with great labor on the part of the animal, a camel might stoop down and make passage.

He was the best and most complete avatar ever recorded in history. He was the Christ.

He that believes in me, though he be dead, yet does he live.

9

In the reign of Decius, one of the last of the great Roman emperors, a promising young boy was being raised by wealthy and impious parents in the village of Pisidia in Syria, along the Mediterranean coast. His name was Cyprian. Cyprian was dedicated by his parents into the service of the Pagan god Apollo at birth.

By the age of seven, he was given over to magicians in order to begin his study of sorcery and to increase in his demonic wisdom.

By 249 A.D., the year Decius became emperor of Rome, Christianity had a strong foothold over the vast reaches of the Roman Empire, and thanks to Christians, the word “Pagan” (from the Latin, *Pagani*) was coined. While Christians and Pagans were successfully co existing in the major outposts of the Roman Empire like

Ephesus, Athens, Tarsus and Carthage, tensions did exist and the whim of the current Roman ruler and the Senate of Rome had dire consequences during frequent intervals of persecution.

The dominant piety which was held in these towns concentrated on the worship of angry and jealous Greek and Roman divinities, gods who would sometimes reflect amalgamating aspects of both the Greek and Roman influences. In some African provinces, this amalgamation produced distinctive native identities which were hard to separate from the original deities. Greek gods, for example, might be supplicated by families in Antioch for their power over crops or forces of the weather; icons carved into stone might bear a resemblance to the Roman prototypes, but the inscriptions around them would be strictly native.

From local priests, Cyprian learned of the multitiered hierarchy of Pagan gods he was to worship and revere.

—Yes, young master, there is only one god; but there reside on Mount Olympus an entire generation of gods which have dominion over the heavens, the seas and the earth. They are twelve in number. Can you name them, Cyprian?

—The first of these are the Protogonoi, or the first born, consisting of those elemental beings that make up the fabric of the universe – the earth, sea, sky, night, day.

—Very well! And the second?

—I forget, teacher.

—The second are the natural daimons or spirits of nature.

—Like satyrs and dryads?

—Yes, Cyprian. These are the nymphai. Now, what are the sixth?

— The sixth are the monsters, sir. Giants, dragons and beasts.

Cyprian also learned from alchemists herbal concoctions and potions, which, if properly blessed by the gods, would have definite effects on their imbibers, for better or worse.

The bronze skinned, tall, thin, delicate nosed young North African boy showed remarkable aptitude for the assimilation of this esoteric information. Although Cyprian was brought to Antioch in Syria as a child, he was born in Carthage, on the northern African coast. From the mountainous terrain above his nativity, the emerald sea that was the grand and majestic Mediterranean shone in splendor.

Cyprian was a child of imagination and infinite curiosity. While other boys his age might be learning archery or mathematics or geometry, Cyprian had been chosen for another calling. Initially, he was sensitive and impressionable, as all youths are. But as his tutelage progressed, his teachers were charged with more than just his occult education and religious training. He had to be hardened, too, to the cruelty of life. He had to be prepared for the brutal truth of his career, as a mystic and a black magician.

He had to be awakened to the fact that the means must justify the end. Yet, it would be more than thirty years before he realized the error of his philosophy. By any means necessary would be his motto until the day of his undoing!

3

The emperor is no longer in Rome. In 285 A.D., the very center of the Roman universe, sprawling from Gaul in the north to Alexandria, Syria and Africa in the south, shifted east. Diocletian, one of the last of the great and long reigning Roman kings, found Rome itself so decadent and contagious that he moved the imperial capital to Nicomedia, in what is now called Turkey. From this eastern outpost, he could easily maintain control over the richest provinces in the Mediterranean area, and be well free from the debaucheries and excesses of Rome.

Wherever the emperor chose to reside, legions of loyal and well paid Roman troops would obligingly file past him in review. The dispensations or dues of war would be bestowed upon those soldiers who had distinguished themselves in battle. They shared in the

looting and pillaging and raping right along side the generals.

Diocletian was particularly interested in forcing compliance from the highest operatives in the still cult like sect known as Christians – compliance with his edicts and enforced by imperial guards. Not that Diocletian himself would have ever thought of becoming a follower of the rabbi from Nazareth.

Neither was the famous emperor compelled to give thanks and praise to the pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses. Like the Greeks gods and goddesses before Rome, they were too, too numerous to mention.

While traveling in the East, Diocletian became acquainted with a Nicomedian priest by the name of Kospia Moran. Moran had experience in India and Palestine, and brought the world's newest religion with him from there to Syria and Turkey. It was from Moran that Diocletian first learned about the last of the new Pagan gods, the Persian mystical god Mithras.

A large statute of Mithras stood regaled in the foyer leading to Diocletian's manor. An altar made of thick wood engraved with intricate designs dedicated to the Oriental Pagan god of The All lay resplendent in the courtyard. Formidable, quixotic Mithras, always depicted in the same manner. The central icon of Mithraism was the so-called tauroctony or "bull-slaying scene" in which the god of the cult, Mithras, accompanied by a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion, is shown in the act of killing a bull. Mithras is most often depicted cutting the bull's throat from behind with a knife or sword.

Diocletian had his plans for the Empire, but it was not to conquer more land. He knew that there was practically no one left to plunder, no great civilization left to assimilate. His plan was to conquer the very minds and hearts of men, to demand allegiance to the tried and

true Pagan tradition. It was the best way to control the masses.

It was effective sociological propaganda aimed at striking fear and hope into the hearts of the people at the same time.

He sent out an edict which commanded that all Roman citizens were required to perform regular prescribed sacrifices to the Pagan gods. The people would be forced to carry certificates of proof of compliance with the sacrifices. It would, of course, require a fee be paid to obtain the required certificate, or a fee to the witnesses, or both.

This made it illegal to be a Christian, because true Christians would never bow down before the graven images of superstitious Pagan gods. Instead, they would proclaim the one true God in heaven along with His Son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, that perfect trinity of Mind, Body and Soul.

—I will be the restorer of the world, Kospia.

—The barbarians have been beaten back, sire.

—The natural boundaries of the Empire have been restored.

—Yes, the Rhine, the Danube and Euphrates rivers, and the Sahara are once again united under Roman rule.

—Stability at home, stability in the colonies — all is right with the Empire, eh, priest?

—Stability at home? How say you that? The very foundation of honor and morality is disintegrating under the weight of Roman lust, blood shedding and gluttony.

—Even at the senatorial level?

—The twenty foot high wall that they have erected around Rome isn't designed to keep invaders out of the city, it is to keep the decadence and decay in.

4

Her saffron robe slipped slowly down below her narrow, smooth white shoulders, falling gently over her small, upturned nipples, which were now fully revealed, as were her firm, supple breasts and soft, flat stomach. Finally the gown fell completely to the floor, and Justina stood naked before the throng of worshippers of Astarte, assembled in the temple room of her parents for the festival of the Goddess of Love.

—The virgin stands before you in naked physicality, expectantly awaiting her meeting with the plentiful goddess Astarte, forever in love with Apollo. She will now be sacrificed by Aedesuius for the faithful devotees assembled here.

Justina's mother, Cletonia, wielded the knife swiftly. The sacrificial lamb's blood, standing in for

Justina's blood, spurted out of the fresh slice in its throat and was collected in a deep bowl.

One of the naked Pagan revelers was brought forward and given a broad brush. He dipped the brush into the blood and brought it over to where the unclothed Justina now lay on the altar with her eyes closed. Then the sacrificial lamb's blood was painted over the thin, young virgin body of Justina, while her father chanted a secret veneration to the ancient Goddess of Love.

—We have offered you, Astarte, our greatest treasure, our virgin child Justina, sacrificed in humble praise, in blood and in faith, that you might bring to us all fertility and eternal happiness in love.

Dripping with the warm lamb's blood, its putrid mustiness revolting her, Justina kept her eyes closed, and concentrated not on the chant of her father, nor the instructions of her mother to the rest of the devotees, as the nude participants paired off into couples and began to have sex.

Instead, she conjured up in her mind's eye the copper cross atop the steeple of the church next door, and opened up her mind's ear to the hymn of praise to God which the bishop of the church was wont to chant while Justina worked in her parents' garden.

—*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those . . .*

Below the ten foot high dark granite statue of the goddess Astarte, on a bed of flower petals and hay, a barren couple enjoyed the unbridled lust of sex in hope that the Goddess of Love above them might bless them with a child.

Delving into the history of this great mother goddess, we find that Astarte predates the Greek civilization; worship of this deity originally emanated from the Middle East, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia and Canaan. The Greeks, as we have mentioned, equated her with their goddess Aphrodite, and the message was clearly Eros, or sex. Or by the third century, at least, the people's conception of her had degenerated to that.

We discover upon research that this ancient fertility goddess is thousands of years older than Justina's parents realized. Talismans depicting her, often with exaggerated sex organs, have been found in Syria from 1100 B. C. and before. Because of the dread of drought and famine, ancient man felt it was especially important to placate this primordial earth goddess. In addition, to the ancients, Astarte ruled war, fertility and motherhood as well as sex.

Here was Astarte, the goddess of Tyre and Sidon, with her temple in Memphis and Carthage. Here was the Bride of Heaven, Astarte, whose image was found as far north as Spain; from her silky breasts flowed the rich mother's milk of life. None other than Ramses II was responsible for importing into the Egyptian religion from the antiquities of Mesopotamia, Arabia and Palestine a thousand years prior, the varying derivatives of this one primordial mom goddess, Qedeshat, Qudshu (the sacred prostitute goddess), Anat, Ashtart or Asherah.

She was always a symbol of life, of nectar, the nectar of life and abundance and fulfillment, generation and fertility.

Later, when the Jews invaded Palestine and found all these images of Astarte, they performed deicide on her by bastardizing her name to Ashtoreth, after the Hebrew word, *bosheth*, or shame. This was a common

practice of early Judaism. It wasn't happening for the Jews to worship any other god but Yahweh, so when they invaded a place and the mother earth fertility goddess was still watching over the fields and the boudoirs, it was inevitable that she'd find herself out of a job.

But don't feel too sorry for her, however, because she had her heyday. At one time there existed in the retinue of King Ahab and his wife some 450 prophets of Asherah (and 400 priests of Baal, the storm god, as well.) These are the knuckleheads that Elijah battles in 1 Kings, 18, and he succeeds in raining down fire upon them from the sky, which they could not replicate. Elijah knew how to summons the elemental salamanders in the air, apparently. He became the heir apparent!

5

At the age of ten, Cyprian, in preparation for a career as a sorcerer, was sent to Mount Olympus in Greece.

—Cyprian, they call it the dwelling place of the gods.

—There you will learn all manner of diabolical arts.

—Is Zeus there, and Apollo?

—A multitude of idols reside there.

—In which demons dwell.

—I know. There is a hierarchy of beings. God. Angels. Humans. Nature. Apostate spirits. Avenging infernal gods and elementals.

A crossing of the waters by sea was required for the young boy. He was cooped up below deck night after

night, listening to the tales of adventure the sailors told one another, each trying to top the previous one with new trials, greater dangers, more horrible monsters of the sea. Sometimes they would talk of other, more interesting matters, at least more interesting to Cyprian. They would talk about alchemy, for example.

—One of the greatest of all axioms is “Within everything is the seed of everything.” Grains of sand have in them the crystal and the precious metal, but it may take millions of years for their latent forms to become manifest. Likewise, the sun, moon and stars are all contained in a grain of sand.

—*Khem* was an ancient name for a land called Egypt. This is where we get the words chemistry and alchemy.

—The thrice great Hermes knew the art of transmutation of metals.

—As did the Babylonians and the Chaldeans.

It went on like this on the most favorable nights, and after a time Cyprian arrived at the school on Mount Olympus to begin his days of study and practice.

It was on Olympus that Cyprian learned the secret of changing the nature of the air. Not only base metal into gold, not only the manipulation of solids was possible to the alchemist – but air and water as well could be transmuted and effected. From our modern perspective, we must be reminded that we have succeeded in the laboratory with high powered particle accelerators to change one element into another, blasting neutrons at atoms and knocking off an occasional proton or electron in the process. Radium decay is a transmutation of an element; it starts out as radium with the atomic number of 88 but decays to lead with the atomic number of 82. So if radium can be turned into lead, why can't lead be turned into gold?

He was given an amulet to wear upon his arrival. It was in the shape of cross, but the lines intersected at the top, not two thirds of the way up as usual. And on this T shaped cross was crucified a twisted snake.

—The effect of alchemy on air is to bring up the wind, young scholar. Watch the fire in the hearth.

The Olympic instructor, demigod or demon, had but to think it and utter an incantation, and the fire in the fireplace flamed brightly and waved about as if being tossed by the wind from a giant bellows.

In other lessons, he watched in awe as a High Priestess of the Temple of Poseidon made it thunder and rain.

—Here, on Olympus, is Jupiter, Vulcan, Apollo, Mars, Neptune and Mercury; their female counterparts are Juno, Ceres, Vesta, Minerva, Venus and Diana. These are the names the Romans have given to the ancient ones.

At the culmination of an elaborate and extensive ceremony, the young Cyprian was amazed beyond measure to behold the sight of Juno herself, resplendently floating on a giant peacock, its plumage sparkling luminously.

—Yes, Cyprian, as an initiate you may be fortunate and get a glimpse of the goddess herself, if she is so inclined to grant it, but an audience is impossible until you complete your training.

—Ceres, or Demeter as she was called in ancient times, is the mother of Persephone, by Zeus. She is the patron of the Mysteries and you must please her in order to be granted accomplishment in the secret arts.

—God, on the other hand, being a luminous principle, resides in the midst of the most subtle fire, and He remains invisible to the eyes of those who do not elevate themselves above material life.

It was not long before the young magician learned the demonically sanctioned ability of making waves upon

the water, bringing blight upon a garden or a vineyard, and even sending diseases and plague upon people.

The methods of instruction varied, and during his time on the mount, Cyprian was exposed to legions of demons, with the veritable Prince of Darkness at their head. Some of these demons served him, others cried out in praise of the prince, still others were sent out among men to corrupt them.

Cyprian had to study and comprehend the nature of everything in its turn. The flowers, plants, fruits and trees; the stones, metals and gems. The elementals themselves, willing subjects to the invocation of learned magicians, had to be understood and conquered.

—The spiritual counterpart to the multiplicity of beings in nature is a host of deceptively non ethereal entities to which the name *elementals* has been given, Master Cyprian. What are the names of the four elementals?

—The names of the four elementals are gnomes, undines, sylphs and salamanders.

—And to what physical elements are they corresponded?

—Earth, Water, Air and Fire.

—Good, good! Now, if we wish to manifest a crystal, say an emerald, for example?

—We must call upon the gnomes to manufacture one for us, sir!

—And to rain fire upon your enemies?

—Call upon the salamanders to take flight!

—Understand, now student, understand that these elementals are not in the truest sense spirits, because they have flesh, blood and bones. They live and propagate offspring; they eat and talk, act and sleep, etc.

Also, during this period on Olympus, Cyprian of necessity had to perform a strict, forty day fast, eating

only acorns, not bread or anything else, and then only after the setting of the sun.

6

The Christian church next door to Justina's house was made of red brick and crude mortar. Its roof was high and vaulted, the seats were simple and made of sturdy wood, and the altar was appropriately large and made of weighty marble. Outside in the garden next to the church a larger than life statue of Jesus Christ stood triumphantly, with His arms outstretched and His palms open in benevolence and forgiveness. There Jesus stood tall and straight and strong, with his arms held high in the offering of peace and joy and love. Sometimes the deacon, whose name was Praylius, would leave a torchlight burning at night in the yard, and then the orange and golden flowing flickers of the flames would cast a huge shadow of the statue on the flat brick wall of the church.

It was a compelling sight for the young, confused Justina, consoling and serene, yet unfamiliar and vague. Was the figure of the man a god like Mercury? She felt intuitively that peace and truth were emanating from the building next door, and the verses which she heard regularly being chanted by the deacon convinced her of this even more.

As she scrubbed the hardwood floor near the Altar of Apollo, and looked up at the place where just last night she had been ashamed and humiliated by her parents, naked and drenched in the blood of a sacrificed beast, she got a bold idea. Why not secretly go over to the church next door and sneak inside?

She often saw individuals and couples come and go from the church, the church that always seemed to keep its doors open. She wondered for some time what it might look like in there, and once there, maybe she would meet the priest.

I mean, she thought, we're neighbors anyway, aren't we? It's not as though we hate Christians, is it?

She harbored some fear over her decision, however. Justina had heard from her parents that the Christians were cannibals and had a regular ritual that involved drinking blood. Nevertheless, after last night's ordeal and orgy, she found it difficult to imagine that anything as disgusting as that was happening in the Christian church next door.

It was early afternoon and both her father and her mother were hard at work; Aedesuius was making barrels instead of wheels, and Cledonia was weaving baskets instead of rugs. Justina finished with the mopping and the scrubbing of the temple floor, cleaned herself up, changed her frock, combed her hair and readied herself for her visit to the church.

There was a heavy oak double door with small diamond shaped stained glass windows on them. Within

the glass was a symbol which looked like the letter “P” and “X” combined. She saw that the doors were not locked and slowly pushed one of them open. Once inside, Justina was struck by the quietude and the cleanliness of the place. Votive candles flickered near a statue of a woman, a woman Justina didn’t recognize. It didn’t seem to be Hera, or Diana or Persephone. And she had a baby in her arms.

Along the rows of chairs in the middle of the chapel, Justina saw one old woman kneeling with her head bowed and obscured by a hood, lowly murmuring what she thought might be an incantation. Was this a Christian witch? In the front of the church, furthest away from the doors, in the sunlight streaming through the church’s stained glass windows, was what Justina immediately took to be the sacrificial altar. But it was what was above the altar that held her attention. It was a very large, golden sign of the cross, glowing with a brilliant radiance that seemed almost otherworldly to her.

—My dear child, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you here before.

Justina turned around abruptly to see a middle aged man with a white beard and piercing, jovial eyes smiling at her tenderly. He was dressed in simple black and white clothing.

—I, I have never been here before.

—Are you a Christian, child?

—No! I mean, I just live next door.

The man sat down in a seat next to the young girl and looked at her. She must be fifteen or sixteen, he thought. She was only four foot ten, weighed barely ninety eight pounds, and had pale white skin, deep brown hair and big blue eyes.

—My name is Praylius. I’m the deacon of this church.

—Oh. Then it's you that I've heard so often while in my room or the garden, singing your incantations?

—Ha ha. So, my dear, you're the sweet little girl from next door? How you've grown lately. I didn't recognize you. Well, then. Why have you come here, child? I know that your parents are Pagani – they're priests of Apollo, aren't they?

—Yes, sir, we aren't Christians, but, I, hearing your incantations, your chants, whatever they were, those words and your singing sounded wonderful!

—I'm so glad that you haven't found my prayers distasteful. God's message is universal; it's for everyone, regardless of one's beliefs. We have many former Pagani among our flock here.

—I was wondering, sir

—What's your name again, child?

—Justina, sir.

—Please, dear Justina, just call me deacon or father.

—Yes, father; I was wondering about the statue outside in the church's garden. What god is it?

—That is a statue of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

—Is he a god?

—My child, Jesus was a man, a man in whom God dwelled, and Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, reigns in heaven in a trinity with God the Father and the Holy Ghost.

—A man, Jesus Christ, the man in the statue? What do you mean, that God dwelled in him?

—I mean, my dear, that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he came to earth and became flesh so that we all might find forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body in Christ. He was born of the most pure virgin Mary, whom you see in that statue over there.

—I don't understand, father.

—In time you will, my dear, if you wish to learn about our faith. You can come to catechisms here and we will teach you.

Throughout the conversation with the amiable deacon, Justina kept returning her gaze to the golden cross that hung above the altar.

—What’s that symbol, deacon, the one above the altar and also it’s the same symbol on the top of the steeple?

—That, Justina, is the most important symbol we have as Christians. It’s the Holy Cross of Jesus. You see, Jesus died for our sins. Our Lord sacrificed his life so that we could have eternal life in God. He was crucified on a cross over two hundred and fifty years ago in Jerusalem in Judea. God gave his only begotten Son on the cross, such is His love of us all! That’s why we revere it so – to remind us of Christ’s suffering and glorious rising afterward into the kingdom of heaven.

The short preaching of the deacon found an attentive ear in Justina. His words, as it were, like the seeds spread by the farmer, fell upon fertile soil in Justina’s case. The words found root in Justina’s heart and began to quickly bear fruit, while at the same time uprooting the thorns of disbelief.

—Thank you, deacon Praylius. You’ve filled my heart and mind with new ideas. But my parents, my parents would not be happy with me if they knew I was here. I must go now.

—Just wait a moment, sweet child. Let me give you something to take along with you.

The kind and gentle priest found a missal and a wooden cross in the vestibule and wrapped them in a cloth.

—Take these, now, and in the privacy of your own home, you may read the words of Our Lord Jesus and take solace in the presence of His Holy Cross.