

A TALE OF  
DEATH  
AND  
GLORY



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AND  
GLORY

The Acts of Saint Sebastian  
and His Companions

SAINT AMBROSE OF MILAN

TRANSLATED BY  
FR. ROBERT NIXON, OSB

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## »»» — Translator's Note —————>

AMONG THE VAST, glorious, and almost innumerable company of martyrs of the early Church, Saint Sebastian stands out as one of the most widely revered and venerated. Saint Sebastian lived during the time of Emperor Diocletian in the late third century. He was a high-ranking soldier distinguished by his intelligence, courage, and talent. He performed his duties as a soldier in meritorious and exemplary fashion while working vigorously and inconspicuously to support other Christians, especially those who faced persecution and hardships. The legendary story of his cruel transfixion by a multitude of arrows is one of the most popular themes of Western religious iconography and has been depicted by artists including Botticelli, Titian, and El Greco.

The written accounts of the deeds, sufferings, and death of the martyrs may be considered one of the very earliest genres of Christian literature. In both Latin and Greek (as well as Coptic and Syriac), countless histories of early martyrs appeared. These

histories range from brief and rudimentary outlines of events to polished and refined artistic productions. Amongst the latter category, the *Acta Sancti Sebastiani*, presented here in an English translation for the first time, must be accorded primacy of place. It is a complex and sophisticated work, encompassing a great many characters and events, almost in the manner of a modern adventure novel.

The *Acta Sancti Sebastiani* is traditionally attributed to Saint Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–97), the great fourth-century Doctor of the Church, who was renowned as an outstanding homilist, exegete, and hymnographer. The date of the work and the style of the writing are all consistent with this attribution, and Saint Sebastian (as a native of Milan) would have been particularly important to Saint Ambrose and his congregation.

The story of Saint Sebastian and his companions is a work of considerable sophistication and serves not only to relate and record actions of heroic sanctity but also to convey a message of fidelity and courage and to expound with radiant clarity the doctrines and theology of the Church. Indeed, in the long discourses of Saint Sebastian and other characters in the story, one can often perceive something of the eloquent and learned voice of the author, Saint Ambrose, shining through.

The form of Christianity portrayed in the work is a distinctly “Roman” one, exemplifying the virtues of manly courage, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and honesty. In the various powerful arguments for the truth of the faith which are articulated, the doctrine is entirely and purely Christian, but the values extolled by Stoic philosophy—endurance, patience, detachment from



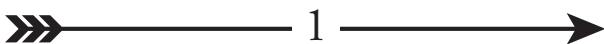
passing things, and acceptance of that which is inevitable—can also be quite clearly perceived.

Today, those who are loyal to the Catholic faith face many serious adversities, both overt and covert, from governments and authorities. The latter often strive to impose values which are contrary to Christ and His Church’s teachings just as in the times of Diocletian and Maximian.

In this context, the story of Saint Sebastian and his companions, which is a true “tale of blood and glory,” presents an inspiring example of those qualities of fidelity and courage which continue to be so urgently necessary for all Catholics today.

*Sancte Sebastiane, ora pro nobis!*

Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB  
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SEBASTIAN, A DEVOUT and sincere Christian, was born in our own beautiful city of Milan. He also enjoyed citizenship of the city of Narbonne through patrilineal descent. At the time when he lived, Diocletian and Maximian held power as co-emperors,<sup>1</sup> and Sebastian was greatly honored and esteemed by both of them. He was a most distinguished soldier and a man of outstanding wisdom and talent, and so he had been appointed to the illustrious rank of commander of the first cohort<sup>2</sup> of the imperial army. The two emperors, though themselves both godless and impious men, greatly valued and appreciated his constant presence at their court.

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<sup>1</sup> Diocletian ruled as emperor from 284 to 305. During most of that time, he shared power with a co-emperor, Maximian.

<sup>2</sup> The rank of commander of the first cohort was considered to be one of the most powerful positions in the Roman army, commanding eight hundred elite soldiers, or five centurions. The first cohort was also the most critical cohort in battle, for they led the initial attack.

Sebastian was ever-ready with prudent and intelligent advice. He was honest and candid, energetic, reliable, competent, and in all respects a thoroughly honorable man. His soldiers loved him as if he were a father to them, and all who were at the palace venerated him with profound and sincere regard. For Sebastian was a worshipper of the true God, and each person who is filled with the gifts of Divine grace and who cultivates real virtue will always tend to be well-esteemed by his fellows in every place and time.

Sebastian diligently offered daily prayers to Christ with all humility and reverence. Yet he did this secretly and kept his faith hidden from the eyes of the emperors. For Diocletian and Maximian were both fanatical persecutors of the Christian religion. But the reason Sebastian concealed his faith from them was not that he was afraid of death or torture, nor that he was reluctant to lose his high position and the wealth and prestige which accompanied it. Rather, he knew that by serving well at the court and exercising a role of leadership in the army, he would be able to encourage and assist his many fellow Christians who faced persecutions and hardships and embolden them to be steadfast in their faith—to the bitter end if necessary. Indeed, Sebastian's words of encouragement and exhortation had fortified the minds of many to face the bloody terrors of martyrdom without flinching, and thus to attain the golden crown of eternal glory.

Among those whom he encouraged were two twin brothers, Marcus and Marcellianus, men of illustrious lineage and considerable wealth. These two brothers had both been imprisoned on account of their allegiance to the Christian faith, and they were

arrested and held in chains. But every day, Sebastian would go to visit them and pray with them, offering them all the spiritual support he possibly could.

Both Marcus and Marcellianus, as well as their servants who had been incarcerated with them, were subjected to a variety of cruel tortures in an effort to induce them to renounce their faith in Christ. Yet thanks to Sebastian's encouragement, they remained steadfast and unwavering. For they saw that all earthly things were passing and that whatever torments they now suffered would seem to be but a momentary dream in comparison with the everlasting and infinite bliss of heaven. Thus fortified by the potent medicine of faith, all traces of fear were dispelled from the hearts of these two courageous and holy brothers.