

CHAPTER
6

Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE

Emperor Galerius's Edict of Toleration

During the third century and the early years of the fourth century, Roman rulers cruelly persecuted Christians. Despite repression, the religion continued to thrive and spread. In A.D. 311, Emperor Galerius issued the first edict, or formal proclamation, of toleration of Christianity just a few days before his death. Why did Galerius decide to tolerate Christians?

Amongst our other measures for the advantage of the Empire, we have hitherto endeavored to bring all things into conformity with the ancient laws and public order of the Romans. We have been especially anxious that even the Christians, who have abandoned the religion of their ancestors, should return to reason. For they have fallen, we know not how, into such perversity and folly that, instead of adhering to those ancient institutions which possibly their own forefathers established, they have arbitrarily made laws of their own and collected together various peoples from various quarters.

After the publication, on our part, of an order commanding Christians to return to the observance of the ancient customs, many of them, it is true, submitted in view of the danger, while many others suffered death. Nevertheless, since many of them have continued to persist in their opinions and we see that in the present situation they neither duly adore and venerate the gods nor yet worship the god of the Christians, we, with our wonted clemency, have judged it is wise to extend a pardon even to these men and permit them once more to become Christians and reestablish their places of meetings;

in such manner, however, that they shall in no way offend against good order. We propose to notify the magistrates in another mandate in regard to the course that they should pursue.

Whereof it should be the duty of the Christians, in view of our clemency, to pray to their god for our welfare, for that of the Empire, and for their own, so that the Empire may remain intact in all its parts, and that they themselves may live safely in their habitations.

from Milton Viorst, ed., The Great Documents of Western Civilization (New York: Bantam, 1965), 6.

Activity Options

- Determining Main Ideas** With several classmates, role-play Christians who live in the Roman empire in A.D. 311. Discuss your reactions to Galerius's edict.
- Analyzing Issues** Make a two-column chart. List what Galerius offered Christians in one column and what he asked in return in the other column. Then discuss with classmates whether or not this edict was fair.