



Introduction: A Letter That Crossed the Centuries

Sometime around the year A.D. 112, the Roman governor **Pliny the Younger** wrote a letter to Emperor **Trajan**. What at first glance seemed like a bureaucratic inquiry about how to deal with Christians, ended up becoming — without their knowing — **the first non-biblical pagan testimony describing early Christian worship**. This letter, preserved by history, becomes today **a window into the soul of the first Christians**, at a time when being a disciple of Christ could cost you your life.

Today, more than nineteen centuries later, we still face — in different forms — **the same dilemmas of fidelity, persecution, and witness**. How can an ancient letter help us live the Gospel today? What does it reveal about the **deep identity of Christians**, about worship, community, and obedience to God in the midst of the world?

1. Historical Context: Rome, Suspicion, and a Faith That Didn't Fit

Pliny the Younger was the governor of the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus (in modern-day Turkey). A cultured, legalistic, and meticulous man, he encountered a puzzling phenomenon: **people from all social classes** claiming to be Christians, gathering in secret, and refusing to worship the gods of the State.

In his letter, Pliny admits he didn't know how to judge them. They weren't committing violent crimes or political conspiracies, but their refusal to offer incense to the emperor and their obstinacy in confessing Christ seemed dangerously subversive to him.

What astonished him most was discovering that **their "crime" consisted in gathering at dawn, singing hymns to Christ "as to a god," committing to not do evil, and sharing a common meal**. Nothing more.

2. What Exactly Did the Letter Say? A Brief Summary of Its Content

Pliny informs Trajan that:

- He interrogated Christians and ex-Christians, even under torture, and found that:
- Their practice consisted of **gathering on a fixed day before sunrise**, singing hymns



responsively to Christ as to a deity.

- They vowed not to commit theft, adultery, fraud, or breach of trust.
- Afterward, they would separate and reassemble to share a meal, “an ordinary and innocent one.”
- Under pressure, many denied being Christians or said they had been “a long time ago.”

Trajan, for his part, responds that **Christians should not be actively sought, but if denounced and they do not recant, they must be punished.**

3. Hidden Beauty: What This Letter Reveals About Early Christianity

What was merely a report for Pliny is, for us, **an X-ray of the early Christian soul:**

a) Christ is Lord

The singing “to Christ as to a god” shows a **high Christology** already present in the early 2nd century. He was not just a prophet or moral teacher but **the Son of God**, worthy of worship.

“Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...” (Philippians 2:9-10)

b) The Eucharist at the Center

Though Pliny calls it “a common meal,” he likely refers to the **breaking of the bread**, followed by a fraternal meal (agape). Even then, **the Eucharist was the heart of the community.**

c) A Life of Moral Coherence

The commitment “not to commit crimes, adultery, theft, or deceit” shows that following Christ was not just about worship, but about **a transformed life**, moral integrity.



d) Community and the Lord's Day

Meeting on a "fixed day" — almost certainly **Sunday**, the day of the Resurrection — reveals a **structured, faithful, and persevering community**.

4. Theological Significance: Christianity as a Seed in Hostile Soil

This document echoes Jesus' command to be **salt and light** (cf. Mt 5:13-16). Christianity did not seek conflict with Rome, but neither could it submit its conscience to Caesar.

Like the three young men in the Book of Daniel, **the Christians of Bithynia refused to worship statues**, even if it meant martyrdom. This peaceful resistance is the essence of **Christian martyrdom**, which does not hate or destroy, but **also does not compromise**.

| *"We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)*

Pliny's letter confirms that **from the beginning, the Christian faith was not a private doctrine but a public, transforming, and dangerous reality for the world's idols**.

5. And Today? Practical Applications and Spiritual Guidance

a) Rediscover the Value of Sunday

Gathering "on a fixed day" at dawn challenges us today. What place does Sunday Mass hold in our lives? Do we live it as the center or as a mere obligation?

| ***Proposal:** Reclaim Sunday as the **day of the Lord and the family**, with Mass, rest, prayer, and acts of charity.*



b) Live a Morally Coherent Life

The Christians of Bithynia were recognizable by their way of life. Today, being faithful to Christian morals (in sexuality, work, honesty, truth) is also a form of daily martyrdom.

***Proposal:** Examine your life in light of your baptismal commitments. Are you living in coherence with what you profess?*

c) Confess Christ Boldly

Many denied Christ out of fear. But others confessed Him, even unto death. Today we may not be asked to burn incense to a statue, but we are asked to **renounce truth, the Gospel, or the Cross** in the name of “tolerance” or success.

***Proposal:** Do not be ashamed of your faith. Speak about Christ. Defend life. Respond with love, but without compromise.*

d) Rediscover Christian Community

Those Christians **did not live their faith in isolation**. They gathered, encouraged one another, supported each other. Today more than ever, we need community, parish life, small groups, brothers and sisters in the faith.

***Proposal:** Get involved in your parish. Find a prayer or study group. Be Church.*

6. A Pastoral Guide: How to Live Like the Early Christians Today

Step 1: Deepen your relationship with Christ. Dedicate daily time to personal prayer and reading the Gospel. Only from intimacy with Christ is the strength for witness born.



Step 2: Be faithful to Sunday Mass and frequent the Eucharist. It is the center of our faith. Without it, we lose our soul.

Step 3: Examine your moral life. Make a regular examination of conscience. Seek confession. Live as a disciple, not just a sympathizer.

Step 4: Don't hide. Bring your faith into your workplace, online, and in public life. Without imposition, but without shame.

Step 5: Love within community. No Christian survives alone. Surround yourself with brothers and sisters. Live out charity.

Conclusion: The Letter That Reminds Us Who We Are

Pliny the Younger's letter was not meant to be a praise of Christianity. But it clearly reveals how a community filled with the Spirit, marked by truth, love, and moral coherence, appeared to outsiders.

Today, in a world that once again views Christianity with suspicion, that letter resonates anew. We are not called to fear, but to faithfulness. Not to isolation, but to witness. Not to a secret faith, but to **a life that sings to Christ "as to a god"**, every day, with our lips and with our lives.

"Be holy in all your conduct, as He who called you is holy." (1 Peter 1:15)

And you? What song do you sing at dawn? To what God do you offer your life?
The silent witness of Bithynia invites you today to **rediscover the transforming power of authentic Christianity.**