

Vincent, Deacon of Saragossa and Martyr, 304

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By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Revelation 7:13–17; Psalm 31:1–5; Luke 12:2–12**

This morning I started with my copy of the second edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* to see what information they have on Vincent. It's a short entry: "St. Vincent (4th cent.), the proto-martyr of Spain. According to a tradition of the late fourth century onwards, referred to be St. Augustine [of Hippo] and by Prudentius [a Spanish Latin poet and hymn-writer] who died c. 410, St. Vincent was educated and ordained deacon by Valerius, Bishop of Saragossa, and suffered in the Diocletianic persecution."¹

The Oxford Dictionary tells us that Diocletian's military career led the army to proclaim him emperor in the year 284, after the murder of Emperor Numerian. Numerian's joint-emperor was murdered by his officers. For two years, Diocletian ruled the entire Roman world before sharing power with others.² According to the Dictionary, he retired in the year 305 and died in 313, but other online resources offer the date of the third of December in the year 311.³ Britannica online gives the year 316. He was an historically important Roman emperor. Reading about him reminded me of the first Roman emperor, Augustus.

For a long time, I had wondered how Christians managed property before Constantine defeated Maxentius, the then-emperor in Italy and Africa, in battle on the 28th of October in the year 312. Maxentius died that day, drowning nearer Rome after falling into the Tiber.⁴ Persecution of Christians would end after Constantine and his Co-Emperor Licinius issued a document that has come to be known as the Edict of Milan. *The Oxford Dictionary* says that it was not legally an "edict," nor was it issued in

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Vincent, St.," 1441.

² *Ibid.*, s.v. "Diocletian, Valerius Diocletianus," 404–05.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletian>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxentius>

Milan.⁵ That said, Christianity would eventually develop into a faith that would persecute others, notably Jews and Muslims, from time to time.

Diocletian's persecution started with the clergy and expanded to include laypersons. The Dictionary says, "The punishment inflicted for resistance was imprisonment, torture, and, in some cases, death."⁶ The paragraph about the persecution begins with this sentence: "For the greater part of [Diocletian's] reign the Christians seem to have enjoyed the tranquility which had been theirs since the Rescript of [the Emperor] Galerius [in the year (260)]."⁷ I confess I had never heard of this rescript, but it explains why Christian bishops would have buildings of their own where believers could worship.

The Diocletian Persecution in the decade before Constantine was the most widespread and cruel. Our Calendar includes three commemorations, Agnes, Vincent, and Alban, England's proto-martyr.⁸ Many died across the Roman world.⁹

Yesterday in my homily, I mentioned how shocking it was to classical culture for Christians to handle and treasure the bodies of the dead. Some rites get a total focus from me, and I'm sure that true for other members of the clergy. One which takes a great deal of concentration and emotional control for me is the commendation at the end of the Burial of the Dead. I cherish the ceremonies of honoring with water and incense the coffin or urn containing the mortal remains of a child of God now in the presence of the Almighty.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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⁵ ODCC, s.v., "Milan, Edict of," 915.

⁶ Ibid., s.v. "Diocletian," 404.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 19, 24.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christians_martyred_during_the_reign_of_Diocletian, (accessed 22 January 2021).