

## ***The Canonical Letter of Peter, Bishop of Alexandria and Martyr***

### ***Canon 1: Lapsed after torture***

There are those who have been reported and thrown into prison and who have sustained intolerable tortures and unbearable whippings and many other dreadful afflictions, but afterwards have been betrayed by the frailty of the flesh. Even though they were not at first received [back into the Church] on account of their great fall, yet they have contended sorely and have resisted long and hard. For they did not come to their present condition of their own will, but were betrayed by the frailty of the flesh, for they show in their bodies the marks of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons and because they have spent three years bewailing their fault and as this is now our fourth Easter under persecution it is enough, I say, that from the time of their presenting themselves to the church a further forty days of penance should be enjoined upon them as a penalty. During these forty days they ought to recall that even though Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ fasted for forty days after He had been baptized He was still tempted by the Devil. And during these days, through hard spiritual exercise and keener vigilance, they will be alert in prayer, meditating upon what was said by the Lord to him who tempted Him to fall down and worship him: "Get behind me, Satan; for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve".<sup>2</sup>

### ***Canon 2 Lapsed after imprisonment***

In the case of those who, after that they had been thrown into prison and endured afflictions and nauseating stench in the dungeon as in a place besieged, afterwards, without the hardship of torture, were led captive, being broken down by lack of strength and a certain blindness of the understanding, a year [of penance] in addition to the foregoing time is enough. For they gave themselves up to be afflicted for the name of Christ, even if in their dungeon they enjoyed much consolation and help from their brethren. This help, indeed, they will return many times over, seeing they desire to be set free from that most bitter captivity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6: 17.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4: 10

Devil, especially remembering one who said: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of retribution ".<sup>3</sup>

### *Canon 3: Lapsed and regret it*

But there are those who have suffered none of these things, and have shown none of the fruit of faith, but of their own accord have gone over to wickedness, being betrayed by fear and cowardice, and now come to repentance. For these it is necessary and appropriate to set out the parable of the unfruitful fig-tree, as the Lord says: "A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumberest thou the ground? And he answering, said to him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it. And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that you shall cut it down". If they keep this before their eyes, and show forth fruit worthy of repentance for the same interval of time [as the fig tree], they will be helped.

### *Canon 4: Lapsed and unrepentant*

To those who are altogether reprobate and unrepentant, who possess the Ethiopian's unchanging skin<sup>4</sup> and the leopard's spots, it shall be said, as it was said to another fig-tree, "Let no fruit grow on you henceforward for ever"; and it presently withered away.<sup>5</sup> For in them is fulfilled what was spoken by the Preacher: "That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered".<sup>6</sup> For unless that which is crooked is made straight, it is impossible for it to be adorned; and unless that which is lacking is made up, it cannot be numbered. Therefore in the end there will happen unto them what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet: "They shall look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against Me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 13:23

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:19

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:15

quenched; and they shall be seen by all men".<sup>7</sup> Since the same has also prophesied, "But the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no rest for the wicked, says God".<sup>8</sup>

### *Canon 5: Those who used cunning to avoid sacrificing*

But there are those who have used dissimulation as David did when he pretended to be mad to avoid death not being really mad.<sup>9</sup> There are those who have not nakedly written down their denial [of the faith], but being greatly troubled, and being like sensible and deliberate boys in the company of foolish children, they mocked the snares of their enemies, either walking on past the altars, or have given a written declaration, or have sent pagans to sacrifice instead of themselves. Some of those who have confessed [the faith] have, so I have heard, pardoned some of them, since with the greatest caution they avoided touching the sacrificial fire with their own hands or offering incense to the impure demons, and they escaped the notice of their persecutors in what they were doing, so let a penalty of six months' penance be imposed upon them.

For in this way will they be significantly profited, meditating upon the prophet's words, and saying, "Unto us a child is born and is given to us; and the government shall be upon His shoulders: and His name shall be called the Messenger of my mighty counsel".<sup>10</sup> This child, as you know, was conceived to preach repentance six months after the conception of another child and he also before the Lord's coming preached repentance for the remission of sins.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we hear both of them preaching, in the first place, not only repentance, but the Kingdom of Heaven, which, as we have learned, is within us.<sup>12</sup> For the word in which we believe is near us, in our mouth, and in our heart. So these people, being put in remembrance of this fact, will learn to confess with their mouths that Jesus is the Christ by believing in their hearts that God has raised him from the dead, and will be like those who hear that with the heart man believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 66, 24 (LXX)

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 57:20-21

<sup>9</sup> Cf. 1 Samuel 21: 13

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 9:6

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Luke 1:76-77

<sup>12</sup> Luke 17:21

<sup>13</sup> Romans 10:8-10

### *Canon 6: Christian slaves who sacrificed for their masters*

There are those who have sent Christian slaves [to offer sacrifice] for them. The slaves are under their master's hand, and in a way are themselves also in the custody of their masters and have been threatened by them. They have come to their present situation and have lapsed on account of their fear, so they shall during one year show forth the works of penitence, learning for the future, as the slaves of Christ, to do the will of Christ and to fear Him, listening to this especially, that "whatsoever good thing any man does, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free".<sup>14</sup>

### *Canon 7: Slave-owners who ordered slaves to sacrifice for them*

The free men<sup>15</sup> however shall do penance under careful scrutiny for three years, both for their dissimulation, and for having compelled their fellow-servants to offer sacrifice, inasmuch as they did not obey the Apostle, who told masters to treat their slaves as they treat themselves, and forbear threatening; knowing, says he, that their Master and ours is in heaven,<sup>16</sup> and that there is no respect of [persons](#) with Him.<sup>17</sup>

Now, if we all have one Master, who is no respecter of person, since Christ is all and in all, whether barbarian, Scythian, bond or free,<sup>18</sup> they ought to consider what they have done, wishing to save their own souls. They have dragged into idolatry their fellow-slaves, who would have been able to escape had they [the masters] given to them that which is just and equitable, as again says the Apostle.

### *Canon 8: Lapsed who have repudiated their sacrifice*

There are those who have been handed over [to the authorities], and have fallen, and have then of their own accord entered into the contest, confessing themselves to be Christians, and have been tortured and thrown into prison. It is right that we join together with joy and exultation of heart in supporting them and join with them in all things, both in prayer and in partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the consolation of the Word. We do this so that if they contend more vigorously,

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<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 6:8

<sup>15</sup> viz. the masters of the slaves mentioned in Canon 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 6:9

<sup>17</sup> Romans 2:11

<sup>18</sup> Colossians 3:11; Galatians 3: 28

they too may be counted worthy of the "prize of their high calling".<sup>19</sup> For "a just man falls seven times and rises up again", so it says.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, if all that have lapsed had done this, they would have shown forth a most perfect penitence, and one which penetrates the whole heart.

### *Canon 9: Volunteers and refugees for Christ*

There are those also who, as it were from sleep, throw themselves into a contest which is painful and promises to be protracted, and bring upon themselves temptations like those of a battle at sea with its many waves - or rather they are heaping up coals to inflame the sinners against the brethren. With them also we must join in Christian fellowship, inasmuch as they come to this conflict in the name of Christ, even though they take no heed unto His words, when He teaches us "Pray that we enter not into temptation";<sup>21</sup> and again in His prayer He says to His Father, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil".<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps also they do not know that our Master and our Great Teacher often retired from those who would lay snares for Him, and that sometimes He did not walk about openly because of them. Even when the time of His Passion drew near, He did not hand Himself over, but waited until they came to Him with swords and staves. For He said to them, "Have you come out, as against a thief with swords and staves, for to take Me?".<sup>23</sup> And they delivered Him, it says, to Pilate.<sup>24</sup>

Those who walk keeping Him before them as an example, experience the same things He did, recollecting His divine words, through which he strengthens us, as He speaks about persecution: "Take heed unto yourselves, for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues".<sup>25</sup> And what He says is "they will deliver you up", and not "you shall deliver yourselves up"; and "you shall be brought before rulers and kings for My sake",<sup>26</sup> but not, you shall bring yourselves.

For He would also have us pass from place to place as long as there are those who persecute us for His Name's sake, even as again we hear Him saying, "But when

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<sup>19</sup> Philippians 3:14

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 24:16

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 26:41

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 6:13

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 26:55

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 27:2

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 10:17

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 10:18

they persecute you in this city, flee into another".<sup>27</sup> For He did not wish us go over to the ministers and satellites of the Devil, and be the cause to them of a manifold death, inasmuch as thus we should be compelling them both to be harsher, and to carry out their deadly works.

He would have us wait, and to take heed to ourselves, to watch and to pray, lest we enter into temptation.<sup>28</sup> Thus Stephen, following in His footsteps, was the first to suffer martyrdom. He was apprehended in Jerusalem by the lawbreakers, and being brought before the council, he was stoned and he was glorified in the name of Christ, praying with the words, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge".<sup>29</sup> Thus James, the second [martyr], being apprehended by Herod, was beheaded with the sword. Thus Peter, the first of the Apostles, having been apprehended often and thrown into prison, and treated with ignominy, was finally crucified at Rome. Likewise also, the renowned Paul having been oftentimes delivered up and brought in peril of death, having endured many evils, and making his boast in his numerous persecutions and afflictions, was also himself beheaded in the same city, so ending his life loyal to the things in which he gloried. At Damascus he was let down by night in a basket by the wall, and escaped the hands of those who sought to capture him.<sup>30</sup>

For what they set before themselves, first and foremost, was to preach the good news and to teach the Word of God, in it "confirming the brethren, so that they might continue in the faith".<sup>31</sup> They said this also, that we can enter into the kingdom of God only through much tribulation.<sup>32</sup> For they sought not what was profitable for them, but that which was profitable for the many, so that they might be saved, and so that they might be enabled to say unto them many things conducing to this, that they might act suitably to the Word of God, unless, as the Apostle says, "the time should fail me" in speaking.<sup>33</sup>

### *Canon 10: Lapsed clergy*

It is therefore not right either that those of the clergy who have deserted of their own accord and have lapsed and have later taken up the contest again, should remain any longer in their sacred office. For they have left destitute the flock of the

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 10:23

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 26:41

<sup>29</sup> Acts 7:59

<sup>30</sup> Acts 9: 23-5; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33

<sup>31</sup> Acts 14: 22

<sup>32</sup> Acts 14:22

<sup>33</sup> Hebrews 11:32

Lord, and brought blame upon themselves, a thing not done by any of the Apostles. For although the blessed Apostle Paul had undergone many persecutions, and could show the prizes of many contests, although he knew that it was far better "to depart and to be with Christ", was still able to say "nevertheless for your sake to abide in the flesh is more necessary".<sup>34</sup> For considering not his own advantage but the advantage of many, that they might be saved, he judged it more necessary than his own rest to remain with the brethren, and to have a care for them. He also wished the man who teaches to be in doctrine an example to the faithful.<sup>35</sup>

Whence it follows that those who strove to justify the faith in prison but who fell from their ministry, and have again taken up the struggle, are plainly wanting in perception. For how else is it that they seek for that which they have abandoned, when in this present time they can be useful to their brethren? For as long as they remained firm and steadfast they were forgiven for that which they had done contrary to reason. But once they had lapsed, as having carried themselves with ostentation and brought reproach upon themselves, they can no longer discharge their sacred ministry; so let them rather take heed to pass their life in humility, ceasing from vainglory.

It is sufficient for them to be in communion, and this is granted them with scrupulousness and care for two reasons; both so that they should not seem to be afflicted with sorrow, and hence by violence seize on their departure from this world, and also lest any of the lapsed should have a pretext for going slack in the observance of their own penalty. These [lapsed clergy] indeed will reap more shame and ignominy than all others, like the man who laid the foundation and was not able to finish it. For all that pass by, it says, will begin to mock him, saying, "This man laid the foundation, and was not able to finish it".<sup>36</sup>

### *Canon 11: Demonstrators in court*

There are those who first, when the persecution grew warm, leaped forth, standing around the judgment-seat watching the holy martyrs who were hastening to the prize of their high calling,<sup>37</sup> and then, fired with a holy zeal, gave themselves up to this. They were very bold and fearless, especially when they saw those who were brought down and lapsed - on their account they were roused mightily within, and,

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<sup>34</sup> Philippians 1:23-24

<sup>35</sup> Titus 2:7

<sup>36</sup> Luke 14: 29-30

<sup>37</sup> Philippians 3:14

as it were by some inward voice, impelled to fight down and subdue the Adversary who was so pleased with himself. They were in a hurry to do this so that the Adversary might not seem to be "wise in his own conceit",<sup>38</sup> thinking that by reason of his cunning he had defeated them, even though it escaped his observation that he was overcome by those who with constancy had endured the tortures of the whips and claws, and the sharp edge of the sword, the burning in the fire, and the immersion in the water.

It is right to give our approval to those who think it right that, in accordance with faith, prayers and supplications should be made either on behalf of those who have been punished in prison and have been betrayed by hunger and thirst, or for those who outside prison have been tortured with claws and whips in front of the judges, and afterwards have been overcome by the infirmity of the flesh. For it hurts no one to sympathize with the sorrow and affliction of those who sorrow and mourn for those who in the contest have been overcome by the great strength of the evil-contriving Devil, whether it be for parents, or brethren, or children.

For we know that some have obtained the goodness of God on account of the faith of others, both in the remission of sins, and in the health of their bodies, and in the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, we are mindful of the many labours and distresses which they have sustained for the name of Christ; not only have they themselves repented, but they have also bewailed that which they did when they were betrayed by the weakness and mortal character of the body. Besides, they testify that in their life they have as it were become aliens from their city. Let us pray with them and plead together for their reconciliation, together with other things that are befitting, through Him who is our Advocate with the Father, and makes propitiation for our sins. "And if any man sin", says he, "we have an Advocate with the Father. Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins".<sup>39</sup>

### *Canon 12: Christians who bribed the authorities*

No accusation can be brought against those who have given money so that they might be entirely undisturbed by evil. For they have sustained the loss and sacrifice of their goods so that they would not hurt or destroy their soul, which others for the sake of filthy lucre have not done. However the Lord says, "What will it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"<sup>40</sup> and

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<sup>38</sup> Romans 12:16

<sup>39</sup> 1 John 2: 1

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 16:26



again "You cannot serve God and Mammon".<sup>41</sup> In these things, then, they have shown themselves the servants of God, inasmuch as they have hated, trodden under foot, and despised money, and have thus fulfilled what is written: "The ransom of a man's life are his riches".<sup>42</sup> For we read also in the Acts of the Apostles that those who in place of Paul and Silas were dragged before the city magistrates at Thessalonica, were dismissed with a heavy fine. For after they [their accusers] had been very burdensome to them on account of His Name, and had disturbed the crowd and the rulers of the city, "having taken security", it says, "of Jason, and of the others, they let them go and the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night to Beroea".<sup>43</sup>

### *Canon 13: Refugees*

It is therefore not lawful to accuse those who have left everything, and have retired for the safety of their lives, even if others were detained on their account. For at Ephesus they seized Gaius and Aristarchus instead of Paul, these being Paul's travel companions, and took them to the theatre.<sup>44</sup> Since the tumult had arisen by reason of Paul having persuaded many of them and brought them to the worship of God "he wished himself to enter the crowd, but his disciples would not let him".<sup>45</sup> What is more, "certain of the leading men of Asia who were his friends sent to him, and begged him not to venture into the theatre".<sup>46</sup>

But if any persists in contending against those who sincerely hold to the saying, "Escape for your life; look not behind you".<sup>47</sup> Let them recall to their minds also how Peter, the leader of the Apostles, was thrown into prison, and delivered to four detachments of soldiers to guard him.<sup>48</sup> He escaped by night, and was rescued from the hands of the Jews by a command of the angel of the Lord, and so it says, "As soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death".<sup>49</sup> No blame is attributed to Peter for their deaths, for it was in their power to escape when

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew 6:24

<sup>42</sup> Proverbs 13:8

<sup>43</sup> Acts 17:9-10

<sup>44</sup> Acts 19:26-30

<sup>45</sup> Acts 19: 30; cf. 19, 26-30

<sup>46</sup> Acts 19: 31

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 19:17

<sup>48</sup> Acts 12:4

<sup>49</sup> Acts 12:18-19

they saw what had happened - just as all the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings might have escaped if their parents had known what was going to happen.<sup>50</sup> These were put to death by the murderer Herod, in order to secure the death of one Infant whom he was looking for, the Infant who himself escaped at the command of an angel of the Lord. This Infant now began quickly to strip the slain enemy of his arms and quickly began to plunder, according to the name whereby he was called: as it is written, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz - hasten the spoil, speed the plunder". For before the child will know how to cry 'father' and 'mother', the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria.<sup>51</sup>

The Magi having been despoiled and plundered, humbly and as suppliants adore the Child, opening their treasures, and offering unto Him gifts most fitting and magnificent — gold, and frankincense, and myrrh — as to a king, to God, and to Man. Whence they were no longer willing to return to the Assyrian king, being forbidden to do so by Providence. For being warned of God in a dream, it says, that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.<sup>52</sup> Then the bloodthirsty Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was exceeding angry, and he sent forth, it says, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem and in its surroundings from two years old and under, according to the time about which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.<sup>53</sup> In addition to them, he sought to kill another infant that had been born earlier, and not being able to find him, he slew the child's father Zacharias between the Temple and the Altar,<sup>54</sup> the child escaping with his mother Elizabeth. So these men that withdrew are not at all to be blamed.

### *Canon 14: Christians forced to sacrifice*

Some have suffered much violence and torture, and have had iron and chains put into their mouths and have bravely borne through the working of their faith the burning of their hands when against their will they have been forced to perform the profane sacrifice. From their prison the thrice-blessed martyrs for the faith and others of their brethren have written to me respecting these same things which were done to those in Libya.

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<sup>50</sup> Matthew 2:13-16

<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 8: 3-4

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 2:11-13

<sup>53</sup> Matthew 2:16

<sup>54</sup> Matthew 23:55, 2 Chron. 24: 10-22

Such witnesses as these who have had others, especially others of the brethren, testify for them may be placed in the ministry among those who have confessed the faith. They were have been mortified by many tortures, and no longer had the strength to speak or to give utterance or to move so as to resist those who vainly offered them violence. For they did not assent to their impiety. As I have again heard from their fellow-ministers, he who has ordered his life after the example of Timothy will be reckoned among the confessors. He too obeyed him who says, "Follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto you are also called, when you have made the good confession before many witnesses".<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Timothy 6:11-12