

ALMACIUS

Almacius was a hermit monk who came to Rome from the East about A.D. 400. He is also known as "Telemachus". Upon arriving in Rome he was shocked to see gladiatorial contests in the amphitheater. Even though there are various accounts of his death it does seem that his death brought to an end the horrible practice of watching people die as a form of entertainment.

Somehow this devout man wound up in the amphitheater. Some say he went there by choice and others that he was inadvertently swept along by the crowd of eager spectators. At any rate he was so shocked to see men killing one another that he rushed down from the bleachers and tried to stop them. When he vaulted over the arena wall to separate the combatants the outraged audience called for his death. Whether he was killed by the mob or hacked to death by the gladiators is also a matter of dispute.

History reveals that many who died to entertain the masses were Christians. The earliest Christian martyrs in Rome died in a huge amphitheater called the Circus Maximus. It was first built as a race track in the sixth century B.C. and held as many as 300,000 spectators. It was destroyed by fire and rebuilt by Claudius in A.D. 36. After the great fire of A.D. 64 it was rebuilt by Nero. It is thought that Nero set fire to Rome as an inexpensive way of getting rid of the slums, and used Christians as a convenient scape goat for his own crime. Ultimately, eleven different Roman Emperors would be involved in the persecution of Christians.

Christians also died by thousands in the Colosseum. This magnificent 50,000 seat amphitheater was begun by the Emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69 - 79), inaugurated by the Emperor Titus (A.D. 79 - 81) and completed by the Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81 - 96).

It is indeed a sad day for society when death for sport

becomes a popular form of entertainment. After everything else is boring, death is the last chance for the ultimate high. Consequently, thousands crowded their way into the stadium to watch the gladiators. The entertainment began with a colorful parade known as the pompa. This was similar in some ways to the procession of the athletes on opening day of the modern Olympic Games. The pompa was usually accompanied by jugglers, acrobats, and other performers, marching to a loud drum beat accompanied by trumpets, flutes and sometimes even a large hydraulic organ. The organ probably also played during the actual fighting, producing the same effect as the background musical score of a movie.

Next the gladiators proceeded, in full public view, to draw lots, which decided who would fight whom. Then an official inspected their weapons to make sure they were sound and well sharpened. Finally, the gladiators soberly raised their weapons toward the highest-ranking official present and said: "Morituri te salutamus!" ("We who are about to die salute you!").

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, describes the addictive nature of these gladiatorial games. His friend, Alypius (later bishop of Tagaste) attended the games in A.D. 385. Vowing not to watch the carnage he was overcome by curiosity. His imagination went wild amidst the shouts, screams, and clash of weapons. When he reluctantly opened his eyes, instead of being repulsed by what he saw, he was transfixed by it. The blood letting drew his eyes like a magnet and he could not look away. Sadly, he wound up embracing the very thing he originally despised.

But now let us return to poor Almacius. How utterly unsophisticated and naive he must have been. How totally out of touch with the way things are in the big city. Like a fool he tried to change centuries of tradition in a moment of time. Like a ignorant child he dared to raise his feeble hands in front of a massive juggernaut. Everybody else knew how foolish he was. Everybody else knew that it couldn't be done. Everybody else knew that what he was trying to do was suicide. Throwing

caution to the wind, however, he did it anyhow. He preferred to die rather than compromise his godly principles. He was willing to fling down his life without a whine or a whimper than to sit passively on the sidelines.. With the help of Almighty God, He did it! The Emperor Honorius, who ruled from 395 - 423 A.D., hailed Almacius as a Christian martyr and in A.D. 404 issued a decree forbidding all gladiatorial games.