by Curtis Blair

On any given day, tens of thousands of spectators passed through these arches on their way to the games

The Church was not silent

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Excitement was in the air. Spectators were turning out by the thousands and passing through the great stone arches of Rome's massive Colosseum. It was to be another day of gladiator fights, and a raucous display of blood, guts, and killing awaited the anxious fans.

On this particular day, however, there was at least one who had not come to cheer and be entertained. A Christian monk, Telemachus, had traveled to Rome from the distant eastern provinces to publicly protest what he believed to be a society-sanctioned crime against his fellow man. He probably seemed out of place as he mingled among the crowds filling the 40,000 seats of the impressive stadium.

Who among the crowds realized that the lone monk in their midst was about to change the course of history forever? Nor could anyone know that he would soon join the fate of countless gladiators who lost their lives upon the arena floor.

Telemachus sat quietly, waiting for the fights to begin.

A voice from the past

There were no abortion clinic blockades in those days, but had there been, Telemachus probably would have been the first one at the door. What he did made him one of Christendom's first "intercessors," physically standing in the gap to protect innocent human life. For a full understanding of what was about to unfold in the Colosseum — the monk's motives and actions — a bit of retrospect is in order, a whirlwind tour through Rome's barbaric history of gladiatorial shows.

Telemachus was not the only one to be appalled at their inhumanity, for, although violence was commonplace in the Roman entertainment world, this death culture was unrelentingly challenged by a dissenting voice of opposition. It came from a minority "sect" of religious people often considered fanatics, but growing in number and influence. These, not surprisingly, were the Christians of the early Church.

It is a history lesson well worth looking into, especially today as many follow in the footsteps of Telemachus, acting as intercessors for those being "dragged off to the slaughter," and advocating for "the weak who are caught in the schemes of the wicked."

Fighters needed

For centuries, the conquering arm of Rome swept across the western world toppling cities and nations in its path. In the aftermath of battles or invasions, Roman troops conducted searches among the survivors for strong, young men. Singled out, these unfortunate fellows were bound and readied for the long march to Rome, never again to see their homes and families. It was all part of a macabre talent search which took its recruits to a foreign land to serve as "entertainers," performing as gladiators for the masses. Among these, the Romans brought in blacks from Africa, "painted savages," and "blonde barbarians" from settlements along the Rhine and Danube. [1]

Though a large number of gladiators fought voluntarily, seeking fame, glory, and cash, the vast majority were war captives, slaves, or condemned criminals.[1] Forced into an arena to face an opponent in a fight to the death, their only option was to cooperate or be executed. It was a do-or-die situation.

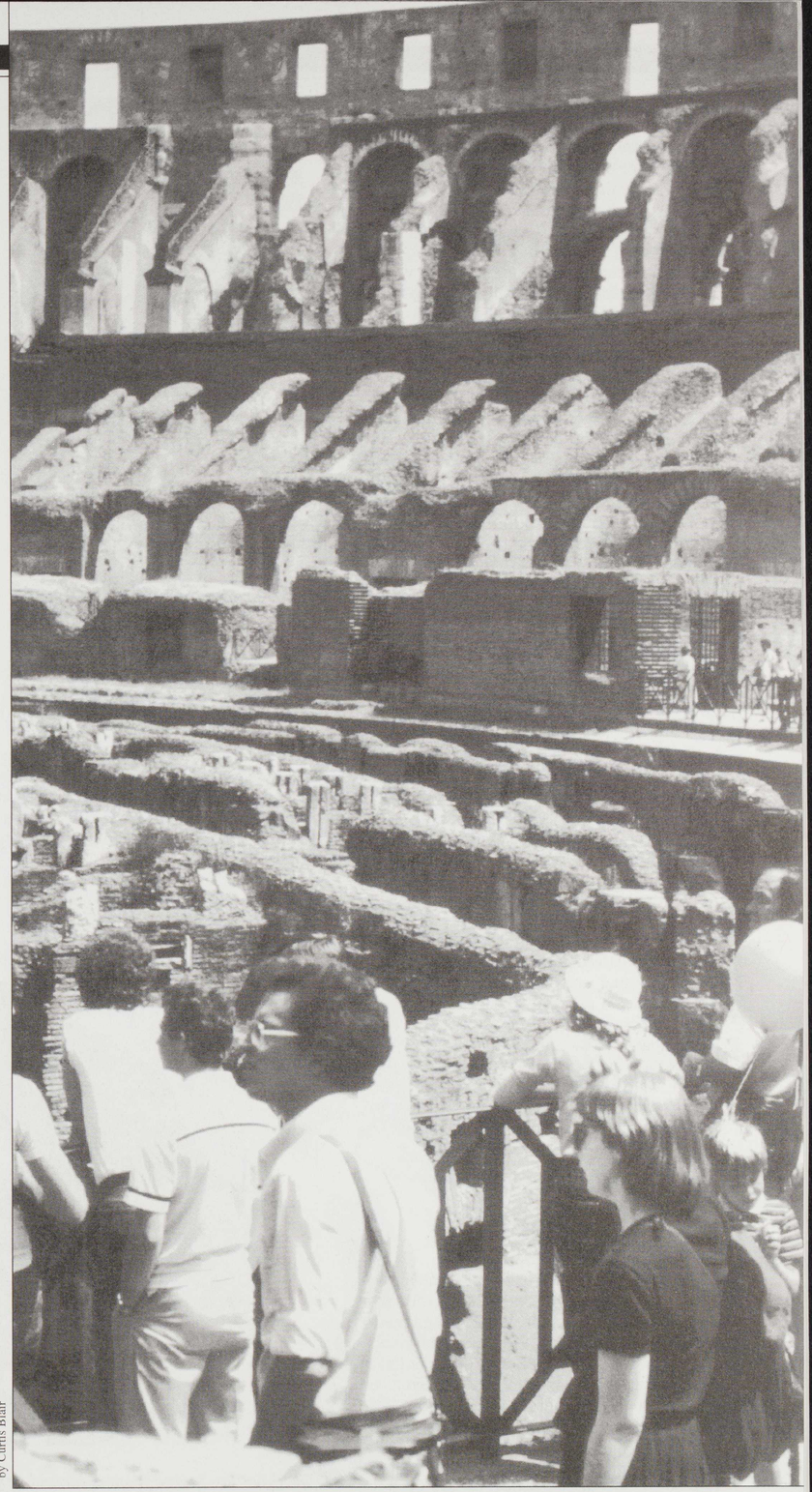
It was also a crime against humanity on a grand scale. By the thousands, young men were cut down in colosseums and arenas throughout the empire, from Europe to North Africa, all to feed the blood-for-thrills appetite of an enthusiastic populace.

Into the arena

Once in the arena, the fighters were typically given swords, three-pronged spears, shields and helmets. Some contestants were even pitted against crazed and famished lions with only a net to defend themselves.[2]

In man-to-man combat, it was often the custom of the winning contestant, as he beat down his staggering opponent, to stop short of actually killing him. This moment did not come until he received a special signal from the crowd. Early eyewitness accounts say that once the signal was given, a frenzied roar of applause and cheering erupted from the stadium as the champion dealt the final death blow upon the loser.[2] It is no wonder that the writer, Tatianus, described the gladiator shows as a multitude of spectators gathering to relish in a terrible feast, "their souls feeding on human flesh and blood." [3]

Roman emperors, wanting to please a demanding public, were often more than willing to supply the arenas with victims, both for fights and for outright slaughter. When Titus conquered Jerusalem in 70 A.D., he provided the eastern provinces with thousands of Jews to be massacred before stadium crowds.[3] Symmachus (391 A.D.) was once infuriated when, hoping to give his citizens a few hours of violent amusement,



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The Colosseum