

Perpetua (late 2nd century – early 3rd century)

A Woman of COURAGE

Perpetua's Story

The emperor, Severus, had decreed that no one could convert to Christianity. Roman soldiers raided Christian meetings and arrested people who were preparing for baptism. Perpetua was among those arrested. Perpetua was thrown into a gloomy Roman prison in the city of Carthage.

We know something about Perpetua's faith, life, zeal, and courage from the diary she kept during her imprisonment and from writings of other early Christians. She came from a wealthy Roman family and was well educated. She was married and had a baby boy. Prison officials did not allow Perpetua to be with her baby in the prison at first. But later they moved her to a more comfortable part of the prison, and her son stayed with her. "My prison has become a palace!" Perpetua wrote in her diary.

Perpetua's friend, Felicity, was also among the Christians who were arrested. Felicity, a slave, had trusted in Christ as her Savior. Now that both women were Christians, Perpetua no longer saw Felicity as a slave but as a beloved sister in Christ.

"Perform the sacrifice!" Perpetua's father begged when he visited her in prison. "Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor!" a Roman official ordered Perpetua at a court hearing. "I will not," she replied. The officials pronounced Perpetua and her friends guilty. "We returned to prison in high spirits," Perpetua wrote.

The Christians' courage and faith served as a witness for Christ to prison guards and officials. The believers also spoke to crowds that gathered near the prison, teaching them about God's coming judgment. "Thus everyone would depart from the prison in amazement, and many of them began to believe," wrote a Christian friend who added comments to Perpetua's diary.

Key Bible Verse:

"Have I not commanded you?
Be strong and courageous.
Do not be frightened, and
do not be dismayed, for the
Lord your God is with you
wherever you go."
(Joshua 1:9)

Key Word: COURAGE

Courage: Bravery in facing
danger, fear, and difficulties.

Read Acts 5:40-42

How is the story in Acts,
similar to the account of
Perpetua and her friends?



Dido

According to ancient legends, a queen named Dido founded the North African city of Carthage where Perpetua lived. Today Carthage is a suburb of Tunis, Tunisia.



Punic Wars

Carthage fought three wars against Rome called the Punic Wars. The Romans then became the rulers of Carthage.



Roman Empire

In Perpetua's time, the Roman Empire controlled over 2.5 million square miles of land. The enormous amount of territory meant the need for control was also great, causing the leaders to become wary of threats to the security of the empire. Some officials considered Christians a threat. Roman officials accepted gods of other religions, but they expected Christians to honor Roman gods (and the emperor), along with their God.



Tertullian

Tertullian, a Christian writer and church leader from Carthage, lived during the time Perpetua and her friends were in prison. He explained Christian beliefs to both Christians and non-Christians.



Saturus

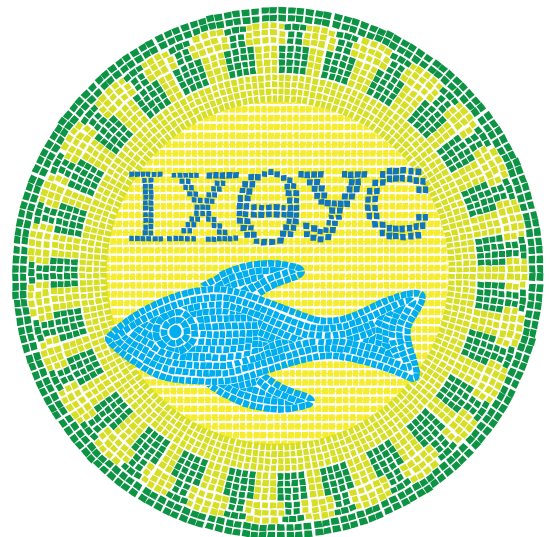
Saturus voluntarily joined Perpetua and her friends in prison. He is believed to have been their Christian teacher. Saturus and Perpetua both experienced visions while imprisoned. In Saturus' vision, he and Perpetua were carried to heaven where they joined those who had been martyred. In what ways would this vision encourage the prisoners?

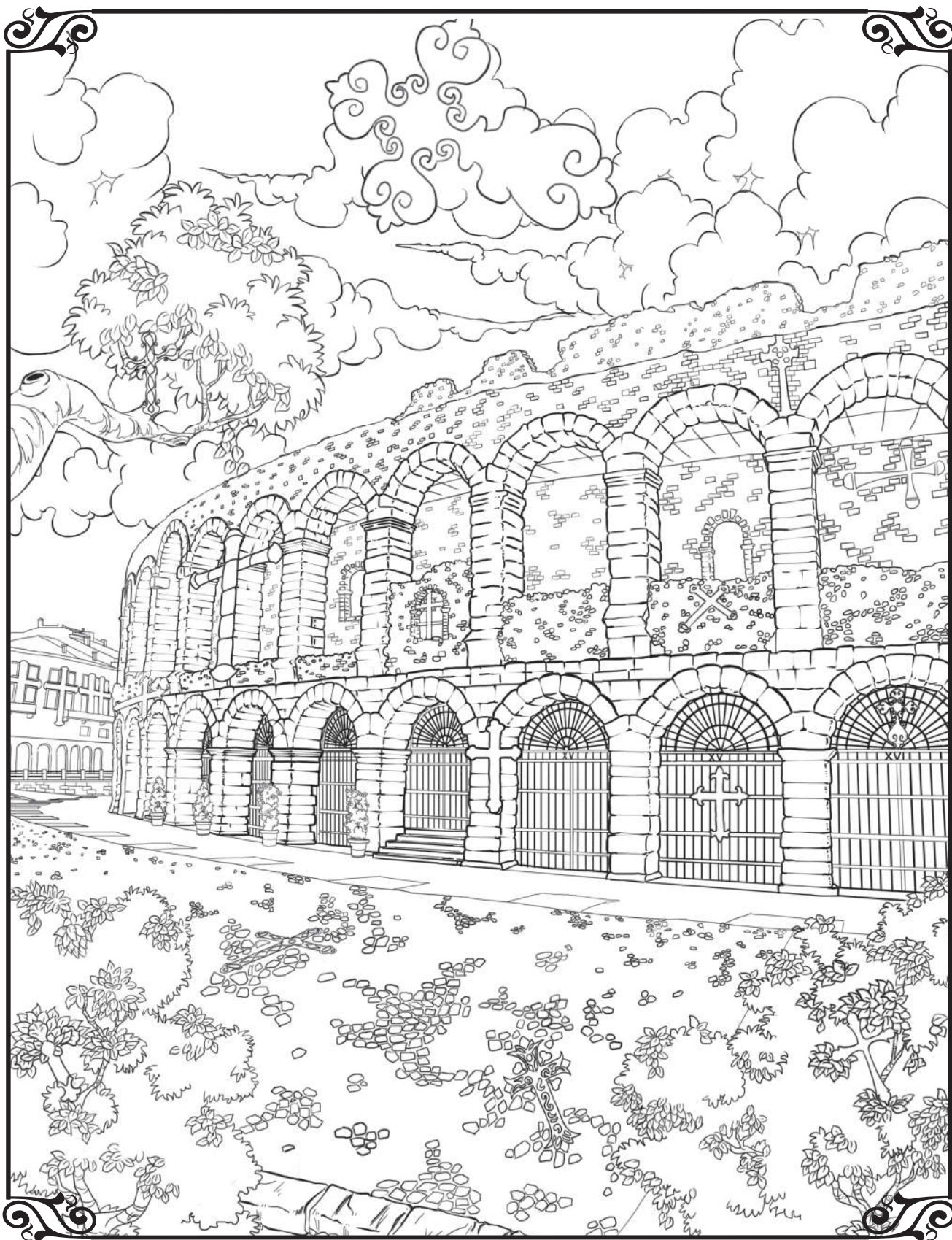


The Ixthus

"Ixthus" is the Greek word for fish. During the early days of Christianity, Christians were often put to death for practicing their faith, so, like persecuted Christians today, they worshiped in secret places. A fish painted on the outside door of a house let other Christians know that they would be safe and welcome inside.

I : Jesus
X: Christ
O: Son
Y: God
C: Savior

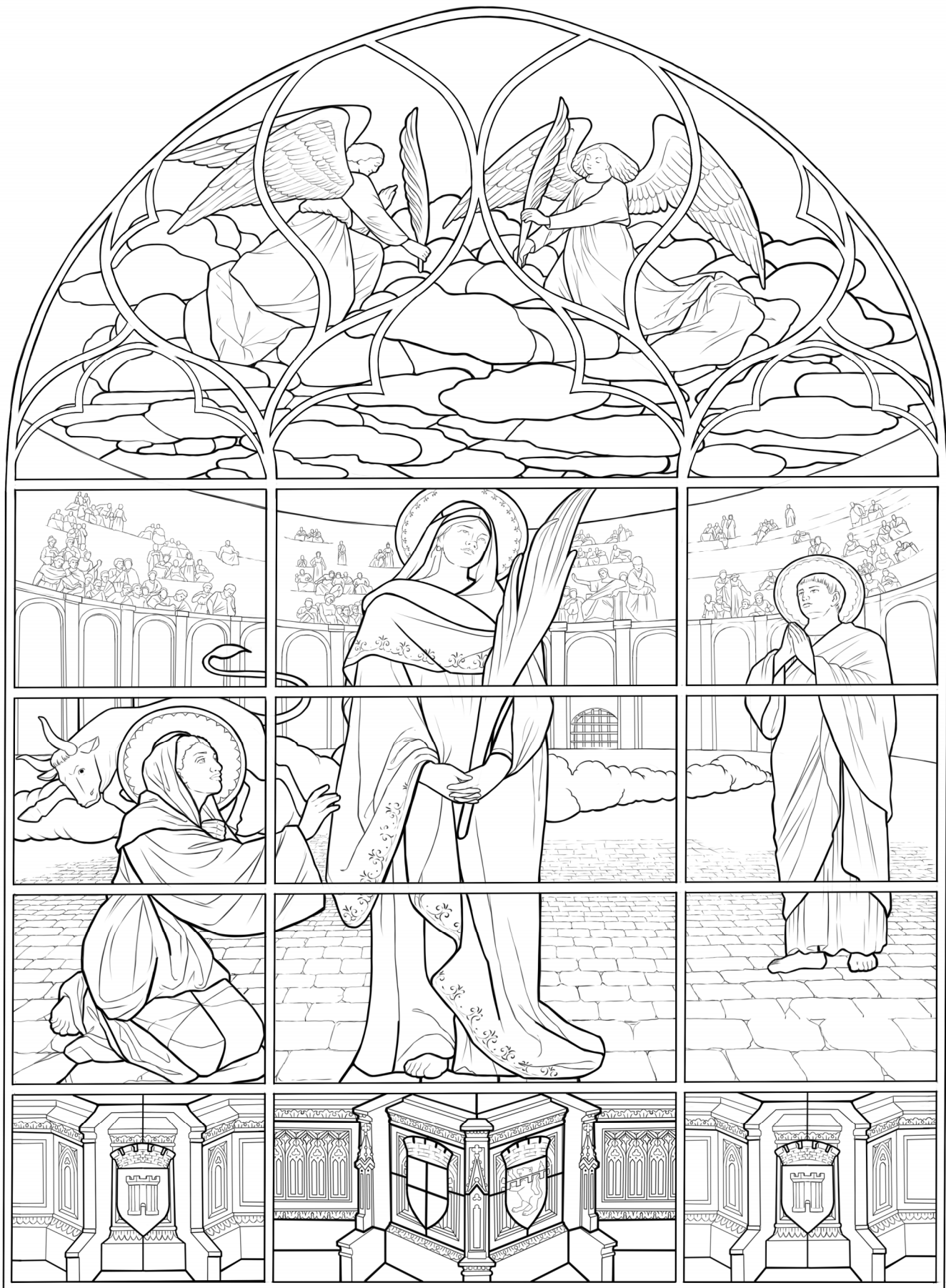




Can you find the 16 hidden crosses in the coloring page? The answer is in the Answer Key. Roman amphitheaters, like the one in the picture, were the scene of the many Christians' deaths.



God provided Perpetua with encouragement through fellow Christian prisoners.



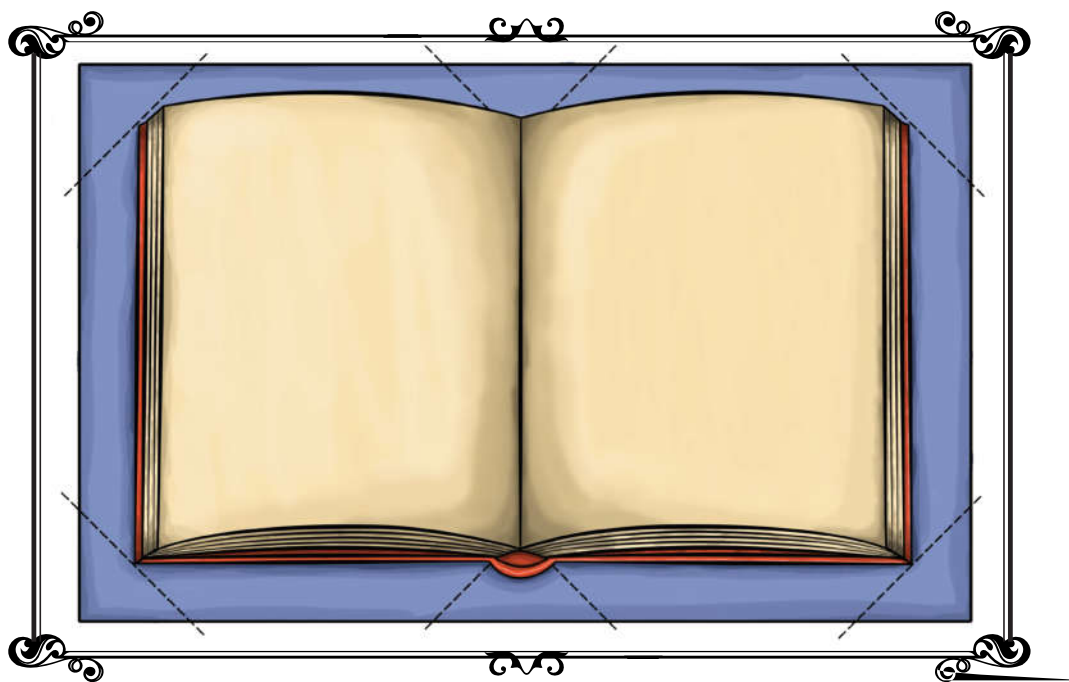
Stained glass window of Perpetua and her friends



Perpetua's journal (diary) was one of the first known writings by a Christian woman. The journal describes Perpetua's sadness, joy, thankfulness, and encouragement in prison.

Journals can be used to describe events in your life, express your prayers to God, capture significant life lessons, or record spiritual events and milestones in your journey with God. Follow the instructions to make your own journal.

Needed: A hardback composition book and contact paper.



1. Open the book and lay it flat, cover side down, then measure it. Cut a piece of contact paper 2 inches larger than the book on all sides.
2. Center the open book on the piece of contact paper with the printed side of the paper down.
3. Cut the corners of the contact paper and the section next to the spine as shown in the picture.
4. Peel off about half of the backing on the contact paper and place the back of the composition book on the sticky paper, with the cut corners aligned with the corners of the book. Firmly press this half into place, folding the edges onto the inside of the back cover. Close the journal. Now peel off the rest of the protective paper and stick firmly to the front cover, folding the edges onto the inside of the front cover.
5. Feel free to decorate the cover of your journal or make reduced-sized photocopies of completed coloring pages from this activity book, and glue them to the cover or inside pages.

What Do You Think?



Perpetua and her fellow believers bravely refused to participate in rituals that honored the emperor as if he were a god.

Perpetua and fellow believers bravely refused to participate in rituals that honored the emperor as if he were a god. A few decades after their death, a stricter emperor passed even harsher laws against Christians who refused to sacrifice to false gods.

Sometimes Christians who did not have the courage to oppose the emperor found ways to keep themselves out of trouble with Roman authorities. Anyone who sacrificed received a certificate stating that they had obeyed the law, so some paid their servants to go in their place and bring them back a certificate. Others would bribe an official to get the certificate.

What do you think?

Was it OK for some Christians to pretend to sacrifice to false gods in order to stay out of prison and continue taking care of their families? Why or why not? Write your thoughts on the lines below.

Read Matthew 10:32. Could Perpetua and her friends have offered a small sacrifice to get out of prison and still believe in Jesus in their hearts?

Perpetua's witness and courage brought many to Christ. Her story continues to challenge believers today to give themselves more fully to Him. If they had sacrificed, do you think others might have said, "Perpetua sacrificed to false gods and she's still a Christian, so maybe I can do the same?" the Apostle Paul said, "Give no offense [or cause to stumble] to Jews or to Greeks, or to the church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:32).

What do you think?

What do you think that means? How might it apply to the early Christians and sacrificing to false gods? Are there ways that Christians today can cause others to "stumble" by their actions (for example, doing sloppy work, repeating rude jokes, watching certain movies, or playing certain games)?



Onesimus was a runaway slave. In those days, slaves who ran away from their masters could be punished severely. The Apostle Paul had led both Onesimus and his master, Philemon, to Christ. After Onesimus ran away, Paul urged Philemon to forgive him instead of punishing him and to accept him “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

(See Philemon 1:15–16, NIV.)

It might be hard to imagine slaves and their masters becoming friends and brothers in Christ. But Paul reminded Christians that, “there is no ... slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Colossians 3:11, NIV).

Probably less than 200 years after Paul wrote those words, Perpetua and her slave, Felicity, became sisters in Christ and close friends. They were imprisoned together and suffered together for their faith. As Christians, they put Christ above everything else in their lives. It didn’t matter that Perpetua was wealthy, and Felicity was a slave.

Choose a Friend, Be a Friend

When you go to a new school, church, or activity, do you make friends with people who seem to be most like you on the outside? Do you consider any of the following when you choose a new friend?

- Can I talk to the person about God, the Bible, and my faith?
- Does the person complain about parents, rules, and school, or would their behavior be a good example for me? Would I be a good example for them?
- Is the person kind to people who need help? Could I be helpful to the person?
- Would I enjoy working on tasks or goals with the person, or do they look for ways to avoid responsibilities? Am I easy to work with?
- Would we be concerned about each other’s needs? Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (NIV).

As friends, Perpetua and Felicity gave each other courage in their walk with God, helped each other in times of trouble, and inspired each other to greater love for the Lord.

Proverbs 12:26

“The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray” (NIV).