In the year A.D. 203 there suffered in the amphitheatre of Carthago a young matron of good family from Thuburbo, Vibia Perpetua, alongside a band of companions, which included the slave girl Felicitas. The account of their martyrdom, with an introduction possibly written by Tertullian himself, portrays a Christlike spirit of witness to and of willing sacrifice for God the Father. Yet this Passio speaks of more than the spirit of martyrdom which was then so strong in the spirituality of the hard pressed church of North Africa. It also speaks of the self-discipline by which the follower in the footsteps of the crucified One was to train himself unto virtue. Indeed, that the church, or at least the Montanist circles of the church of North Africa, so understood the Passio seems clear from the introduction and the conclusion of the work. For them the work was 'a witness to the non-believer and a blessing to the faithful.' Nor is it surprising that the Church should understand the Passio in both these ways. For both Perpetua's life in prison and her death in the amphitheatre 'bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty and to his son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendour and immeasurable power for all ages. Amen.' Her martyrdom was not seen as an isolated episode in her life. Certainly it was the climax of her virtuous life, the final stamping upon her humanity of the likeness of her crucified Lord. Yet equally it was but the inevitable culmination of that far more prosaic life, in which through obedience to her heavenly Father she daily took up her cross and followed in the path of her Lord.

Even if we do not believe the assertions of the anonymous author that the account of the passion of Perpetua was written from the martyr's own words, the Passio does appear to be an authentic reflection of the period of the persecution of the Church in North Africa in circa A.D. 200, and does reflect the vigour of the young but growing African church of that time. It follows therefore that the work does present to
the reader the acts of inner self-discipline which the true follower of Christ in North Africa was then expected to adopt in the pursuit of virtue and perfection. Indeed, it presents this inner self-discipline to all true followers of Christ, the obedient servant of God, irrespective of the context in which they found themselves. For, for the true disciple, God was he for whom he lived and, if necessary, died, the historical and political context but deciding the necessity, or otherwise, of the martyr's death. This Passio however not only presents those acts of inner self-discipline whereby moral and spiritual maturation might occur. It also focusses such inner self-discipline within the lives of Perpetua and her companions. For they were, very literally, prisoners of conscience.

It is here presumed that there is within the Passio a spirituality dependent upon the imitatio Christi. It must be admitted that there is no great emphasis upon a positive imitation of Christ, the one, perfected martyr, as there is for example in the account of the martyrdom of Blandina at Lyons in A.D. 177. Perpetua is portrayed as a vehicle of the Holy Spirit: her life is seen as a profound rejection of both the values of the pagan and the religious traditions of her family; and her death is that prompted by contempt for Rome and conflict with Satan. Such is as only may be expected of a document from a persecuted, proto-Montanist church. Yet there is a spirituality dependent upon an imitatio Christi within this loyal dependence in the Spirit upon the Father. For her life and death are prompted by the Spirit in witness against anti-Christ and in gloriæ domini nostri Iesu Christi. Her life indeed is portrayed as a fight against an 'Egyptian of vicious appearance'. Robert suggests that the explanation of the Egyptian lies in the fact that a great number of Egyptians "à l'époque impériale allaient concourir dans toutes les fêtes gymniques grecques de la Méditerranée, que ce soit dans celles de la période". This seems a more probable explanation than that which see here an indirect reference to the Egyptian Pharaoh. Yet there also seems to be a Christological dimension present here. The description of Perpetua's striking the Egyptian in the face with her heels points beyond a pan-cratemum with an Egyptian to the Christologically interpreted text of Genesis 3.15, '[the woman's seed] shall bruise the head [of the serpent]'. In this Perpetua lived a Christlike life, in nomine Iesu Christi. Similarly, her death carries Christological overtones. This dies victoriae was, as we have already noted, in gloriæ...Christi. Yet her identification in death with Christ is made more explicit. For she, the compiler of the