

# Father of the Church: St. Cyprian of Carthage

We are invited to extend our reflection on the Fathers of the Church into the third century. Continuing with the Latin fathers, after Tertullian on whom we meditated last month, we turn our attention to St. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, for this month.

## His Life:

Caecilius Cyprianus Tharcus was the first bishop in the African region to receive the crown of martyrdom. Born into a wealthy pagan family in Carthage, Cyprian pursued a career as a lawyer. After a dissipated youth, he converted to Christianity at the age of 35. Reflecting on his life after baptism, he acknowledged his past erroneous life and doubted whether God's mercy could redeem him from his past sins and the vices. However, through the help of the water of new birth, he came to understand God's grace and mercy. He expressed this transformation saying, "I clearly understood that what had first lived within me, enslaved by the vices of the flesh, was earthly and that what, instead, the Holy Spirit had wrought within me was divine and heavenly."

Shortly after his conversion Cyprian was ordained a priest and subsequently elected the bishop by the people of Carthage as it was the custom in the early Church when a bishop died, the people together with the clergy would elect their pastor. His episcopacy was marked by persecution under two emperors namely Decius and Valerian. During the persecution, Cyprian faced the difficult decision to leave Carthage not to save his own life, but to prevent the decimation of Christian communities through the targeted killing of their leaders. Hence, he fled from his diocese but continued to guide his flock through his letters. Later, when was questioned by Rome about his decision to flee, he presented these letters, demonstrating that his actions were for the good of the local Church. However, when the second wave of persecution broke out under Valerian, he was ready to embrace martyrdom and was ultimately beheaded in exile.

## His Theological Contribution:

For the Christians of North Africa in the second and third centuries, the essential questions revolved around the conduct and response of followers of Christ during the persecution. The persecutions of Decius and Valerian brought these issues to a crisis. Some Christians were unable or unwilling to endure the torture or even the threat of it. Yielding to Roman pressure, they agreed to renounce their faith and offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. Such weak believers were termed *lapsi*, 'the lapsed' or 'the fallen ones.' However, they ardently desired to be readmitted to the community. The debate on their readmission actually divided the Christians of Carthage into laxists and rigorists. These difficulties were compounded by a serious epidemic of the plague which swept through Africa and gave rise to anguished theological questions both within the community and in the confrontation with pagans.

At this juncture, Cyprian found himself navigating between laxists and rigorists in his community. He was severe but not inflexible with the laxists, granting them the possibility of forgiveness after exemplary repentance. Before Rome, he staunchly defended the healthy traditions of the African Church; he was deeply human and steeped in the most authentic Gospel spirit when he urged Christians to offer brotherly assistance to pagans during the plague; he knew how to maintain the proper balance when reminding the faithful – excessively afraid of losing their lives and their earthly

possessions – that true life and true goods are not those of this world. In addition, he was relentless in combating corrupt morality and the sins that devastated moral life, especially avarice.

Cyprian's theological writings were deeply rooted in the specific circumstances of the Christian community at Carthage, especially to settle down the squabbles regarding the *lapsi* and validity of the baptism administered to the pagans by the heretical Christians and schismatics. He wrote above all for the edification of the community and to encourage the good conduct of the faithful. Therefore, ecclesiology was the core of his theological writings. Despite his disagreement with the bishop of Rome, Pope Stephen, regarding the acceptance of heretical baptizands, Cyprian founded his ecclesiology on the chair of St. Peter to preserve unity. This led him to write his famous theological treatise, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*. The Catholic Church is geared towards now on 'synodality' and Cyprian is the only Father of the Church mentioned in the first document on synodality.

The invisible and mystical Church is solely present in the visible Catholic Church. Thus he made some strong statements like: "outside the Church there is no salvation", and "no one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as mother". For him, an indispensable characteristic of the Church is unity, symbolised by Christ's seamless garment. Therefore, he stated: "God is one and Christ is one and his Church is one, and the faith is one, and the Christian people are joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord. Unity cannot be severed. And what is one by its nature cannot be separated". The unity of the Church is twofold for him. Firstly, the Church is united with Christ as her source like the branches are united with the roots. Secondly, there is unity among the Christians inside the Church. He insisted on the unity of Christians even in other treatises. For example, in his explanation on the Lord's Prayer he describes that a Christian does not pray 'my father in heaven' rather 'our father' even when he prays alone or pronounces secretly.

In prayer the unity is the union of the hearts. Indeed, in accordance with the Bible and the Fathers, the heart is the intimate depth of human, the place in which God dwells. In it occurs the encounter in which God speaks to the human person, and the person listens to God; man speaks to God and God listens to man. All this happens through one divine Word. Ultimately, St. Cyprian placed himself at the root of that fruitful theological and spiritual tradition which sees the "heart" as the privileged place for prayer. Hence the unity continues in prayer between the lips and heart and God looks at the heart in prayer.

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