

The Church and Reconciliation

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church in the Age of Persecutions

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"There was no religion in the priests, no faith in the servants, no mercy in works, no discipline in their way of life..." (St. Cyprian, d. 258)

The age of the persecutions was not a period of unrelieved violence. Long periods of tolerance intervened between outbreaks of persecution. In 249 A.D., after almost 50 years of peace, the emperor Decius launched the first organized, state persecution of the Church. Christians were given a simple choice — sacrifice to the gods or die.

Once again heroes came forward to fight the good fight. The martyr Carpus, for example, defied the Roman magistrate:

"I am a Christian! I worship Christ the Son of God, who comes to our help even in these days and snatches us from the deceptions of

the devil. I shall not sacrifice to the idols! Do what you will!" (The Acts of Carpus, c. 250)

In general, though, the Church had grown complacent, and was taken by surprise. For the first time the Church had to face the problem of mass defections.

"At the first threatening word of the enemy, a great many of the brothers betrayed the faith. They prostrated themselves, not under duress, but of their free will... They never expected to be taken and to have to defend themselves under interrogation. There are many victors before the battle! They fell without a fight, without even the appearance of reluctance to offer sacrifice to the pagan idols." (St. Cyprian)

Decius intended to destroy the Church, but only succeeded in creat-

ing a host of repentant sinners, whose only wish was to be reconciled with the Church.

Two parties formed within the Church over the question of reconciliation of sinners. One, under the leadership of the anti-pope Novatian, demanded the utmost severity toward the "lapsi" (those who had fallen away). The Church recalled her heritage of mercy, her mandate for reconciliation:

"The power of remitting sins was given to the apostles, and to the churches which they established at the command of Christ, and to the bishops who succeeded them." (Bishop Firmilian, d. 265)

Once again the Church rose above the world as a sign of contradiction. To punish the traitor is a reasonable thing. To forgive the sinner is the work of faith, hope and love. The

Church has always known where her duty lies:

"It must be known that the true Catholic Church is that in which there is confession and repentance, which treats in a wholesome manner the sins and wounds to which the weakness of the flesh is liable." (Lactantius, d. 317)

At the end of the persecutions as at the beginning the Church drew her strength from the bread of life:

"Jesus Christ Our Savior was made flesh through the word of God, and took on our flesh and blood for our salvation. So too, we are taught, through the word of prayer that comes from Him, the food over which the thanksgiving has been spoken becomes the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus, in order to nourish and transform our flesh and blood." (St. Justin the Martyr, d. 165)

St. Cyprian — Heroic Service in God's Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"I am a Christian and a bishop. I recognize no god but the One and True God, who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. This is the God we Christians serve. To him do we pray day and night for ourselves and for all men, even for the good health of the emperor." (St. Cyprian, d. 258)

This was the testimony entered by St. Cyprian of Carthage at his trial. They are fitting valedictory to a life of heroic service in God's Church.

Cyprian was born around the year 200 in North Africa of wealthy parents. He became a Christian about the year 246. Only two years later the people of Carthage elected him bishop. There he became deeply embroiled in the events of the Decian persecution and the subsequent bitter disputes within the Church.

The Novatian party wanted the "lapsi" treated with the utmost rigor, even to the point of invalidating any sacraments conferred by lapsed clergy. They took particular satisfaction in taunting Cyprian about his conduct during the Decian persecution.

Cyprian had chosen to flee from the Romans and go "underground" in order to preserve the government of the Church. For some months he ruled his church in exile. The rigorist element viewed this as cowardice.

Cyprian, mindful perhaps of the uncharity shown to him, always taught the doctrine of mercy to the sinners:

"We certainly think that no one is to be restrained from the fruit of satisfaction or the hope of peace. We know, according to the faith of the Scriptures, both that sinners are brought to re-

pentance, and that pardon and mercy are not denied to penitents."

In all his struggles with his enemies, Cyprian defended the doctrine of the unity of the Church. The local church is united in its bishop; all the churches are united in the Bishop of Rome. Some of his remarks preface the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the collegiality of the bishops:

"Although Jesus gave an equal power to all the Apostles after His resurrection when he said: 'As the Father has sent me so I send you...'; nevertheless, to show forth the unity of His Church, He decided by His authority to base the origin of this unity in one Apostle. The other Apostles were the equal of Peter in endowments of power and honor, but the source of this power arises from their unity that the Church of Christ may be seen to be one." (On the Unity of the Church, c. 25)

The living embodiment of that unity resides at Rome, "... the chair of Peter and the principal church whence the unity of the priesthood arises." (Letter to Pope Cornelius, c. 252)

Cyprian was arrested by the Romans during the persecution of Valerian. He insisted upon dying at Carthage as an example to his people.

"Let us arm ourselves with the sword of the Spirit in our good right hands. Let us reject the sacrifices of death and remember the Eucharist which is the Body of Christ. Afterward we shall take up the reward of a heavenly crown." (Exhortation of Martyrdom, St. Cyprian)



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

ST. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

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