



## **CYPRIAN c. 200 – 258**

Cyprian is important in the development of Christian thought and practice in the third century, especially in northern Africa. He was born around 200 AD of pagan parents. He was a prominent trial lawyer and teacher of rhetoric. Around 246 he became a Christian, and in 248 was chosen Bishop of Carthage. He was highly educated, a famous orator, and he distributed his goods to the poor, amazing his fellow citizens by making a vow of chastity before his baptism. Within two years he had been ordained a priest and was chosen, against his will, as Bishop of Carthage (near modern Tunis).

Cyprian complained that the peace the Church had enjoyed had weakened the spirit of many Christians and had opened the door to converts who did not have the true spirit of faith. When the Decian persecution began, many Christians easily abandoned the Church. It was their reinstatement that caused the great controversies of the third century, and helped the Church progress in its understanding of the Sacrament of Penance.

Novatus, a priest who had opposed Cyprian's election, set himself up in Cyprian's absence (he had fled to a hiding place from which to direct the Church—bringing criticism on himself) and received back all apostates without imposing any canonical penance. Ultimately he was condemned. Cyprian held a middle course, holding that those who had actually sacrificed to idols could receive Communion only at death, whereas those who had only bought certificates saying they had sacrificed could be admitted after a more or less lengthy period of penance. Even this was relaxed during a new persecution.

During the reign of the Emperor Valerian, Carthage suffered a severe plague epidemic during which Cyprian urged Christians to help everyone, including their enemies and persecutors. He organized a program of medical relief and nursing of the sick, available to all residents, but this did not prevent the masses from being convinced that the epidemic resulted from the wrath of the gods at the spread of Christianity. Another persecution arose, and this time Cyprian did not flee.

The consul banished him to Korba, whence he comforted to the best of his ability his flock and his banished clergy. In a vision he saw his approaching fate. When a year had passed he was recalled and kept practically a prisoner in his own villa, in expectation of severer measures after a new and more stringent imperial edict arrived, demanding the execution of all Christian clerics, according to reports of it by Christian writers.

On September 13, 258, he was imprisoned and the following day was examined for the last time and sentenced to die by the sword. His only answer was *"Thanks be to God!"* The execution was carried out at once in an open place near the city. A vast multitude followed Cyprian on his last journey. He removed his garments without assistance, knelt down, and prayed. After he blindfolded himself, he was beheaded by the sword.

Cyprian was a mixture of kindness and courage, vigor and steadiness. He was cheerful and serious, so that people did not know whether to love or respect him more. He waxed warm during the baptismal controversy; his feelings must have concerned him, for it was at this time that he wrote his treatise on patience. St. Augustine (August 28) remarks that Cyprian atoned for his anger by his glorious martyrdom.

Many of his writings have been preserved. His essay *On the Unity of The Catholic Church* stresses the importance of visible, concrete unity among Christians, and the role of the bishops in guaranteeing that unity. It has greatly influenced Christian thought, as have his essays and letters on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He has been quoted both for and against the Roman Catholic claims for Papal authority.