



## The Martyrdom of Cyprian

Today is the feast of St. Cyprian the patronal saint of my parish. What follows is an account of his martyrdom.

In the year 258 AD severe edicts were issued from Rome indicating that those who persisted in their refusal to worship the pagan gods were to be put to death. Knowing his end was near, Cyprian spent his final days encouraging his flock and expressing his affection for them. He also undertook personal penances in preparation for death.

**Sentenced to Death** – Cyprian had already been imprisoned and exiled to the City of Curubis the year before for his refusal to burn incense to the Roman gods. Soon enough orders came and Cyprian was brought back to Carthage to stand trial once again. When word got out among the populace that Cyprian was in custody, a large multitude gathered and lamented him. Even a great many pagans protested on his behalf for they remembered his

kindness, courage and generosity during the recent plague. But it was to no avail, the new proconsul, Galerius Maximus, seemed anxious to enforce the death penalty.

We are blessed to have received from antiquity the account of St. Cyprian's final trial which is substantially reproduced here:

- **Proconsul:** Are you Thascius Cyprian?
- **Cyprian:** I am
- **Proconsul:** Are you the person who has been bishop and father to men of ungodly minds?
- **Cyprian:** I have been their bishop.
- **Proconsul:** The most sacred emperors have commanded you to conform to the ceremonies of the Roman religion.
- **Cyprian:** I cannot
- **Proconsul:** Consider again for your own safety.
- **Cyprian:** Obey your orders. In so manifestly just a case there is no need for me to reconsider.
- **Proconsul:** Long have you lived with an irreligious heart and have joined great numbers with yourself in an unnatural conspiracy against the Roman deities and their holy rites. Nor have our sacred and most pious emperors...been able to claim you to their ceremonies. Since you have been a ringleader in crimes of such a heinous nature, you

shall be made an example to those whom you have seduced to join with you and discipline shall be established in your blood. I will that Thascius Cyprian be beheaded.

- **Cyprian:** Blessed be God

Many Christians who were within the room cried out, Let us be beheaded with him! As Cyprian was led out to die a large crowd pressed in on all sides so that a strong cohort of soldiers was required to escort him. They led him outside the city to an open field ringed by large trees. Many onlookers climb those trees to better see him.

**Martyred** - On arriving at the spot where he was to die, Bishop Cyprian took off his mantle (or overcoat), and fell to his knees and prostrated himself before God. Then, arising he took off his dalmatic which he gave to his attending deacons and remained in his long white robe. He payed his executioner the sum of 25 gold denarii. While this gesture was not unheard of especially for a person of some means it nevertheless tells us of the graciousness and forgiveness in the heart of Cyprian. He himself tied the blindfold over his eyes after which his hands were tied. Kneeling again he awaited the final blow. At length the sword passed and Cyprian ended his pilgrimage here. It was September 14, 258.

*We have solemnly renounced the world and therefore, while we continue in it should behave like strangers and pilgrims. We should welcome that happy day (of our death) which is to fix us, everyone, in our proper habitation, to rescue us from the embarrassments and snares of this world, and remove us to the kingdom of heaven.... There we shall meet with the glorious choir of apostles; with the goodly company of the prophets; with an innumerable multitude of holy martyrs; there we shall be blessed with the sight of those triumphant virgins who have subdued the inordinate lusts of the flesh; and there we shall behold the rewards of those who, by feeding the hungry and consoling the afflicted have with their earthly treasure stored up for themselves treasure in heaven. To these beloved brethren let us hasten with eager longing! Let us pray that it may befall us speedily to be with them; speedily to come to Christ. (St. Cyprian, *De Mortalitate*, 26)*