

WHO WAS ST. CYPRIAN?

(Second in a series)

Last week we read of Cyprian's earlier years and of his struggle to find and embrace the truth about himself, about God and about the ultimate meaning of his life. Once he heard the Gospel message he was overjoyed but also fearful. He was drawn by the glory of Christ's saving truth but doubtful he could ever live up to its demands. Finally he yielded in trust to almighty God's power to save and he discovered the power of leaning on the Lord. After his baptism St. Cyprian came alive with new life and discovered a new-found joy in the freedom of God's children.

He was baptized on April 18, in the year 246 at the Easter vigil. He was now thirty-six years old and newly baptized. Though he had carefully prepared himself for his baptism and entrance into the life of faith, he now pressed on with even more study and prayer. He earnestly read and re-read every book of Sacred Scripture and sought to heed the lessons taught there for living a life pleasing to God. He noted with particular emphasis the exhortations of Scripture to love the poor and to live chastely. As noted last week, he sold his whole estate and gave the money for the care of the poor. He also took a vow of chastity and led a humble, penitential life.

We must remember that Cyprian was a well known man to the whole city of Carthage. He was a learned and capable man, well regarded by all. Thus his profound conversion caused quite a stir. Perhaps some of his old friends were alarmed. But the Christians of Carthage were most delighted. This is illustrated by two events that were shortly to follow.

Ordained a Priest.

It is rare that the newly baptized

are called to lead a community or share in the ministerial priesthood. This is due to a norm laid down in Sacred Scripture by St. Paul (1 Tim 3:6). But this norm was set aside in Cyprian's case. Within a year he was ordained a priest. Evidently he served so well in that capacity that within less than a year he would be called to lead the whole diocese of Carthage as its bishop.



Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage

It was the year 248 A.D. and Donatus, the Bishop of Carthage had just died. It was the practice of the early Church in many parts of the ancient world to permit the members of the local Church to present a man for the office of Bishop. And so it was that after the burial of Donatus, a

groundswell began that would lift Cyprian to the office of Bishop. Who first suggested his name is not known, but the consensus of the Christians as they gathered together in Carthage became clear, "Cyprian!"

Trust God

As the news of this first reached Cyprian's ears he was filled with dread. How, he wondered, could he ever take up so difficult and weighty an office as that of Bishop? Why did they not ask an older and more experienced priest? But the crowd persisted. In his fear Cyprian fled the scene. He could not go far though and, sure enough, he was discovered to have gone home. The crowd gathered outside his home and surrounded it. Cyprian, though knowing himself to be trapped, tried to escape through a window! Seeing it was all to no avail, he finally presented himself to the crowd who received him with great joy. Once again, the Lord was calling Cyprian to trust, *He can make a way out of no way*. With unanimous approval of the other bishops of the province, Cyprian was consecrated Bishop of Carthage, North Africa the third largest city of the ancient world. He was 38 years old and barely two years baptized.

Cyprian brought with him a great dedication to his office combined with a keen intellect and administrative skill. These qualities are surely essential for a bishop but above all, a bishop must be a wise and loving shepherd for his people. Here too Cyprian showed great gifts. Eighty-two letters of St. Cyprian survive to this day and give us a portrait of a passionate and faithful bishop who wished to console and encourage the faithful under his care. There was much need for such a ministry for

within a year of his ordination as Bishop a fierce persecution broke out against the Christians of the Roman Empire.

Persecution

In Cyprian's time the Roman Empire was still officially pagan. Worship of the gods of the empire was considered a patriotic duty. From time to time (especially in times of crisis, or of special celebrations) Roman Emperors would issue edicts calling on all citizens to offer formal worship to the pagan gods. To fail in this duty was a crime punishable in various ways: fines, imprisonment and even death. Christians obviously ran into trouble with such legal requirements and frequently suffered greatly due to them. To be sure, many ordinary citizens could escape notice but prominent Christians were often sought out and made an example of to strike fear in all others who might refuse to worship. Here then is the background for the persecution that would trouble Bishop Cyprian and the City of Carthage

In 250 A.D. Decius became the Roman Emperor. Shortly after taking power he issued an order that all in the Empire were to offer sacrifice to the gods of Rome. His reasons for doing this were many but one thing was certain, the enemies of the Christians were delighted. They knew that faithful followers of Christ could not offer such sacrifice. In Carthage, as soon as the law of sacrifice was proclaimed, enemies of the Christian Church ran through the streets crying, "Cyprian to the Lions!"

Cyprian was targeted not only because he was Bishop but also

because of his notable conversion. He was one of the most prominent pagan citizens of Carthage who not only became a Christian but also set aside the whole aristocratic and worldly manner of life.

Exile

Here was a chance for Cyprian to step forth and accept a martyr's death. In Rome, Pope Fabian had already been martyred. But Cyprian would not be killed in this persecution. He chose to seclude himself in a self-imposed exile. Although he later received some criticism for this, the decision was made by him for carefully considered reasons. As he himself remarked, *There is great danger that the collapse of a leader may lead to the downfall of his followers.* (Letter 9.1.2 *Romae consistentibus*) So it is not always heroic or virtuous to leap into the jaws of the lion merely because it pursues. Martyrdom does not mean casting one's life aside unnecessarily. Had not the scriptures given this same counsel, *When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next* (Matt 10:23)? As bishop he gave this same advice to all the members of his flock. Clearly they could not offer the sacrifice to the pagan gods. But neither should they intentionally place themselves in vulnerable situations. Further he advised, they should make every effort not to stir up trouble for the Christian community. Even their visits to Christians jailed for failing to offer sacrifice should be discrete (Letter 5.2.1 *Fratribus carissimis*). Finally it should be stated that Cyprian indicated, according to his biographer Pontian, that he had received in prayer a clear mandate from the Lord to act so as to save his life. Cyprian's time for martyrdom

would come, but for now, his community, devastated by defections needed absolutely to be able to count on him, even if in exile.

Where exactly St. Cyprian stayed during this exile is not certain. It may have actually been in the city itself. But where ever it was it could not have been far since his correspondence with the Christian faithful by letter was so voluminous and showed such an awareness of events at Carthage. From his place of exile Bishop Cyprian instructed, exhorted and encouraged the faithful of Carthage. Where necessary he also corrected and admonished them.

The persecution abates

In 251 A.D. Emperor Decius died and there was a temporary halt to the persecution. Cyprian was able to appear openly in Carthage once again and the Christian faithful were generally accorded their freedom. Sadly, many Christians had given way to fear during the persecution and they offered sacrifice to the pagan gods. Now many sought to be readmitted to the Church. There were various opinions about what to do in such cases. Some held they could never return. Others said the whole matter should be overlooked and they should be readmitted without any penance. Cyprian called a Council of the African Bishops in Carthage where his own position was eventually adopted. Those who had lapsed from the faith were to be readmitted to the Church after confession and a time of penance tempered with mercy. The Church at Rome also concurred with this view.

(Next week: Plague hits Carthage, the persecution resumes and Cyprian dies a martyr).