

WHO WAS ST. CYPRIAN?

(Third in a series)

In previous weeks we considered Cyprian's entrance into the Church and also saw the zeal with which he undertook the Christian life. A piety so edifying that within two years he would be ordained priest and appointed Bishop of the city of Carthage. His first years as bishop were not easy for a terrible persecution of the Church flared up and he found that he had to exercise his office of bishop from exile.

Plague

By the end of 251 A.D. the persecution abated with the death of Emperor Decius. Cyprian was able to appear openly once again in Carthage. One might hope that life would be simpler and safer once again and that the Church could enjoy peace. But it was not to be. For now, a terrible plague broke out throughout the empire. According to an author from the time, "People died like flies. All were horrified, they wept tried to avoid contagion." Some were even locked out by their families without pity. Fear often brings out the worst in others and there was a great lack care for the sick. An important exception to this was the Church of Carthage which Cyprian managed to organize help for the sick and homeless. In many sectors this won great admiration for the Church. And yet here too old fears surfaced. Emperor Gallus ordered all in the empire to offer sacrifice to the gods. He did so out of a belief that the plague was due to the anger of the gods. The anger might be turned back by sacrifices. Again the Christians declined and again a great cry went up among the enemies of the Church, "Cyprian to the lions!" This despite all the help the Church had given. But this time there was neither the strength nor the will to carry forth on the threats. Within time the plague began to abate. Now there would be peace? Not really

Controversy.

By 255 A.D. a controversy arose in the Church about the validity of baptisms given by heretics. It had been the opinion of Cyprian and the practice of the African Church not to



accept the baptism given by heretics. Thus, any one who had baptized by a member of a heretical sect needed to be re-baptized. Pope Stephen in Rome however indicated that such baptisms were valid provided they used the Trinitarian formula and intended what the Church intended. This created quite a problem for Cyprian who was passionate on the issue. *He who has not the Church as mother, cannot have God as Father*, he wrote in his

greatest treatise, Concerning the Unity of the Catholic Church. In the same treatise he emphasized the primacy of Peter and his successors, the Popes. Yet now he felt at odds with Rome, "Why did the Pope not allow the African Church to follow its own custom in this matter?" he wondered. After much debate and some delicate negotiations. Cyprian won tacit tolerance from Rome but some years later, the African Church adopted the Roman position.

New Persecution

No sooner had this controversy died down than new persecutions arose. In 257 the Emperor Valerian ordered all in the Empire to offer sacrifice to the Roman deities. The Christians of course could not offer such sacrifices. Knowing this, and being especially aware of Cyprian's unswerving loyalty to Christ, Cyprian was sought out and arrested on issuance of the decree from Valerian. Cyprian was brought before the proconsul Paternus who reminded Cyprian that he was ordered to make sacrifice to the gods of the empire. Cyprian responded, *I am a Christian and a bishop. I worship no other gods besides the one, True God who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them. This is the God we Christians serve, to this God we pray day and night for you and for all mankind.* The proconsul Paternus threatened Cyprian with exile but to no avail and further demanded to know who the priests of his diocese were and where they might be found. Here began a procedure that was to lead to Cyprian's martyrdom. The proconsul said, *You will go into exile to the city of Curubis in accordance with the orders of Valerian!* Cyprian responded, *I go.*

(Next week, his martyrdom and an overview of some of his most significant teachings).