

The Teachings of St. Cyprian

Last year, in a series of four flyers, we considered the life of St. Cyprian from an historical perspective. His life is surely instructive for us and this is no less true of his formal teachings. It is no exaggeration to state that he was one of the most influential bishops and theologians of the early Church. With St. Augustine and Tertullian, he is among the greatest of the African Fathers of the Church. To call him a “Father of the Church” is to use a term which describes those who, through the exercise of their pastoral teaching and preaching, decisively influenced the development of Christian doctrine and the understanding of Sacred Scriptures in the first centuries of the Church. Thus Cyprian’s teachings provided an important foundation upon which others would later build. We can learn much by surveying some of his teachings. Sadly, we can only but touch the surface for Cyprian wrote extensively. Nevertheless, in this and next week’s flyer is a small sampling of the teachings of our patron, St. Cyprian.

The Power of Grace

St. Cyprian taught emphatically on the power of God’s grace to effect dramatic change in one’s life. This he did not so much by a long discourse as in a vivid description of his own experience of what God did for him. In this testimony written in 247 A.D. he describes first his condition before baptism and then turns to a beautiful description of the glorious freedom of the children of God. *And I myself was bound fast, held by so many errors of my past life, from which I did not believe I could extricate myself. I was disposed therefore to yield to my clinging vices; and, despairing of better ways, I indulged my sins...But afterwards, when the stain of my past life had been washed away by means of the waters of rebirth, a light from*

above poured itself upon my chastened and now pure heart; afterwards, through the Spirit which is breathed from heaven, a second birth made of me a new man. And then in marvelous manner, doubts immediately clarified themselves, the closed opened...and what had been thought impossible was able to be done (“Letter to Donatus,” 4). Thus St. Cyprian teaches how God is able to free us from even the powerful of sinful habits. He can give us freedom over addiction, strength over weakness, and the joy of the saints in place of the sorrow of sinners. Cyprian’s testimony is this, *What a wonderful change has come over me!*



The Teachings of the Lord’s Prayer.

One of the most famous of the works of St. Cyprian is his Treatise on the Lord’s Prayer. It is a work of some length and for that obvious reason cannot be fully reproduced here. Yet a few lines help us to see how Cyprian taught his people to understand the meanings of the words they prayed. *We say, ‘Hallowed be thy name’ not that we want God to be made holy by*

our prayers, but because we seek from the Lord that His name be made holy in us. As He Himself said, ‘Be holy, as I too am holy.’ We ask and seek that very thing, so that we who have been made holy in baptism may persevere in what we have begun to be...We continue and say, ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ not as if praying that God may do as he wills, but that we may do what God wills...[For] the devil would prevent our thoughts and deeds from being devoted in all things to obedience to God. We have need of God’s will, that is, of His help and protection... (“Treatise on the Lord’s Prayer” 12, 14).

Teachings on the Church

Another of Cyprian’s greatest treatises is entitled, “The Unity of the Catholic Church” St. Cyprian teaches that the Church was both founded and intended by Christ as a necessary means of salvation. Those who wilfully depart from the Church thus sin against the unity willed by Christ (Jn 17:20). Here are some excerpts from St. Cyprian’s teaching: *If someone does not hold to this unity of the Church can he imagine that he still holds the faith?...He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his mother. If anyone outside the ark of Noah was able to escape, then perhaps someone outside the pale of the Church may escape....Does anyone believe that in the Church this unity, which proceeds from the divine stability and which is welded together after heavenly patterns can be divided and can be separated by the parting asunder of opposing wills? Whoever holds not fast to this unity holds not to the law of God...(The Unity of the Catholic Church 4,6)*

In the same treatise on the Church, St. Cyprian also insisted that unity

with the successor to St. Peter, the Pope, was an essential ingredient and expression of Church unity. *The Lord says to Peter: 'I say to you, you are rock and upon this rock I will build my Church...and to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever things you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth they shall be loosed also in heaven.'* (Mt 16:18-19). *It is on one man that He builds the Church and although he assigns like powers to all the apostles after His resurrectionnevertheless, in order that unity might be clearly shown, He established by His own authority a source for that unity which takes its beginning from one man alone. A primacy is given to Peter whereby it is clear that there is but one Church and one chair* ("The Unity of the Catholic Church," 4).

In reviewing these teachings of St. Cyprian on the Church it is important to remember the context in which he wrote. In the Third Century the Catholic Christian Church was substantially united. There were no Protestant churches (these would not arise for another 11 centuries) and the divisions with the Eastern Church was still some 700 years away. There were some small heretical sects that had broken away from the Catholic Church. Likewise there was a group called the "lapsed" who had formally left the Church to avoid persecutions being inflicted at that time by the Roman Government. It is to these groups and individuals that Cyprian addresses his strong plea for unity and the need to return to the Church. In today's world, many Christians are born into divisions which predate them by several hundred years. Thus it is wrong to conclude that non-Catholics commit a sin of disunity merely by their membership in their churches. But it is also wrong to

conclude that all these divisions are OK. Clearly the Lord willed that his followers be one (cf. Jn 17:20). We must pray and work for this unity.

It is in this context that Cyprian's teaching is most valuable. In effect he teaches that the Lord had a plan for his Church and we must learn of that plan and submit to it as a source for our unity. For the Church to effectively work for the salvation of souls, unity is an indispensable quality. Jesus himself declared that unity among his followers would be the miracle whereby the world would acknowledge that he had truly come (Jn 17:23) and that He was Lord. Thus St. Cyprian calls us quite emphatically to work for and establish the unity among Christians which the Lord clearly wills, *There is one God, and one Christ, and one Church and one chair founded on Peter by the word of the Lord. It is not possible to set up another altar or for there to be another priesthood besides that one altar and that one priesthood. Whoever has gathered elsewhere is scattering.* ("Letter of Cyprian to All His People," 43)

Confession of Sins to the Priests

St. Cyprian clearly taught that sins, especially serious sins, must be brought to the clergy for there to be reconciliation. His teachings in this regard are significant since they provide important evidence that the Sacrament of Confession was celebrated in the earliest days of the Church. St. Cyprian was bishop in the middle part of the Third Century. This means that by the middle 200's A.D. confession was an expected remedy for serious sins. It is also interesting that Cyprian does not give lengthy explanations or defenses in requiring this practice of sinners under his care. This provides additional evidence that the practice of confession of sins to

the clergy was an accepted or at least normative part of Church life that had been received from the earliest days. Here are some references to confession in St. Cyprian's writings: *Finally, of how much greater faith and more salutary fear are those who...confess to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. Thus they remove the weight from their souls and seek the saving remedy for their wounds, however small and slight they be...I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned, confess his sin while he is still in the world, while his confession is still admissible, while satisfaction and remission made through the priests are pleasing before the Lord.* ("The Lapsed," 28). Likewise he wrote to a fellow Bishop in Numidia: *We [i.e. the Bishops of North Africa] think that no one should be held back from the fruit of satisfaction...We know by our faith in the Divine Scriptures, of which God Himself is the author and initiator, both that sinners are brought back to repentance and that pardon and forgiveness are not denied the penitent. Inasmuch as the Lord is merciful and kind, we find that none of those imploring and entreating his mercy should be prohibited from doing penance, then peace is able to be extended through His priests.* ("Letter to Antonianus," 55). Thus St. Cyprian teaches of the necessity of confession to the priests not as a burden to be endured but as an encounter with God's mercy and a place where the peace of God may be both experienced and restored.

(Next Week, more teachings of St. Cyprian: especially those regarding the Eucharist and Baptism)