

The Teachings of St. Cyprian

In the last flyer we considered a number teachings of St. Cyprian on Grace, prayer, the Church and the Sacrament of Confession. This week we consider two other topics on which he taught: the Eucharist and Baptism.

The Eucharist

At the heart of our Catholic teaching on the Eucharist is that the bread and wine, after the words of consecration are spoken over them, are no longer bread and wine but are in fact the Body and Blood of Jesus. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is therefore not a symbolic one but a very real presence. We actually receive Jesus in the Eucharist. This belief in the Eucharist comes to us from the scriptures themselves (Mt 26:26; Jn 6:51-53; 1 Cor 10:16; 1 Cor 11:27; *inter al*) and from the teachings of the Church from as far back as we can trace.

St. Cyprian is a clear teacher on the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He does this primarily by his insistence on the worthy reception of the Eucharist. He teaches that since the Eucharist is Jesus' Body and Blood, worthy reception is a proper and required response. In the following passage he rebukes the notion that serious sinners can receive the Eucharist before they have been reconciled through the sacrament of Confession: *The anxious cares of my office and the fear of God leave me no choice but to send you...words of admonishment...Certain priests behave, without a thought or fear of God or respect for their bishop...They acting contrary to the law of the gospel...before penance has been done, before confession of the most serious and grievous of sins has been made, before there has been the imposition of hands by the bishop and clergy in reconciliation, they have the audacity to make the offering on their behalf and give them the Eucharist,*

that is to say, to profane the sacred body of the Lord. And this in spite of the words of Scripture: "He who has eaten the bread or drunk the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord." (1 Cor 11:27) - (Letter 15 of Cyprian to the Martyrs and Confessors).



Cyprian's point is not to deny people of the Eucharist but to avail them first of the Lord's mercy through confession. For our present purpose we can also see how he implicitly but clearly teaches Christ's true presence in the Eucharist. Cyprian's logic is based solidly in the scriptures. Since the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of the Lord it must be received worthily. Were it merely a symbol, we would not sin directly against the Body of the Lord through sinful reception. But since it is in fact His Body we must first receive His mercy for any serious sins committed before receiving Him in the Eucharist. *Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. (1 Cor 11:28-29).*

The Necessity of the Eucharist

St. Cyprian also taught that the regular reception of the Eucharist was something quite essential, something for which we must pray. *As the prayer [Our Father] continues we ask and say, "Give us this day our daily bread." We ask that this bread be given us daily, so that we who are in Christ and daily receive the Eucharist as the food of salvation may not, by falling into some more grievous sin and then, in abstaining from communion, be withheld from the heavenly Bread, and be separated from Christ's Body...He Himself warns us saying, "Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, You shall not have life in you" (Jn 6:54). Therefore we ask that our Bread, which is Christ, be given us daily that we who abide and live in Christ, may not withdraw from His sanctification and from His Body. (Treatise on the Our Father, 18)*

Again, St. Cyprian's reflections flow quite clearly from the Scriptures wherein Christ insists that if we do not eat His Flesh and drink His Blood we have no life in us. That is to say, without the Eucharist, we starve to death spiritually. Thus, Cyprian teaches we must pray for the Heavenly Bread, Jesus Himself, to be given us daily. Note too that he speaks of the daily reception. This is important evidence that the early Church celebrated the Eucharist not only on Sunday, but daily. It is the practice of the Church to both celebrate and encourage even daily reception of Holy Communion that we be well nourished spiritually. Surely weekly reception of the Eucharist is imperative, lest we starve.

Teachings on Baptism

The Church has always taken the obligation to be baptized very seriously, teaching that it is necessary

for salvation that a person be baptized. This is in accord with the teaching of Jesus who said, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (Jn. 3:5 cf also Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38). It is for this reason that the Church has insisted that even infants should be baptized as soon as possible after birth. This is due to the fact of the poison of sin. Even though infants have not personally sinned they did contract Original Sin in their conception (cf Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22). It is also due to everyone's need for the life of grace.

Here too, St. Cyprian is an important source that these teachings on baptism were both taught and practiced in the early Church. In the following excerpt from one of his letters, he speaks not only for himself but also for the Council of the Bishops of North Africa.

As far as concerns the case of infants you [Fidus] expressed your view that they ought not be baptized within the second or third day after their birth; rather, that the ancient law on circumcision ought to be respected and you therefore concluded that the newly-born should not be baptized and sanctified before the eighth day. Our Council [of African Bishops] adopted an entirely different conclusion. No one agreed with your opinion on the matter; instead without exception, we all formed the judgement that it is not right to deny the mercy and the grace of God to any one that is born....We must do everything we possibly can to prevent the destruction of any soul....For just as God draws no distinction between persons, so neither does He between ages, but shows Himself Father equally to all, being evenhanded in the distribution of His heavenly graces....In our view

no one is to be prevented from obtaining grace...Rather, every one without exception, has the right to be admitted to the grace of Christ. We ought not be the cause for debarring anyone from access to baptism and the grace of God for He is merciful, kind, and loving towards all men. And whilst this is a rule that ought to be observed and maintained concerning the whole of mankind, it is our view that it is to be observed most particularly in the case of newborn infants; they have all the more claim upon our assistance and God's mercy for the reason that, right from the very first moment they are born, in their crying and wailing they are doing nothing else but imploring our help (Letter 64 to Fidus, 2,3,5).

Cyprian's emphasis in the letter is clear, Baptism confers essential graces that ought not be denied anyone, especially infants. Not only does baptism help prevent the destruction of the soul (which sin causes) but it also admits the soul to the grace and favor and the special gifts of God. We must facilitate this for our children as soon as possible.

Do not delay!

St. Cyprian's teaching calls all of us to reflection on our duties toward our children. Notice how Cyprian thinks a delay of even eight days after birth is an unjust delay. The Canon Law of the Church also reflects the importance of early baptism: *Parents are obliged to see to it that infants are baptized within the first weeks after birth* (Canon 867.1). Baptism should certainly be done very early in the life of a child. Yet it is not uncommon for some parents to wait months, even years to have their children baptized. This is usually not done out of any intentional neglect of their children. What underlies it is more often a muted sense of the necessity of

baptism and the glorious life it confers. The teachings of St. Cyprian and that of the whole Church calls us back to a greater appreciation of the wondrous gift of baptism, the forgiveness of sin and the life of grace. With such knowledge parents will certainly want to bring their children to the baptismal font as soon as possible.

Baptism changes us.

St. Cyprian did not teach on the necessity of baptism merely because we need to have our sins forgiven. Surely this is a fabulous gift in itself. But Cyprian was well aware that baptism did so much more. It gives us freedom over sin and leads us into the life of God. Cyprian's own experience of his baptism was a profound one: *When the stain of my past life had been washed away by means of the water 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 a marvelous manner, doubts immediately clarified themselves, the closed opened, the darkness became illuminated, what before had seemed difficult offered a way of accomplishment, what had been thought impossible was able to be done....What was born of the flesh...had now begun to be of God, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit was animating it.* (Letter to Donatus, 4)

Baptism to Cyprian was no mere ritual, it was a rebirth to new life every bit as real and central as his own natural birth. Through it God's grace was poured forth upon him and he was a whole new creation. Thus he teaches us of the glory of this sacrament and calls us to respect God's plan for our salvation.

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