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Cyprian and his Role as the Faithful Bishop in Response to the Lapsed, the Martyrs, and the Confessors Following the Decian Persecution

Abstract

In 249 A.D., in an attempt to bring about a renewal in the devotion to Roman authority and the Roman gods, Roman Emperor Decian issued an edict. The edict called for Roman citizens to take part in a simple sacrifice to the Roman deities. Cyprian, the recently named bishop of Carthage, opted to flee the city and avoid the persecution. Upon his return to Carthage in 251 A.D., Cyprian was forced to deal with the results of the persecution among those who had given in to the edict and those who had resisted. He did so with his now famous *On the Lapsed*. In dealing with both groups, Cyprian was faithful first to Christ and the biblical mandates that he felt the church was obligated to uphold. He was faithful also to the authority of the Church hierarchy, which he felt was being undermined even by the martyrs, whom he did believe had a special place within the Church. Finally, Cyprian was faithful to his position of bishop, which meant he was not only to lead but also to unite his community during difficult times such as persecutions, regardless of what situation or conditions existed that may have led to it. To complete this task, this study will look at a number of challenges that Cyprian faced while he attempted to remain faithful to these three areas. In doing so, the paper will focus mainly on Cyprian's response to these challenges in his writings from *On the Lapsed*. The story of Cyprian and the issues surrounding the lapsed do not end with what he wrote in *On the Lapsed*, and the conclusion of this study will take a few moments to address some of those issues.

Keywords

Cyprian, Faithful, Bishop

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

In 249 A.D., in an attempt to bring about a renewal in the devotion to Roman authority and the Roman gods, Roman Emperor Decian issued an edict. The edict called for Roman citizens to take part in a simple sacrifice to the Roman deities. Those who did not obey this edict faced the loss of property, imprisonment, and in some cases, death.¹

For the Christian living in the Roman Empire, this created a significant dilemma. Refusal to comply with the edict at best threatened their social and economic position within their community. At worst, it could mean the loss of their very lives. The situation in North Africa, and Carthage in particular, was no different. Cyprian, who had been named bishop of Carthage the very year the edict was issued, (249 A.D.)² watched as a number of citizens voluntarily went forward to comply with the edict and perform what was required of them by the edict—many not even waiting until a threat of danger was upon them. At the same time, there were many who held firm in the commitment to Christ and the Church. Those who openly refused to comply with the edict and who may have spent some time in prison became known as the confessors. Those who refused to comply and who eventually lost their lives in the process were the martyrs.

Cyprian opted to flee the persecution. He left Carthage³ and went into hiding, where he would remain until early in 251. Upon his return to Carthage, Cyprian would deliver his now famous *On the Lapsed*. One of Cyprian's overarching themes in *On the Lapsed* was his belief that the persecution that the Church had faced had been brought upon them by themselves, and was God's way to test and punish the Church.

Illustrating God's use of moral standards in the governance of the universe, his exhortations assigned blame to the whole community . . . The persecution, Cyprian concluded, was a divine punishment intended to test, to correct, to sift the church.⁴

With this understanding as the backdrop, Cyprian began to deal with the results of the persecution among those who had given in to the edict and those who had resisted. In dealing with both groups, Cyprian was faithful first to Christ and the biblical mandates that he felt the church was obligated to uphold. He was faithful also to the authority of the Church hierarchy, which he felt was being undermined even by the martyrs, whom he did believe had a special place within the Church. Finally, Cyprian was faithful to his position of bishop, which meant he was not only to lead, but also to unite his community during difficult times such as

¹ Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smith, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 50.

² Ibid., 208.

³ Ibid, 50.

⁴ J. Patout Burns, Jr, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 30-31.

persecutions, regardless of what situation or conditions existed that may have led to it.

Therefore, this study will examine how Cyprian viewed his faithful role as bishop of Carthage in the three areas named above, (1) the biblical mandate for the Church, (2) upholding the authority of the Church hierarchy, and (3) his role as the bishop to his people. To complete this task, this study will look at a number of challenges that Cyprian faced while he attempted to remain faithful to these three areas. In doing so, this study will focus mainly on Cyprian's response to these challenges in his writings from *On the Lapsed*. The story of Cyprian and the issues surrounding the lapsed do not end with what he wrote in *On the Lapsed*, and in the conclusion, this study will take a few moments to address that.

FAITHFUL TO THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

What to do with the lapsed (*lapsi*), those who had given in to the edict of Decius by performing either a sacrifice or by burning incense to the Roman gods, was obviously at the center of the issue. In dealing with the situation that surrounded the lapsed, Cyprian always kept within his focus the biblical mandate which had been given by Christ to Peter and the Church in Matthew chapter 16:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.⁵

Cyprian had written in his work *On the Unity*, that through this mandate, the Church received from Christ the authority to do His will on Earth. In addition, in Cyprian's view, this mandate went beyond Peter, in that "assuredly the rest of the apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honour and power."⁶ Therefore, Cyprian felt that as bishop of Carthage, this mandate included his role and actions as bishop, as well as the role and actions of his fellow bishops. With this understanding of the biblical mandate forming the foundation of his thought process, Cyprian viewed a number of situations surrounding the lapsed as a direct challenge to the Church's mission for Christ on Earth and to the authority given to the bishops.

The first of these challenges came from the lapsed themselves. The tradition in the African church had been that anyone who had essentially denied Christ was to expect to be excluded from fellowship of the Church. They were also to remain in

⁵ Matthew 16:18-19, NIV.

⁶ Cyprian, *On the Unity*. ed Alexander Roberts, D.D. & James Donaldson, LL.D., "The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325, Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 5, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix". (Grand Rapids: M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 740.

Available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.i.html>

a constant state of penance.⁷ The problem facing Cyprian following the Decian persecution was the incredible number of Christians in Carthage who had lapsed as a result of the Decian edict. To this point, Cyprian had written:

Immediately at the first words of the threatening foe, the greatest number of the brethren betrayed their faith, and were cast down, not by the onset of persecution, but cast themselves down by voluntary lapse. (He continues) Many were conquered before the battle, prostrated before the attack . . . they seemed to sacrifice to idols willingly. They ran to the market place on their own accord.⁸

The large number of those who lapsed during the Decian persecution does not seem to have come as a big surprise to Cyprian, who, as stated earlier, believed the persecution the Church was facing to be a punishment brought upon them by their own doing. We see this as Cyprian described the condition the Church had been in prior to the outset of the persecution:

Among the priests there was no devotedness of religions; among the ministers there was no sound faith: in their works there was no mercy; in their manners there was no discipline. In men . . . Crafty frauds were used to deceive the hearts of the simple.⁹

This is what Cyprian believed led to the great number of those who had lapsed, and may have also contributed to the way they themselves refused to follow what had been viewed as the traditional condition of perpetual penance. With the support of their large numbers, they threatened to riot if their request for readmission to the Church and to Communion was denied.¹⁰

To compound this problem even further, many of the lapsed turned to two groups of individuals for a certificate of reconciliation. Called a *libelli pacis*, this certificate had been traditionally issued by martyrs, and was used by those who received it as a way to be readmitted to the fellowship of the Church and to Communion. Martyrs held an extremely high position within the Church, who believed their authority came directly from the Holy Spirit.¹¹ From this authority came the right to forgive mortal sins,¹² and this was gained by the martyrs through

⁷ Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 55.

⁸ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325, Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 5. Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix. Edited by Alexander Roberts, D.D. & James Donaldson, LL.D. (Grand Rapids, MI : M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 768. Available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.i.html>

⁹ Ibid., 767.

¹⁰ Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 55.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John Alfred Faulkner, *Cyprian: The Churchman*, (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1906), p. 86. There Faulkner wrote, "This right of the martyrs to forgive mortal sin was a survival of the old power of the prophets."

something that Tertullian had described as a second baptism,¹³ which they received in martyrdom. Cyprian, for the most part, held to the view that because of the special place within the Church given to martyrs, the lapsed who received a certificate of reconciliation from one of them might gain re-admittance into the Church and into Communion. However, it seems that for Cyprian, this would be limited to only those lapsed who were on their death beds. Anyone else receiving a certificate needed to also wait for the bishops to give their final approval.¹⁴ Cyprian believed it was this final approval, to be granted by the bishops, that helped to uphold and respect the biblical mandate.

Obviously, the martyrs who issued these certificates of reconciliation did so prior to their martyrdom. The individual who would issue a certificate of peace did so when death seemed imminent. Thus, the certificates they issued prior to death would be honored once the individual had been martyred. During the Decian persecution however, it was not just those who faced imminent death and who expected to be martyred who were issuing the certificates. Even the “non-tortured confessors who did not expect death,”¹⁵ began to issue certificates. These individuals were the confessors, and Cyprian, similar to how he felt about the martyrs, felt very highly of the confessors, and praised them in *On the Lapsed*:

The white-robed cohort of Christ’s soldiers is here, who in the fierce conflict have broken the ferocious turbulence of an urgent persecution, having been prepared for the suffering of the dungeon, armed for the endurance of death. Bravely you have resisted the word: you have afforded a glorious spectacle in the sight of God; you have been an example to your brethren that shall follow you . . . How joyously does your Mother Church receive you in her bosom, as you return home from the battle.¹⁶

Despite this praise though, it is obvious that Cyprian did not feel he was in any position, as a faithful representative of the biblical mandate, to honor any certificate issued by these confessors. The actions of the martyrs to issue certificates was not new, but the actions of the confessors to also issue certificates may have come about due to the incredibly large number of the lapsed seeking re-admission into the Church and into Communion. In the case of both groups, the martyrs and the confessors, the certificates they issued as a result of the Decian persecution seemed to challenge the biblical mandate, each in their own unique ways. Cyprian,

¹³ Tertullian, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetual and Felicitas*, The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 ANTE-NICENE FATHERS VOLUME 3. Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical Edited by ALLAN MENZIES, D.D. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing, 1986). In ch 4.4 Tertullian describes martyrdom with the second baptism. “And immediately at the conclusion of the exhibition he was thrown to the leopard; and with one bite of his he was bathed with such a quantity of blood, that the people shouted out to him as he was returning, the testimony of his second baptism, “Saved and washed, saved and washed.”

¹⁴ John Alfred Faulkner, *Cyprian: The Churchman*, 86.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 765.

in holding to this biblical mandate, saw clearly how honoring the certificates of either group could challenge the authority of the hierarchy within the Church. It is to this topic that this study will now turn.

FAITHFUL TO THE CHURCH HIERARCHY

In his role as the faithful bishop to his people at Carthage, a topic we will examine more closely in section three of this study, Cyprian constantly worked to convince his people of how he believed God was viewing their actions. These actions included what he felt was a view that was embraced by many of the lapsed, who felt they could rely simply on the certificates issued by the martyrs or confessors, while at the same time giving little regard to the hierarchical structure of the Church, and more specifically, the role of the bishops and priests:

You are still aggravating and enhancing your crime; and you yourself are implacable against the ministers and priests of God, do you think that the Lord can be appeased concerning you?¹⁷

Those from the Protestant tradition sometimes fail to appreciate and honor the role and position of those who are called by God to be His ordained pastors and ministers of His Church. While it is true that many Protestant Christians embrace the idea of a “Priesthood of all Believers,” which grants every believer access to God, many in the Catholic tradition, maybe even more so in the early Church of Cyprian’s day, held closer to the view that only the priest has the authority to issue the sacrament of Communion.¹⁸ This carries an even greater significance when one also understands that within the Catholic tradition, many held that it was through Communion, or the Eucharist, that the individual was viewed as being in full fellowship within the Church. And it is through being in full fellowship within the Church that the individual can find the access to God and the salvation they seek.

The importance of the hierarchy within the Church and the role of the bishops and priests who were working in the light and authority of the biblical mandate could not, in Cyprian’s view, be altered simply through human will. Cyprian believed Christ had given Peter, and likewise those within the ordained hierarchy of the Church, the authority to build his Church and act in His place here on earth. To support the idea that even the martyrs, which Cyprian himself would eventually come to be, could not claim any authority which was not granted to them by God, Cyprian devotes significant space in *On the Lapsed* to outlining for the martyrs and confessors how not even some of the most highly regarded biblical

¹⁷ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 776.

¹⁸ Joseph Pohle, *The Blessed Eucharist as a Sacrament*. The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), accessed 5 Aug. 2010. Available at: <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05584a.htm>>. Pohle writes, “In this matter the Church alone has the right to decide, and her regulations regarding the Communion rite may vary according to the circumstances of the times. In general it is of Divine right, that the laity should as a rule receive only from the consecrated hand of the priest.” (cf. Trent, Sess. XIII, cap. viii).

figures could obtain any measure of protection or salvation for God's children without God granting it:

The Lord alone can have mercy. He alone can bestow pardon for sins which have been committed against Himself, who bare our sins, who sorrowed for us, whom God delivered up for our sins... Moses...the friend of God; he who had often spoken face to face with the Lord, could not obtain what he asked, nor could appease the wrath of God by his entreaty...(nor) Jeremiah... Noah... Daniel... Ezekiel... Job...neither can human judgment claim to itself or usurp anything, unless the divine pleasure approve.¹⁹

Cyprian, it would seem, is doing more here than simply being faithful to the hierarchical structure of the Church. This was more than simply being faithful to the biblical mandate, on which he based his view of how the Church on Earth was to operate. Greater was Cyprian's faithfulness to his role as the bishop to the people of Carthage. It is to this final topic that this study will now turn.

FAITHFUL TO HIS (CYPRIAN'S) ROLE AS BISHOP TO HIS PEOPLE

In the portion of *On the Unity* that was quoted at the conclusion of the last section of this study, Cyprian was making a clear point to the confessors and martyrs alike, that despite what power and authority the certificates they granted might possess, ultimately each man and woman will stand before God in final judgment. Thus to give the lapsed a hope that by the possession of a mere certificate from a confessor or martyr was enough to have their sins forgiven, have them granted re-admission into the Church and Communion, and thus back into the fellowship from where they could find their salvation, was ultimately something of great danger:

We believe, indeed, that the merits of martyrs and the works of the righteous are of great avail with the judge; but that will be when the day of judgment shall come; when after the conclusion of this life and the world, His people shall stand before the tribunal of Christ. But if any one...thinks that he can give remission of sins to all, or dares to rescind the Lord's precepts, not only does it in no respect advantage the lapsed, but it does them harm.²⁰

Cyprian, it would seem, holds to the notion that despite any possession of any certificate obtained from confessor or martyr, the lapsed must still seek counsel from the bishops and priest. In addition, the lapsed must humbly submit themselves to a state of perpetual penitence, separated from the fellowship of the Church and Communion, with the hope that God will look favorably upon them.

¹⁹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 773-774. The word "(nor)" is my addition, added for purposes of flow within the broken quote.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 773.

This is because, ultimately, it is God who sees and knows their hearts, and who will bring to them their final judgment:

God cannot be mocked, nor deceived, nor deluded by any deceptive cunning. Yea, his sins the more, who, thinking that God is like man, believes that he evades the penalty of his crime if he has not openly admitted his crime.²¹

Therefore, Cyprian, as their faithful bishop, tells them what they must do:

I entreat you, beloved brethren, that each one should confess his own sin, while he who have sinned is still in this world . . . I beg you, brethren, acquiesce in wholesome remedies, obey better counsels, associate your tears with our tears, join your groans with ours; we beseech you in order that we may beseech God for you: we turn our very prayers to you first; our prayers with which we pray God for you that He would pity you. Repent abundantly, prove the sorrow of a grieving and lamenting mind.²²

To the confessors, martyrs, and even to those bishops who might be tempted to freely allow the lapsed to return to the fellowship and communion without seeking the penitence they most desperately needed, Cyprian again plays the role of the faithful bishop to his people. He warns those mentioned above that they are only granting the lapsed a false peace that brings them no amount of safety, and instead places them (confessors, martyrs, and bishops) in danger. Furthermore, he believes that by granting the lapsed an easy way out through a certificate alone, they are keeping the very ones who should be seeking God's forgiveness in "sorrow and repentance" from obtaining the necessary means for any possible salvation from their sins.²³

Such a facility does not grant peace, but takes it away; nor does it give communion, but it hinders from salvation.²⁴

Additionally, Cyprian seems to view the lapsed that were being readmitted into the Church, and thus readmitted into the receiving of Communion, without respecting the authority of the Church and its bishops by performing penitence, as those who were actually bringing danger upon the whole fellowship:

The entire community, not just the individual lapsed, was being subjected to divine correction in the persecution itself. Subsequently, the

²¹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 778.

²² *Ibid.*, 779.

²³ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 772.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 773.

faithful assembly was endangered by sharing the eucharist with the unrepentant lapsed.²⁵

If, as Cyprian held, the Decian edict and subsequent persecution that accompanied it was a test and reprimand of God for the relaxed attitude its members had fallen into during an extended period of peace, then doing anything that offended God and which did not recognize his ultimate authority in no way showed any acknowledgment of this. As a faithful bishop, who in the line of Peter had been granted a biblical mandate to represent Christ and His Church here on Earth, Cyprian could not let God's reprimand go unappealed. This ultimately was his duty and his main role as the faithful bishop to his people in Carthage.

CONCLUSION

It has been the goal of this study to show that in his words written in *On the Lapsed*, Cyprian fulfilled the role of being faithful, first to the biblical mandate from Christ, second to the hierarchy of the Church, and finally, as a true and caring bishop to his people of Carthage. This study is not long enough to give a comprehensive picture of all that went on concerning the lapsed in Carthage during the decade that Cyprian was the bishop, but in closing, there are some important pieces of that story that need to be addressed.

As the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian performed his faithful role among members and clergy who were, at the very least, divided in their opinion of the situation concerning the lapsed. Three groups, the laxists, moderates, and rigorists, each viewed the situation differently. The laxists viewed any action of the martyrs almost as they would an action of God, and "accepted their power to secure forgiveness directly from Christ."²⁶ Thus, allowing the lapsed who held certificates of peace from the martyrs back into the Church and back into Communion was perfectly reasonable to them. The rigorists, striving first and foremost to uphold the purity of the fellowship of the Church and of Communion, held that the fellowship and Communion would be contaminated by the readmittance of the lapsed. Therefore, they held to a position that would not allow their readmittance. Finally, the moderates held a view that attempted to reintegrate the lapsed back into the community in a way they believed would not pollute it. In doing so, "they insisted that the fallen must submit to the judgment and rituals of the community in order to regain the peace of the church and the forgiveness of Christ."²⁷

When the bishops gathered in the spring of 251 in Carthage, despite what Cyprian had written in *On the Lapsed*, which one could conclude would have placed him clearly on the side of the rigorist, he began almost immediately to make concessions to the moderate and laxist positions. One of these moves was to allow the lapsed who possessed a certificate of peace to have each case examined

²⁵ J. Patout Burns Jr, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

separately and on its own merits. Each would be viewed based on the extent to which they had complied with the Decian edict, as well as how they responded with the request of penance. In the end, Cyprian came to understand that he “could not enforce a standard which did not win the support of his people and colleagues.”²⁸ Instead, as a faithful bishop, Cyprian understood that although God demands utmost loyalty and devotion of his people, He also cares deeply for them and wishes that none would perish. Therefore, working as a servant of Christ and as a servant of the people of Carthage, Cyprian carefully walked a tightrope that tried to be faithful to both.

On September 13, 258 A.D., Cyprian was taken to *Ager Sexti*, the vacation home of the Roman proconsul Galerius Maximus. There, over a two day period Cyprian faced questions and challenges to his Christian faith, not unlike many of the lapsed had faced during the Decian persecution. Cyprian did not give in to the Roman official’s demands, nor did he seek refuge in hiding as he had done years earlier. Rather, Cyprian held true to his Christian faith and as a result he was martyred at the hands of Roman authorities on September 14, 258 A.D.²⁹

²⁸ Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 39.

²⁹ See Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 80-81.

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