

WHO WAS ST. CYPRIAN?

(Fourth in a series)

Arrested

It is August 30, 257 A.D. Perhaps he is at prayer. Perhaps he is in his study, Perhaps he is celebrating Mass. We do not know, but on this day Roman soldiers approach him and arrest him. The charge? Atheism.

An order had gone forth from the Roman Emperor Valerian that every inhabitant of the Roman Empire exercise their religious duties and take part in the worship of the Roman gods. It is perhaps a supreme irony that the early Christians who died for their faith were officially charged with atheism. But the judgements of this world matter not, for God has the final word, *He understands, He'll say "Well done."*

Charged

Now Cyprian is brought before the Roman proconsul Paternus who seemed quite delighted to enforce the law which would end the lives of Christians. He began his interrogation of Cyprian, *The most sacred emperors Valerian and Gallien have done me the honor to command that I oblige all who follow not the Roman worship to immediately conform to it. What is your name and your quality?* Cyprian responded, *I am a Christian and a bishop. I know 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.* Paternus balked, *And so you persist in this way of thinking?* But Cyprian, who

would not be provoked, answered with serenity, *A good way of thinking which brings knowledge of God cannot be changed.* Perhaps to threaten or frighten Cyprian the Proconsul stated, *You will go into exile to the city of Curubis in accordance with the orders of Valerian!* Cyprian responded, *I go.*



The proconsul however had not finished issuing his threats and declared to Cyprian that he had also received the honor of arresting all the priests of the Christians and of forbidding under penalty of death all public worship by Christians. The proconsul then demanded of Cyprian the names of

all the priests. Respectfully but firmly, Cyprian refused to disclose such information.

Exiled

With this he was led off into exile to the city of Curubis, some sixty miles from Carthage. Cyprian arrived there on September 14, 257, exactly one year before he would suffer death for the name of Jesus. Shortly after arriving in Curubis, Cyprian had a vision granted by God that forewarned him of his approaching death. Rather than be unsettled by it, Cyprian took it as a promise of the great honor of martyrdom.

It was not long before more severe edicts were issued from Rome indicating that those who persisted in their refusal to worship the pagan gods were to be put to death. Knowing his end was near, Cyprian spent his final days encouraging his flock and expressing his affection for them. He also undertook personal penances in preparation for death.

Sentenced to Death

Soon enough orders came and Cyprian was brought back to Carthage to stand trial once again. When word got out among the populace that Cyprian was in custody, a large multitude gathered and lamented him. Even a great many pagans protested on his behalf for they remembered his kindness, courage and generosity during the plague. But it was to no avail, the new proconsul, Galerius Maximus, seemed anxious to enforce the death penalty.

We are blessed to have received from antiquity the account of St. Cyprian's final trial which is substantially reproduced here:

Proconsul: *Are you Thascius Cyprian?*

Cyprian: *I am*

Proconsul: *Are you the person who has been bishop and father to men of ungodly minds?*

Cyprian: *I have been their bishop.*

Proconsul: *The most sacred emperors have commanded you to conform to the ceremonies of the Roman religion.*

Cyprian: *I cannot*

Proconsul: *Consider again for your own safety.*

Cyprian: *Obey your orders. In so manifestly just a case there is no need for me to reconsider.*

Proconsul: *Long have you lived with an irreligious heart and have joined great numbers with yourself in an unnatural conspiracy against the Roman deities and their holy rites. Nor have our sacred and most pious emperors...been able to claim you to their ceremonies. Since you have been a ringleader in crimes of such a heinous nature, you shall be made an example to those whom you have seduced to join with you and discipline shall be established in your blood. I will that Thascius Cyprian be beheaded.*

Cyprian: *Blessed be God*

Many Christians who were within the room cried out, *Let us be beheaded with him!* As Cyprian was led out to die a large crowd pressed in on all sides so that a strong cohort of soldiers was required to escort him. They led him outside the city to an open field ringed by large trees. Many

onlookers climb those trees to better see him.

Martyred

On arriving at the spot where he was to die, Bishop Cyprian took off his mantle (or overcoat), and fell to his knees and prostrated himself before God. Then, arising he took off his dalmatic which he gave to his attending deacons and remained in his long white robe. He payed his executioner the sum of 25 gold denarii. While this gesture was not unheard of especially for a person of some means it nevertheless tells us of the graciousness and forgiveness in the heart of Cyprian. He himself tied the blindfold over his eyes after which his hands were tied. Kneeling again he awaited the final blow. At length the sword passed and Cyprian ended his pilgrimage here. It was September 14, 258.

His body was buried near the site of his death and, once the Christian faith became legal (in 313 AD) two churches were erected in his honor. By the 9th Century (after the Moslem sweep of North Africa), the body of St. Cyprian was removed to France by Charlemagne. Today the remains of Cyprian lie in Compiègne in the Great Abbey Church of St. Corneille.

Reflecting on his martyrdom we do well to recall his own words, *We have solemnly renounced the world and therefore, while we continue in it should behave like strangers and pilgrims. We should welcome that happy day (of our death) which is to fix us, everyone, in our proper habitation, to rescue us from the embarrassments and snares of this world, and remove*

us to the kingdom of heaven. Who of us, if he had long been a sojourner in a foreign land would not desire to return to his native country? Who of us, when he had begun to sail there would not wish for a prosperous wind to carry him to his desired home with speed, that he might sooner embrace his friends and relatives? We must account paradise our country. There friends and parents and brethren and children without number wait for us and long to celebrate our happy arrival. They are in secure possession of their own joy yet are solicitous for ours. How great will be our common joy upon the transports of meeting together in those blessed abodes. How unutterable must be the pleasures of that kingdom which have no intermission. There we shall meet with the glorious choir of apostles; with the goodly company of the prophets; with an innumerable multitude of holy martyrs; there we shall be blessed with the sight of those triumphant virgins who have subdued the inordinate lusts of the flesh; and there we shall behold the rewards of those who, by feeding the hungry and consoling the afflicted have with their earthly treasure stored up for themselves treasure in heaven. To these beloved brethren let us hasten with eager longing! Let us pray that it may befall us speedily to be with them; speedily to come to Christ. May God see this our purpose. May Christ look upon this resolution of our mind and faith, who will give more ample rewards of His love to those whose longings for Him have been greater. (De Mortalitate, 26)