

WHO WAS ST. CYPRIAN?

(First in a series)

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. And yet many who first hear the name of St. Cyprian, ask, "Saint. who?...How's that spelled?" It may not help much to say that he was the Bishop of Carthage, for the next question is also inevitable, "Carthage? Where's that?...And, by the way, What is a "Father of the Church?"

These questions and more must be answered as we explore the life, the times and the teachings of our patron, St. Cyprian. We will discover he lived in times not unlike our own, in a city not unlike ours. And, like us, he struggled to be a faithful disciple in the midst of temptation, fearful conflict and disappointments.

Carthage.

Carthage was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. Though today it lies in ruins, at the time of Cyprian (200 AD) it was the third largest city in the ancient world, surpassed only by Rome and Alexandria. The city had a large market, colossal baths, a magnificent amphitheater and a library. It also had an artificial harbor created by impressive stone walls stretching out into the ocean that were surmounted by stately columns. The main streets of the city were broad avenues with large buildings and impressive columns very much like Pennsylvania & Constitution Avenues of our own city near the Mall.

Carthage was a commercial city.

The vast tracts of farm land and estates that filled the river valleys nearby made the city a major exporter of crops and many other goods. Carthage was an important trading and export center also due to its strategic location on the coast of North Africa, giving it a central location on the Mediterranean ocean.



Despite its great opulence, a sizeable number of the population of the city did not live in great opulence at all. They lived in small shanty towns of mud huts on the outskirts of the city. Here too we can see a similarity with our own city where wealth and

power are found not far from great poverty.

Though Cyprian was from a well to do family, the inequities between rich and poor, as well as his disgust with the immorality generally prevalent at the time, would be strong factors that would lead him to sell much of his property, give the money to the poor and embrace the Christian faith.

The Life of Luxury.

He was born to a rich, noble family about the year 210 A.D. His full name was Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus. Raised in a pagan family he would not convert to the faith until his mid thirties. He attended the finest schools and became a master of Rhetoric. He then took up a career in law. He, like many of his elevated social class, enjoyed a comfortable life without career worries and filled with the luxuries and pleasures of that his high social rank afforded. We might conclude that Cyprian had it made: wealth, luxurious comfort and security. He was intelligent and highly regarded by others. What more could he want?

Cyprian's Struggle

Cyprian had climbed the ladder of success but now discovered it was leaning against the wrong wall. We do not know that the exact time or manner of his conversion but it is clear from his writings that he became increasingly besieged by a feeling of emptiness and a hidden desperation. His own riches seemed burdensome and whatever pleasures they offered were empty. Probably recounting his own experience he

would later write of the wealthy as, *Fearful in the midst of riches...lest the robber lay them waste, the murderer attack or the envy of some wealthier neighbor disturb with malicious lawsuits. Neither food nor sleep is had in peace; the rich man sighs at the banquet although he drinks from a jewelled cup...the wretch does not understand that these gilded things are his torments, that he is held bound by gold and is possessed by riches, rather than possess them. Yet he continues to brood still more over his troublesome fortunes and stubbornly cling to his punishing hoards* (Letter to Donatus, 12). More and more he was disillusioned with the immorality of his age. He wrote sadly not only of the sexual immorality of his day but also of the horrible violence displayed in the arena and on the stage where the death of gladiators was entertainment for the crowds. He lamented the injustice and bribery in the courts where “justice” often went to the highest bidder. And then there was the neglect of the poor. He wrote of the rich who: *...add forest to forest and extend their infinite, boundless estates ever wider excluding the poor from its limits...There is no sharing with the needy...They impart nothing to their friends, nothing to their children; they possess it only for this purpose, that another may not possess it. They make no use (of it) except for evil ends.* (Letter to Donatus, 12).

Cyprian saw clearly the evil and injustice of his own age and knew he was part of it too. But he also felt trapped. Change was too difficult and frightening. Perhaps it is best to let him speak for himself: *I was prostrate in the gloom of dark night...hesitant and undecided, I was tossed here and there by the stormy tides of the world, ignorant of the*

meaning of my life, remote from truth and light. What divine mercy was promising me for my salvation seem to me (given the habits of my life then) something truly difficult and wearisome...How is such a radical transformation possible, how is it possible to rid oneself of all those inborn vices...which have become like second nature over time? They have set roots in the depths of our being! I was disposed to give in to my clinging vices and in my despair of better things I indulged my sins as if they were natural and normal to me. (Letter to Donatus, 3 & 4). (Letter to Donatus, 3)

Cyprian had been introduced to the teachings of the Christian faith by Cecilianus, an elder in the Christian community of Carthage. He could sense the wisdom and the glory of the gospel but doubted his ability to set aside his old ways.

Most of us struggle with the same issue. We know the glory to which we are called and hear the summons to be set free from sin. Yet, we sense our weakness, we fear change and wonder how we can ever fully overcome them.

Trust God.

“God can do anything...but fail.” Cyprian chose to trust in God’s promise of freedom and accepted baptism. When he did, a whole new life, a whole new power, a whole new man was born. Cyprian rejoiced in his new-found freedom, the freedom of the children of God. His writings express his great joy: *A light from above poured itself upon my chastened and pure heart...a second birth transformed me into a new man; immediately and in a marvelous manner doubtful matters clarified themselves, the closed opened, the shadowy shown with light, what seemed impossible was able to be accomplished. What*

formerly was of the flesh and lived submissive to sins...began to be of God. (Letter to Donatus 4).

St. Cyprian also advises us: *If you hold to the way of innocence...depending upon God with all your strength and with your whole heart...so much power is given you in the way of freedom to act...For the Spirit flowing forth bountifully is shut in by no boundaries...It spreads out continually, overflows abundantly, provided our hearts are athirst. From this source the power is given with modest chastity, a sound mind and a pure voice to extinguish the virus of sorrowful poisons, to cleanse the sin-sick soul by restoring health...so that, as one cleansed and pure it is seized by no stain of the attacking enemy but it becomes greater and stronger in its might. It rules with imperial right of every army of the attacking adversary!* (To Donatus, 5)

What a transformation! From a man troubled and enslaved, we see joy and the freedom of the children of God. “God is a good God, He can move so many mountains out of our way. God is a wonderful God.” For Cyprian these were more than words. He really experienced God’s power. His biographer, Pontius tells us that almost immediately Cyprian renounced certain long standing vices, took a vow of chastity and sold his property for the benefit of the poor. A miracle Cyprian thought impossible had taken place, the giving up of his old life. The change of such a well known public figure astonished everyone, but no one more than Cyprian himself. God can do anything but fail.

(Next Week: he is ordained priest, made bishop, endures exile and teaches us perseverance).