

Cyprian of Carthage's Response to the *Lapsi* Controversi

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Introduction

The fullness and perfection of revelation came through the words Jesus spoke and the signs and wonders he worked.¹ It is the task of the Church, which she received from Christ her bridegroom, to continue to grasp, develop, and teach all that he presented and taught during his time on Earth.² The carrying out of this task throughout the centuries has resulted in a variety of difficulties including the rejection of the Church's teaching authority by various schismatics and heretics. Sadly, these schisms and heretical teachings are often the result of infighting, hurt feelings, and pride amongst the Church's hierarchy, albeit often with the best intentions of safeguarding the Church and her teachings. Thankfully though, not all such situations end in disunity, but rather greater clarity of doctrine regarding a specific issue. Observing such episodes reminds one to cling to St. Paul's promise in his Letter to the Romans, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."³

One issue that fell under contention in the early Church was the problem of what ought to be done regarding those Christians who, during times of persecution, apostatized and later desired to return to full communion, the term commonly used for these individuals is the *lapsi*. During the persecution of Decius, the situation of the *lapsi* would give rise to tensions among different bishops and presbyters. One of the key individuals in the latter debate, and the one to

¹ Second Vatican Council, Dei verbum [Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation], Vatican Website, November 18, 1965, accessed July 13, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, §4.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), §66.

³ Romans 8:28 RSV.

whose writings we owe much of our knowledge regarding it, is St. Cyprian of Carthage, a North African bishop of the mid-third century.

Cyprian of Carthage

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus, more commonly known as St. Cyprian of Carthage, converted to Christianity between AD 245 and 246.⁴ Prior to his conversion there is very little known about the saint's life, other than that by his own admission, his conversion brought him from the dark world of paganism to the light of Christianity.⁵

Shortly after his conversion, under the tutelage of Caecilius, a priest of Carthage, Cyprian entered into the ranks of the presbyters and was elevated to the episcopate in 248.⁶ Due to his station in life prior to his conversion, Cyprian was able to sell his possessions and provide for the poor of the diocese. This source of means would prove most helpful during the time of persecution that would soon come upon the Church.⁷

His election as bishop of Carthage came about by the popular acclaim of the people. As he was such a new convert, a handful of his fellow presbyters balked at his election and were vehemently opposed to it, as there were many senior presbyters hoping to ascend to the episcopacy; however the people won in the end. According to Cyprian's biographer, Pontius, the antagonistic presbyters were soon won over by Cyprian's kindness and patient endurance.⁸ This did not, however, prevent the opposition from setting up against Cyprian when they attempted to

⁴ Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), I.

⁵ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, I.

⁶ Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology: The Lives and Works of the Fathers of the Church*, (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1908), 191.

⁷ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 3.

⁸ Ronald D. Burris, "Where is the Church? The Sacrament of Baptism in the Teaching of Cyprian, Parmenian, Petilian, & Augustine" (doctoral dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 2002), 48.

undermine the latter's authority as bishop and directly contradict his ordinances regarding the lapsed Christians in the midst of persecution.⁹

Despite his "novice" status in the faith, Cyprian served the people well and continued to provide for the poor out of his own means throughout the times of persecution in Carthage. His wide acclaim amongst the people was evident even until his death in 258, when the people went to his place of imprisonment and accompanied him to his trial and place of martyrdom amidst wide acclaim and affection.¹⁰ When one considers that Cyprian's conversion took place in AD 246 and his martyrdom just twelve years later in 258, the impact he had on the Church is remarkable.

The Persecution of the Emperor Decius

Shortly after his election as bishop of Carthage, the Emperor Decius decreed that each citizen of the empire must attest that he was a worshipper of the immortal gods, offer sacrifice, partake of the sacrificial meat, and pour out a libation.¹¹ It was the emperor's hope that through unifying the people in worship, a return to the golden age of the empire would be possible through receiving the peace of the gods, *pax deorum*, by the offering of acceptable worship.¹²

It should be noted that Decius's intent was not to force individuals to renounce allegiances to other religions, but to bring unity to the empire through common worship.¹³ Those who complied with the decree were given a certificate of proof, and their "duty" to the emperor

⁹ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 342.

¹⁰ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 3.

¹¹ J. Patout Burns, "On Rebaptism: Social Organization in the Third Century Church," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 4 (1993): 369.

¹² Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 6-7.

¹³ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 369.

was completed.¹⁴ He allowed Christians to continue the practice of the faith as well as presbyteral access to those in prison. It was during this persecution that St. Fabian would die in prison leaving the See of Rome vacant for the remainder of the persecution. Cyprian of Carthage, to continue the support of his flock, albeit from afar, voluntarily went into exile for the remainder of the persecution.¹⁵

There was some controversy surrounding Cyprian's self-imposed withdrawal from his See during the persecution as is evident from several of the epistles written to the presbyters and deacons left behind.¹⁶ The bishop's main assertion is that because of his prominent position, his absence was for the good of the community. Cyprian writes not only to explain his absence, but also to affirm his continued presence and support for his people as he says:

I, taking into consideration not so much my own safety as the public peace of the brethren, withdrew for a while, lest by my over-bold presence, the tumult which had begun might be still further provoked. Nevertheless, although absent in body, I was not wanting either in spirit, or in act, or in my advice, so as to fail in any benefit that I could afford my brethren by my counsel, according to the Lord's precepts, in anything that my poor abilities enabled me.¹⁷

We see here Cyprian's desire to reaffirm his great love for his people, as well as his deep, indwelling knowledge of the support and love he owes to those entrusted to his care. The pain at being accused of abandoning his people is palpable in the above text.

Upon his return to Carthage following the persecution, Cyprian issued the treatise, *De Lapsis*, on the lapsed. He continued to defend himself regarding his decision to go into exile rather than remain with the people.

¹⁴ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 7.

¹⁵ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 369.

¹⁶ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 8.

¹⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 14*, <http://newadvent.org/fathers/050614.htm>, accessed July 15, 2015, §1.

It is the first title to victory to confess the Lord under the violence of hands of the Gentiles. It is the second step to glory to be withdrawn by a cautious retirement, and to be reserved for the Lord. The former is a public, the latter is a private confession. The former overcomes the judge of this world the latter content with God as its judge, keeps a pure conscience in integrity of heart.¹⁸

Later in the same document he once again reaffirmed his decision by appealing to Scripture saying, "...a voice is heard from heaven, forewarning what is becoming for the servants of God to do, saying, 'Come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues (Rev. 18:4).'"¹⁹ It is necessary to note, that the concept of fleeing during times of persecution was a well established custom in the church of Africa. This option gained credence throughout generations based on the scripture passage mentioned above.²⁰

Later in his treatise, Cyprian again gave a defense of his flight and confides to his people the Lord's counsel to keep away from temptation as he says,

...and therefore the Lord commanded us in the persecution to depart and to flee...for as the crown is given of the condescension of God, and cannot be received unless the hour comes for accepting it, whosoever abiding in Christ departs for a while does not deny his faith, but waits for the time but he who has fallen, after refusing to depart remained to deny it.²¹

It is clear that while Cyprian may have desired to stay with his people on principle, his withdrawal into exile most certainly helped him to remain faithful to his role as bishop and he did not regret the action which many perceived as abandonment.²² Interestingly, when he returned from his exile Cyprian ranked those who fled at the outbreak of the persecution, or

¹⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise 3: On the Lapsed*, <http://newadvent.org/fathers/050703.htm>, accessed July 10, 2015, §3.

¹⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise 3*, §10.

²⁰ Robert F. Evans, *One and Holy: The Church in Latin Patristic Thought*, (London: The Camelot Press, Ltd., 1972), 42.

²¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §10.

²² Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 8.

otherwise went undetected by its officials alongside those who stayed and underwent the torments of persecution as witnesses of the faith and heroes to be admired.²³

The Christian's Response to Persecution

The response of the Christian people in Carthage during this time of persecution took several forms. Many of the people, including clergy, gave in to the Emperor's decree and offered the sacrifices, joining the Roman worship of the gods. Others paid a fee in order to obtain the certificate mentioned above. But some refused to submit to the pagan ritual and were imprisoned and tried, and then either released or sent into exile.²⁴ It was not until the year AD 250 that torture was introduced in an effort to force compliance with the decree. While no one was sentenced to death as a result of the persecution, some did perish under the influence of the torture.²⁵

Those who complied with the decree of sacrifice, whether by their own voluntary will, or after undergoing a time of pressure or torture at the hands of the Romans, would also fall into varying categories, all of which Cyprian would classify as apostasy in varying degrees. Those guilty of apostatizing were classified as *libellatici*, *thurificati*, or *sacrificati*.²⁶ Each of the three received a *libellus*, or certificate, attesting to the fact that they had complied with the decree, and could be classified as *lapsi* or, the lapsed.²⁷

The *libellatici*, in no way participated in sacrifice to the gods. Members of this group whether through bribery, proxy, or some sort of official favor were able to receive the certificate

²³ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 373.

²⁴ J. Patout Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," *The Expository Times* 120, no. 10 (2009): 469.

²⁵ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 370.

²⁶ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 8.

²⁷ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 373.

of compliance with “clean hands”.²⁸ Cyprian would claim in his *De Lapsis* that while the hands of the *libellatici* were stainless, their consciences were not, as they were still intent upon escaping the persecution rather than confessing their faith. He says

Nor let those persons flatter themselves that they need repent the less, who, although they have not polluted their hands with abominable sacrifices, yet have defiled their conscience with certificates...he says that he has done what another has actually committed...he has served an earthly master...he has been more obedient to human authority than to God...he will not be able to escape and avoid God his judge.²⁹

He goes on to warn this group that, while the Lord judges one's outward actions, he also sees the thoughts and actions of the heart.³⁰

The *thurificati*, like the *libellatici*, did not offer the sacrifice in a formal sense, through animal sacrifice. The individuals in this group found sympathetic magistrates who, contrary to Decian's decree, allowed the Christians to simply offer incense. It was also understood that these individuals offered the incense not to Caesar as a god, or in reference to any of the other gods, but simply to the “genius” of Caesar as such.³¹

The final group included among the *lapsi* were those who formally cooperated with the emperor's decree. This group also was also categorized by degrees. Firstly, Cyprian addressed those who immediately fled to the magistrates as soon as the decree was issued and willingly sacrificed to the gods in order to retain favor with the Roman government.³² Cyprian says of these in his treatise on the lapsed,

²⁸ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 7.

²⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §27.

³⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §27.

³¹ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 8.

³² Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 8.

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. What unheard-of thing, I beg of you, what new thing had happened, that, as if on the occurrence of things unknown and unexpected, the obligation to Christ should be dissolved with headlong rashness?³³

It is clear from this passage that Cyprian's disappointment in this latter group lay in the fact that they did not even wait for the force of the decree to take effect. They did not allow even the remotest possibility that they might have to suffer for their faith, before giving in to the pagan government's law of sacrifice. He goes on to say,

They ran to the market-place of their own accord; freely they hastened to death, as if they had formerly wished it, as if they would embrace an opportunity now given which they had always desired...how can he purge his crime, when it was he himself who rather used force to bring about his own ruin?³⁴

The next group of *sacrificati* did not offer the sacrifice as true apostates, denying the one true God, but simply out of fear.³⁵ Once their names were officially in the books as having fulfilled the rituals they felt themselves safe from further persecution and then wished to return to communion with the Church.³⁶ Cyprian distinguishes between these two groups in the following way in his *Epistle 57*:

We need to draw distinctions, dearly beloved brother, between two kinds of lapsed. On the one hand there are those who after apostatizing, returned to the world which they had renounced and now live there as pagans, or who, becoming deserters to heresy, now take up each day impious arms against the Church. Far different, on the other hand, are those who have never left the threshold of the Church, there with ceaseless lamentation begging for the consoling gifts of God their Father: they declare that they are now prepared for combat, ready to take

³³ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §7.

³⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §8.

³⁵ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 12-13.

³⁶ Johann Peter Kirsch, "Lapsi," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9, (1910; New Advent 2012), <http://newadvent.org/cathen/09001b.htm>, accessed July 13, 2015.

their stand and to fight courageously for the sake of the Name of their Lord and their own salvation.³⁷

As the persecution ended and Cyprian returned to his flock in 251, the discussion as to how those seeking re-admittance to communion, after denying Christ and their membership in his body, ought to be treated.³⁸ The question became, should all be treated equally, or is there a need to differentiate means of reconciliation based on each individual's case?³⁹

Cyprian's Response to Reconciling the Lapsed

In his letters to the Church from exile, Cyprian's view regarding those who apostatized was clear. At whatever level one denied their faith, whether by obtaining their *libellus* without sacrifice, offering only incense, or through formal compliance and animal sacrifice, they ought not to be readmitted to communion.⁴⁰ He declared that all who desired reconciliation with the Church ought to immediately do penance and seek purification, insisting that any formal reacceptance of the lapsed to communion would not be considered until the end of the persecution when the Church herself returned to a state of peace.⁴¹ This latter position of waiting for the end of the persecution was a point communicated from Rome, which Cyprian accepted.⁴²

Before returning from his self-imposed exile, Cyprian had deputed his presbyters to receive back into communion those who had fallen, yet later returned and undertaken a life of

³⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, "Epistle 57", in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* vol. 3 no.46, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1983), §3.1.

³⁸ Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," 470.

³⁹ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 13.

⁴⁰ Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon, *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language and Thought*, (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010), 12.

⁴¹ Burns, "On Rebaptism," 371.

⁴² Burns, "On Rebaptism," 371.

penance, should they be near death.⁴³ Unfortunately, this permission opened the door to abuse and what Cyprian would come to recognize as a threat to the unity of the Church.⁴⁴ This threat to unity stemmed from a misunderstanding of what ought to be involved in the act of reconciling the lapsed. Some took it to mean that it simply necessitated a presbyter extending the chalice and paten (communion) to the one seeking reconciliation. Cyprian, however, was of the opinion that for full reconciliation, one who apostatized must receive the laying on of hands from the bishop once it was determined that the hadlapsed performed a sufficient period of penance.⁴⁵

The Beginning of Schism

The true beginning of disunity which arose from the situation of the lapsed came as a result of certain confessors and martyrs taking on themselves the authority to reconcile the lapsed on the basis of their suffering for the faith.⁴⁶ Contrary to Cyprian's admonishments that the lapsed should undertake penance, the confessors issued letters promising to intercede for the lapsed upon their martyrdom, and thus win them the grace of reconciliation. Armed with these letters, the lapsed upon the confessor's death would present these letters to the presbyters and expect full reconciliation with the Church.⁴⁷

Cyprian vehemently opposed this method of reconciliation arguing that it belonged to the bishop alone to grant such pardon and that those who had suffered for the name of Christ could not apply their sacrifice for the reconciliation of others and the lapsed must offer their own penance before readmission. He did, however, allow the presbyters to grant pardon to those among the lapsed who, on their deathbed, presented a letter of intercession from one of the

⁴³ Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," 470.

⁴⁴ Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," 470.

⁴⁵ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 9.

⁴⁶ Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," 470.

⁴⁷Burns, "On Rebaptism," 371.

martyrs.⁴⁸ Eventually, Cyprian would allow for any penitent to be reconciled by the local clergy in the case of death.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, a group of presbyters in Carthage remained opposed to the bishop and reconciled any lapsed with a letter of peace, regardless of whether they were near death or not. Upon his return to Carthage, Cyprian would excommunicate the rebels and all those who followed them, which resulted in those “laxists”, led by Felicissimus, entering into schism.⁵⁰

Shortly after his return to Carthage, Cyprian penned his treatise on the Lapsed (*De Lapsis*) which would be read at a council of bishops and presbyters meeting to discuss the matter of reconciling those who fell away during the persecution. This was to be the foundational document upon which the Church’s response to the lapsed would be based.⁵¹ In the document, Cyprian reiterates that those who lapsed should not be readmitted to communion automatically or with great ease, but should rather undergo penance. However, he also began at this point, to soften his position against the lapsed, and allowed for greater ease of reconciliation particularly for those who fell after a great deal of torture and those who received their *libellus* without making any sort of sacrifice.

It is evident in *De Lapsis* that Cyprian took great care to exult the place of the martyrs’ and confessors’ witness during the persecution as he says,

We look with glad countenances upon confessors illustrious with the heraldry of a good name, and glorious with the praises of virtue and of faith; clinging to them with holy kisses, we embrace them long desired with insatiable eagerness. . . . Let none, my beloved brethren, let none depreciate this glory; let none by malignant dispraise detract from the uncorrupted steadfastness of those who have stood.⁵²

⁴⁸ Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 371.

⁴⁹ Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 372.

⁵⁰ Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 372-373.

⁵¹ Quasten, *Patrology*, 349.

⁵² Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §2-3.

At the same time, however, he took care to reaffirm the bishop's authority even above those who have given their lives for the faith.⁵³ We see later in *De Lapsis* Cyprian asserting his authority as bishop and, not mentioning specific circumstances, alluding to his disappointment regarding those who went against his regulations regarding reconciliation:

Moreover, beloved brethren, a new kind of devastation has appeared; and, as if the storm of persecution had raged too little, there has been added to the heap, under the title of mercy, a deceiving mischief and a fair-seeming calamity. Contrary to the vigor of the Gospel, contrary to the law of the Lord and God, by the temerity of some, communion is relaxed to heedless persons—a vain and false peace, dangerous to those who grant it, and likely to avail nothing to those who receive it. They do not seek for the patience necessary to health nor the true medicine derived from atonement.⁵⁴

About two years after his return to Carthage, as the lapsed continued undertaking penance, the threat of a second persecution loomed. In the face of this, the bishops of Africa decreed that any who had fallen and sacrificed to the gods and had been undertaking penance should be reconciled immediately.⁵⁵ This was a pastoral response to the situation considering that it is the responsibility of the shepherds of the flock, according to the bishop, to ensure that those entrusted to his care be ready to fight the battle of persecution, and if necessary suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ. As such, it is only in union with the Church that members of the flock possess the Spirit needed to strengthen and encourage them in times of trial.⁵⁶ Cyprian emphasizes the importance of the penitent being received back into the Church in order that the Christian might have all of the graces he needs to persevere under trial when he says, "...the lapsed, who has subsequently attained to martyrdom, may receive the promises of the kingdom,

⁵³ Burris, "Where is the Church? The Sacrament of Baptism in the Teaching of Cyprian, Parmenian, Petilian, & Augustine," 59-61.

⁵⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §15.

⁵⁵ Burns, "Cyprian of Carthage," 470.

⁵⁶ Cyprian of Carthage, "Epistle 57", in *Ancient Christian Writers*, §4.2.

while the other, if he have been slain without the Church, cannot attain to the rewards of the Church.”⁵⁷ Again, this shows Cyprian’s pastoral heart, and his great love for the flock. At the same time, it also shows his understanding of the need for the lapsed to repent of their failures during the previous persecution in order to be reconciled.

Opposite Extremes Regarding the *Lapsi* and the Resulting Schisms

Unfortunately, as time went on, it became evident that there was a tripartite division in the Church.⁵⁸ Those who broke with Cyprian’s decision to “wait out” the persecution before readmitting the lapsed fell into one of two extremes that can be characterized as the “laxists”, and the “rigorists”. The laxists, as their name may suggest, argued for immediate readmission of the lapsed. On the other side of the debate, the rigorists refused readmission of the lapsi to communion, while leaving open the possibility that one *might* be forgiven of the mortal sin of apostasy on their deathbed. These rigorists sided with Novation. As mentioned above, Cyprian initially held to this rigorist perspective before adopting a more pastoral approach.⁵⁹

Cyprian condemned the laxist position in his *De Lapsis* using the analogy of a physician’s treatment of a patient’s infected wound. Essentially, he asserted that although the treatment may not be pleasant, and may result in further pain, it is nevertheless more beneficial for the patient to deal firmly and skillfully with a wound rather than do only that which does not bring further pain. Therefore, Cyprian compares those who hold to the laxist position with the likes of an unskilled physicians who,

⁵⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise 1: On the Unity of the Church*, <http://newadvent.org/fathers/050701.htm>, accessed July 10, 2015, §19.

⁵⁸ J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 100. eBook Collection, EBSCOhost. (72881).

⁵⁹ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 10.

...handle the swelling edges of wounds with a tender hand, and, by retaining the poison shut up in the deep recesses of the body, increases it. The wound, must be opened, and cut, and healed by the stronger remedy of cutting out the corrupting parts. The sick man may cry out, may vociferate, and may complain, in impatience of the pain; but he will afterwards give thanks when he has felt that he is cured.⁶⁰

Although not explicitly stated, one might imagine that Cyprian had in mind the words of Jesus to his disciples, “he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”⁶¹ The road to following Christ, especially when rising from a fall into sin, is not one of comfort and ease, but rather often involves difficulty, struggles, and pain. What is more, Cyprian argued that too lenient a position as regards the lapsed is against justice, as a certain satisfaction is necessary to regain hope of salvation.⁶²

Those holding to the rigorist view initially embraced by Cyprian reacted against both the extreme laxist position as well as the more moderate position of the bishop of Rome and, eventually, of Cyprian himself.⁶³ These individuals, united under the bishop Novation, claimed that to admit the lapsed back into communion would introduce impurity into the Church.⁶⁴

Upon the death of Pope Fabian shortly after the outbreak of the Decian Persecution, the presbyters of Rome decided to refrain from electing his successor until the persecution subsided. During the interim period the presbyters oversaw the diocese. Pope Cornelius was elected in 251 as the bishop of Rome.⁶⁵ As a result of Cornelius’s election the presbyter Novation, one of the

⁶⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed*, §14.

⁶¹ Matthew 10:28, RSV.

⁶² Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 373.

⁶³ Bardenhewer, *Patrology: The Lives and Works of the Fathers of the Church*, 191.

⁶⁴ Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 375.

Burns, “On Rebaptism,” 374.

leading and more powerful of the Roman presbyters, took steps to set himself up against the newly elected bishop.⁶⁶

Novation was a rigorist regarding the *lapsi*, and was of the opinion that those who had committed the sin of idolatry ought not to be readmitted to communion with the Church lest she be defiled.⁶⁷ Cornelius, however, was the authority behind the moderate approach adhered to by Cyprian described above. As one might imagine, Novation, already upset about being looked over for election, and seeing the bishop of Rome taking what he considered a laxist approach, was not willing to obey quietly.

Unlike Cyprian, Novation held to his rigorist views and refused to submit to the Church's official position of prudent mercy with required penance and time before readmission to communion.⁶⁸ After the election of Cornelius, Novation set himself up in opposition to the one, true Church, beginning another rival sect. Not content to keep his influence to Rome, Novation would later send an envoy to Africa to win support for himself there. When the African bishops affirmed the election of Cornelius, contrary to Novation's expectations based on his knowledge of Cyprian's previous rigorist view, another Church with a rigorist bishop was established in North Africa in union with Novation.⁶⁹

By 252, just one year after Cyprian's return from exile and the end of the Decian persecution, the African Church was faced with two opposing views. On the one side, those admitting lapsed Christians freely, and on the other, those vehemently opposed to lapsed returning to communion after having fallen during the persecution.⁷⁰ It is important to note that

⁶⁶ Evans, *One and Holy*, 44.

⁶⁷ Evans, *One and Holy*, 44.

⁶⁸ Evans, *One and Holy*, 45.

⁶⁹ Evans, *One and Holy*, 45.

⁷⁰ Evans, *One and Holy*, 45.

although Cyprian struggled with the rivaling positions regarding the lapsed, that was not what instilled in him the greatest sadness. Rather, Cyprian was most greatly saddened by the fact that the laxist rivals at Carthage and the Novationists in Rome set themselves up against the Church in such a way that in breaking with the unity of the Church they were no longer Catholic.⁷¹

It was this double schism of Novation and the laxist bishops of Carthage that led Cyprian to pen his treatise On the Unity of the Church, *De Unitate*. In this work Cyprian calls upon the authority of Scripture and Tradition to assert that the Church is one, and it is the role of the episcopacy to maintain and give witness to that union.

And this unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us that are bishops who preside in the Church, that we may also prove the episcopate itself to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brotherhood by a falsehood: let no one corrupt the truth of the faith by perfidious prevarication. The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole.⁷²

Conclusion

Despite Cyprian's admonishments, the schisms that arose from the issues related to the *lapsi* continued and a new question arose in the Church. Did those who received baptism in one of the schismatic churches receive a valid baptism?

This question is a poignant one that laid the foundation for the Church's current teaching on baptism administered outside the Roman Catholic Church. The controversy would find Cyprian opposed to Stephen, bishop of Rome, ironic given the former's intense adherence to the necessity of unity in the Church. Providentially, Stephen would die in the midst of their dispute and Cyprian would be martyred a short time later.⁷³ These events may have prevented yet

⁷¹ Evans, *One and Holy*, 47.

⁷² Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise 1: On the Unity of the Church*, §5.

⁷³ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 18-19.

another schism in the Church. Regardless of what the outcome may have been, one can see in the events of the schisms due to the *lapsi* controversy, and the later question of rebaptism that arose from it, that, although not willed by God, his providential hand has guided the Church throughout the centuries and helped her to more clearly articulate her teachings, and show forth his mercy, even amidst trials, persecutions, and disagreements among her leaders.

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