

Saint of the Week: Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258)

Observed 15 September



At the beginning of the third century, Cyprian was born into a wealthy pagan family, and was probably either Punic or Berber, the native peoples of that area of North Africa. In about the year 248 he was converted to Christianity, was baptized, and subsequently gave a large portion of his wealth to the poor. For Cyprian baptism was quickly followed by ordination to the diaconate and then to the priesthood, and very soon was chosen Bishop of Carthage, but not without opposition. He was most popular among the poor, who appreciated his generosity. Many were moved by his learning and the gifts he retained from his earlier career as an orator. Not long after Cyprian became bishop, Emperor Decius began a vicious persecution of the churches through the Roman Empire. In this persecution all citizens were required to sacrifice to the Emperor in the presence of an imperial official and to obtain a certificate indicating their compliance. This presented considerable difficulty for faithful Christians. Some chose to sacrifice, knowing that the ritual was in itself meaningless, in order to preserve their lives and protect their families. Others felt that honor and their loyalty to Christ made the required sacrifice unthinkable. When the persecution abated, there was fierce debate within the Church about whether individuals who had made the sacrifice could be readmitted. The argument led to much deep thought and argument about the nature of forgiveness, from God and from the Church. During this first persecution, Bishop Cyprian went into hiding outside the city in order to keep functioning. He governed through a faithful deacon who was able to carry his messages. When this persecution ended, Cyprian's enemies complained to Rome about their bishop's 'cowardice'. Decius' successor, Emperor Valerian, renewed the persecution a few years later,

first sentencing any who would not make the required sacrifice to exile and soon after making the punishment death. Many Christians throughout the Empire, including Cyprian, were martyred at this time. In the few years between the two persecutions, Bishop Cyprian dealt with controversies about lapsed Christians, heretic baptisms, and irregular ordinations. He was a clear and rigorous thinker, whose speaking and writing were of great help to his flock and fellow clergy. But what really won the hearts of his people was his self-forgetful devotion in the face of devastating famine and plague. Cyprian was beheaded in his own villa where he was kept under house arrest after being brought back from months of exile. Even though his life as a Christian was only ten years long, Cyprian's writings give us substantial insight into the struggles of the 3rd century church with a hostile culture and within its own ranks. It was a time when the blood of the martyrs truly proved to be the seed of the Church, which continue to grow and spread throughout the Empire.

Lessons: Micah 4:1-5; Psalm 116:10-17; I Peter 5:1-4.10-11; John 10:11-16

Collect: Almighty God, who gave to your servant Cyprian boldness to confess the Name of our Savior Jesus Christ before the rulers of this world, and courage to die for this faith: Grant that we may always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us, and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*