

A STUDY OF "THE SAINTS THROUGH THE CENTURIES"

By Richard Thornton

SAINT CYPRIAN – THIRD CENTURY

Saint Cyprian (Thascius Cyprianus) came from a prominent pagan family. After his studies he launched into a profitable career as a teacher of philosophy and rhetoric. His pursuit of worldly pleasures gave him no lasting satisfaction. He began to read and study and became a profound scholar of the sacred scriptures and the great religious authors, especially the great writings of Saint Tertullian. Through these experiences he became persuaded of the Christian faith. After much study, prayer, and thought, he was baptized at about the age of forty-six. At his baptism, he felt that God had granted him to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and he himself felt that he had become a "new man". He gave away his possessions and so impressed people by his genuine conversion and virtuous way of life, he was ordained a Priest and just two years later he was made Bishop.

During the reign of Emperor Philip (244-249), the Church in Carthage enjoyed relative peace. Unfortunately, this seem to allow the Christians to become very lax in the practice of their faith. Many fell back into pagan ways: quarrelling, participating in pagan forms of amusement, and in general setting their interests and affections on the earth rather than on the things above. (Perhaps like many Christians today). The new Bishop reminded his people of their high calling as followers of Jesus Christ, and encouraged them to behave accordingly. One year later, Decius became emperor and unleashed a new wave of persecution. Many of these so called "lax Christians" left their faith.

Within a short period of time, Saint Cyprian had earned respect as an efficient and wise leader of the Church. When Pope Fabian of Rome was martyred, his clergy turned to Saint Cyprian for advice. Together with the Carthaginians, they persuaded him to go into hiding in order to preserve himself for further service to the Church. He remained in close contact with the people encouraging them in numerous letters to turn to prayer and instructing the Priests and Deacons to look

out for the weak and to use whatever possessions he had left to help the poorer Christians to resist the temptation of material advantage to join the pagans.

In 252-254, Carthage was hit with a plague. When Saint Cyprian worked to aid victims both Christian and pagan, he and the Christians were blamed for the epidemic and hated by the pagan population.

In 252, the emperor renewed and intensified the persecution of Christians forbidding any assembly of Christians and requiring all bishops, Priests, and Deacons to participate in the official state religion.

Saint Cyprian was arrested when he refused to participate and was exiled for one year. The following year an imperial decree ordered that all Bishops, Priests, and Deacons were to be put to death. When the death sentence was announced, many of his flock, who had risked their lives to come for a final blessing, cried out, "Let us die with him!" Saint Cyprian was beheaded on September 14, 258. Saint Cyprian was the first Bishop in Africa to obtain the crown of martyrdom.

Some may tend to think that the lives of Saints and Martyrs, may be inspiring, but not particularly relevant for us today. I hope that many will rethink this. I pray that our Saints will lead us all to a deeper understanding of our Church and give us encouragement as we pursue our personal development of holiness.