



Pope Benedict XVI
Reflects on
St. Cyprian of Carthage

Wednesday, June 6, 2007

Dear brothers and sisters, (the Pope's Catechetical speech, edited)

Continuing with our catechetical series on the great figures of the ancient Church, we arrive today to an **excellent African bishop of the third century**, St. Cyprian, "the first bishop in Africa to attain the crown of martyrdom."

St. Cyprian was born in Carthage to a rich pagan family. After a squandered youth, Cyprian converted to Christianity at age 35. He himself tells us about his spiritual pilgrimage: "When I was still in a dark night," he wrote months after his baptism, "it seemed to me extremely difficult and exhausting to do

what the mercy of God was proposing to me. ♦ I was bound by many mistakes of my past life and I didn't think I could be free, to such extent that I would follow my vices and favored my sinful desires. ♦ Later, with the help of the regenerative water, the misery of my previous life was washed away; a sovereign light illumined my heart; a second birth restored me to a completely new life. In a marvelous way, all doubt was swept away. ♦ I understood clearly that what used to live in me were the worldly desires of the flesh and that, on the contrary, what the Holy Spirit had generated in me was divine and heavenly" ("A Donato," 3-4).

Immediately after his conversion Cyprian, despite envy and resistance, was chosen for the priestly office and elevated to the dignity of bishop. In the brief period of his episcopacy, he faced the two first persecutions mandated by imperial decree: Decius' in 250 and Valerian's in 257-258. After the particularly cruel persecution of Decius, the bishop had to work hard to restore order in the Christian community.

Amid these truly difficult circumstances, Cyprian showed a true gift for governing: He was strict, but not inflexible with the "fallen," giving them the possibility of forgiveness after a period of exemplary penance; in regard to Rome, he was firm in his defense of the traditions of the Church in Africa; he was extremely understanding and full of a truly, authentic evangelical spirit when exhorting Christians to fraternal assistance toward pagans during the plague; he knew how to maintain the proper balance when reminding the faithful, quite afraid of losing both their lives and their material possessions, that their true life and authentic goods are not of this world; he was unyielding in fighting the corrupt practices and sins that destroy the moral life, especially avarice.

"Thus were his days spent," narrates Deacon Pontius, "when by the command of the proconsul, unexpectedly, the police arrived at this house" ("Vida," 15,1). That day the holy bishop was arrested and, after a brief interrogation, courageously faced martyrdom amid his people.

Cyprian composed numerous treatises and letters, always linked to his pastoral ministry. He wrote mostly for the edification of the community and to encourage the good behavior of the faithful. In fact, the Church was his favorite subject. He distinguishes between the hierarchical "visible Church" and the mystical "invisible Church," but he strongly affirms that the Church is one, founded on Peter.

He never tires of repeating that "he who abandons the Chair of Peter, upon which the Church is founded, lives in the illusion that he still belongs to the Church" Cyprian knew well, and strongly

stated that "he who doesn't have the Church as his mother can't have God as his Father" **Unity is an irrevocable characteristic of the Church, symbolized by Christ's seamless garment** : a unity that, as he says, finds its foundation in Peter (and its perfect fulfillment in the Eucharist (Epistle 63,13).

"There is only one God, one Christ," Cyprian exhorts, "one Church, one faith, one Christian people **firmly united by the cement of harmony**; and that which by nature is one cannot be separated" ("The Unity of the Catholic Church," 23).

We have spoken of his thoughts on the Church, but **let us not forget, lastly, his teachings on prayer**. I particularly like his book on the "Our Father" which has helped me to understand and pray better the "Lord's Prayer." Cyprian teaches us that precisely **in the Our Father, Christians are offered the right way of praying**; and he emphasizes that this prayer is said in plural "so that whoever prays it, prays not for himself alone."

"Our prayer," he writes, "is public and communal, and when we pray, we pray not only for ourselves but for the whole people, for we are one with the people" ("The Lord's Prayer," 8).

In this manner, personal and liturgical prayer are presented as firmly united to each other. This unity is based on the fact that they both respond to the same Word of God. The Christian does not say "My Father," but "Our Father," even in the secret of his own room, because he knows that in all places and in all circumstances, he is a member of the one Body.

"Let us pray then my most beloved brothers," writes the bishop of Carthage, "as God, the teacher, has taught us. It is an intimate and confident prayer to pray to God with what is his, elevating to his ears Christ's prayer. May the Father recognize the words of his Son when we lift a prayer to him: that he who dwells interiorly in the spirit would also be present in the voice. ♦ Moreover, when we pray, we ought to have a way of speaking and praying that, with discipline, remains calm and reserved. Let us think that **we are under God's gaze**.

"It is necessary to be pleasing to the divine eyes both in our bodily attitude and our tone of voice. ♦ And when we gather with the brethren and celebrate the divine sacrifice with a priest of God, we must do it with reverent fear and discipline, without throwing our prayers to the wind with loud voices, nor elevating in long speeches a petition to God that ought to be presented with moderation, **for God does not listen to the voice but to the heart**" (3-4). These words are as valid today as they were then, and they help us to celebrate well the sacred liturgy.

Undeniably, Cyprian is at the origins of that fertile theological-spiritual tradition that sees in the "heart" the privileged place of prayer. According to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, **the heart is, in fact, the inner core of the human being where God dwells**. That encounter in which God speaks to man and man listens to God takes place there; there man speaks to God and God listens to man; all this takes place through the only divine Word. It is precisely in this sense that, echoing Cyprian, Smaragdus, abbot of St. Michael, at the beginning of the ninth century, asserts that **prayer "is the work of the heart, not of the lips, because God does not look at the words, but at the heart of him who prays."** (Diadem of the Monks, 1.)

Let us have this "listening heart" of which Scriptures and the Fathers speak (cf. 1 Kings 3:9): How greatly we need it! Only then will we be able to experience fully that God is our Father and the Church, the holy Bride of Christ, is truly our Mother. (**Delivered by Pope Benedict on June 6, 2007 at St. Peter's in Rome**)

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