

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND ST. CYPRIAN'S *DE LAPISIS*

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ST. CYPRIAN'S *De lapsis* is a happy hunting ground for those in search of texts denying the Church's power to forgive sins. Yet nothing could be more paradoxical, for the whole purpose of the treatise is to exhort those who had fallen from the Church in the persecution of Decius to submit to the penance expected of them by the Church, so that they might be reconciled by the Church through the imposition of the bishop's hands and then readmitted to Holy Communion. Texts from the letters confirm this. It has therefore been necessary to show that the alleged texts could not mean a denial of the Church's power to forgive sins, as this would stultify Cyprian's main purpose and indeed his whole teaching and practice. But if scholars have rightly insisted that neither set of texts should be sacrificed to the other, and if they have (in various ways) explained what the awkward texts "must" mean in view of Cyprian's known theological outlook, one is still left with a certain uneasiness whether that is what they really do mean, especially when the explanations offered differ among themselves. It is not the purpose of these pages to discuss those explanations, but, if possible, to contribute to the debate something—a line of approach—which has only been partially taken into consideration hitherto.

The *De lapsis* is a difficult treatise. It is difficult because of its allusiveness; the identity of the persons alluded to, unmistakable to his hearers, often escapes us. It was an address made in a tense, electric atmosphere; Cyprian had to choose his words. He meant to say his say, but wanted to avoid giving a handle to his opponents or to the merely disgruntled. It would have been clear and easy for us to understand if only he had mentioned a few names. But what we get is "aliquis," "quemquam," "quorundam," and we are left to guess whom he is referring to. If we could identify those to whom he was in each case alluding, we should be able to fill in the details of their delinquencies, which he usually describes in general terms that are obscure to us but must have been plain enough to his hearers. Luckily we have

the means of identifying most of them, though it is a rather long and laborious process to do so. It means reviewing the preceding months, so as to recapture the present situation, but this we can do from the correspondence which has survived from those stormy times. The letters which Cyprian wrote or received during the eighteen months of the persecution, when he was in hiding but kept in touch with his priests and people, reveal a series of events, all of which are reflected in some way in *De lapsis*, the address which he made on his first return among them. These events, often only recognizable in the treatise by the recurrence of identical phrases found in the letters, enable us to identify either the individuals or the groups to whom Cyprian is alluding. Once this is done it is comparatively easy to recognize what precisely he was aiming at under the generalizations which prudence recommended. The result is that what at first appeared so shocking to our modern ears, is seen to be no more than the rhetorical cloak thrown over quite simple ideas.

I

To confine ourselves to the main problem, we find in *De lapsis* 15-20 that, in spite of Cyprian, certain people are in various ways dissuading the lapsed from doing penance in the customary way, so that they are already being given communion, or are clamouring to receive it. Who are these people who are interfering with the lapsed in these ways? If we look through the letters of the previous months in their order, we shall find a number of candidates for the post, and it will be necessary to sort them out.

Standing in the background and not personally involved here, are the martyrs of the past, and also those who in the early days of this persecution imitated them in pleading for their fallen brethren, expecting martyrdom themselves. In an early letter Cyprian reminds the latter "of the number and nature of the concessions made by the martyrs who preceded you,"¹ and praises them "for having sent me your letters, in which you asked for an examination of your wishes and that certain specified 'lapsed' should be reconciled when the end of the persecution permitted us to meet together in synod with the clergy."² Such recommendations, then, were quite in order. But in the

¹ *Ep.* 15, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 515).

² *Ep.* 15, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 514).

same letter he warns them of the need to discriminate among those who apply to them for their intervention:

Like your predecessors, you too must use discrimination and weigh well the requests of your petitioners. . . . Investigate the conduct and the charitable activities and merits of each, and differentiate between the crimes themselves with their various degrees of seriousness. We must avoid anything hasty or unworthy being either promised by you or carried out by ourselves, which would lead to our Church being shamed in the eyes of the pagans themselves. . . . Let religious considerations lead you to exercise restraint in the petitions which you make.³

A confessor therefore (or "martyr," as he was sometimes called by anticipation) should not recommend just anyone who asked him; a *libellus* received from a martyr should be a first-class reference. For that reason Cyprian insists that such *libelli* should indicate the beneficiaries *nominatim*. The passage is so important that it must be quoted in full:

For I learn that *libelli* are being given to some people in the form, "Let communion be granted to so-and-so and his people"—a thing that has never been done by the martyrs before, an indeterminate and unspecified petition which will only create a great deal of bad blood against me (*invidiam nobis*) later on. For there is no limit to "so-and-so and his people," and dozens and scores and more can present themselves to me with the assurance that they are relatives, or in-laws, or freedmen, or servants of the man who received the *libellus*. And for this reason I beg you that only those whom you have seen yourselves, whom you know personally, whose penance you have verified as approaching adequate reparation (*quorum paenitentiam satisfactioni proximam conspicitis*), these you should indicate in the *libellus* by name, and in this way address your letters to me in conformity with the requirements of faith and discipline.⁴

We notice throughout that it is understood that the action taken by the "martyrs" is not one which replaces that of the bishop; on the contrary, it looks forward to his intervention. But we have now, incidentally, come across a first group towards whom Cyprian feels a certain grievance, viz., those confessors who were distributing "portmanteau" *libelli*, which would place him in a difficult position (*invidiam nobis*) when it came to deciding who was covered by them. From a later letter we know that one of these confessors was called Lucianus, for he was responsible "for the distribution to many of

³ *Ep.* 15, 3 (CSEL 3, 515).

⁴ *Ep.* 15, 4 (CSEL 3, 516).

portmanteau *libelli* . . . which he had written out himself";⁵ but, as Lucianus went considerably further, we shall deal with him later.

Actually, there is a second group mentioned in that same Letter 15, as also in the next two. They were five priests,⁶ who had long been a thorn in Cyprian's side. They had opposed his elevation to the episcopate; they had initiated the present trouble which was, by the time of *De lapsis*, to develop into the schism of Felicissimus;⁷ and one of them, Fortunatus, was later to be made a "pseudoepiscopus" in opposition to Cyprian.⁸ They were dispensing with penance altogether, and without more ado admitting the lapsed to Mass and Communion. Cyprian tells the confessors that

. . . all that you are yourselves doing, with so much regard for God's honour and with such deference towards His bishop, is being undermined by certain priests. These, without any fear of God or regard for their bishop . . ., in contrast with the law of the Gospel, in contrast too with the deference of your own petitions, before the lapsed have done their penance, before they have made any humble acknowledgment of their most serious, indeed worst possible of sins, before the bishop and clergy have imposed hands on them in token of their penance, these [priests] have the audacity to offer the Eucharist itself for their benefit, which is to profane the sacred body of the Lord, as it is written: "Whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord."⁹

This is clear enough, but there is evidence to show that these same priests (and no doubt Felicissimus, the deacon, among them) were exerting their influence on the confessors against Cyprian. Thus, already at this time Cyprian writes of them: "Besides, they are bringing the blessed martyrs into discredit, and setting those glorious servants of God against God's bishop."¹⁰

In a letter shortly preceding *De lapsis* he says: "These men were, not so long ago, inciting some of the confessors and persuading them not to walk in step with their bishop and not to observe the bounds of the Church's discipline in faith and modesty, as our Lord taught us. . . ."¹¹

⁵ *Ep.* 27, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 541).

⁶ In *Ep.* 17, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 522) Cyprian says, "quidam de presbyteris," but in *Ep.* 43, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 592) he specifies "five."

⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 41 and 43 (*CSEL* 3, 587 ff., 590 ff.).

⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 59, 9-11 (*CSEL* 3, 676-79).

⁹ *Ep.* 15, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 514); cf. *Ep.* 16, 2; 17, 2; 59, 12 (*CSEL* 3, 517-18, 522, 679-80).

¹⁰ *Ep.* 16, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 519).

¹¹ *Ep.* 43, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 591).

The last phrase is an obvious reference to their getting the confessors to overstep the traditional limits of intercession for the fallen; in fact, the priests were taking advantage of the privileged position of the confessors to curry favour with those lapsed who were people of influence. It is against their machinations that Cyprian warned the confessors: "You must recognize and curb those who, with an eye on persons of rank, make use of your good services to oblige them (*gratificantur*), or are on the lookout for opportunities of trafficking in this shady business."¹² Those priests were making a regular trade in *libelli martyrum* to get influential support against Cyprian. So at least Cyprian describes their activities.¹³

One might be tempted to stop there and to say that these priests were the people aimed at in *De lapsis*. Obviously they are included there, perhaps even chiefly aimed at, since they were reconciling the lapsed without regard for Cyprian and were misusing the intercessions of the "martyrs." But precisely the action of some of these confessors was also a source of trouble to Cyprian, and a consideration of this will provide us with two more groups involved in "relaxing the discipline of the Church."

The central figure here is Lucianus, whom Cyprian in his charity characterizes as "one of the confessors, a man of burning faith and sturdy courage, but not so well grounded in the Scriptures."¹⁴ We have already noticed that he was distributing *libelli* "gregatim," but at least he was not issuing them in his own name (although he was himself in prison and was being starved for confessing Christ,¹⁵ and seems to have been put to the torture)¹⁶ but in the name of one Paulus, who had actually suffered martyrdom, dying on the rack.¹⁷ According to Lucianus, Paulus before his death had said to him: "Lucianus, in Christ's presence I tell you: if after my summons anyone asks for reconciliation, give it him in my name."¹⁸ Hence

¹² *Ep.* 15, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 515).

¹³ Cf. *Ep.* 17, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 522): "if it was not for some of the priests who deceived them [the lapsed] by playing up to them" (*gratificantes*). In contrast, Cyprian says of himself in *Ep.* 34, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 569): "I have their salvation at heart, without any interested flattery but in all the sincerity of faith."

¹⁴ *Ep.* 27, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 540-41).

¹⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 21, 3; 22, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 531, 534-35).

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 22, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 534).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

at first, as Cyprian records later, Lucianus "had made himself responsible for the distribution to many of portmanteau *libelli* in Paulus' name, which he [Lucianus] had written out himself";¹⁹ but afterwards, in spite of Cyprian's protest,²⁰ he went much further and, in the name of all the confessors, bade Cyprian to reconcile all the lapsed who should apply to him. In Letter 22 Lucianus, after quoting Paulus' words to him, continues: "In fact, all of us whom the Lord has deigned to summon in this dread visitation, we have all by a joint letter granted reconciliation to all."²¹ His actual letter to Cyprian reads:

All the confessors to Bishop Cyprian greeting. Be it known to you that we have granted reconciliation to all those whose conduct since their fall is examined and found correct by you, and we desire that this resolution should be communicated by you to the other bishops too. Wishing you all peace with the holy martyrs.

(In the presence of an exorcist and a lector representing the clergy)

(Signed) Lucianus.²²

Whether Lucianus died in prison soon after, as he expected,²³ we are not told; but his action led to considerable trouble, and this is reflected in *De lapsis*.

The two groups which can be distinguished here are (1) the martyrs, or at least Paulus, who had allegedly left behind instructions for wholesale reconciliations, and (2) Lucianus and those confessors who claimed to be acting in their name. With the latter Cyprian was specially indignant, and with cause. It was all very well for them to make a show of submission to him by the words, "whose conduct since their fall is examined and found correct by you";²⁴ no doubt they left it to him to decide each case according to the behaviour of the lapsed since their fall. But, as he put it, "this only stirs up the greater resentment (*invidiam*) against myself, for when I begin to hear each case in turn and to examine them, I shall be considered to be refusing to many what today they are saying has been granted to them already by the martyrs and confessors."²⁵ Cyprian therefore

¹⁹ *Ep.* 27, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 541). ²⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 15, *supra*. ²¹ *Ep.* 22, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 534).

²² *Ep.* 23 (*CSEL* 3, 536).

²³ Cf. *Ep.* 22, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 535).

²⁴ *Ep.* 23 (*CSEL* 3, 536).

²⁵ *Ep.* 27, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 542). It is in relation to this that he completes his picture of Lucianus in the same *Ep.* 27, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 543): "Lucianus . . . who, as I said, is not too skilled in knowledge of the Scriptures and who gives free rein to his laxity (*facilitate sua immodestus*), regardless of the unpopularity (*invidiam*) and embarrassment which I shall incur thereby." The phrasing is important, as we shall see below.

turned down their request, adding that the whole question of the lapsed must be put off until after the persecution, when the bishops could take counsel together; he refused to shoulder the whole of the responsibility. "As this is a matter which regards the deliberation and judgment of us all, I will not presume to prejudge the case nor take upon myself what is a common responsibility."²⁶

In fact, Cyprian foresaw the trouble in store for him, and signs of it soon showed themselves. "In some cities of our province, violence has been done to the authorities [of the Church] by the people, who clamouring that they had all been granted reconciliation once and for all by the martyrs and confessors, have insisted that it should be put into execution then and there."²⁷ In some places the clergy yielded to their importunity, and as for Carthage, "here too certain hotheads, whom already in the past I had difficulty in controlling and whom I had put off till my return, have been touched off by the spark of this letter and have begun to blaze more than ever, trying to force from me the reconciliation which they claim."²⁸

These Carthaginian *lapsi* form another opposition group which Cyprian had to deal with. They went so far as to write to Cyprian insisting on their immediate reconciliation, "demanding reconciliation not as something yet to be granted but claiming it as granted already: 'Paulus has given reconciliation to us all'";²⁹ and, concealing their identity, they signed themselves, "The Church."³⁰

We see here what Lucianus' use of Paulus' name has led to. Cyprian gives them a lecture on the constitution of the Church, asking them whether the Church is in fact "a collection of lapsed" (*lapsorum numerus*);³¹ he points to the example of other *lapsi* who are obediently waiting and humbly doing their penance, "notwithstanding the *libellus* which they had received from the martyrs"; and he tells them that he will answer in detail when they have let him have their names.³²

²⁶ *Ep.* 26 (CSEL 3, 539); cf. *Ep.* 34, 4 (CSEL 3, 570-71).

²⁷ *Ep.* 27, 3 (CSEL 3, 542). ²⁸ *Ibid.* ²⁹ *Ep.* 35 (CSEL 3, 571).

³⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 33, 1 (CSEL 3, 566): "I am surprised that certain people should have had the audacity to write to me using as signature the name of 'the Church.'"

³¹ Compare Tertullian's "ecclesia numerus episcoporum," *De pudicitia* 21 (*Florilegium patristicum* 10 [Bonn, 1915], 96).

³² *Ep.* 33, 1-2 (CSEL 3, 566-68). It is probably at this juncture that he decides to excommunicate any priests who reconcile the lapsed without reference to him, whereas hitherto he has merely "suspended" them. Cf. *Ep.* 16, 4 (CSEL 3, 520): "that for the time

Cyprian also writes post-haste to Rome to report the matter, though he already had some letters on the way there,³³ and in due time receives an important letter back, praising him for the line he has taken, analyzing the significance of the action of the lapsed, and calming Cyprian's exasperation both with regard to the liberties which he felt the "martyrs" had taken, and also "to the respect due to the bishop of God."³⁴

Finally, out of a combination of some of the previous groups, arose the revolt and schism of Felicissimus. The occasion for it lay in some vigorous measures taken by Cyprian to relieve the deserving poor, which Felicissimus, as deacon, no doubt felt should have been entrusted to him. Anyhow, Felicissimus announced that, if anyone availed himself of Cyprian's assistance, he would be excluded from communion even at the hour of death. For this and other personal crimes Cyprian excommunicated him and his associates without delay.³⁵ But it soon came out that the five priests—Cyprian's inveterate enemies—were at the back of this move, and that a regular schism was being enacted, gathering together all those who were aggrieved by Cyprian's policy of deferment of reconciliation for the lapsed. Cyprian saw in their movement a danger to the Church as great as the persecution itself had been:

It is the same again now; through the five priests who are associated with Felicissimus the same process of destruction is staged for the ruin of souls: God is not besought; the man who has denied Christ is not to implore the mercy of that same Christ whom he denied; with all the guilt of his sin upon him he is to be deprived of penance as well; there is to be no satisfaction made to God with the help of bishops and priests, but, to the neglect of God's own priests and in opposition to the discipline of the Gospel, there is to arise a ready-made "tradition" sacrilegiously established. . . .³⁶

We have now reviewed chronologically the main events which led up to the situation which faced Cyprian when he delivered *De lapsis*.

being they should be forbidden to say Mass" (*offerre*); and *Ep.* 34, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 570): "For the present, if any of our own or any visiting priests should with intemperate rashness presume to give communion to the lapsed before our decision has been taken, he is to be excluded from our communion. . . ." Cf. also *Ep.* 55, 4 (*CSEL* 3, 626).

³³ Cf. *Ep.* 35 (*CSEL* 3, 571-72).

³⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 36, 1-3 (*CSEL* 3, 572-75).

³⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 41, 2; 42; 59, 1; 59, 9 (*CSEL* 3, 588-89, 590, 666, 676).

³⁶ *Ep.* 43, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 592); cf. *Ep.* 59, 9 (*CSEL* 3, 676-77).

We have tried to distinguish between the various groups concerned, as they appeared on the scene; and, as there was some overlapping between them, we can now reduce them to the three following: (1) Paulus and some other martyrs—at least according to what Lucianus reported of them; (2) Lucianus and some of the confessors who, appealing to the wishes of the martyrs (to those of Paulus in particular), at first recommended indeterminate groups and later all the lapsed to Cyprian for reconciliation; (3) the five priests (and perhaps others), together with Felicissimus the deacon, who at first reconciled some of the lapsed without any penance and without regard either for the martyrs or for Cyprian, and then later did so on the pretext that the martyrs had accorded the *pax* to all the lapsed. We can neglect the lapsed themselves, save in so far as some of them were led astray by the encouragement of one or other of the above groups.

Bearing in mind the various motives and attitudes which had manifested themselves in Carthage during those many months of persecution, we are now in a position to appreciate better what we find in *De lapsis*.

Chapter 15 deals with the bad effects on the lapsed of too hasty a reconciliation. In the background are those responsible for granting it. Their pity is misguided:

... as if the fierce storm of persecution were not enough, there has come to crown it a subtle evil, an innocent-seeming pestilence, which masquerades as compassion. Contrary to the full strength of the Gospel, contrary to the law of our Lord and God, through certain people's presumption a deceptive readmission to communion is granted, a reconciliation that is null and void, one that imperils the givers and is worthless to those who receive it. The latter no longer seek the slow, painful road to recovery nor the genuine cure through satisfaction done. . . .³⁷

Who are the "certain people" here? One might think of Paulus, or of the confessors, but a closer inspection makes it clear that they are the priests of the faction of Felicissimus. Of those already martyred Cyprian would not have said that the reconciliation "imperils the givers," for they were beyond the reach of harm; and in speaking of the "genuine cure" which he is offering, he is picking up what he said at the end of the previous chapter, where he contrasted his own severe but sound treatment with the flattering but culpable negligence

³⁷ *De lapsis* 15 (*Florilegium patristicum* 21 [Bonn, 1930], 25–26; *CSEL* 3, 247–48).

of an "unskilled doctor." The confessors' action in granting *libelli* is now a thing of the past; what is in question here is still going on and really only fits the actions of the party of Felicissimus and in particular the priests among them.³⁸

Chapter 16 begins by reproving the lapsed who have managed to receive communion without having done penance. "They think that it is the *pax* which certain men are hawking about (*venditant*) with honeyed words; it is not peace but war, and none is in union with the Church who cuts himself off from the Gospel."³⁹ Once again, the "certain men" here are not the martyrs or the confessors, but the insubordinate priests. Their identity is already revealed by their "hawking it about with honeyed words," which recalls "some of the priests who deceived them by playing up to them" (*gratificantes*)⁴⁰ and their "interested flattery";⁴¹ and previously: they "make use of your good services to oblige people (*gratificantur*), or are on the lookout for opportunities of trafficking in this shady business" (*illicitae negotiationis nundinas*).⁴² But the next lines remove all vestige of doubt as to their priestly character: "Why do they admit to communion, as they pretend, those who should still be weeping and calling on God's mercy, making them drop all sorrowing and penance? . . . This is a new sort of persecution, a new sort of temptation. . . ."⁴³ For he here uses the very phrases by which he denounced them a few weeks before. It was they who dispensed men from the prayers "which should appease the Lord in long and persevering satisfaction";⁴⁴ it was of them that he first said: "This is a new sort of persecution, a new sort of temptation, and *those five priests* are nothing but. . . ."⁴⁵

³⁸ Already in chapter 14 (*FlP* 21, 24-25; *CSEL* 3, 247) there are similar hidden allusions to these priests. The contrast there between the indulgent, incompetent physician and the bishop who applies stern but salutary remedies is a reproduction of *Ep.* 34, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 569-70) in its thought, its quotation from *Is* 3:12, and several of its expressions. Cyprian there expressly contrasted his action with that of "certain priests," and the medical passage there is itself clearly the echo of a letter from Rome, *Ep.* 30, especially 3 *ad fin.* (*CSEL* 3, 551), where the Roman clergy say they are not going to replace "their discipline by such worldly laxity (*profana facilitate*)," whereby "a deceptive compassion (*miseri-cordiam falsam*) only adds fresh wounds to the wounds of sin." The whole passage is paralleled here in our chapter 15.

³⁹ *De lapsis* 16 (*FlP* 21, 27; *CSEL* 3, 248).

⁴⁰ *Ep.* 17, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 522).

⁴¹ *Ep.* 34, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 569).

⁴² *Ep.* 15, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 515).

⁴³ *De lapsis* 16 (*FlP* 21, 27; *CSEL* 3, 249).

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 43, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 592).

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 43, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 592).

II

Chapters 17 and 18 of *De lapsis* present most formidable difficulties if they are not interpreted in the light of the situation with which Cyprian was dealing. So far, our difficulty has lain in identifying the people to whom in each case he was alluding, and a comparison with his correspondence has enabled us to determine them fairly definitely. But here there is the added difficulty of determining his theological outlook itself; he seems to deny that the Church ever forgives sins at all, and he seems to maintain that heaven is closed to all, save perhaps the martyrs, until the general judgment. As such views conflict with his teaching and practice elsewhere, we must either admit an unresolved contradiction in his doctrine, or explain how he came to use these misleading expressions if he did not really mean what they seem to say. To do this, it will be of great help to us if we can once more identify the adversaries he is dealing with.

Let us make this identification at once, anticipating its verification; indeed, the study of these two chapters on this hypothesis may of itself provide sufficient verification. Cyprian, then, is not (as is often supposed) directly attacking the "martyrs" or the confessors as such; he is directly attacking the five priests who are reconciling the lapsed on the pretext of the martyrs' intercession. What he seems to say in criticism of the martyrs is not really directed against them but against the false picture of them which, deriving from Lucianus' propaganda, is being perpetuated and exploited by those priests. When once this is understood, it will appear that the Church's forgiveness of sins is not called in question in any way, and that the last judgment is only on the periphery of the debate.

The gist of chapter 17 is that the martyrs are not to be exalted to the level of God Himself. Already in his correspondence Cyprian had charged Lucianus with doing precisely this, in two ways: first, by distributing *libelli* "passim" at the alleged behest of the martyr Paulus, "not recognizing (*nesciens*) that our Lord must be obeyed rather than a fellow servant" (*conservus*);⁴⁶ and secondly, by ascribing to Paulus the function of the Blessed Trinity: "For, whereas our Lord said that the nations should be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and the sins of the past cancelled in

⁴⁶ *Ep.* 27, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 541).

baptism, this man ignores the Gospel precept and commands that reconciliation be given and sins cancelled in Paulus' name. . . ."⁴⁷ So too here, in the course of this chapter: "Man is not above God, nor can the servant (*servus*) with arbitrary indulgence cancel or condone the commission of some more grievous offence against his Lord, for that would make the lapsed liable to this further charge, that he knows not (*nesciat*) the words of the prophet: 'Cursed be the man that putteth his hope in man' (Jer 17:5)."⁴⁸ The *servus* here is the martyr and corresponds to Paulus, the *conservus* of Lucianus in Letter 27; *hominem* refers to the same.

The comparison with baptism in Letter 27 is very important. Sins committed by an adult before baptism were, of course, unlike those committed later, remitted completely by the sacrament, so that no penance for them was required of the catechumen or new convert.⁴⁹ This was due to the *divina indulgentia*⁵⁰ whereby the passion of Christ blotted out his sins and all their consequences. The Church had received the power of baptism from Christ and it covered not only original sin but every other sin possible.⁵¹

It was a similar wholesale "remission" of sins which was now being ascribed to Paulus and the martyrs in general. For such a sweeping "condonation" or "exculpation" of sins the Church had no warrant, apart from baptism. That such were the effects of baptism was Christ's doing, and to suppose that the martyrs could do the same for post-baptismal sins was to put them on a level with Christ, with God Himself. On the contrary, as Cyprian continues: "It is the Lord we must pray to, it is the Lord we must win by our satisfaction; for He has said He will deny the man that denies Him (Mt 10:33), and He alone has received all power of judgment from His Father (Jn 5:22)."⁵²

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 27, 3 (CSEL 3, 543).

⁴⁸ *De lapsis* 17 (FIP 21, 28; CSEL 3, 249).

⁴⁹ Whatever ascetical exercises were required of the catechumens, they were regarded as medicinal merely and not as penal, i.e., they were not performed in expiation for past sins but as preparatory to the ordinary self-denial of the Christian life. Of course, there must be a detestation for those sins, and so a painful change of attitude, which could be called *poenitentia*. For this reason I agree with Poschmann in his interpretation of *Ad Demetrianum* 25 (CSEL 3, 369-70), as against K. Rahner.

⁵⁰ *Ad Donatum* 3 (CSEL 3, 5).

⁵¹ Cf. *Ep.* 55, 22 (CSEL 3, 639); 69, 11 (CSEL 3, 759), where Jn 20:21-23 is quoted; *De opere et eleemosynis* 2 (CSEL 3, 374), and *Ad Demetrianum* 25-26 (CSEL 3, 369-70), where baptism is implied throughout; *Ep.* 64, 5 (CSEL 3, 720-21).

⁵² *De lapsis* 17 (FIP 21, 28-29; CSEL 3, 249).

It is this line of thought which prompted the opening words of the chapter, to which we now return. Reinforcing it is another thought which we shall consider presently; they combine to form a startling assertion, which by a rhetorical trick prepares for the crushing charge of treating men as if they were God. It reads as follows: "Let no man deceive himself, let none be misled. Only the Lord can grant mercy. Sins committed against Him can be cancelled by Him alone who bore our sins and suffered for us, by Him whom God delivered up for our sins. Man is not above God. . . ." ⁵³

"None but the Lord who suffered for our sins can forgive them." If we realize the object which Cyprian had in mind, viz., to put a stop to absolutions (as we should say) being given without *any* satisfaction—and possibly without any contrition either—we shall recognize that his words were not meant to deprive bishops and priests of the power to forgive sins under proper conditions. If his words could, of themselves, have been taken in this sense, they thereby fulfilled their purpose of startling his hearers, so that they should be attentive to his explanation. When it became clear that he was only referring to satisfaction-less absolutions, such as the five priests were dispensing on the alleged authority of the martyrs, the minds of his hearers would be reassured. They knew that the Church's absolution always involved satisfaction.

The force of Cyprian's argument is partly increased, partly weakened by the accompanying thought referred to above. The sins in question are said to be those which are "committed against the Lord." The argument is reinforced because the special malice of apostasy, which is the sin that these priests are presuming to remit, is thus underlined. But his argument is momentarily weakened because of the possible alternative that Christ's forgiveness was not necessary in the case of other sins and that, if not the five priests, at least the Church could deal with them. "By Him alone (*solus*)" would thereby lose its force, or else we must suppose that Christ suffered and died only for the sins "which are committed against Him," and that the others needed no forgiveness. ⁵⁴ But, as we have already seen, Cyprian soon shows that

⁵³ *Ibid.* (FLP 21, 28; CSEL 3, 249).

⁵⁴ Cyprian may imply that there are others when he speaks (*ibid.*) of "the commission of some more grievous offense against his Lord" (*quod in Dominum graviore delicto commissum est*). However, K. Rahner is right in recognizing that Cyprian's *peccata in Deum* are a very uncertain quantity, even in Cyprian's own mind; cf. "Die Busslehre des hl. Cyprian von Karthago," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 74 (1952) 385, n. 8.

such is not his meaning: the *venia* in question is a *remissio* not only of *culpa* but of *poena* too—things almost inseparable in his mind. However, his reference to sins “committed against the Lord” calls for special treatment.

III

It may be admitted that, at least before the crisis of the Decian persecution, Cyprian considered the forgiveness of apostasy, being a “sin against God,” to lie beyond the prerogatives of the Church. Apart from the passage in *De lapsis* which we are considering, there is the capital text in the *Testimonia* which seems to put it beyond all doubt. There he has grouped three texts under the heading, “There is no forgiveness in the Church for one who sins against God.”⁵⁵ The first two texts refer to the sin against the Holy Ghost (Mt 12:32; Mk 3:28–29), and the third is “If one man shall sin against another, they shall pray to the Lord on his behalf; but if a man shall sin against the Lord, who shall pray for him?” (1 S 2:25) The heading which he gave to these texts was perhaps the natural reaction of one who, as a fairly recent convert, could scarcely conceive it possible that a Christian should ever deny his God. Christ’s words seemed to imply that such a sin was unforgivable, and those of Heli seemed to forbid prayer for such a sinner, and they would exclude him from the ranks of the Church’s penitents. We can perhaps take it that this was, at the time, his own personal opinion; it does not involve his having derived it from the Church’s tradition. Having had no experience of persecution, he will not have put the question to himself as a practical issue. Indeed, the Church herself had been free from persecution for a long time; it had not, even for her, been a live question.

But what really concerns us is that during the Decian persecution Cyprian never once repeated that threatening heading, nor ever made use of it again. The *lapsi* could and should do penance, and admission to the ranks of the penitents always implied the expectation of reconciliation and of forgiveness. He kept the distinction between sins “which are committed against God,” and those which are not, in Letter 16,2 and 17,2, but only as an *a fortiori* argument against easy absolutions: if “in the case of lesser crimes” the whole long penitential

⁵⁵ *Testimonia* 3, 28 (CSEL 3, 142).

process is gone through, how much more is it needed when Christ has been denied, for He our Judge has said: "Whoso denies me, I will deny him" (Mt 10:33). That sin, if any, requires us to appeal humbly for mercy: "He who is asked for something must needs be won over, not provoked."⁵⁶

Light on the development of his thought can be found in *Ad Fortunatum* (*de exhortatione martyrii*), which is similar in construction to the *Testimonia*. It is striking that he does not there quote the "irremissible sin" passages and that, instead of saying that the Church cannot forgive sins against God, he rewrites the title: "God does not forgive idolators lightly" (*non facile*).⁵⁷ Even if *Ad Fortunatum* was put together a year or two later, this change was not unconnected with *De lapsis*. In *De lapsis* 35 we read: "Do you think that He will easily (*facile*) have mercy on you, when you have said that He is none of yours?"⁵⁸ And chapter 19, which quotes the Old Testament to illustrate the idea that even the prayers of saints on behalf of sinners are not always heard, provides Cyprian with three of the four texts under that title in *Ad Fortunatum*. The last of the texts is the only one in common with the group which we found in the *Testimonia*; but again Cyprian never appealed to it otherwise. It would seem, then, that even in *De lapsis* we have evidence of his "conversion" from the rigid idea which he had originally formed for himself. It was a change due to his own experience and to his correspondence with Rome.

Midway between these two treatises comes the important Letter 59 to Pope Cornelius, in which we find Cyprian speaking of "sins against God" (*adversus Deum facinora*) in a different way, in fact in much the same way as the sin against the Holy Ghost is usually explained today. Though he does not quote the relevant texts, it looks as if he had them in mind. His words are directed against those priests who were dispensing the lapsed from penance and reconciling them at once:

Do you think, brother, that *these* are only trivial sins against God, only small or venial sins, when at their instigation there is to be no pleading before God's insulted majesty, no fear is to be felt for the wrath and the fire and the day of the Lord, and when with Antichrist at hand the loyal Church militant is stripped of its weapons, being deprived of the bracing fear of Christ?⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Ep.* 30, 7 (*CSEL* 3, 555).

⁵⁷ *Ad Fortunatum* 4 (*CSEL* 3, 320, 324).

⁵⁸ *De lapsis* 35 (*FLP* 21, 46; *CSEL* 3, 262).

⁵⁹ *Ep.* 59, 13 (*CSEL* 3, 682).

Nor is it merely a disregard for God's insulted majesty and the absence of any fear or contrition which they foster, but they flout the discipline and authority of the Church:

God's majesty and His sanctions are flouted to such an extent . . . by these desecrators that they urge men not to think of God's anger, not to be afraid of the judgment of the Lord and not to knock at the door of Christ's Church; instead, with penance and all acknowledgment of sin done away with, with episcopal dignity scorned and trampled on, they have reconciliation preached to them insinuatingly by priests, and communion is offered to them by men who are out of communion themselves (*communicatio* *a*) *non communicantibus offeratur*).⁶⁰

The "sins against God," therefore, consist in a mentality which these laxist priests were transmitting to the lapsed, equivalent to the obstinacy in sin, the refusal to repent which makes sin irremissible. It is no longer the sin of apostasy itself that is in question, but the obduracy in the sin and, in the case of the priests, the scandalous fomenting of such obduracy in the lapsed.

This seems to show a real progress in Cyprian's thought, the result of his experiences during the persecution and of his subsequent reflection and deepening understanding of the mind of the Church. He has passed from his rigorist interpretation of the texts which derogated from the Church's powers over sin, to that merciful insistence on discipline, "*mitis iustitia*,"⁶¹ which, for the repentant, opened the way to reconciliation with the Church and with God. What had completed his "conversion" was the danger which he recognized in the rigorism of the Novatianist heresy. This led him to an almost directly opposite interpretation of our Lord's words that "the Father hath given all judgment to the Son." In *De lapsis*, as we saw, he used the text to denounce those who were giving forgiveness freely to the lapsed; now he uses it to denounce those who were refusing them all hope of forgiveness:

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* For the reading adopted, which has the support of some MSS, cf. also *De lapsis* 33 (*FIP* 21, 45; *CSEL* 3, 261-62): the lapsed who refuse to do penance have been led astray by "apostatis ac perfidis" and "communicationem *non communicantium* ratam ducunt."

⁶¹ *Ep.* 54, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 623).

De lapsis 17

*Homo Deo maior non potest esse, nec remittere aut donare indulgentia sua servus potest quod in Dominum delicto graviore commissum est. . . . Dominus nostra satisfactione placandus est qui negantem negare se dixit, qui omne iudicium de Patre solus accepit.*⁶²

Ep. 54, 3

*Esse non potest maior Domino suo servus nec quisquam sibi quod soli Filio Pater tribuit vindicare, ut se putet aut ad aream ventilandam et purgandam palam iam ferre posse, aut a frumento universa zizania humano iudicio separare.*⁶³

Whatever else he was, Cyprian was never a "Novatianist," save perhaps in the abstract in his early days as a Christian. Some of his expressions in *De lapsis* may be reminiscent of this phase, but his mind is already far removed from it, as the unfolding of his thought makes manifest. The needs of his own people in practice, as well as his correspondence with Rome, showed him how justice must be tempered with mercy, and he came to see that, if any sins were irremissible, it was not through lack of power in the Church, but of repentance in the sinner.

IV

In the foregoing it has been tacitly assumed that Cyprian believed in the power of the Church to forgive sins as such, and not merely to readmit sinners after penance to the normal participation in the liturgical life of the faithful, especially to the Eucharist. Some, however, have held that, as regards the sins themselves, whatever the Church might do could only be provisional, and that the only real judgment of sins was to be that by Christ at the last day. Even Dom Capelle, who collected the evidence in a valuable article,⁶⁴ admitted that, though Cyprian allowed to the "reconciliation" all the spiritual effects of absolution as we understand it, he did not conceive it as bestowed *per modum iudicii*, and that in fact he denied it any such character, chiefly because all judgment had been reserved to the Son at the end of the world.

Such a view seems to derive considerable support from the last

⁶² *De lapsis* 17 (FIP 21, 28-29; CSEL 3, 249).

⁶³ *Ep.* 54, 3 (CSEL 3, 623); cf. 55, 25 (CSEL 3, 643).

⁶⁴ "L'Absolution sacerdotale chez Cyprien," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 7 (1935) 221-34.

sentence of chapter 17, which we have yet to consider: "... from His Father. We do not call in question the power which the merits of the martyrs and the works of the just have with the Judge, but that will be when the day of judgment comes, when after the passing of this present world Christ's flock stands before His tribunal."⁶⁶ This, it is said, agrees with Cyprian's regular doctrine that, with the exception of the martyrs, all the faithful will have to wait till the day of judgment before they enter heaven.

There is no call here to go over the whole ground again after the detailed studies of Dr. Poschmann and Fr. Karl Rahner. But one or two points deserve attention. Let us begin with the supposed delay till the day of judgment for the reward of the just.

In the first place, had that been Cyprian's view, he would necessarily have referred to the status of those already dead as being a provisional one, still awaiting the judgment. But in *De mortalitate* the status entered into by the just at death is described as a reunion with their loved ones in the happiness of heaven: "To come to the sight of them and to their embrace, what joy for us and for them alike! How great the delights of the kingdom of heaven; with no fear of dying and an eternity of living before us, what exquisite bliss without end!"⁶⁶ Nor is this addressed to future martyrs (who in any case would have few martyred parents and relatives to rejoin), but to the ordinary folk during a pestilence which was causing panic among pagans and Christians alike.

Similarly, at the end of *Ad Fortunatum*, the immediate reward of the martyr is indeed beautifully expressed: "... at one moment to close one's eyes, which have been looking on men and upon the world, and to open them the next (*statim*) to the sight of God and of Christ!"⁶⁷ But all those who stand firm in the persecution, or whom sickness carries off before they are called to martyrdom, will receive as prompt a reward: "Even if the summons comes before, the faith that was prepared for martyrdom shall not go unrewarded. Without stay of time is the reward given where God is Judge (*Deo*

⁶⁶ *De lapsis* 17 (FIP 21, 28-29; CSEL 3, 249-50).

⁶⁶ *De mortalitate* 26 (CSEL 3, 313); cf. *ibid.* 17 (CSEL 3, 307-8).

⁶⁷ *Ad Fortunatum* 13 (CSEL 3, 347).

iudice): in persecution it is the battle, in peace the conscience, which wins the crown."⁶⁸

The phrase "*Deo iudice*" here should warn us against taking "*iudicii dies*" as necessarily meaning the last judgment. And, in any case, the supposed privilege of the martyrs would involve their not being judged at all if there is no judgment before the last day. Yet if Christ is to exercise "all judgment," and if He is to do so in "denying those who have denied Him on earth," will He not also be judging when He "confesses those who have confessed Him" on earth? Either we must make the martyrs, too, wait till the last day—which Cyprian excludes—or we must admit that Cyprian, like any modern preacher, is prepared to pass freely from the particular to the general judgment, though these categories were not clearly distinguished in his mind.⁶⁹ The upshot of all this is that the picture of the vast majority of the dead waiting in suspense for the day of judgment is a myth, and this myth had no place in Cyprian's eschatology.⁷⁰

Our first conclusion, then, in interpreting our passage is that "when the day of judgment comes" is simply a way of saying "in the next life" or, more especially, "when we come to be judged." It does not pin-point the time as that of the final judgment, for though Cyprian was not averse to telling his people that the disasters of the times showed that the end of the world was at hand, this did not normally influence his thinking on the next world. Such an idea may, however,

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; cf. end of chap. 12 (CSEL 3, 345–46).

⁶⁹ As is very obvious in *Ep.* 58, 4 (CSEL 3, 659–60). Those who die while in exile for the faith will be rewarded as the martyrs are: Christ "awards the prize, which He promised He would give *at the resurrection*." At death, or at the last day?

⁷⁰ Quite contrary to Cyprian's mind is the suggestion, based on *Ep.* 65, 5, that the reconciled sinner will be pleading for mercy at judgment day: "*Quomodo enim deprecari in die illo Dominum poterit qui . . . ?*" Cyprian is speaking of the sinner who has never so pleaded in his lifetime; he is not implying that others would need to do so still. It would contradict his oft-repeated "*Exomologesis apud inferos non est*" (*Ep.* 55, 17, 29, etc. [CSEL 3, 636, 647]); cf. B. Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda* (Bonn, 1940), p. 404. As for the pseudo-penitent whom the bishop reconciles unaware of his unworthiness (cf. *Ep.* 55, 18; 57, 3 [CSEL 3, 636, 652–53]), Cyprian speaks no otherwise than any priest would do today: "He may have deceived me, but God will judge him in His own good time." The future tense does not imply that the forgiveness of the sincere penitent is in abeyance till judgment day.

have facilitated the telescoping of the particular and the general judgments.

Nor must we think that the reference to "the people of Christ standing before His tribunal" excludes the particular judgment. A similar mistake has been made in the interpretation of another passage which has affinities with ours. Cyprian says that the penitents must eventually be readmitted to the Church "and there be kept safe for our Lord who, when He comes back to His Church, will decide the fate precisely of those whom He shall find inside her."⁷¹ To take this as referring exclusively to the general judgment is to force the wording and to disregard the context. In the preceding paragraph Cyprian inveighs against those who would insist on a sinner doing penance without offering him any hope of reconciliation. He represents them as telling him: "Afflict yourself and weep . . . but for all that it is outside the Church that you shall die."⁷² As we know, "there is no salvation outside the Church,"⁷³ and therefore to leave the penitents *extra ecclesiam* even at their death is to deprive them of salvation. What Cyprian says in describing the true practice of the Church is, therefore, equivalent to "but it is inside the Church that you shall die." For Christ "will come" as each one dies—which is the most natural interpretation of the warnings to be ready for the Lord's coming in Mt 24:37–25:30. The expressions, "His Church" and "inside," clearly refer to the concrete Church here and now, and not at the end of the world. The effect of the reconciliation after penance is to put penitents on a level with the other members of the Church.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Ep.* 55, 29 (*CSEL* 3, 647); cf. 55, 19 (*CSEL* 3, 638).

⁷² *Ep.* 55, 28 (*CSEL* 3, 646).

⁷³ *Ep.* 73, 21 (*CSEL* 3, 795).

⁷⁴ Another passage often quoted on behalf of the idea that only the martyrs receive their reward at death is in the same *Ep.* 55, 20 (*CSEL* 3, 638). The section ends: "in a word, it is one thing to be still awaiting our Lord's sentence at the day of judgment, another to be crowned by Him at once." This passage would support that view if the contrast were between the martyr and the reconciled penitent *after death*. But the whole point of the passage is the general psychological effect of granting reconciliation to the *lapsi* at all; Cyprian maintains it will not discourage from martyrdom. And the list of contrasts which he makes is between the lapsed *still here* on earth and the martyr who meantime is already enjoying his reward. The former has to await forgiveness, he has to serve his time "till he has paid the last farthing," he has to do long and severe penance to expiate his sin, and (even when reconciled) to await the judgment when he comes to die; the martyr, on the other hand, has long since received his crown.—It will be noticed by specialists that "purgari diu igne," in the penultimate contrast, is not here taken

But do not both the passage from *De lapsis* and that from *Ep.* 55,29 imply that the Church's reconciliation of the sinner is no real absolution, but that his cause is in abeyance at least till the next life, if not till the last judgment?⁷⁵ Is it not "reserved" to Christ, the one and only Judge? In the first place, "kept safe for our Lord" is here said of the "reconciled" sinner: he is safely bestowed once more in the Church (*in ipsa*). But, secondly and more important, he is, as we have just said, put on a level with the other members of the Church. This has been too often overlooked. Because Cyprian often speaks of the penitents as ultimately being judged by Christ hereafter, it has been concluded that the Church's reconciliation did not touch their sins in themselves. Such a conclusion seems quite unwarranted. We must remember that even as the result of the persecution only a minority of the faithful would be "in the ranks of the penitents." "Private" penance in some form was not unknown,⁷⁶ but it played little part in the general presentation of the lives of the faithful as found in Cyprian's exhortations and correspondence, and lesser sins were atoned for chiefly by charitable alms.⁷⁷ And so the "faithful" as a whole were considered to be, as we say, in a state of grace; they all partook of the body and blood of the Lord in the Eucharist. Yet—as was inescapable, from the Scriptures—all were to appear before the tribunal of Christ to be judged. The fact that the reconciled penitents were to be judged after death by Christ, no more called in question the efficacy of their reconciliation to God by the Church, than the fact that the rest of the faithful were also to be judged then, called in question the faith and the devotedness of their

to refer to purgatory, because (a) the context does not suggest it, (b) Cyprian does not appear to refer to purgatory anywhere else, and (c) the reading, "igne," is not certain and can be otherwise interpreted.

⁷⁵ In an early letter (*Ep.* 19, 2 [CSEL 3, 525]) Cyprian writes of the lapsed whom sickness carries off before they have fulfilled their penance that, when they have confessed and the priests have imposed hands upon them, "let them be committed to the Lord (*ad Dominum remittantur*) with the reconciliation promised them by the martyrs." This and similar passages might suggest the same criticism.

⁷⁶ Cf. K. Rahner, *art. cit.*, pp. 425-38.

⁷⁷ Cf. *De opere et elemosynis*, passim. Also in *De lapsis* itself, e.g., chap. 35 (*Flp.* 21, 46-47; CSEL 3, 262), the sinner is told: "apply yourself to good deeds (*iustis operibus*) which can wash away your sins." *Opus* and *opera* stand by themselves regularly in the sense of "works of charity," as we call them.

lives. The penitents at their reconciliation were restored to their previous status, the status of those who had not so sinned. Of course, they would be judged after death; but so would the rest. If anything, their reconciliation meant precisely the forgiveness of their sin before God; otherwise they would not have been on a level with the rest.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Cyprian was careless about the chronology of the future life. In fact, he was careless about anything save the immediate object in hand. That object here (as is specially clear from the end of the next chapter towards which he was working) was to invalidate the appeal to the martyrs made by the five priests and their followers. The first point which he makes to this end is that the pleading of the martyrs for the *lapsi*, though of value, only takes its effect at the judgment. He gives the proof of this below, after a couple of sentences (to which we shall return presently), and his proof is a curious one: the martyrs themselves have not been vindicated yet, so they are not in a position to "vindicate" others—let alone against the judge's ruling:

At the foot of God's altar the souls of the martyrs who have been slain cry aloud saying: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and revenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Ap 6:10) And they are told that they must wait and have patience yet awhile. Is it credible, then, that any [martyr] could wish for good to be done by wholesale remissions and condonations of sin, against the will of the Judge, or that before he has himself been avenged he should have power to defend others (*Et quemquam posse aliquis existimat remittendis passim*

⁷⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 43, 6 (*CSEL* 3, 595), of the lapsed, "who are imploring to have their former (*pristinam*) spiritual standing restored to them"; *Ep.* 58, 8 (*CSEL* 3, 664): in the threat of a fresh persecution the lapsed are to receive Communion again: "let the lapsed too be rearmed, so that even the lapsed may recover what he had lost" (*quod amisit*); *Ep.* 57, 4 (*CSEL* 3, 653): for how can the Holy Spirit be advocate for one "who has not already through reconciliation received back the Spirit of the Father?"; *Ep.* 59, 13 (*CSEL* 3, 680): God works through the Church: to dispense with penance before reconciliation is "to prevent God's mercy (*divina clementia*) from tending the wounded in His Church." It is incredible that Cyprian, who kept repeating, "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, etc.," should have admitted to Communion those whom God was merely "ready to forgive" (at the day of judgment) but had not forgiven yet (Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda*, p. 404). Indeed, the idea that reconciliation with the Church is merely the pre-condition for absolution on judgment day (*ibid.*, p. 409) has to be qualified in so many ways that finally there is little left of it (so, noticeably, K. Rahner, *art. cit.*, p. 394, n. 26, etc.). The only real support which it has is this passage in *De lapsis* 17–18. It is surely preferable to admit some inconsistencies in Cyprian's eschatology than to ascribe to him such a glaring contradiction at the heart of his pastoral practice.

donandisque peccatis bonum fieri contra iudicem velle aut prius quam vindicetur ipse alios posse defendere)?⁷⁹

"Passim" and "contra iudicem" have been built into this last difficult sentence from the intervening passage. Neglecting them for the moment, we have the idea that the martyrs, sitting below the altar of God, are asking to be avenged on their persecutors. But that means that they are not yet sitting on their judges' thrones⁸⁰ and so are in no position to defend others, i.e., to remit the sins of the lapsed. One can very much doubt whether Cyprian means to do more than suggest that even a martyr in heaven cannot have it all his own way. Especially as, master that he is of rhetoric (or is he its slave?), he is guilty of a little verbal trickery: *vindicare* and *defendere* are synonymous and often interchangeable in his writings,⁸¹ but only when they mean "to avenge someone." That is the meaning here in the first case; but there is surely no question of avenging the lapsed, but of defending them, in the sense of pleading for them. Moreover, the difficulty of following the chronology implied is increased by the fact that both the "merits of the martyrs" and the "works of the just" are said to be effective "only at judgment day." For Cyprian on other occasions allowed great value to the prayers of the martyrs here and now;⁸² and, after all, the "works of the just" formed part of the Church's contribution to the rehabilitation of the lapsed—which certainly took effect here below.

Hence it is unfair to press any of his expressions in this passage. They were but the rhetorical scaffolding for his main purpose. We shall be true to his thought, not if we insist on the implications of his every

⁷⁹ *De lapsis* 18 (*FLP* 21, 29–30; *CSEL* 3, 250). A little reflection will show that "aliquis" stands for the five priests, "quemquam" for the martyrs, "ipse" also (most probably) for the martyrs (cf. *infra*, footnote 109), "alios" for the lapsed.

⁸⁰ Cf. Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30. Cf. also *Ep.* 6, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 481): "When, then, you call to mind that you will be judging and reigning with Christ our Lord . . ."; *Ep.* 15, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 515): "since you are our Lord's friends and destined later to sit in judgment at His side . . ."; *Ep.* 31, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 559): "For what could be more glorious . . . than through the divine condescension of one's Judge to be appointed as a judge oneself . . .?" Martyrs, or future martyrs, are in question in each passage.

⁸¹ Cf. also, e.g., *Ad Demetrianum* 17 (*CSEL* 3, 363): "vindicta," "defensio."

⁸² For example, especially to those of the Roman "confessors"; cf. *Ep.* 37, 4 (*CSEL* 3, 579): "For when you appeal to our Lord's generosity, what is there that *you* do not deserve to obtain?"

phrase, but if we simply accept the conclusion which he made them lead to, without adding any of our own. Let us allow him, at a moment when his troublesome flock are challenging him with "what the martyrs said," to exploit, as best he may, his discovery of a passage in Scripture where the martyrs are still "under the altar" pitifully praying to be avenged.

V

But we must return to the two preceding sentences which open chapter 18 and which we have not yet seen. They sum up much that is found in his letters of the previous months directed against Lucianus, and especially against the priests who took their cue from him and who worked upon the confessors against Cyprian. "If, however, anyone in his impatience of delay (*praepropera festinatione*) thinks that he can condone the sins of all, presuming thus to override our Lord's commands, so far from benefitting the lapsed his rashness (*temerarius*) does them harm."⁸³

At first sight this description might apply to the martyrs and confessors as much as to the insubordinate priests. But, if we can be guided by Cyprian's normal use, we do not in fact find him attributing this characteristic to the confessors and martyrs. He does, indeed, ascribe to the lapsed "temeritas"⁸⁴ and "nimia inpatientia et intolerabilis festinatio," but the lapsed are not in question here. However, he uses such expressions still more frequently of the priests,⁸⁵ so that here too it is the priests who are aimed at by "si quis praepropera festinatione temerarius." Hence, "thinks that he can condone the sins of all," though in itself applicable to the martyrs as well as to the priests, must here too be taken to describe the unwarranted granting of *communicatio* by the priests.

This conclusion helps us to interpret the difficult sentence which follows: "To disregard His decree is to call down His anger, if one thinks that there is no need now to appeal to His mercy, but, treating the Lord with contempt, one presumes to exercise indulgence oneself" (*Provocasse est iram non servasse sententiam nec misericordiam prius*

⁸³ *De lapsis* 18 (FIP 21, 29; CSEL 3, 250). ⁸⁴ *Ep.* 43, 2 (CSEL 3, 592).

⁸⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 16, 4 (CSEL 3, 520): "temerarii"; *Ep.* 20, 2 (CSEL 3, 528): "temeraria festinatione praecipites"; *Ep.* 34, 3 (CSEL 3, 570): "si quis immoderatus et praiceps."

deprecandam putare, sed contempto Domino de sua facilitate praesumere).⁸⁶

For at least it gives us that the unnamed subject of the infinitives are the priests, and not, on the one hand, the lapsed to whom the two first phrases might apply, nor, on the other, the confessors to whom all three would at first appear applicable. However, the last phrase, if it definitely excludes the lapsed—for it would be inappropriate indeed to speak of the lapsed as presuming on their own leniency—, strongly suggests the priests (and Lucianus) rather than the confessors. For in *Ep.* 27,3, as we saw, Cyprian speaks of the embarrassment caused him by Lucianus' lack of moderation: "he gives free rein to his laxity" (*facilitate sua immodestus*).⁸⁷ The Roman clergy denounce the idea of reconciling the lapsed without penance: "Far be it from the Church of Rome to replace its discipline by such worldly laxity (*tam profana facilitate*) . . .";⁸⁸ and the holy confessors of Rome praise Cyprian for rebuking those men in Carthage "who with obsequious indulgence (*prona facilitate*) had distributed the sacred [body] of the Lord, casting their pearls regardless of the Gospel"—a clear reference to the priests who were admitting the lapsed to the Eucharist.⁸⁹ They add: "What room is left for the fear of God if forgiveness is given to sinners so easily" (*tam facile*)?⁹⁰

One problem remains. The first way in which the priests had "provoked the anger of God" was "by disregarding His decree." What was Cyprian referring to? Was it some decision of policy taken by Cyprian, or by the bishops in general? Was it some judgment—a sentence passed either in general, or on these priests in particular? Was it a sentence passed by God, or by man? The context already suggests that it is not merely some human resolution or sentence: "treating the Lord with contempt"; also, that it refers to a judge's sentence—both these chapters (17 and 18) are dominated by the idea of judgment. The sense of the passage can be built up from the evidence of the letters of the preceding period, but a little later Cyprian himself sums up his thought in a single sentence:

Keep ever before your eyes, most dear brethren, that He whom the Father has made sole judge of all things has already pronounced the decree (*sententiam*)

⁸⁶ *De lapsis* 18 (*FLP* 21, 29; *CSEL* 3, 250).

⁸⁷ *Ep.* 27, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 543).

⁸⁸ *Ep.* 31, 6 (*CSEL* 3, 562).

⁸⁹ *Ep.* 30, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 551).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

giving His verdict in the judgment to come, when He solemnly forewarned us that He would confess before His Father those who confessed Him, and would deny those who denied Him.⁹¹

As we already know, Cyprian did not draw the conclusion that that was the end of the matter (as the Novatianists did), but he did argue that the Judge must therefore be won over, and that that could only be done by penance and by appealing to His mercy. Actually he does not argue thus in that letter (58), because he is not there considering the lapsed, but exhorting the faithful to face death bravely because of Christ's promise to those loyal to Him. But the structure of his thought is only the clearer to us on that account: Christ has told us what His sentence will be; we must respect it. Hence he here says, "to disregard His decree is to call down His anger, if one thinks that there is no need now (*prius*) to appeal to His mercy"⁹²—the "*prius*" obviously meaning "before coming to judgment." The priests concerned were disregarding that sentence by assuring the lapsed that there was no need to do penance.

That this is the correct way of interpreting the passage is confirmed by the lines that follow, which we have already consulted for the meaning of "when the day of judgment comes." The delinquent priests are asked whether they think that the martyrs can possibly want to go against the Judge by condoning the sins of the lapsed wholesale: "could wish for good to be done . . . against the will of the Judge."⁹³ The martyrs would never want that; if the priests have disregarded the sentence hanging over those who deny Christ, if they have told the lapsed that there is no need to implore His mercy, they have done so on their own authority, not on that of the martyrs, and have thereby provoked the anger of the Judge.⁹⁴

If this interpretation of "*non servasse sententiam*" ("disregarding His decree") is accepted, it will contribute to the search for the precise meaning of "*audet Domini praecepta rescindere*" ("presuming thus to override our Lord's commands"), in the first sentence of this chapter.⁹⁵ A "*sententia*" of condemnation implies a breach of some "*praeceptum*," and one might at first think that the word "*praecepta*" means no more

⁹¹ *Ep.* 58, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 659).

⁹² *De lapsis* 18 (*FLP* 21, 29; *CSEL* 3, 250).

⁹³ *Ibid.* (*FLP* 21, 29–30; *CSEL* 3, 250).

⁹⁴ Cf. *infra*, on chap. 20.

⁹⁵ *De lapsis* 18 (*FLP* 21, 29; *CSEL* 3, 250).

than the commands to confess Christ and not to deny Him. But "rescindere" seems too strong a word to go with it, and we need to remember that it is the priests who were concerned, and that their activities involved more than misleading the lapsed as to their obligations towards God. They were, in fact, subverting Church discipline, and we have only to read through the many letters concerned with the lapsed to notice how often such expressions as "*divina praecepta*," "*lex evangelica*," etc., are used to describe Church order and discipline in this context. Thus, expressions colourless in themselves came to take on a very precise meaning from being constantly used in association with the whole penitential process and with the bishop's authority behind it all. If this is true, its importance in more ways than one will be obvious, but as its full scope has not, it seems, been hitherto noticed, it will be necessary to give at least a selection of quotations to substantiate it.

Why Cyprian chose to express himself in such a general phrase ("override our Lord's commands") can be seen from our first quotations: it was his own authority that circumstances were forcing him to defend. Writing to the confessors in prison, in the early days of the persecution, he praises their respect for the customs traditional among those in their position, and blames those who are trying to mislead them:

But to my great distress I learn that not only are the injunctions of the Lord (*divina praecepta*) not recalled to their mind, but obstacles are even placed to their fulfilment, so that all that you are yourselves doing with so much regard for God's honour and with such deference towards His bishop is being undermined by certain priests . . . in contradiction to the law of the Gospel (*contra evangelii legem*).⁹⁶

Cyprian was the "bishop of God" whose "authority" was being disregarded.

The same day he was writing to his clergy. He would have kept silence but for the danger to the whole flock caused by some of them: "Insults to my person as bishop I could overlook and endure, as I have always overlooked and endured them. But there is no question of turning a blind eye now when my flock is being misled by some of you. . . ."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Ep.* 15, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 513-14).

⁹⁷ *Ep.* 16, 2 (*CSEL* 3, 517).

In the third letter of the same date, intended to be read to the faithful in general, he says of the priests who are disturbing the Church: "... paying no heed to the Gospel, nor any attention to what the martyrs had written to me, nor observing towards their bishop the respect due to his priesthood and his chair," by reconciling the lapsed without penance, they are dispensing with the whole penitential process which now, if ever, "needs to be maintained according to the prescriptions of the Lord" (*secundum disciplinam Domini*).⁹⁸ He asks all to cooperate in appeasing the minds of the lapsed: "... and by your advice and your own personal restraint bring the lapsed to calm themselves in accordance with the Lord's commands" (*secundum divina praecepta*).⁹⁹ The same collocation of thought appears in Letter 19, for the phrase, "acts of humility and works of charity," here stands for the penitential observances: "Proper penance is done when a man is mindful of the Lord's command (*divini praecepti*), and in meekness and patience and obedience to the bishops of God deserves to be received by the Lord because of his acts of humility and works of charity."¹⁰⁰

A little later he describes what is at stake to be "the holy precepts of the Gospel and the life-giving commands left to us once and for all," and the enemy are men "who lay impious hands on the commands of the Lord to undermine them."¹⁰¹

But though we now recognize the associations of "the commands of the Lord," we have as yet no clue as to what commands are intended. We find a first indication in Cyprian's reply to the letter from the *lapsi* which bore no signatures but claimed to speak in the name of "the Church." His reply begins: "Our Lord, whose commands (*praecepta*) we must respect and fulfil, established episcopal authority as the hall-mark of His Church when in the Gospel He said to Peter: 'I say to thee that thou art Peter, etc.' " (Mt 16:18-19).¹⁰² In this text, as is well known and as he proceeds to interpret it, Cyprian sees the foundation of the episcopate, i.e., the basis of his own authority, and of the peace and unity of the Church. So he ends this letter: "Wishing you every

⁹⁸ Ep. 17, 2 (CSEL 3, 522).

¹⁰⁰ Ep. 19, 1 (CSEL 3, 525).

¹⁰² Ep. 33, 1 (CSEL 3, 566).

⁹⁹ Ep. 17, 3 (CSEL 3, 522).

¹⁰¹ Ep. 28, 2 (CSEL 3, 545-46).

blessing, brethren, and a life in peace and quiet according to the prescriptions of our Lord (*secundum Domini disciplinam*). Farewell."¹⁰³

Once we have seized the idea that the "praecepta divina . . ." refer to our Lord's dispositions for the organization of the Church and for the discipline in it, both the previous and the subsequent passages where such expressions are used take on a firm and clear meaning. Thus, in the important letter just before Cyprian's return among his people (a letter which foreshadows both *De lapsis*, which he was probably writing at the time, and *De unitate ecclesiae*, written a little later), he describes how the priests of the faction of Felicissimus were fomenting disaffection among the confessors, "persuading them not to walk in step with their bishop and not to observe the bounds of the Church's discipline (*ecclesiasticam disciplinam*) in faith and modesty, as our Lord taught us" (*iuxta praecepta dominica*).¹⁰⁴ They were, in fact, doing away with penance, so that "there is to be no satisfaction made to God with the help of bishops and priests, but to the neglect of God's own priests and in opposition to the teaching of the Gospel (*contra evangelicam disciplinam*) there is to arise a ready-made 'tradition' of sacrilegious contrivance. . . ."¹⁰⁵

If *De lapsis* is chiefly concerned with the restoration of the penitential discipline as such, *De unitate ecclesiae* expressly deals with the ecclesiastical issues at stake in this complex of ideas. And, later on, we find Cyprian tracing the origin of schisms back to the neglect of "Christ's teachings," and again rehearsing the same pattern:

Indeed, in no other way have heresies arisen or schisms been created than by disobedience to God's bishop, and by disregard for the fact that there is one man in the Church who here and now is its bishop, here and now is its judge in the name of Christ; and, if the body of the brethren obeyed him in accordance with the divine instructions (*secundum magisteria divina*), no one etc.¹⁰⁶

This long excursus goes to show that, when Cyprian, in *De lapsis* 18, says that one who tries to remit sins without more ado "presumes to override our Lord's commands" (*Domini praecepta*),¹⁰⁷ he was referring

¹⁰³ *Ep.* 33, 2 (CSEL 3, 568).

¹⁰⁴ *Ep.* 43, 2 (CSEL 3, 591).

¹⁰⁵ *Ep.* 43, 3 (CSEL 3, 592).

¹⁰⁶ *Ep.* 59, 5 (CSEL 3, 671-72).

¹⁰⁷ *De lapsis* 18 (FIP 21, 29; CSEL 3, 250).

to those commands of Christ which created the authority of the bishops over all Church discipline. So his people would have understood him; and if any of them had missed the reference, he made it quite clear in sentences that followed.

But, before passing on, it is necessary to call attention to two small points that arise from a sentence already considered. Cyprian is challenging the five priests about the martyrs: "And can anyone think that anyone [let alone a martyr] can wish that by wholesale remissions and condonations of sin a good should be done against the [mind of the] judge, and that before the wrong to him [the martyr] has been punished he can defend others?" (*Et quemquam posse aliquis existimat remittendis passim donandisque peccatis bonum fieri contra iudicem velle aut prius quam vindicetur ipse alios posse defendere?*)¹⁰⁸

Such is the bald translation. But who is "the judge"? If in the preceding passage more explicit reference to the bishop had been made, it might have been he who is represented by "iudicem" in this sentence (cf. the previous quotation above, from *Ep.* 59,5, where the bishop is "judge [*iudex*] for the time being in the name of Christ"); but, all things considered, it seems best to take it that the judge here is Christ. It is against Christ's will that the rebels are absolving those whom He has threatened to deny.

The other point is whether the wrong to be punished is the wrong suffered by the martyr, as is suggested above. The Latin and the general sense seem to require it. Yet it deserves mentioning that in a different context the "vindication" of the martyrs is said to take place *along with* the vindication of our Lord at the day of judgment: "It is such as he, then [i.e., the martyrs], who are crowned by our Lord; it is they who will be vindicated with the Lord in the day of judgment."¹⁰⁹ However, that need not distract us. We have already seen that Cyprian is uncertain in his celestial chronology; indeed, in yet another context he insists that the martyrs have already been "vindicated" by the calamities which are here and now overtaking

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* (FLP 21, 29-30; CSEL 3, 250).

¹⁰⁹ *De dominica oratione* 24 (CSEL 3, 285). This would suggest that "ipse" in our sentence might refer to Christ, in which case it would mean that the martyrs cannot be thought able to defend (?) others, when the judge himself has not yet been vindicated. Whichever way it is taken, Cyprian's main contention is clear.

their persecutors. He even introduces this statement with the sweeping generalization: "No criminal onslaught is ever made upon our faith by the wicked, but divine retribution immediately overtakes them."¹¹⁰

After this we can conclude that Cyprian's timing of the "vindication" of the martyrs and of the efficacy of their intercession was dictated by the exigencies of the moment, and that what he says elsewhere on the subject need not be forcibly harmonized with what he happens to say here.

The importance of this conclusion is far greater than may at first appear. As we shall see below, this is the only passage which, of itself (yet, even so, only indirectly), puts off all real forgiveness of post-baptismal sins till the judgment. We have already suggested that it is simply part of the rhetorical scaffolding of his argument; what we have just seen only confirms it.

We come finally to the last two sentences of this chapter, for which all that has preceded was only a preparation. The first sentence is one of supreme irony: "The martyrs have given orders, have they? Of course, if carrying them out does not involve offending God, the bishop will obey with all alacrity—provided, mind you, the sinner who asks observes a little pious humility." So, it seems, must we take the rather clumsy sentence: "Suppose the martyrs do command something to be done; if it is good and lawful, if it does not involve God's bishop acting against the Lord Himself, let the bishop accede readily and with all deference to the order—provided, of course, the petitioner observes a becoming modesty" (*Mandant aliquid martyres fieri: si iusta, si licita, si non contra ipsum Dominum a Dei sacerdote facienda, sit obtemperantis facilis et prona consensio, si petentis fuerit religiosa moderatio*).¹¹¹ In "facilis et prona consensio" Cyprian is mimicking the laxist priests and pretending in "obtemperantis" to obey the "mandata" of the martyrs (which he has just proved to be, as yet, unavailing). But, balancing "obtemperantis," he throws into the scale the attitude expected of the "petentis," the lapsed, who notoriously was practising anything but "religiosa moderatio." However, he concludes, if what is ordered has no scriptural backing, we shall first need to know whether God has granted their request; it is not

¹¹⁰ *Ad Demetrianum* 17 (CSEL 3, 363).

¹¹¹ *De lapsis* 18 (FIP 21, 30; CSEL 3, 250).

something that we can take for granted: "The martyrs, then, give some command; but if what they command is not in Holy Writ, we must first know whether what they ask for has been granted to them by the Lord, and only then carry out their bidding. We cannot take it for granted that, because man has made a promise, the same has been granted by the majesty of God."¹¹²

The whole of the next chapter (19), which presents no difficulty of interpretation, is an expansion of this last idea. It consists of examples of requests made by saints of the Old Law which God rejected in spite of their merits. It concludes thus: "So true is it that not every request is settled by the merits of the petitioner, but that it lies at the discretion of the giver, and no human verdict can claim to decide anything, unless God's judgment (*censura divina*) concurs."¹¹³ The "*censura divina*" is the divine judgment demanding reparation or punishment for sin. That no human sentence can override it is the background of the twentieth chapter, whose chief purpose is to absolve the martyrs from having attempted anything of the kind.

Chapter 20 opens with the "*censura divina*," viz., Mt 10:32-33, Christ's promise to confess those who confess Him, His threat to deny those who deny Him. If the martyrs cancel the threat, they are discrediting the Gospel and therefore the promise too, sawing off the branch which gives them their commanding position. That a martyr should wish to do this is inconceivable. This is a point which kept recurring in Cyprian's correspondence with Rome, expressed in various forms. Thus, *Ep.* 27,3: Lucianus "overlooked the fact that it is not the martyrs who make the Gospel, but it is the Gospel by which martyrs are made"; 28,2: to be a "confessor" (*martyrem*) of Christ means irreproachable loyalty; "it does not mean being favoured by our Lord with martyrdom while one is engaged in subverting the Lord's own commands" (*praecepta Domini*); 30,4: the Roman clergy reply that the martyrs are obviously the champions of the Gospel, "since none were so fitted to preserve an untarnished reputation by upholding the full strength of the Gospel (*evangelici vigoris*) as those who for the sake of the Gospel had surrendered their bodies to be tortured and butchered by their frenzied [persecutors]"; and they develop the

¹¹² *Ibid.*¹¹³ *Ibid.* 19 (*FlP* 21, 32; *CSEL* 3, 252).

thought still further in 36, 2 (whence Cyprian obviously took his inspiration for this chapter):

For the very authority of the Gospel will seem to be sapped and overturned if it can be superseded by some new upstart decree (*alterius decreti novitate*); and the glorious crown of the martyrs' confession will be plucked from their brow if it turns out that they have won no crown for the maintenance of the Gospel, though it is that by which martyrs are made. . . .¹¹⁴

Hence Cyprian repudiates the idea that the priests are acting with the authority of the martyrs behind them: "those who themselves have fulfilled the commands of God cannot instigate the bishops to act against the command of God" (*mandatum Dei*).¹¹⁵ It is on this note that Cyprian closes the question,¹¹⁶ and as he has been working up to this, it shows that the indications which we noticed on our way really did point to this one idea: the authority of the bishop, whose responsibility it is to uphold "the Lord's commands" and "the teaching (*disciplina*) of the Gospel," and to prevent anything being done "against the command of God." Cyprian defends the good name of the martyrs by dissociating them from the laxism of the priests in the faction of Felicissimus; the martyrs and true confessors had always submitted their requests to the judgment of the bishop.

VI

Before summing up, we can look briefly at the remaining passages in *De lapsis* which are relevant to us. We need only notice what

¹¹⁴ CSEL 3, 543, 546, 552, 573.

¹¹⁵ *De lapsis* 20 (FLP 21, 33; CSEL 3, 252).

¹¹⁶ Whoever first divided Cyprian's works into chapters seems to have made a mistake here. The last sentence of chap. 20, though still dealing with the laxist priests, introduces a new subject which covers the next two chapters. It is true that "do some folk think themselves greater than God?" seems an echo of "man is not above God" of chap. 17; perhaps it is, but, even so, it can equally well open up a new line of thought. It is also true that of one who was distributing "absolutions" it might be said that "what God has allowed to be done, he wants [to treat] as not having been done" (*infectum*); but such an interpretation is ruled out by the next sentence: "Or was it perhaps without God's knowledge that these things happened or without His permission that all these calamities befell us?"—which obviously refers to the terrors of the persecution itself. Hence, "what God has allowed to be done" must refer to the same, and we have passed from the misdeeds of the priests to the brazen attitude of some of the lapsed. Do they think the Church needs rescuing by these priests, as if what has happened was not permitted by God, or as if He was impotent to prevent it? Whereas it was His judgment on us for our sins. . . .

Cyprian says about some of his flock who had more delicate consciences than most. They did not sacrifice nor secure certificates of sacrifice, but had merely thought of doing so; how admirable that, "merely because they entertained the thought, they confess this simply and contritely to the priests of God and manifest their conscience to them"¹¹⁷—a passage valuable for the light it throws on "private" penance, as well as on the preliminaries to becoming a "penitent." The same may be said of the appeal at the beginning of the next chapter (29): "I beg you all, brethren, each one of you, to confess your sin—now . . . when with the help of the priests the reparation for his sin and its remission are pleasing to God."¹¹⁸ After what we have already seen, there is no need again to call attention to the bishop's place in the process.

But rather more needs to be said of the last chapter of all (36). In it he encourages the lapsed to earnest penance by the strongest arguments at his command. He quotes Isaias, Ezechiel, and Joel, all speaking of the mercy of God anxious to pardon; he tells them that, besides their penance and almsgiving, the prayers of the martyrs and the intervention of the bishop will avail in their favour. Indeed, their earnestness may even be rewarded by God with martyrdom and the crown that awaits it. The question for us is: does this language necessarily suppose that what is done here below will only avail, if at all, in the next world? Is the bishop's intervention merely on the disciplinary plane, with no more than an attenuating effect on the judgment in the after life, or has it a religious sacramental effect here and now? We have tended to see the latter in the various passages which we have considered. Were we justified, or does this last passage exclude our interpretations?

Let us first dispose of an incidental phrase which comes in the middle of the chapter. Cyprian says: "Towards sorrow, good works, pleadings, He [our Lord] can show clemency and forgive; He can take into account (*in acceptum referre*) what the martyrs have asked for on their behalf and the bishops do for them."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ *De lapsis* 28 (FIP 21, 40; CSEL 3, 257).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 29 (FIP 21, 41; CSEL 3, 258). Karl Rahner's careful study of this passage (cf. *art. cit.*, pp. 383 and 404, n. 38), while noting its importance, warns us not to read into it more than it really says.

¹¹⁹ *De lapsis* 36 (FIP 21, 48; CSEL 3, 263).

It is true that in Cicero or Horace *in acceptum referre* is a technical phrase in accountancy for "carrying over to the credit side," "placing to one's credit." It suggests of itself a delay before the making up of the accounts; in our case it would be the delay till "the day of judgment." But need it have suggested this in ordinary parlance, and that two hundred years and more after Horace and Cicero? Such a phrase can acquire a very attenuated meaning. Cyprian uses it several times in his letters, and in each case it means no more than "to take account of." Thus, in *Ep.* 66, with huge irony he asks Puppianus, an old opponent of his who would not recognize him as bishop, to have pity on the Carthaginian Church which has had no bishop for so long. Let Puppianus, who has made himself "bishop over his own bishop and judge of the judge whom God has empowered here and now,"¹²⁰ recognize that bishops are appointed in the Church "by God and through His agency (*a Deo et per Deum*)",¹²¹ "let him recognize the judgment of God and of Christ" (*iudicium Dei et Christi in acceptum referat*),¹²² i.e., "take into account" Cyprian's appointment by God and Christ. Again, in *Ep.* 73, at the height of the baptismal controversy, he asks rhetorically of the baptisms conferred by heretics: "Why should we pay any attention to them (*quid . . . in acceptum referimus*), when they are adulterous and alien and at war with the divine unity [of the Church]?"¹²³—why should we "reckon with" them at all? Most clearly in *Ep.* 74 does the phrase refer to action here and now: "If a bishop of God acknowledges and approves and recognizes the baptisms of blasphemers, can he possibly get a clean bill at the day of judgment" (*an constare sacerdoti Dei ratio in die iudicii possit adserenti et probanti et in acceptum referenti blasphemantium baptismata*)?¹²⁴ Cyprian's grievance against such bishops is that they treat such baptisms as being as effective as baptisms within the Church. But baptism in the Church is not something merely "placed to the credit" of the baptized; it confers *remissa peccatorum* here and now. Those bishops are not merely "booking those baptisms to the account" of the converts, but "recognizing" their baptisms as valid.

Hence Cyprian's own use of the phrase would suggest that in our

¹²⁰ *Ep.* 66, 3 (*CSEL* 3, 728).

¹²¹ Cf. *Ep.* 66, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 727).

¹²² *Ep.* 66, 5 (*CSEL* 3, 730).

¹²³ *Ep.* 73, 10 (*CSEL* 3, 785); cf. 73, 12 (*CSEL* 3, 786).

¹²⁴ *Ep.* 74, 8 (*CSEL* 3, 805).

passage our Lord's action is that of one recognizing, here and now, the intervention of martyrs and bishop, rather than of merely "entering it on the credit side" of the penitent, the final reckoning being put off till the judgment.

What seems to be a far more serious difficulty is presented by the repeated "potest" in this chapter: "misereri talium potest qui et misericordiam suam protulit dicens . . ."; "Potest ille indulgentiam dare, sententiam suam potest ille deflectere. Paenitenti, operanti, roganti potest clementer ignoscere, potest in acceptum referre. . ."¹²⁵ It has been argued that Cyprian merely holds out the possibility of God's forgiveness, provided the sinners perform their penance and are reconciled to the Church. All is still in abeyance till the dread moment of judgment comes. To reinforce this view an appeal is made to *Ep.* 57, where Cyprian justifies the reconciliation of sick penitents in danger of death, even though they have not completed their penance: "since our Lord Himself allowed it, and gave us the law that what things were bound on earth should be bound also in heaven, and that those . . . (?) be loosed there (*solvi autem possent illic*) which had first been loosed in the Church" (cf. Mt 16:19).¹²⁶ Should we translate "might be loosed" or simply "should be loosed"? Generally taken in the first sense, it has been termed by Capelle "a bold watering-down of the scriptural reading," meant to safeguard the freedom of the divine Judge.

To take this last text first. It is interesting in more ways than one, but it is not necessarily parallel to the passage in *De lapsis* 36. Besides, one may call in question the interpretation just given. The Gospel text which Cyprian quotes elsewhere is: "Whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven."¹²⁷ With the new turn which he has given to his sentence, he needs a future subjunctive passive to express his meaning. Cyprian had several expedients for meeting this difficulty, and one was to make use of *posse*. We have a clear example of this in *De zelo et livore* 18, where he wanted to put into the subjunctive "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." This is how he did it: "Reflect that those alone shall be called

¹²⁵ *De lapsis* 36 (*FIP* 21, 47-48; *CSEL* 3, 263). ¹²⁶ *Ep.* 57, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 651).

¹²⁷ Cf. *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate* 4 (*CSEL* 3, 212); *Ep.* 33, 1 (*CSEL* 3, 566).

(*possint vocari*) children of God who are peacemakers. . . ."¹²⁸ Hence there is nothing sinister about the use of "solvi possent" in our passage; it is the natural transposition of the future, "erunt soluta." There is, therefore, no reason for seeing in it any watering-down of the text of Scripture, or any denial of the efficacy of the reconciliation of the lapsed by the bishop lest Christ's prerogative as judge be infringed.¹²⁹

However, our passage in *De lapsis* is not of this sort. "Potest" here is emphatic, and emphatically repeated. It is not just some auxiliary verb slipped in to avoid an awkward subjunctive; it stands there in its own right. Why this emphasis? Emphasis is meant to exclude something, and in ordinary parlance "I can," when emphatic, excludes one of two things: either "I shall necessarily," or "I can't." In other words, it can stand for "I can, but sha'n't necessarily—I may or I may not, as I choose," or else for "I can, however impossible or extravagant it may seem." Taken in the first sense here, it would imply that the reconciliation granted after penance was, as far as God was concerned, not merely provisional but simply hypothetical: God would be in no way committed; at the judgment He could disregard it in spite of its having been "entered on the credit side." It is thus that Dom Capelle takes it, allowing at the same time that in its implications it contradicts what Cyprian says elsewhere of the effects of penance and the reception of the *pax*.¹³⁰

But, inasmuch as Cyprian has in the course of *De lapsis* been emphasizing Christ's threat against those who deny Him, emphasizing that men *can't* take it on themselves to condone such a sin, that Christ will *not* "easily" forgive it, he is not likely to finish on the note: "Do all the penance you can, Christ can forgive you, *but He won't necessarily* do so!" It would be an anticlimax. Rather, having insisted on all that tells against the possibility of forgiveness, he ends on a note of triumph: "For all that, don't think Christ *can't* forgive you; He *can*, and He has

¹²⁸ CSEL 3, 432. Cf. *Latinitas christianorum primaeva* 9 (Merkx), 102, where other examples of such a future are given; also *ibid.* 6 (Schrijnen and Mohrmann), 46, 48.

¹²⁹ K. Rahner (*art. cit.*, p. 394, n. 26) also protests against Dom Capelle and explains "possent" merely as a future. But, like him, he seems to forget that even today we can quote our Lord's words, future and all, without putting off the real forgiveness till the day of judgment. He also sees an emphatic future in the "potest" of this last chapter.

¹³⁰ So, too, Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda*, pp. 402-6.

promised to do so!" There is an exact parallel to this use of *posse* in *Ep.* 55, in a passage which itself deals with the bishop's reconciliation of penitents: "But if we find there [in the Scriptures] that no one must be prevented from doing penance, and that those who implore and call upon the Lord's mercy can, because He is merciful and kind, be granted (*posse concedi*) reconciliation by the hands of His bishops, the laments of those who sorrow must be recognized. . . ." ¹³¹ Because the *pax* can be given by the bishop, he must admit them to penance and must eventually grant it to them. "Can" does not mean "may"; otherwise there would be no "must" about it. "Can" means that the bishop is empowered to grant it and, because the Lord is merciful and tender, His vicar must act accordingly. This same loving kindness of God runs through all the last chapter of *De lapsis*: the more sincere is their contrition, the blacker their sin will appear to them, and they may come to think that God can't forgive them such a betrayal. Cyprian comforts them: God can indeed forgive them; He is merciful and His promises stand.

Against the former interpretation there is this further consideration. Those who take it that Cyprian is presenting the forgiveness merely as a possibility, associate it with the idea of a delay till judgment day. We have already called in question this supposition, but we can let it stand for the moment. Taken in this sense the rhetorical swing of the chapter is pulled up dead by a sudden shift back in time and place. What Cyprian obviously meant to be his final climax is the idea that to those who reach the perfection of penance God grants the privilege of winning the crown of martyrdom. But, on this view, he has already taken his hearers to the judgment seat of God at the end of the world, telling them that, if they do penance, they will have a chance of being forgiven then. Since those who may be chosen to face martyrdom are still here on earth, he has to scramble back from heaven to earth, from judgment day to the present, in order to reach his climax. Such a retrogression would seem to ruin the rhetorical effect, and is certainly not Cyprian's way.

The forgiveness that Christ *can* give through His priests is, therefore, a forgiveness given and accomplished here and now upon earth. The context requires it and there is no forcing of the Latin to get to it.

¹³¹ *Ep.* 55, 29 (*CSEL* 3, 647).

If it seems to contradict what he said before, viz., that man cannot remit sins against God, the contradiction evaporates on two separate counts: (a) that "remit" there meant "condone, without any personal satisfaction," and chiefly because (b) when the bishop reconciles according to "our Lord's commands," it is Christ who is acting through him: "Only the Lord can grant mercy . . . who alone has received all power of judgment from the Father."¹³² But "with the help of the bishop reparation for sin and its remission are pleasing to God,"¹³³ because there is "one man in the Church who here and now is its bishop, here and now is its judge, deputizing for Christ" (*iudex vice Christi*).¹³⁴

¹³² *De lapsis* 17 (FIP 21, 28-29; CSEL 3, 249). ¹³³ *Ibid.* 29 (FIP 21,41; CSEL 3, 258).

¹³⁴ *Ep.* 59, 5 (CSEL 3, 672).