

# ST. CYPRIAN AND THE RECONCILIATION OF APOSTATES

JOHN H. TAYLOR, S.J.

GONZAGA UNIVERSITY  
Spokane, Wash.

IT seems that at the end of the third century the attitude of the Church towards those who fell into sins of fornication, adultery, and apostasy after Baptism was somewhat more lenient than it had been in the early part of the century. But just how much had the penitential discipline changed? Various answers have been given to this question by historians who have studied the history of penance in the early Church, the controversy centering chiefly around the "edict of Callistus" which allowed absolution to penitents guilty of adultery. It is not my purpose, however, to recount here the widely divergent views on this very difficult problem: they have been summarized by d'Alès<sup>1</sup> and Rauschen<sup>2</sup> and most recently by Mortimer.<sup>3</sup>

In this study I am concerned with Cyprian's treatment of the lapsed in the Decian persecution. Several questions naturally present themselves to anyone who has even a slight acquaintance with the documents of the period: (1) Was Cyprian the first African bishop to reconcile apostates? (2) If not, did he notably temper the penitential discipline in their regard? (3) Did he suffer any doubts or misgivings about granting them reconciliation?

Modern scholarship has given us a vast array of opinions in answer to these questions. Some of the more noteworthy conclusions, more or less typical of different schools of thought, are here presented.

---

<sup>1</sup>A. d'Alès. *L'Edit de Calliste*. (Paris. 1914) pp. 3-11.

<sup>2</sup>G. Rauschen. *Eucharist and Penance*. (St. Louis. Herder. 1913) pp. 152-155.

<sup>3</sup>R. C. Mortimer. *The Origins of Private Penance*. (Oxford. 1939) pp. 6-14. Mortimer's work is directed chiefly against the arguments of Paul Galtier who, in *L'Eglise et la rémission des péchés aux premiers siècles* (Paris. 1932), ably defended the existence of private penance in the earliest times. Some of Mortimer's interpretations of passages from Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian have been subjected to careful criticism by G. H. Joyce. "Private Penance in the Early Church." [*Journal of Theological Studies*. XLII (1941) 18-42].

Harnack in his *History of Dogma* maintained that the primitive Church regarded itself as a society of saints in which there could be no penance for those who fell into any one of the capital sins after Baptism. The practice of absolving these sinners was, according to him, a gradual growth which marked a fundamental change in the very concept of the Church.<sup>4</sup> The reconciliation of apostates in the Decian persecution was an innovation which caused Cyprian painful doubts: "What scruples were caused by this innovation is shown by the first 40 letters in Cyprian's collection. He himself had to struggle with painful doubts."<sup>5</sup>

Batiffol, who did not subscribe to a rationalistic conception of the Church nor deny in any way the power of the keys, was, nevertheless, of the opinion that the Church did not actually use its power to forgive apostates before the year 250. He says:

Il [le pouvoir des clés] est souverain: la réserve qui avait interdit aux adultères d'en bénéficier a été levée au temps de Calliste; la réserve qui excluait encore les *lapsi* est, de même, en principe et en fait, levée au temps de Cornelius.<sup>6</sup>

A similar position was taken by O. D. Watkins.<sup>7</sup>

Stufler<sup>8</sup> and Galtier<sup>9</sup> held that the clemency shown the lapsed in 251 was not an entirely new thing. In support of their conclusion they adduced such facts as: (1) the spontaneous recourse of the lapsed to the intercession of the confessors; (2) the fact that neither Cyprian nor Rome declared that the petition of the lapsed was against the traditional discipline; and

<sup>4</sup>A. Harnack. *History of Dogma*. (translated from 3rd German edition by N. Buchanan, 7 vols. London. Williams & Norgate. 1896) II, 108-112.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* p. 111, n. 5. Harnack gives no specific references to indicate the passages where these scruples and painful doubts can be found.

<sup>6</sup>Batiffol. *Études d'histoire et de théologie positive*. (7th edition. Paris. 1926) I, 144.

<sup>7</sup>O. D. Watkins. *History of Penance*. (2 vols. London. Longmans. 1920) I, 179: "The new situation called for a new treatment. . . . She [the Church] maintains her commission to retain and remit; she alters from this time forward the conditions of its exercise for the apostate." Elsewhere (*Ibid.* p. 182) he says: "The adulterer might at this period [A. D. 250] be reconciled after due penance performed. But the apostate might be no more reconciled than ever before."

<sup>8</sup>Stufler. "Die Behandlung der Gefallenen zur Zeit der decischen Verfolgung." [*Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*. XXXI (1907) 589 ff.] Cited by Rauschen, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup>Galtier. *De paenitentia*. (2nd edition. Paris. 1931) pp. 172-174.

(3) the common practice of promising the *pax* to the repentant apostates.

D'Alès, realizing the difficulties presented by many of St. Cyprian's statements, was a little cautious in his contention that Cyprian introduced no radical change. If the attitude Cyprian took was somewhat new, "cette nouveauté n'eut pas le caractère d'une révolution dans la discipline pénitentielle. Cyprien ne montre d'autre intention que celle d'appliquer à des cas nouveaux les principes toujours affirmés par l'Eglise."<sup>10</sup>

The problem, then, is not an easy one to solve. Perhaps we shall never be able to know for certain, unless new documents come to light, just exactly what policy the Church followed prior to 250 regarding the reconciliation of apostates. But an examination of the treatises and letters of St. Cyprian, and of the letters by others contained in Cyprian's collection, can throw much light on the problem. In this study an attempt is made to review these documents and draw a few conclusions that the evidence seems to demand.

When the Decian persecution broke out in A. D. 250, the Church in Africa faced a severe crisis. Although many Christians bravely endured torture and death rather than sacrifice to idols, a large number apostatized from the faith. St. Cyprian was grieved especially by those who rushed spontaneously to the forum to sacrifice, even before they were apprehended.

Ultrò ad forum currere, ad mortem sponte properare, quasi hoc olim cuperent, quasi amplecterentur occasionem datam quam libenter optassent.<sup>11</sup>

And the bishop who guided the Church of Carthage through this crisis did not mince words in pointing out the cause of such weak faith. He told his people plainly that God allowed the persecution because of their lax morals and worldly ways.

Those who actually performed the pagan rites were called *sacrificati*. But there were many Christians who, though they

<sup>10</sup>A. d'Alès. *La théologie de saint Cyprien*. (Paris. 1922) p. 301. Regarding the absolute exclusion of all apostates, "si quelques évêques isolés préconisèrent cette pratique rigoureuse, du moins l'Eglise ne la reçut jamais." (*Ibid.* p. 300.)

<sup>11</sup>*De lapsis*. 8, p. 242, 14-16. This passage and all other passages of Cyprian are cited according to Hartel's edition in the Vienna Corpus.

would not go this far in abandoning their faith, were willing to procure from government officials signed statements (*libelli*) to the effect that they renounced Christianity or that they had participated in the pagan sacrifice. These were called *libellatici*.

While the persecution raged, Cyprian lived in hiding outside the city and governed his flock by means of the priests and deacons who remained faithful. Though in retirement he was busy and kept in close touch with clergy and people. Thirty-six letters of the Cyprian collection belong to this period and bear witness to his zeal and labor in guiding his flock.

In those chaotic days, however, there were forces at work that he could scarcely control. Many of the lapsed, whether *sacrificati* or *libellatici*, wanted to be admitted immediately back into the Church. They would have no delay, but without canonical penance wished to be received straightway to communion. Some, in making their demands, even wrote to him in the name of the Church, as though they were its rulers.<sup>12</sup>

To add to the confusion, certain confessors who were enduring imprisonment and torture felt that their sufferings entitled them to a privileged position in the Church, and that therefore they could reconcile or at least demand the reconciliation of their friends who had lapsed. Even in the early days of the persecution we hear of this spirit of pride,<sup>13</sup> and Cyprian reminds them "humiles et modestos et quietos esse debere."<sup>14</sup> But they would not remain quiet, and their pretensions threatened to destroy the organization of the Church in Carthage. We read, for instance, of a certain martyr, Paul by name, who before his death called Lucianus, one of Cyprian's clergy, and gave him this command: "Luciane, coram Christo tibi dico ut si quis post arcessionem meam abs te pacem petierit, da in nomine meo."<sup>15</sup>

The lapsed who wished to use the intercession of the martyrs in order to be readmitted to the communion of the faithful,

<sup>12</sup>*Ep.* XXXIII, 1, p. 566, 12-16.

<sup>13</sup>*Ep.* XI, 1, p. 496, 1-18; *Ep.* XIII, 4, p. 507, 4-19.

<sup>14</sup>*Ep.* XIV, 2, p. 510, 21—p. 511, 6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ep.* XXII, 2, p. 534, 5-6.

visited those suffering in prison and received from them written petitions (*libelli pacis*). At first the martyrs designated by name those for whom they were pleading, but before long they were demanding the *pax* for a certain one and his family. As time went on abuses multiplied. "They [the *libelli*] were issued in the name of a dead confessor, of a confessor too illiterate to write; issued so copiously, that some thousands were believed to be circulating in Africa, and the very sale of them was not beyond suspicion."<sup>16</sup>

All might have been well had Cyprian's clergy remained loyal. But many of them joined with the rebellious confessors and the lapsed, demanding or even granting the *pax* which Cyprian had insisted should be deferred till the persecution subsided. There is extant in the collection of letters an amazing document written by Lucianus in the name of the confessors, notifying Cyprian that the *pax* has been granted to the apostates:

Scias nos universos [universis] quibus ad te ratio constiterit quid post commissum egerint, dedisse pacem, et hanc formam per te et aliis episcopis innotescere volumus. Optamus te cum sanctis martyribus pacem habere. Praesente de clero et exorcista et lectore, Lucianus scripsit.<sup>17</sup>

Cyprian handled his disobedient clergy with charity and firmness. In writing instructions to the martyrs in prison, he grieves over the fact that his priests have ignored his orders<sup>18</sup> and he directs a letter to his priests and deacons reprimanding them for their disobedience.<sup>19</sup> In another epistle he complains that they fail even to answer his letters,<sup>20</sup> but a later letter indicates that they have finally answered and are following instructions.<sup>21</sup>

Some remained rebellious, however, insisting on the immediate reconciliation of the lapsed, and a faction was formed,

<sup>16</sup>E. W. Benson. *Cyprian, His Life, His Times, His Work*. (London. Macmillan. 1897) p. 93.

<sup>17</sup>*Ep.* XXIII, p. 536, 3-7.

<sup>18</sup>*Ep.* XV, 1, p. 513, 13-p. 514, 7.

<sup>19</sup>*Ep.* XVI, 1, p. 517, 9-14.

<sup>20</sup>*Ep.* XVIII, 1, p. 523, 13-14.

<sup>21</sup>*Ep.* XIX, 1, p. 525, 1-7.

headed by five priests who had opposed Cyprian's election. It was easy for these men to gain power with the people, because their action flattered the vanity of the confessors and reinstated the apostates. More than once Cyprian appealed directly to his people, and in a letter written to the lapsed he admonishes them that the Church is built upon the bishops and is governed by them. "But," he says ironically, "if some of the lapsed consider themselves the Church, and if the Church is to be found with them and in them, what can I do but ask them to receive me into the Church?"<sup>22</sup>

Alongside of the lax party which stood for immediate reconciliation of apostates without penance, there was an intransigent group that seriously doubted whether the Church could or should forgive the apostate at all. They considered the sin of idolatry so enormous that those who fell into it should never be admitted again to communion. But while the persecution raged, these men did not cause Cyprian any serious trouble. Their number apparently was not great, and there was no reason why they should be at odds with a bishop who had decided to postpone the reconciliation of apostates anyway. Later, as we shall see, they did cause considerable difficulty.

The persecution did not last long. In November of the same year (250) it was relaxing in intensity, and shortly after Easter of the following year we find Cyprian back at Carthage preparing for a provincial council. It was at this time that he wrote his *De lapsis*, in which he formulated his policy on the treatment of apostates, and his *De unitate ecclesiae*, in which he defended the unity of the Church against the schismatics.

Before the restoration of peace, Cyprian, as we have said, had decided to postpone the reconciliation of apostates, but he had made an exception in favor of those who held martyrs' *libelli* and were in danger of death.

Occurrendum puto fratribus nostris, ut qui libellos a martyribus acceperunt et praerogativa eorum apud Deum adiuvari possunt, si incommodo aliquo et infirmitatis periculo occupati fuerint, non expectata

<sup>22</sup>Ep. XXXIII, 1, p. 567, 3-5.

praesentia nostra apud presbyterum quemcumque praesentem, vel si presbyter repertus non fuerit et urgere exitus coeperit, apud diaconum quoque exomologesim facere delicti sui possint, ut manu eis in paenitentiam imposita veniant ad Dominum cum pace quam dari martyres litteris ad nos factis desideraverunt.<sup>23</sup>

This decision, made by Cyprian in the early days of the persecution and promulgated without any evidence of doubt or hesitation, furnishes convincing proof of his belief in the power of the Church to forgive apostasy. It may be objected, of course, that Cyprian's decision, to exclude the dying from reconciliation if they did not hold martyrs' *libelli*, was an extremely rigorous policy. However, Cyprian apparently applied this principle during the persecution because the possession of a martyr's petition was a sign of repentance, and one who neglected to obtain such a petition might be presumed to lack the proper dispositions.<sup>24</sup> We know that in other circumstances<sup>25</sup> Cyprian was inclined to deny absolution to those who led impenitent lives and then clamored for the *pax* on their deathbed, because he did not think that such sorrow would ordinarily be sincere.

But whatever the case of the dying, all those who were not in danger of death had to wait for a council.

Plane ceterorum causas quamvis libello a martyribus accepto differri mandavi et in nostram praesentiam reservari, ut cum pace a Domino nobis data plures praepositi convenire in unum coeperimus, communicato etiam vobiscum consilio disponere singula vel reformare possimus.<sup>26</sup>

Now, however, the time of waiting was over, and there was need of formulating a definite policy. In April, 251, the bishops and priests of Cyprian's province met in Carthage to deal with the schismatic party and consider the treatment to be given apostates. Cyprian, a born ruler, dominated the assembly; and

<sup>23</sup>*Ep.* XVIII, 1, p. 523, 19-p. 524, 8. This passage is important as evidence of the early practice of communicating absolving power to simple priests. The extraordinary grant of power to deacons has brought forth some ingenious explanations, but it is not our purpose to discuss them here.

<sup>24</sup>*Galtier*, op. cit. p. 177.

<sup>25</sup>*Ep.* LV, 23, p. 641, 21-22.

<sup>26</sup>*Ep.* XX, 3, p. 529, 2-6,

the decisions made, though perhaps a little more rigorous than he would have liked, conform in general with what he had always taught.

But before examining the work of the council, it will be well to investigate Cyprian's doctrine regarding the power of the Church to forgive sin, especially the sin of idolatry committed after Baptism.

Four points stand out in Cyprian's teaching in this matter, and they run through the body of his correspondence and the treatise *De lapsis*: (1) the Church has the power to forgive sins committed after Baptism; (2) this power extends even to the sin of apostasy; (3) it is exercised by the ministry of priests; (4) the sinner must confess and satisfy divine justice. Cyprian's admonition to the lapsed in 251 clearly contains this doctrine:

Confiteantur singuli quaeso vos, fratres, delictum suum, dum adhuc qui deliquit in saeculo est, dum admitti confessio eius potest, dum satisfactio et remissio [facta] per sacerdotes apud Dominum grata est. Convertamur ad Dominum mente tota et paenitentiam criminis veris doloribus exprimentes Dei misericordiam deprecemur. Illi se anima prosternat, illi maestitia satisfaciatur, illi spes omnis incumbat. Rogare qualiter debemus dicit ipse. Revertimini, inquit, ad me ex toto corde vestro simulque et ieiunio et fletu et planctu et discindite corda vestra et non vestimenta vestra. Ad Dominum toto corde redeamus, iram et offensam eius ieiunio, fletibus, planctibus sicut monet ipse placemus.<sup>27</sup>

This clemency towards the lapsed was by no means a compromise proposed by Cyprian in 251 to pacify the laxists. He had consistently taught the same doctrine from the beginning. Early in the persecution he wrote:

Et lapsis quidem potest in hoc venia concedi. Quis non mortuus vivificari properet? Sed praepositorum est praeceptum tenere et vel properantes vel ignorantes instruere, ne qui ovium pastores esse debent lanii fiant.<sup>28</sup>

To deny Christ, as did the lapsed, is indeed the greatest sin;

<sup>27</sup>*De lapsis*. 29, p. 258, 17-p. 259, 3.

<sup>28</sup>*Ep.* XV, 2, p. 514, 16-20. That the *venia* promised in this letter is divine forgiveness granted through the ministry of the Church is clear from Cyprian's mode of expression where he allows the absolution of the dying, "ut manu eis in paenitentiam imposita veniant ad Dominum cum pace" (*Ep.* XVIII, 1, p. 524, 6-7).



but those who have fallen will find forgiveness if they will repent and submit themselves to ecclesiastical penance.<sup>29</sup>

But here we run into an apparently insoluble difficulty. Cyprian in one of his early works, *Testimonia ad Quirinum*, written probably before 250, had gathered together, under short doctrinal statements, pertinent scriptural texts. One of these statements reads: "Non posse in ecclesia remitti ei qui in Deum deliquerit."<sup>30</sup> Just what Cyprian had in mind when he wrote *non posse remitti* is not entirely clear. As to the *peccata in Deum* we know that besides the sin against the Holy Ghost and the sin of idolatry he also included under this head impurity,<sup>31</sup> criminal abuse of worldly goods,<sup>32</sup> and revolt against legitimate pastors.<sup>33</sup> Now Cyprian never considered it impossible to reconcile sinners guilty of these sins. Of adulterers, for instance, he says: "Nam et moechis a nobis paenitentiae tempus conceditur et pax datur."<sup>34</sup> There had been African bishops who refused to give the *pax* to adulterers,<sup>35</sup> but Cyprian was not among their number.

We cannot, therefore, conclude from the brief statement in the *Testimonia*—a statement which stands by itself without any explanation—that Cyprian was a rigorist in his early days. Such an argument would prove too much, for it would mean that he taught that adultery was unpardonable, which he never did. The statement must be taken with everything else that Cyprian taught and practised. Perhaps some light is thrown upon it by a sentence in a later work, "Non facile ignoscere Deum idololatriis."<sup>36</sup>

A further explanation perhaps may be found in the word *remitti*. The idea of remission in Cyprian's language implies a total liquidation of sin such as is had in Baptism, and the word

<sup>29</sup>Ep. XVI, 2, p. 518, 1-p. 519, 7.

<sup>30</sup>*Testimonia*. III, 28, p. 142, 6-7.

<sup>31</sup>Ep. LV, 27, p. 645, 8-10.

<sup>32</sup>*De habitu virginum*. 11, p. 195, 15-16.

<sup>33</sup>Ep. LIX, 13, p. 680, 13-16.

<sup>34</sup>Ep. LV, 20, p. 638, 11-12.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.* 21, p. 638, 23-25.

<sup>36</sup>*Ad Fortunatum*. 4, p. 324, 12.

is used almost exclusively to indicate the remission of sin by Baptism.<sup>37</sup> This means the entire removal of both guilt and punishment; though such a distinction, which belongs to a later age, was not consciously in Cyprian's mind. The sins which were said to be *in Deum* were, it seems, all those sins for which public penance was required. Now in the process of public penance the sinner had to expiate his sin. In this sense, then, we can understand how Cyprian would consider it almost impossible for the apostate to have his sin "remitted," since the debt he had to pay by his public penance would be so great.<sup>38</sup>

This interpretation of *remitti* in the *Testimonia* is one way of saving Cyprian from a contradiction. It may be objected that we have read too much into his statement, but the fact remains that elsewhere he consistently teaches that every sin, even a *peccatum in Deum*, can be forgiven.

If we go on to examine the reasons why Cyprian postponed his decision on the *lapsi* till a council might convene, we will find no indication of any doubt about the possibility of reconciling them.

Foremost in his mind is his determination not to make any important decisions without consulting clergy and people. Early in 250, even before the trouble with the lax party became acute, he wrote to his clergy:

Ad id vero quod scripserunt mihi compresbyteri nostri Donatus et Fortunatus et Novatus et Gordius, solus rescribere nihil potui, quando a primordio episcopatus mei statuerim nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis mea privatim sententia gerere.<sup>39</sup>

We are not told what these four priests asked, but it is most probable that they wanted to reconcile the *lapsi*. At any rate, we have here a policy formulated from the very beginning and followed faithfully to the end.

Shortly after, while allowing the recipients of martyrs' *libelli* to be absolved in danger of death, he insists that the others must wait for the council:

<sup>37</sup>Cf. d'Alès. *La théologie de saint Cyprien*, p. 287.

<sup>38</sup>The explanation I have given here has been proposed by d'Alès, *op. cit.* pp. 283-287.

<sup>39</sup>*Ep.* XIV, 4, p. 512, 16-20.

Ceteri vero qui nullo libello a martyribus accepto invidiam faciunt, quoniam non paucorum nec ecclesiae unius aut unius provinciae sed totius orbis haec causa est, expectent ante de Domini protectione ecclesiae ipsius publicam pacem. Hoc enim et verecundiae et disciplinae et vitae ipsi omnium nostrum convenit, ut praepositi cum clero convenientes praesente etiam stantium plebe, quibus et ipsis pro fide et timore suo honor habendus est, disponere omnia consilii communis religione possimus.<sup>40</sup>

It is only natural that those who demanded immediate reconciliation should want to know the reason for waiting, and to this difficulty Cyprian gives various answers: because he was admonished in visions granted him to postpone the matter;<sup>41</sup> because he did not want to act rashly;<sup>42</sup> because it was necessary to examine into each case.<sup>43</sup>

Are these only excuses? Did Cyprian really consider idolatry "an irremissible sin"? A careful reading of all the letters of this period reveals not the slightest doubt about the power of the Church to reconcile the idolaters or the faintest hint that Cyprian intends to exclude them all from the Church. Indeed, if he had such rigoristic ideas, he would not have been so ready to grant absolution to the dying. But why wait for a council to decide what to do about the others who were not dying? Here we are left to conjecture. Probably Cyprian knew that any decision he would make would cause trouble either with the laxists or with the rigorists and eventually lead to a schism. From his hiding place outside the city, communicating with his priests only by letter, he could not possibly check the machinations of a rebellious party. In such circumstances, it was better to postpone the matter till peace should be restored and a council convene; for Cyprian might well have felt that with the clergy and people all assembled, he could, by the force of his authority and eloquence, appease both sides and bring them to accept a reasonable solution midway between rigorism and laxism.

<sup>40</sup>*Ep.* XIX, 2, p. 525, 20-p. 526, 8.

<sup>41</sup>*Ep.* XVI, 4, p. 520, 5-10.

<sup>42</sup>*Ep.* XVII, 1, p. 521, 14-18.

<sup>43</sup>*Ep.* XXVI, p. 539, 16-17.

Moreover, there was a problem here for the whole Church of Africa. It was imperative that all the bishops agree upon a uniform policy, determining under what conditions the lapsed should be admitted to penance. Amidst the wholesale apostasy, which was entirely unprecedented, this was a serious problem; and it must have caused Cyprian much thought. But of doubts about the power of the keys to absolve apostasy or hesitation to use that power we find none.

Such was Cyprian's position when the council convened in 251. He had been writing his treatise, *De lapsis*, and when the clergy and people assembled he read it to them.<sup>44</sup>

Everything in this treatise fits in with what we know of Cyprian's policy from the correspondence of the preceding year. He censures the apostates because, without remorse for their fall, they live amid pleasures and luxury and perform no acts of penance. He blames the confessors for their impatient desire to throw open the doors of the Church to all indiscriminately. In an eloquent passage<sup>45</sup> he grieves over the sacrileges of those who were admitted to the Eucharist without exomologesis or imposition of hands or expiation of their sin.

The course that he outlines is severe but not unreasonable. The lapsed can be forgiven, but they must confess their sin with sorrow to the bishop,<sup>46</sup> and where there is a very serious sin, a long penance is required.<sup>47</sup> There was, indeed, good reason to make a distinction in the amount of guilt among those who had lapsed. As we have pointed out above, some had rushed to the forum to sacrifice even before they were arrested, and they surely had committed a very grievous sin. Others had resolved to remain faithful, but under torture had lapsed; these could be more quickly reconciled.<sup>48</sup>

This is but a brief sketch of the policy recommended by Cyprian in his celebrated treatise and by no means does justice

<sup>44</sup>*Ep.* LIV, 4, p. 623, 16-17. Cf. P. Monceaux. *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*. (7 vols. Paris. 1901-1923) II, 292.

<sup>45</sup>*De lapsis*. 16, p. 248, 20-p. 249, 16.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.* 29, p. 258, 17-22.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.* 35, p. 262, 18-19: "Alto vulnere diligens et longa medicina non desit."

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.* 13, p. 246, 20-21.

to the eloquence of the former rhetorician, to the wisdom and tact of the bishop, or to the charity and zeal of the saint. Of this work Monceaux has said:

C'est à la fois un sermon, un mandement, et un programme: le programme très net d'un politique avisé, qui par ses adroites négociations, et par son autorité morale, avait rallié à ses idées toute l'Eglise d'Afrique; un mandement très ferme et très habile où les sévérités de l'évêque s'enveloppaient de charité et de compassion; un sermon plein d'onction et d'éloquence, qui toujours cherchait dans l'Ecriture la règle de vie.<sup>49</sup>

If the bishops showed a little more rigor than Cyprian would have wanted, they did in general follow his advice. The decisions of the council, in the absence of official acts, can be pieced together from statements in various letters.<sup>50</sup> Forty-two African bishops, writing to Pope Cornelius a year later, reminded him that they had decided in the synod of 251 that those who had sacrificed should perform a long penance (apparently lifelong), and that if they were in danger of death they should be absolved.<sup>51</sup> In another letter a reference is made to the same decision, and we are further informed that an examination of each case was demanded.<sup>52</sup> In this letter, we also learn that the *libellatici* were to be absolved without delay.<sup>53</sup> In no place do we find any reference to martyrs' *libelli* being required. Cyprian during the persecution had allowed this honor to the martyrs and the imputation of their merits, but it was not considered necessary to make the possession of these petitions a requisite in normal times.

There is one class of lapsed towards whom a certain amount of severity seems to have been shown: namely those who, though they refused to do penance during life, asked for the *pax* on

<sup>49</sup>Monceaux. *op. cit.* p. 298.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 47-48.

<sup>51</sup>*Ep.* LVII, 1, p. 650, 16-20.

<sup>52</sup>*Ep.* LV, 6, p. 627, 13-p. 628, 7.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.* 17, p. 636, 6-9: "... libellaticos interim admitti." Benson (*op. cit.* p. 158), without making any reference to this passage, states that the libellatics had to perform "a considerable term of penance" Galtier [*L'Eglise et la rémission des péchés* (Paris, 1932) p. 292] and many others understand *interim* as meaning "immediately." Mortimer (*op. cit.* p. 32) rejects this translation; but it seems to me the only one that fits the context.

their deathbed. These should not hope for reconciliation: "prohibendos omnino censuimus a spe communicationis et pacis."<sup>54</sup> Benson<sup>55</sup> considered this rule to be a decree of the council, but there is no indication in the passage cited that such was the case; and elsewhere in Cyprian's letters, when there are references to what the council decreed, this rule is not mentioned. It may have been simply a policy adopted by Cyprian. In those times when, as he tells us in the *De lapsis*, there were so many apostates neglecting penance and leading worldly lives, he must have thought it imperative to adopt such a severe norm in order to deter his people from the terrible sin of presumption. But that he would actually reject penance where he knew it to be genuine is questionable, since we know from other circumstances<sup>56</sup> that he was always guided by equity in enforcing his own rules and those of the council.

The decrees of the synod were sent to Rome, and Cornelius, after holding a local council, agreed with the decisions of the African bishops.<sup>57</sup> This approval by Rome seems to have been in keeping with the Roman tradition, for we know that during the persecution Cyprian had kept in touch with the clergy there and that they had agreed with him on the handling of the lapsed.

At this time, indeed, strange events were taking place at Rome. Novatian, who had written to Cyprian<sup>58</sup> during the persecution in the name of the Roman clergy (while the Roman See was vacant) and had approved of Cyprian's policy towards the lapsed, was now set up as anti-pope, heading a puritanical party that opposed the reconciliation of the apostates. More bewildering still is the action of Novatus, one of the laxists of Carthage, who had wanted immediate reconciliation of the lapsed, and who now went to Rome to join the Novatian rigorists. But whatever may have been the motives of these

<sup>54</sup>*Ep.* LV, 23, p. 641, 21-22.

<sup>55</sup>Benson. *op. cit.* p. 158.

<sup>56</sup>*Ep.* LVI, 2, p. 649, 9-22; *Ep.* LV, 13, p. 632, 16-23.

<sup>57</sup>*Ep.* LV, 6, p. 628, 3-7.

<sup>58</sup>*Ep.* XXX, pp. 549-556.

men, their strange actions can hardly prove the existence of a rigoristic tradition at Rome. The important point is that Rome, whether during the vacancy after Fabian's martyrdom or under the pontificate of Cornelius, officially approved Cyprian's decisions.

There were a few rigorists, too, in Africa, who were apparently admitting the lapsed to penance but denying them reconciliation even at the hour of death. Against this practice Cyprian cries out with indignation:

O frustrandae fraternitatis inrisio, o miserorum lamentantium caduca deceptio, o haereticæ institutionis inefficax et vana traditio hortari ad satisfactionis paenitentiam et subtrahere de satisfactione medicinam, dicere fratribus nostris: "plange et lacrimas funde et diebus ac noctibus ingemisce et pro ablundo et purgando delicto tuo largiter et frequenter operare, sed extra ecclesiam post omnia ista morieris: quaecumque ad pacem pertinent facies, sed nullam pacem quam quaeris accipies." Quis non statim pereat, quis non ipsa desperatione deficiat, quis non animum suum a proposito lamentationis avertat?<sup>59</sup>

For the most part, however, the decisions of 251 were observed. Cyprian, indeed, must have felt that even that program, however much it displeased the rigorists, was too severe; for there were many sincere penitents faithfully performing their acts of penance, not knowing when they would be reinstated.

Especially sad was the plight of those, who though they had bravely confessed the name of Christ, finally yielded in their torments, and then, immediately repenting, undertook to do penance in which they now remained steadfast. Should not these be absolved? Such a case of conscience was presented to Cyprian by some African bishops, and he was asked to consult with his colleagues and return an answer. It happened that at the time (May, 252) a council was about to convene at Carthage, and Cyprian promised to bring the matter up. But he did not hesitate to say that he himself thought they should be absolved.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup>*Ep.* LV, 28, p. 646, 8-17.

<sup>60</sup>*Ep.* LVI, 2, p. 649, 9-22.

The council met on May 15, 252. Another persecution was threatening, and in these circumstances the bishops determined to reconcile all the lapsed, including the *sacrificati*, who had been performing penance.<sup>61</sup> They thought that in the difficult times to come the people should be armed "protectione sanguinis et corporis Christi."<sup>62</sup> From that time on, it seems, there was less difficulty with laxists and rigorists, although we are informed<sup>63</sup> that in the following year another council severely reprimanded a certain bishop, Therapius, for absolving a lapsed priest before he had done the penance prescribed. But by and large the bishops of Africa, and indeed throughout the whole Church, recognized the wisdom of treating the lapsed with a reasonable severity tempered with mercy, and most of the extremists that remained were definitely out of the Church.

There is a letter of Cyprian's to a Numidian bishop, Antonianus, written early in 252, which is a long defense of his treatment of the lapsed and is an important document in this discussion. In it Cyprian writes:

Et quidem primum, quoniam de meo quoque actu motus videris, mea apud te persona et causa purganda est, ne me aliquis existimet a proposito meo leviter recessisse, et cum evangelicum vigorem primo et inter initia defenderim, postmodum videar animum meum a disciplina et censura priore flexisse, ut his qui libellis conscientiam suam maculaverint vel nefanda sacrificia commiserint laxandam pacem putaverim. Quod utrumque non sine librata diu et ponderata ratione a me factum est.<sup>64</sup>

Here then is an admission by Cyprian himself that he was formerly a rigorist! But if we examine the following paragraph to see what he means by his erstwhile rigorism, we will find that he is referring to his policy during the persecution of postponing his decision on the lapsed and meantime leaving them to the more difficult but surely more glorious way of martyrdom. Thus he exhorted them:

<sup>61</sup>*Ep.* LVII, 1, p. 651, 12-16.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.* 2, p. 652, 2-3.

<sup>63</sup>*Ep.* LXIV, 1, p. 717, 8-21.

<sup>64</sup>*Ep.* LV, 3, p. 625, 10-18.



. . . ut paenitentiae viam non solum precibus et lamentationibus sequerentur, sed quoniam repetendi certaminis et reparandae salutis dabatur occasio, ad confessionis potius ardorem et martyrii gloriam nostris increpiti vocibus provocarentur.<sup>65</sup>

His admission, therefore, of a departure from his former policy (*a proposito meo recessisse*) means simply the abandonment of a course of action which was admittedly temporary. Both in this letter and during the persecution itself he stressed the fact that it was a temporary policy adopted until such a time "cum quies et tranquillitas data esset et episcopis in unum convenire indulgentia divina permetteret."<sup>66</sup>

But the explanation to Antonianus goes on to say that the council made its decision only after a careful examination of Scripture;<sup>67</sup> and the bishops showed clemency in order to keep the lapsed from turning "ad gentiles vias et saecularia opera" or "ad haereticos et schismaticos."<sup>68</sup> This indeed sounds very much as if they were in doubt at first; which is probably true of some of the bishops, since there were not a few rigorists present. Then, too, the reason assigned gives the impression that if there were not the danger of a large portion of the faithful falling into paganism or heresy, the bishops would not have admitted the lapsed; and the same appears to be implied in Cyprian's statement about himself, *necessitate temporum succubuisse*.<sup>69</sup>

The opportunism referred to here is apparently not the mere fact of reconciling the lapsed but rather the *immediate* reconciliation of the libellatics, which seems indeed to have been an innovation;<sup>70</sup> but we must remember that it was an innovation only because the situation was entirely new.

In any case it should be pointed out that Cyprian here is writing to a bishop who, fearing that Cornelius and his followers are lax, is thinking of joining the Novatian puritans.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.* 4, p. 625, 22-p. 626, 1.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.* 4, p. 626, 11-13.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.* 6, p. 627, 16-17.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.* 17, p. 636, 2-3.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.* 7, p. 628, 15.

<sup>70</sup>Galtier. *De paenitentia*. pp. 175-176.

<sup>71</sup>*Ep.* LV, 2-3, p. 624, 14-p. 625, 18|

It is only natural for Cyprian in these circumstances to emphasize the careful deliberations of the bishops and the grave reasons that exist for the apparently lenient attitude they are taking.

But it does not enter Cyprian's mind that his attitude is too lenient, and there is no real evidence of "painful doubts"; in fact he tells Antonianus that he is surprised the rigorists will not absolve the lapsed:

Miror autem quosdam sic obstinatos esse ut dandam non putent lapsis paenitentiam aut paenitentibus existiment veniam denegandam, cum scriptum sit: "Memento unde cecideris et age paenitentiam et fac priora opera."<sup>72</sup>

There were indeed a few well-meaning rigorist bishops in the Church at the time of this letter, which was written shortly before the council of 252. The bishops in their official statement to Pope Cornelius after the council, announcing their decree to absolve the apostates who were doing penance, were conscious of the rigorists when they wrote:

Quod si de collegis aliquis extiterit qui urgente certamine pacem fratribus et sororibus non putat dandam, reddet ille rationem in die iudicii Domino vel importunae censurae vel inhumanae duritiae suae.<sup>73</sup>

Everything, then, that we know of Cyprian indicates that he was never really one of the rigorists and that the puritanical spirit was not the tradition of the Church in Africa. Indeed this catharism which had manifested itself towards adulterers in Tertullian's time seems to have been anything but the traditional attitude. Cyprian's statement that the rigorists of those days were "quidam de episcopis" who "locum contra adulteria cluserunt" implies that they were a minority group who departed from the traditional policy.<sup>74</sup> One is hardly said to have closed a thing unless it was previously open.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.* 22, p. 639, 8-11.

<sup>73</sup>*Ep.* LVII, 5, p. 655, 13-16.

<sup>74</sup>*Ep.* LV, 21, p. 638, 23-25. Cf. M.-C. Chartier. "La discipline pénitentielle d'après les écrits de saint Cyprien." [*Antonianum* XIV (1939) 21-25].

Those who opposed the reconciliation of the lapsed in Cyprian's time were the heirs of this puritanical spirit. That Cyprian ever contemplated adopting their policy is not proved from his letters and treatises, which we have studied. That their policy can be called the tradition of the Church in Africa is not proved either.

Perhaps we may say from all we know of those times that the tradition was divided, the majority of bishops favoring a lenient attitude towards the apostates, a minority adhering to puritanical ideals. There must have been some precedent for reconciling the lapsed; otherwise, as Galtier has pointed out, the immediate clamor for reconciliation cannot be explained. And this seems to be confirmed by what Tertullian, as a Catholic, tells us of a *paenitentia secunda* for those who fall into grievous sins, such as impurity or apostasy.<sup>75</sup> Certainly if Cyprian and his followers went against a fixed tradition of rigorism when they welcomed back the repentant apostates, we would hear of that tradition. It would be one more argument of the rigorists for Cyprian to answer in his letters to Antonianus and others. In the absence of any reference to such an argument, we may conclude that his opponents never appealed to tradition because they could not.

Now, if we put together all the facts we have studied, we may say with all probability that when Cyprian first faced the entirely new problem of wholesale apostasy he did not contemplate abandoning the lapsed; but that, seeing innumerable difficulties in admitting them immediately, he decided upon a temporary solution until the bishops might convene and discuss the whole matter. Thus the plan that Cyprian suggested to the council of 251 does not mean a reversal in his policy; and the decision of the bishops at that time does not seem to have been an innovation, except perhaps the decree to absolve the *libellatici* without a long penance. The decision of 252, to grant the *pax* immediately to all the *sacrificati* doing penance, was

<sup>75</sup>Tertullian. *De paenitentia*. (ed. Preuschen. Tübingen. 1910) 7, 9-10.

indeed a new thing, for we know that such a sin normally required a long time of canonical penance. But the action of the bishops was an innovation only because the Church in Africa had never before, as far as we know, had to face a new persecution with a large number of penitents doing canonical penance for previous apostasy. At least in the mind of Cyprian (and probably the same could be said of the majority of the bishops), it was not a radical departure but rather the logical application of principles that had always guided him. Those principles were at work during the persecution when he decided to grant the *pax* to the dying, and after the persecution when he wanted to shorten the duration of canonical penance in cases where there were extenuating circumstances.

To answer the questions we proposed at the beginning of this enquiry, we may state briefly: (1) There is no evidence to prove that Cyprian was the first African bishop to reconcile apostates, and there are indications that seem to show that such reconciliation was granted before his time. (2) The tempering of the severity of the penitential discipline did not consist in a reversal of policy but rather in a benign and equitable application of old principles to an entirely new situation. (3) Cyprian suffered no doubts about the possibility of reconciling apostates who were truly repentant, although he did deliberate carefully on the conditions under which they would be admitted and absolved.

The change, then, which had come over the African Church by the end of that decade cannot be considered the abandonment of an official puritanical tradition, but rather the adaptation of the existing penitential discipline to new conditions and the triumph of the traditional spirit of Christian mercy over a very heretical spirit of puritanism that had been lurking within the Church. From that time on, the policy of the Church in Africa and elsewhere, however diverse it may have been before, was one of clemency; and the rigoristic bishops and priests, who had been able to stay within the Church, now gradually learned to conform or went over to the Novatian sect.