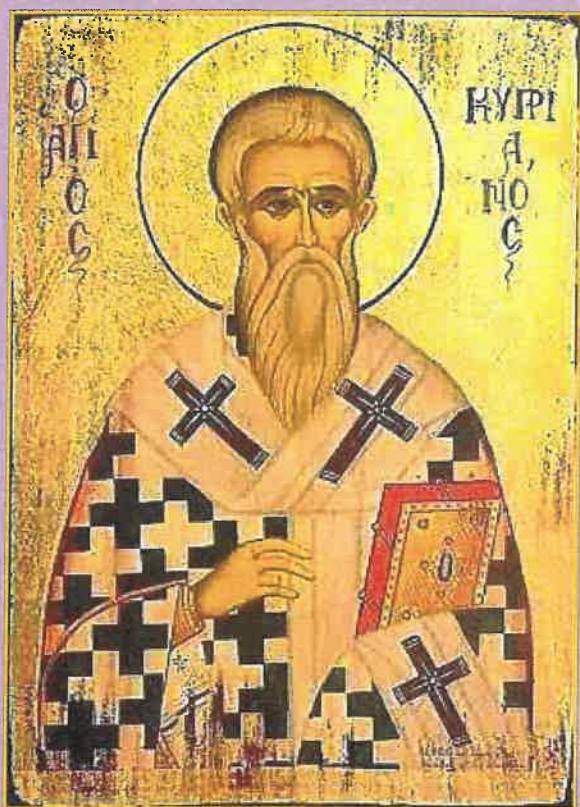


The Meaning of Baptism



The Witness of
St. Cyprian of Carthage

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Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus was born about 200 AD in North Africa of wealthy, non-Christian parents. Well educated, Cyprian became a prominent lawyer in Carthage, the capitol city of ancient Roman Africa. In 246, he converted to Christianity and in 249, he was elected the bishop of Carthage, becoming thereby the most important bishop in Africa at that time.

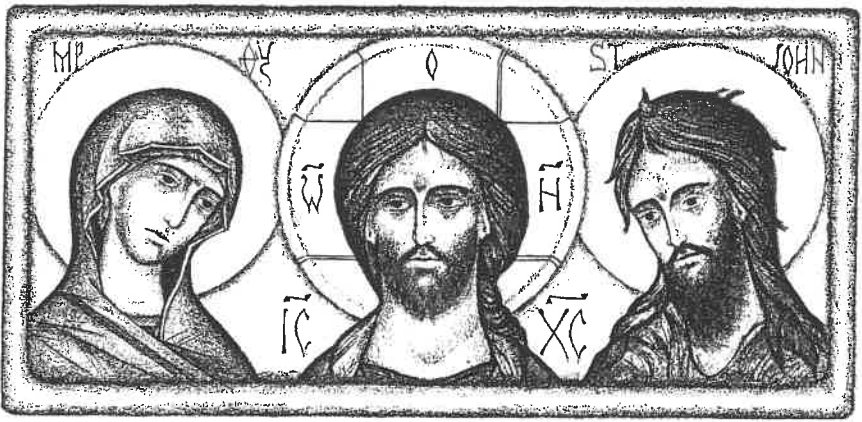
His episcopate of a little less than a decade was of great significance for the history of the early Church in Africa. He guided his community through the bloody persecution of the Roman emperor, Decius; a plague, similar to the Black Death, which swept through and devastated the Roman Empire; and the initial stages of the continued persecution of Christians under the next emperor, Valerian.

It was during this latter persecution that Cyprian was martyred. On September 14, 258 he was beheaded in the gardens of the proconsular Vila Sexti, on the outskirts of Carthage.

This pamphlet is one of 81 surviving letters written by Cyprian before his brutal execution. It is a personal testimony of faith written in 246 to his friend Donatus about the significance of his baptism.

It is well worth our reading today.

St. Cyprian of Carthage is remembered in the Church on the day of his death, September 14th and August 31st.



*A Personal testimony from St Cyprian
to his friend Donatus*

Carthage, A.D. 246

I promised to share with you the grace God in his great mercy has shown me, and to tell you as simply as I can what I have experienced since I was baptized.

Until that time I was still living in the dark, knowing nothing of my true life. I was completely involved in this world's affairs, influenced by all its changing moods and troubles, and exiled from the light of truth. I had indeed been told that God offered men and women a second birth by which we could be saved, but I very much doubted that I could change the kind of life I was then living. Frankly, I could not see how a person could cast off his fallen nature and be changed in heart and soul, while he still lived in the same body as before. How is it possible, I asked myself, to change the habits of a lifetime instantaneously? How can one suddenly rid oneself of accumulated guilt and break with sin that has become so deeply rooted in one's life? Can a man whose whole life style is characterized by feasting and luxury learn frugality and simplicity in a single moment? A person who craves for public distinction and honors cannot bear to be passed over unnoticed; another who is accustomed to throngs of flattering attendants thinks it a terrible penance to be left alone. Is every species of temptation suddenly to lose its force? Shall we no longer feel the enticement of wine and

good living? Will pride no longer swell our heads or anger blaze in our breasts? Shall we no longer be troubled by covetousness or cruelty or ambition or lust?

These were my thoughts. My past life was burdened with so many sins that I saw no way ever to be rid of, that I had grown accustomed to giving way to my weakness. I despaired of ever being any better. Consequently I simply humored my evil inclinations and made no attempt to combat them.

But at last I made up my mind to ask for baptism. I went down into those life-giving waters, and all the stains of my past were washed away. I committed my life to the Lord; he cleansed my heart and filled me with his Holy Spirit. I was born again, a new man.

Then, in a most marvelous way, all my doubts cleared up. I could now see what had been hidden from me before. I found I could do things that had previously been impossible. I saw that as long as I had been living according to my lower nature I was at the mercy of sin and my course was set for death; but that by living according to my new birth in the Holy Spirit I had already begun to share God's eternal life.

You know as well as I do what sins I died to at that moment, just as you know the gifts the Holy Spirit gave me along with my new life. I have no desire to boast, but it is surely right to thank God for his free gift. It was through faith in him that I received the power to break with the sins into which my own folly had led me.

All our power for good is God's gift; he is the source of our life and strength. Through him we grow and mature, so as to experience even in this life a foretaste of what is to come. Only let us keep our hearts pure, and fear nothing so much as to lose our newly restored innocence; then the Lord who has made the light of his grace shine in our hearts will establish his home within us.

If we walk firmly and steadily in the Lord's ways, trusting in him with all our heart and strength, all we have to do is to be what our baptism has made us. Freedom and power to do good will be given us in proportion to our spiritual growth. God does not measure his heavenly gift to us in the scales the way we mortals dispense earthly

goods; he pours out his Spirit without stint, so that it flows freely on and on, never ceasing, continually abounding in endless generosity. We have only to open our hearts with longing and drink it in. The amount of grace we receive is measured by the faith with which we appropriate it. By that grace we are given power in all purity to heal the sick, whether of body or of mind, to reconcile enemies, to quell violence, to calm passions, to reprimand demons and force them to disclose their identity, punishing them with sharp blows until, with loud shrieks and struggles, they flee in terror. The blows we deal them are invisible, but what they effect is manifest to all. In so far as we are what we have begun to be, the Spirit is free to act through us, even though our bodily sight is still hindered by the cloud of this earth's dust.

How tremendous is this freedom and the spiritual power the Lord has given us! Not only are we protected from harm, but we are given authority over the whole force of the enemy who attacks us!

When I look back on the darkness from which I have escaped, I can only praise and thank God for the love he has shown me. My heart is filled with pity for all the people still trapped in that living death. Our civilization has surely reached the lowest depths of infamy; robbery, violence, murder on every side, the whole world reeking with blood; cruelty and bloodlust at the games, parricide and incest on the stage, perversion in private life, corruption in the administration of the law. Public office is purchased by flattery, wealth gained by dishonesty. Men are in bondage to money and luxury, yet they obstinately cling to the possessions from which neither they nor their families derive any profit. The more exalted a person's station, the greater is his fear of losing it. A ruler who denies peace to his subjects can find none for himself. What a price the world exacts for the honors and dignities it bestows!

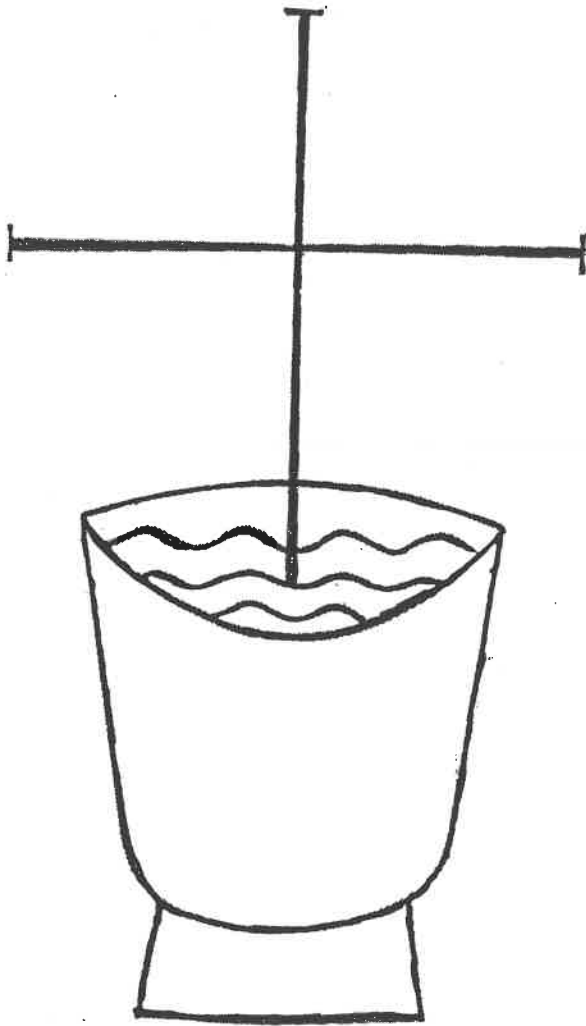
True peace and security here below can only be attained by seeking deliverance from this turbulent world and accepting the salvation held out to us by God; in fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ, not on the earth. Then when we have been admitted to a share in the divine gift and have come to know the Lord, we discover that the things that seem so important to others are as nothing com-

pared to the joy we now experience. We no longer seek the world's favors, because we have been raised above the world. How blessed it is to be released from earthly entanglements and to emerge from corruption into the light of eternity! All the mischief our old enemy has done us in the past is brought to nothing. When we see what we once were, it makes us love even more what we are to be.

We do not have to toil and sweat to achieve our own perfection, nor are money and influence needed to obtain the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is freely given by God, always available for us to use. Just as the sun shines and the day brings light, the stream irrigates the soil and rain waters the earth, so the heavenly Spirit pours itself into us. Once we have lifted our eyes to heaven and acknowledged our creator, once we have been raised above the earth and rescued from slavery to this world, then we begin truly to be that new creation we believe ourselves to be.

We have received the seal of the Spirit. Our task now is to preserve the integrity of what we have received by living a truly Christian life. We must give time to prayer and the study of scripture, now speaking to God, now listening to his word to us and letting his teaching mold us. He has enriched us with a treasure no one can take away; we have eaten and drunk at his heavenly banquet, and can never again know the pinch of poverty. Magnificent palaces are as nothing in comparison with the glory of our own soul, which has become the Lord's temple with the Holy Spirit dwelling in it. As long as we keep it clean and open to the light, this temple of ours will never lose its beauty or fall into decay, until the day our bodies are restored to us from the grave and our whole being is brought to the perfect realization of God's plan for us.





The New Life in the Spirit

I went down into those life-giving waters and was born again, a new man. All my doubts vanished. I could see what had been hidden from me. I could do what had been impossible.

St. Cyprian, A.D. 246

