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Cyprianic Ecclesiology: Redefining the Office of the Christian Bishop

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CYPRIANIC ECCLESIOLOGY: REDEFINING THE OFFICE OF THE CHRISTIAN BISHOP

by

LAUREN HUDSON

(Under the Direction of Timothy Teeter)

ABSTRACT

St. Cyprian was a pivotal figure in the early Church. During his tenure as bishop of Carthage, 248-9 to 258, the Roman emperor Decius ignited the first empire-wide persecution of the Christian Church. The problems that resulted from this persecution were unprecedented. This thesis will analyze the letters and treatises of Cyprian and will illustrate how Cyprian solidified certain powers of the bishop and built upon the existing orthodoxy of the Church. The actions of Cyprian will be viewed as a microhistory. Cyprian is not a fringe character in history; he is a well-known Church father and a saint in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Thus, this microhistory is focused on the textual sources of Cyprian rather than all the available material on the subject of the Decian persecution and the controversies Cyprian experienced. The epistles and treatises written and received by Cyprian will be the bases of research chronicling the events in which he lived. Thus, differing from other modern scholarship, this thesis states that at the pinnacle of Cyprianic ecclesiology is the belief that the bishop, as the divine head of an ecclesiastical community, was to guard both the faithful and the damaged until the return of their Lord.

Index words: Cyprian of Carthage, Christianity, Microhistory, Orthodoxy, bishop, Decian persecution, Apostasy, Penitential discipline, Donatism
CYPRIANIC ECCLESIOLOGY: REDEFINING THE OFFICE OF THE CHRISTIAN BISHOP

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CYPRIANIC ECCLESIOLOGY: REDEFINING THE OFFICE OF THE CHRISTIAN BISHOP

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Tyler, for his optimistic support and unfailing humor.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cyprian, in a scathing letter to Puppianus, describes the duties of a bishop using seven different terms. Puppianus was a layman in the Carthaginian Church who openly challenged Cyprian’s position. Cyprian asserts that as the appointed leader, *praepositus et sacerdos*, he could not be summoned to court by a layman. He also reminds Puppianus of the length he had held the office of overseer (*episcopus*); when the letter was written in 255, Cyprian had been bishop of Carthage for six years. Without him, Cyprian claims, the people would have no leader (*praepositus*), shepherd (*pastor*) or helmsman (*gubernator*). Christ would be without a priest (*antistites*) for his Church, and God would be left without His representative on earth, the bishop (*sacerdos*). While Cyprian utilizes his training as a rhetorician to fell Puppianus’ argument against his qualifications to lead the Church, he also outlines his understanding of the office of the bishop.¹

St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from 249 to his martyr’s death in 258, was a pivotal figure in the early Church. This work will discuss two separate arguments based on the work of Cyprian. First, through analyzing the letters and treatises of Cyprian this thesis will illustrate how Cyprian solidified certain powers of the bishop and built upon the existing orthodoxy of the Church. The development of orthodoxy will be integral to the discussion of authority within the early Church. Second, this thesis will demonstrate how later leaders defined ecclesiology based upon Cyprian’s elucidations. Finally, in the chapter entitled “Cyprian’s legacy,” these two focal points will be brought together to examine questions of authority within the primitive

Christian Church. In his time as bishop, Cyprian redefined episcopal authority. He did not introduce new sources for his authority; rather, he extended the authority of a bishop to encompass new powers and privileges by using the already recognized sources as validation. This encompasses his redefinition of certain rituals and sacramental practices. Once Christianity was legalized, his ecclesiology would strongly affect the two largest Christian groups of the time, the Catholic Church and the schismatic Donatists.

Modern scholarship on Cyprian is centered on his fight and consolidation of authority after the Decian persecution, both against errant confessors and other bishops.\(^2\) Johannes Quasten characterizes Cyprian as a gentle and giving man while still highlighting his demand for authority and control, two points that W.H.C. Frend and Henry Chadwick also emphasized.\(^3\) This portion of Cyprian’s ecclesiology was truly influential, as evident during the Decian persecution when Cyprian judged the necessity of his action based on his position within the hierarchical structure of the Church.

In his 2002 work on Cyprian, J. Patout Burns Jr. relied heavily on secondary sources to determine how Cyprian’s theology was evident in his actions as a bishop. His conclusion was that Cyprian developed his theological decisions in the midst of the persecution to aid his community in recovery, and when Christianity was recognized and adopted by the empire, Cyprian’s theology no longer served the direction of the Church. Augustine mentions Cyprian as an influence, but ultimately his theology reflects little Cyprianic inspiration.\(^4\) Allen Brent, writing in 2010, focused on the pagan influence on the ministry of Cyprian. He writes that

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Cyprian’s response to the persecution was determined by the pagan culture in which he lived. He also interprets many actions on the part of Cyprian, primarily those against the Decius and the confessors, as guided by his eschatological concerns.  

G. W. Clarke made a major contribution to the historiography of Cyprian with his translations of the letters of Cyprian published between 1984-1989. He also included brief but detailed summaries of the events of the empire and Church in the midst of Cyprian’s correspondence. The primary focus of these works was on the correct interpretation of Cyprian’s letters and the corresponding dates to the letters, not the intent or purpose for Cyprian’s actions. However, he does emphasize the devout passion of Cyprian and his unfailing allegiance to the Church as an institution.  

This thesis will attempt to view the works of Cyprian as a microhistory. Cyprian is not a fringe character in history; he is a well-known Church father and a saint in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Thus, this microhistory is focused on the textual sources of Cyprian rather than all the available material on the subject of the Decian persecution and the controversies Cyprian experienced. The epistles and treatises written and received by Cyprian will be the bases of research chronicling the events in which he lived. The final chapter, “Cyprian’s Legacy,” will depend more broadly on secondary source material while still referring back to the primary source material of Cyprian.

In every action, thought and letter Cyprian attempted to preserve the Church. Maintaining unity was the catalyst through which to achieve his goal, but not at the expense of Church doctrine and belief. Cyprian was an exhaustive author, and through correspondence

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with not only his own clergy but churches throughout the empire, Cyprian encouraged, educated and debated the ecclesiology of the wider church. Yet, during his tenure, Cyprian developed a uniquely individual theology. By focusing primarily on the words and justifications of Cyprian, through the materials he left behind, this thesis will attempt to give a closer and more accurate illustration of his thought. At times his decisions seem contradictory, although he provides justification for each action. Yet his ultimate goal and focus never changes. As the divinely appointed priest, overseer and shepherd of God, Cyprian guides the Church, making the tough decisions and accepting the consequences. The thesis differs from other modern research concerning Cyprian by making him the primary voice for his tenure as bishop, allowing Cyprian himself to justify his actions.

The progression of Christianity did not follow a set pattern. Numerous innovators and Church leaders built on the work of their forbears to create a formidable institution. They did not always agree with their predecessors, but piece-by-piece doctrines and creeds were defined to create a recognizable orthodoxy. Many leaders that preceded Cyprian slightly or significantly changed something during their tenure. Cyprian consolidated episcopal authority in such a way as to appeal to the emperor, giving the Christian Church a structure and a legitimacy that eventually enticed Constantine.

It is evident from Cyprian's correspondence and treatises that he recognized four primary sources of his authority. The first was the need for a figurehead. Institutional authority evolved out of the charismatic authority that the apostles and other first generation leaders possessed. The second source, apostolic succession, was pivotal in the mid-second century, and from that notion, several avenues of responsibility resulted. The third source can be seen
throughout every step taken to centralize and maintain power. A defined orthodoxy
encompassed the centralization of power along with a distinct liturgy. Lastly, the Holy
Scriptures accepted by the Catholic Church in the third century are the primary source for
Cyprian’s development of thought. He justified each action and decision made during his
tenure as bishop with scriptural comparisons and references.

\[7\] In the late second century more Churches were attempting to solidify an official canon of Scripture. The
Muratorian Canon, the earliest Latin document listing the books of Scripture, was most likely circulated in Rome by
CHAPTER 2

EVOLUTION OF AUTHORITY

In the nascent Church of the first three centuries, Christian leaders were concerned with questions of authority. The apostles fought for the authority of the gospel message in competition with Jews and traditional religions. The leaders of the first and second generations of Christianity struggled to assert their authority over the numerous house-Churches that were dispersed across the cities of the empire. By the third generation, in the late first and second century, the monarchical episcopate had been established in the eastern portion of the empire and a hierarchy of authority was evident.8

In the first generation of Christianity, the apostles were primarily concerned with evangelizing. Their final charge had been to spread the message first in Judea then to the uttermost parts of the earth.9 The apostles and their disciples established leaders in the Churches they founded, that they might minister to the believers in their stead. Christian believers assumed the apostles and their early disciples were endowed with a special revelation due to their proximity either to Jesus or one of the original twelve. After the death of the apostles there was a shift toward a more established hierarchy within the Christian Churches.10 Church leaders were not expected to possess the same level of charismatic authority as their predecessors.11 Two major factors in the transition from charismatic to institutional authority were the doctrine of apostolic succession and the dismissal of the belief in an imminent apocalypse.

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8 There had been a marked move towards single episcopacy beginning in the early second century, extending from the east westward. Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 140; 231-234.
9 Acts 1:8
10 Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 139.
11 Eusebius lists James the brother of Jesus as the first bishop or Jerusalem. H. E. II. 1.
Catholic doctrine concerning the end times was not solidified quickly. Within the first several centuries of the early Church, eschatological doctrine was left to individual interpretation. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa all had different concepts of a millennial age, but the Church did not seek to sharply define a chiliast doctrine. Even heretical sects were not condemned specifically for their apocalyptic teaching. Apocalypticism was the first Christian understanding of eschatology. It was a “fervid vision” of Christ crushing evil and bringing about a new divine existence. In the sub-apostolic and post-apostolic periods the faithful refocused the urgency of the second coming and emphasized rather the duties and emotions of the present. The Church did not suffer a break or crisis in Christ’s delay. Instead, they reinterpreted certain scriptures with a previously strong apocalyptic implication. Millenarian hope replaced apocalyptic expectation.

Eschatological motivation continued to influence the development of Christianity. Christians quickly accepted that they would be in this place for some time, and they began making provisions for the Church’s future success. The doctrine of apostolic succession provided legitimacy to new leaders by creating a chain connecting them with the progenitors of Christianity.

The First Letter of Clement is one of the oldest Christian writings outside of the New Testament. In his letter the author advocates for the reinstatement of the deposed leaders of the Corinthian Church based on an early version of apostolic succession. I Clement charts a line

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12 Jaroslav Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1971, 129. Pelikan used Montanism as his example.
13 Irenaeus cited Papias as the author of this doctrine in Haer. 5. 33. 4.
of succession that would provide Church leaders with defensible authority for life. The author
reasons that since Christ defined through whom “offerings and liturgical rites” were to be
performed, he also provided a plan to continue the appointment of these officiators. The
Corinthian Christians are told that the apostles possessed the foreknowledge that strife would
arise over offices within the Church; therefore, they established a line of succession. Thus, the
congregation did not have the authority to remove their leaders from office.

The doctrine of apostolic succession also reserved the interpretation of the scriptures
solely to those appointed as successors to the apostles. By controlling knowledge and
presenting it in a defined manner, the Church believed that unity could be maintained. Not only
was the information and those interpreting the information controlled, the places at which
adherents had access were controlled. The correct interpretation could only be found in
apostolic Churches. In leaders like Ignatius and Polycarp the Church believed it had security in
its message. These men had been taught by the apostles themselves. The true faith was
preserved in an unbroken line of instruction, and the doctrine of apostolic succession
attempted to preserve this confidence.

Irenaeus’ “rule of faith” or “rule of truth” attests to the early desire for a more uniform
faith, something to which early baptismal creeds also bear witness. For Irenaeus the “rule of
faith” could refer to both the scriptures and traditions of the Church. Both were accepted as

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15 *I Clem.* 40.3.
16 *I Clem.* 44.1.
17 Bart Ehrman synopsis of *I Clement* stresses the importance of restoring harmony by reinstating and submitting to
the original presbyters. Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers V. I, 20; My evaluation of I Clement and its importance
concerning the developing doctrine of Apostolic Succession is more in line with the thought of Frend. Frend, *The
Rise of Christianity*, 140.
fully legitimate modes of instruction.\textsuperscript{19} By the late-second century an early New Testament canon was being circulated amongst the Churches, as can be seen in the Muratorian fragment, an early Christian codex of the tenth century with a list nearly identical to the eventual canon but also including works later judged apocryphal. Such apocryphal literature was transmitted throughout the Churches alongside the letters of apostles and other early Church fathers. Most apocryphal works were not considered heretical, just not divinely inspired.\textsuperscript{20} They focused on moral restriction and reproof. These texts were instrumental in the development of the Church, and they are very telling of the concerns of the early Church. \textit{I Clement}, the \textit{Didache} and the \textit{Shepherd of Hermas} were influential sources for the authors of Christian orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{21} Yet, the qualification for divine inspiration was restricted to those texts written in the apostolic age. Thus these influential pieces were ultimately rejected because of the later date of their origination. The letters of Ignatius, preserved and distributed by Polycarp, were read in Churches throughout the empire as means of Eucharistic instruction and encouragement to episcopal obedience.\textsuperscript{22}

Along with the doctrine of apostolic succession, the monarchical episcopate established a locus of authority for Church officials. The culmination of securing institutional authority was in the establishment of the monarchical episcopate. The divisions of power evident in the monepiscopate are not found in the New Testament. In the monarchical episcopate one presbyter would be elevated above the rest to fulfill the position of overseer for that Christian

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{19} Pelikan, \textit{The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)}, 117.
\bibitem{21} Ehrman, \textit{Apostolic Fathers V. I}, 1.
\end{thebibliography}
community. Each position under this bishop or overseer would serve the Church in a specific manner, always referring back to the bishop as the final authority.

Even the laity had important duties within the monarchical structure. The laity were actively involved in their Church community. Early sources such as *The Apostolic Tradition* credit the people with selecting their next bishop, although it must be serving bishops through the imposition of hands that invoked the sending of the Holy Spirit. The laity is seen as having a very active role in this decision, and they remain during the consecration to offer prayer for their newly sanctified leader.²³

While authority within the Christian Church was fluctuating and evolving so too were the terms used to denote power and assign duty. Many Greek terms traditionally understood as bishop, presbyter and deacon, that fit within the structure of the monarchical episcopate, were also translated literally to define certain functions. While the terms to denote position or authority within the Church changed frequently, the duties of the leaders remained similar when a college of presbyters or a single bishop led the Church. The leadership of a single bishop is noted in many of the Eastern Churches as early as the first century, while a number of presbyters were sharing responsibility for the leadership of a Church in the west.²⁴

In the apostolic period those who evangelized in a community became the leaders of the Christian movement there.²⁵ The Pauline approach to Church leadership was that each

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²⁵ The only recorded instance of one of the original twelve accepting the duties of a static leader is James, the half-brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem. Disciples of one of the missionary apostles led the believers in the other Christian communities throughout the empire. Eusebius mentions John as “administering” the churches in Asia and being a witness to the Church at Ephesus. Euseb. *H.E.* III. 23. 1-6.
member within a Christian congregation was endowed with a spiritual gift; some members would be given the gift of leadership, but it did not make them superior to their fellow members. The Church quickly transitioned into elders or presbyters leading the congregations, in a fixed position of authority.²⁶ Within the epistles of the New Testament canon leaders of the Church were known by numerous titles. *Hegoumenoi* was a generic term that encompassed many people and is usually simply translated as “leaders.”²⁷

Although *episkopos* has historically been understood as designating the authority of a single individual, the bishop, authors as early as the apostolic period used the term when referencing one in leadership positions in the Church. *Episkopos* is translated as “overseer.” In *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke, chronicling Paul’s farewell speech to the leaders of Ephesus, refers to the presbyters in attendance as *episkopous*.²⁸ The term is also used in the pastoral letter addressed to Titus.²⁹ In both instances the word illustrates the function these men serve.³⁰

The author of *I Clement*, writing in the late first century, most frequently refers to the deposed leaders in Corinth as *presbuteroi*. *Presbuteroi* is the most common term used to denote the position of leader within the Church in the sub-apostolic period. *Presbuteroi* is best translated as “elder.”³¹ The author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* in the early to mid-second

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²⁸ Acts 20:28
²⁹ The letter to Titus and both letters addressed to Timothy were written concerning pastoral care in the name of Paul. It is believed by most scholars that a follower of Paul wrote these epistles after Paul’s death. I included them because they provide insight into the duties of a leader in the sub-apostolic period.
³¹ The letter of I Clement suggests that a college of presbyters were leading the church rather than a single bishop. Frend lists the first evidence of the monarchical episcopate form of government as originating with Hegesippus, c. 175. Frend, *Rise*, 130.
century uses the term in this sense. He instructs believers to respect the elders who are *proistamenon* (presiding) over the Church.\(^{32}\)

On his march to Rome, Ignatius wrote pastoral letters to numerous Church leaders. Ignatius is remembered as the bishop of Antioch in a time before leaders in the West claimed the same authority. However, the authority Ignatius claims for himself and for Polycarp in particular still differs greatly from the authority later exercised by bishops of the monepiscopate.\(^ {33}\) The bishop, as perceived by Ignatius, is much more a spiritual being than an institutional leader. Ignatius’ theology lacks the protection of power through apostolic succession; rather, the primary duty of the three offices he mentions, bishop, priests and deacon, were to reflect the images of God the Father, the apostles and Christ in the “liturgical life of the community.”\(^ {34}\) The Church is unified when their divine purpose is accomplished, and the Church as a whole must be unified to their bishop as he leads them in the sacramental worship that binds them to Christ.\(^ {35}\)

Justin Martyr wrote his *First Apology* c. 155. In his explanation of the eucharist, Justin calls the leader of the liturgy the *proestos* or “president.” The duties of the president are to lead the ceremony, offer a prayer of thanksgiving, take responsibility for the money collected on behalf of the poor and care for those in need. At this time, the Church in Rome was being led by a single bishop, and all the duties that Justin ascribes to him were also claimed by Ignatius forty years previous.\(^ {36}\)

\(^{32}\) Herm. Vis. 2:4.1-3.


\(^{34}\) Brent, “The Enigma of Ignatius of Antioch,” 437.


The monarchical episcopate established a division of power and authority within the Church. The terms *hegoumenos, presbuteros*, and *episkopos* could be used to refer to either presbyters or bishops in the earliest years of the Church, but by the mid-second century a consolidated hierarchy appears to have been established first in Antioch and the eastern regions of the empire and finally in Rome and the west. Yet, as the Church evolved and positions within the Church became more stratified, the terms and titles used to describe these offices were solidified and no longer interchangeable. These authors, through describing their Church’s hierarchy and Church government at the time, reveal on what grounds they drew their authority. The doctrine of apostolic succession became irrevocably connected with the monarchical episcopate. As successors to the apostles, the leaders within the monepiscopate were uniquely capable of preserving the knowledge and traditions of the Church.

The monarchical episcopal structure became so essential that a group without one was not a Church. The Church was able to define and implement its definition of orthodoxy with the authority given by a tangible universal system of government. Bishops became the unifying force of the Church, and ultimately, the idea was embraced that only through compliance with the bishop could unity be maintained. Christianity never lacked influential personalities, but orthodoxy did not need charisma; it needed an undivided mind.

The Christian Church had the strong foundation of lineage, tradition and scriptural support. Yet an enforceable Christian orthodoxy was not possible prior to the establishment of the monarchical episcopate, because there was no network of authority capable of enforcing a common faith. Before a system was in place that defined the distribution of power, individual

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37 Ign. Pol. 6. 1.
Churches operated as separate entities. Individual leaders and scholars rejected heretical groups, but there could be no formal denunciation from a universal Church.

The perceived need for an orthodox doctrine derived from the desire for unity in the face of a growing diversity of teaching.\(^{38}\) Ignatius of Antioch is the first known to use the term “catholic” in describing Christian believers. The term \(\text{ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία}\) was meant to illustrate a widespread communion, specially referring to the connection to the bishop through the Eucharist.\(^{39}\) The believers’ faith was a unifying force, but their perception of autonomy placed them at odds with other religious organizations. Roman religious tradition gave the participant freedom, whereas Christians were expected to adhere to a delineated practice.

Along with the internal dynamic of apostolic succession, scripture and tradition, external factors that encouraged Church leaders to define the orthodox faith included Christianity’s split with Judaism and the influence of ancient philosophy. One of the earliest struggles in an attempt to maintain a unified faith was clashes with orthodox Jewish converts. Early Churches with large Jewish-Christian populations experienced an authority crisis, because Jewish converts had close ties to the synagogue and Jewish teachers. This sparked division and conflict with the Gentiles, or members adhering to Pauline authority.\(^{40}\)

As for Greek philosophy, some of the most influential Church leaders of the first two centuries were conversant with philosophical literature. Tertullian used such knowledge to better attack pagans. Others, such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, believed that ancient philosophy added to the understanding of Christian values and doctrines. Athenagoras

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\(^{38}\) In his letter to Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius stresses the importance of unity above all else. \textit{Pol.} 1:2.  
\(^{39}\) Ign. \textit{Smyrn.} 8.  
used this view as a defense for Christianity in the late second century, when petitioning the
emperor Marcus Aurelius. He believed a Christian association with ancient philosophy would
improve the emperor’s view of Christianity.\(^{41}\)

In the mid-third century, Origen claimed that Christians were convinced and dedicated,
as compared to pagans who failed to maintain and protect their traditional gods.\(^{42}\) Christians
had always been belittled for their lack of intellectual pursuits, a quest held in high esteem
throughout the empire. The empire was under almost constant attack during the third century,
and Roman cities were declining. Roman religion was tied very closely with regional centers,
and the decline of a prominent city would ultimately lead to the decline of the cults practiced
there.\(^{43}\) This led Origen to claim that Christianity would ultimately unite with the empire. He
believed Christianity could be a cure for Rome’s barbarian cultures.\(^{44}\) Origen was the
incarnation of Celsus’ greatest fear that Christianity could eradicate traditional Roman culture.
Men such as Clement and Origen brought a new intellectual rigor to the defense to Christianity,
and whether they used their knowledge to attack pagans, Jews and Gnostics or to encourage
Christian unity, their use of philosophy demonstrated that education was essential. Christian
apologetics thus sought to defend orthodox positions with new sources.

The competition for control over sources of revelation also encouraged the
establishment of orthodoxy. Gnostic sects stressed an oral tradition of interpretation over
interpretation of the written word. Thus while orthodox Christian leaders claimed the right of
interpretation through apostolic succession and preservation of the true message, Gnostics

\(^{42}\) Origen, *Cels.* III. 29-30.
\(^{43}\) J.B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine*, Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1995, 173.
\(^{44}\) Origen, *Cels.* III. 29-30.
countered that they were privy to a fuller tradition of Christian truth with the inclusion of their secret knowledge.\(^{45}\) It was imperative that the Church claimed exclusive rights to interpretation, even more so than the scriptures themselves. It was their only defense against theosophical exegesis by gnostic sects.\(^ {46}\) Yet one of the most powerful tools of heretical leaders was the lack of a New Testament canon. In the second century, the formation of a New Testament canon was read alongside Old Testament scriptures, but gnostic leaders were still able to lead some astray with their secret messages, a Christian *gnosis* only revealed to them.\(^ {47}\) However, the distinctive Christian liturgy and the tradition of Christian teachings within apostolic Churches strengthened the claim of bishops to correct interpretation.

\(^{45}\) Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, 92-93.

\(^{46}\) Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 119.

\(^{47}\) Einar Thomassen’s article concerning the development of orthodoxy and the most prominent challenges from gnostic sects details the charismatic influence of early gnostic leaders and the most convincing points of their theology. Einar Thomassen, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 3, (July 2004) 244.
CHAPTER 3
THE CHURCH BEFORE DECIUS

Due to the troubles of the empire in the third century Roman emperors became more concerned with a collective religious identity, and Christians, who were on the extreme end of nonconformity with Roman religious traditions, were targeted. Christianity was viewed as dangerously disloyal to the empire, because it was a missionary religion. Thus, it had the potential to encompass a large number of citizens. Christianity’s predecessor, Judaism, was containable, because it only included a small number of people. The Historia Augusta provides evidence of the treatment of Christians prior to the persecution of Decius. The verdict is similar to what Athenagoras argued in his letter to Marcus Aurelius, merely claiming the name of Christianity was punishable by death; although, many emperors did not actively enforce this standard. For example, Septimius Severus attempted to prevent the conversion to Christianity, rather than acutely target the existing Church.

Christians were not ignorant of the Roman perception of the Church. Yet, in the decades before the Decian persecution, many Christians rejected the practice of separation to protect against contamination from without. Callistus, bishop of Rome from 217-223, reinterpreted popular Christian parables and scriptures to teach that the Church was meant to be full of both devote adherents and those who were not particularly orthodox. God would be the judge in

50 Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians, 2.
51 H.A. Severus 17, 1.
52 Callistus taught that the parable of the wheat and the tares was a portrait of the Church not a picture of the world.
the end; it was not man’s place to make a distinction on earth. Yet, distinctiveness and separation had been imperative since the foundation of Christianity. Believers were meant to be unified with one another, not the whole world. Callistus was more influenced by a new social class of converts and the rise in membership than by the desire to remain distinct. With this new class involvement in the Church, civil influences began permeating the Church mind. Tertullian provides evidence of these new converts, particularly in his treatises addressing problems that only the elite within society would encounter.

Tertullian and Origen, both philosophically trained, took separate paths in their understanding of the limitations of the Church. Tertullian used his training to better defend the doctrines and practices of the Church against any pagan attack; while, Origen asserted he had the freedom to speculate on anything that did not contradict the established beliefs of the Church. Eusebius later defended his hero when Basil of Caesarea criticized Origen for being orthodox in practice but not at heart. The orthodoxy that Origen defended was the purity necessary for the success of the Church. He followed in the path of Clement of Alexandria who regretfully noted that many in his congregation would only attempt separation from pagan practices and pleasures on Sundays. The most detrimental indifference was that of the clergy. Church positions now afforded their holder a new measure of influence and power, and the concerns of the past, particularly sanctification and purity, mattered less in the context of third century possibilities.

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53 Callistus used Rom. 14:4 as proof for this assertion. Hippolytus’ Refutation of all Heresies addresses Callistus’ dispensations to encourage growth against the traditional measures to protect Christian customs.
54 Rives, Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage, 271.
55 Tertullian, On the Adornment of Women.
56 Chadwick, The Church in Ancient Society, 144.
57 Eusebius of Caesarea, Defense of Origen.
58 Origen,Paidagogos 3. 2. 80-82.
The penitential system that developed was in response to the growing laxity of many professing Christians. The Christian notion of performing penance to receive pardon and be reunited to the body of believers existed before the death of Christ. New Testament sources are full of calls to continual repentance and methods of assisting others in their supplications for forgiveness.\textsuperscript{59} Even with a defined liturgy and hierarchy, bishops led their congregations based on individual interpretations of scripture and tradition. The Catholic Church as an institution outlined the acceptable means of \textit{exomologesis}, making it a very public process.\textsuperscript{60} When house-Churches shared frequent correspondence and the governing concern was the return of Christ, believers insisted on steadfast purity. The penitential system of the third century and beyond was best described by Tertullian in his treatise \textit{De Paenitentia}. Baptism was meant to seal the believer to the fellowship of God, and the newly cleansed was not to sin again.\textsuperscript{61} However, in His grace, God provided a way for the truly penitent to receive forgiveness for a sin after baptism. This penitential system restricted believers to one chance after baptism. Many believers delayed baptism out of fear of sinning again with no option of pardon. Because this second chance was so precious, a long, public \textit{exomologesis} was deemed an appropriate process.\textsuperscript{62} The penitential system, upheld in orthodoxy and supported in scriptural interpretations both in the Old and New Testament, was most radically challenged after

\textsuperscript{59} Matt. 18:15-18; James 5: 15, 19-20. In his discussion of the early penitential system within the Churches, Joseph M. Bryant also includes which sins could not be forgiven by apostles.

\textsuperscript{60} Joseph M. Bryant, “The Sect-Church Dynamic and Christian Expansion in the Roman Empire,” \textit{The British Journal of Sociology} 44, No. 2 (June 1993), 310.

\textsuperscript{61} This belief was also outlined in \textit{The Shepherd of Hermas}. Some scholars believe that Tertullian had access to an early copy of this text, but there are numerous possibilities for the dating of this text. The Muratorian Canon, produced c. second half of the second century, does not include the \textit{Shepherd} in their list of Scriptures, yet Origen, possibly in an attempt to give the text credence, maintained that the work was written in the sub-apostolic era. Bart D. Ehrman, \textit{The Apostolic Fathers V. II}, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003, 165-169; \textit{Shepherd, Commandment}, IV. 3.

\textsuperscript{62} Tertullian, \textit{De Paenitentia}, 7-9.
persecution in the re-admittance of the lapsed by forgiving the unpardonable sins, the sins unto death. These sins were apostasy, murder and fornication. One of the more scandalous examples, before persecution, of a bishop pardoning one of these sins was Callistus’ leniency concerning concubinage and marriage vows. The defense for his actions was the trouble elite Christian women faced when attempting to find an acceptable marriage within the Church.

In his *Homilies on Jeremiah*, Origen claimed that although the Church had grown considerably, few would actually attain the divine blessedness upon Christ’s return. The struggle to either abandon or protect the virtuous principles of the Church led to several schisms in the following century.

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64 Joseph M. Bryant, “The Sect-Church Dynamic and Christian Expansion in the Roman Empire,” 316-17.
CHAPTER 4

CYPRIAN

Punic Carthage was destroyed in 146 B.C., and the site was not re-inhabited until 29 B.C., colonized by Augustus. Several lingering, indigenous religious traditions could be found in Carthage, but Roman religious practice dominated the city. Carthaginian indigenous culture was composed of Libyan, Punic and Greek influences. Roman traditions were not forced on the new inhabitants of Carthage, as they were mostly Roman immigrants. At the beginning of the second century Carthage was one of the wealthiest cities in the empire, and it was also the regular seat of the Roman governor of North Africa. Carthage benefitted greatly from its natural position and became the chief port of Northern Africa. The agricultural production of the region was greatly enhanced by this established trade.\(^{65}\)

Thacius Caecilius Cyprianus was born c. 200 A.D in Roman Carthage. His parents were wealthy and provided him with a good education with the hope that he would become a rhetorician. His orator’s training is evident in his writing style and the challenging nature of his letters.\(^{66}\) Cyprian converted when he was as a mature adult, most frequently dated 245, while a student of the presbyter Donatus. Cyprian recounts the story of his conversion in a letter to Donatus emphasizing the heavy influence of the Holy Spirit. In this very personal story, Cyprian’s perception of the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion and, more controversially, the role of baptism in the life of a new convert is clearly explained.\(^{67}\) He believed that it was

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\(^{65}\) Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage*, 27.

\(^{66}\) Cyprian, *Ep. 66*. 5. 1-2, Cyprian had received a letter from Puppianus, also known as Florentius, claiming Cyprian was one of the primary causes for the lapse of so many Carthaginian Christians. Cyprian’s retort embodied the entire spiritual defense necessary for his position and was laced with venomous comparisons enough to terminate any further correspondence.

\(^{67}\) Cyprian, *Ad Donatum* 3.
baptism that tied the believer to the catholic congregation. In accordance with the belief of Tertullian, baptism was the shedding of one’s old life and a dedication ceremony to the new man one would become. Cyprian continued to possess this belief of the defining role of baptism in conversion even in the midst of the Novatianist schism and baptismal controversy in 255.

He was still considered a new convert when he was made bishop of Carthage in 248-9.68 One of the few sources for Cyprian’s early life is his biography penned by a loyal presbyter, Pontius. Pontius wrote, “with premature swiftness of piety he almost began to be perfect before he had learned the way to be perfect.” Pontius asserted that although Cyprian was a recent convert, his faith resembled that of one much longer separated from heathenism.69 He explained that Cyprian was able to be a good bishop, despite his Christian youthfulness, because he imitated worthy models. For the Christian Church, legitimacy of a leader was supported by the legacy of the Church. The superiority of charismatic authority (immediate inspiration) was rejected in favor of an institutional authority (institutional memory), because the Church as an institution validated its leaders. It was to an established institution that Cyprian was elected, and it was the history and precedent set within this institution that he had to emulate.

His education and good family standing were important factors in his election to the bishopric in Carthage. Those who opposed Cyprian’s appointment as deacon and then bishop were mostly members of the existing clergy in Carthage. His detractors were loudest in the midst of persecution when Cyprian fled to avoid bringing further attention to his

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68 Rives, Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage, 289.
69 Pontius, Life and Passion of St. Cyprian, 3.
congregation.⁷⁰ These were the same men who in early summer of 251, led by Felicissimus, created a separate congregation in Carthage.⁷¹

Cyprian’s critics did not share Pontius’ view that he possessed the spiritual maturity to lead, although he had the support of the people. Lay support became a very important rallying point for Cyprian in the midst of the persecution. To stabilize and legitimize his deeply contested ascension, Cyprian continued to increase his popularity with the laity through charitable projects. Caring for the poor was one of the primary duties of a bishop, but Cyprian went beyond this duty to create for himself a notable reputation.⁷² Before the persecution, he was also known for his strict adherence to the penitential system recognized by orthodox Churches. The Church at Carthage had the reputation as being one of the strictest centers in Christendom.⁷³

One of the defining factors of Cyprian’s tenure was his understanding of the offices within the Church. Bishops were appointed by God, whereas presbyters, deacons and the lower officials were appointed by the bishop and occasionally lay consensus.⁷⁴ Thus, those in positions beneath the bishop could be dismissed from their post or even excommunicated. Cyprian’s perception of the hierarchy was for the purpose of functionality. The monepsicopate was a mechanism that only worked when each member fulfilled his duties correctly. The relationship between a bishop and his presbyters was significantly different than the relationship between bishops or the relationship of fellow presbyters one to another. Cyprian’s definition of these

⁷⁰ Allen Brent writes that Cyprian equated all those inciting conflict within the Church to be in league with the anit-Christ. Brent states that Cyprian saw the Decian persecution and following schisms as confirmation of his eschatological beliefs. Allen Brent, Cyprian and Roman Carthage, 112.
⁷¹ Cyprian, Ep. 43. 1. 2. – 2. 1.
⁷² Pontius, Life 2.
⁷³ The puritanical ideals of Tertullian helped further this belief. Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 346-351.
⁷⁴ Cyprian, Ep. 3. 1.1.
relationships greatly affected his ecclesiastical duties. For example, Cyprian instructed the presbyters in Rome in the midst of the persecution, while they were without a bishop. Yet, after the persecution when addressing his fellow bishop, Stephen, Cyprian merely gave his counsel on the matter. And when his advice was rejected, Cyprian continued in his independent duties. Apart from the manner in which he applied and understood his authority, Cyprian conceived of a very specific relationship between the laity and the hierarchy. Tertullian had supported much more lay involvement, and while Cyprian valued the participation of the laity; they had no true authority within the Church.

Pre-persecution Cyprian defined his authority in four key bases of power: apostolic succession, the hierarchical structure of the monarchical episcopate, the newly defined orthodoxy, including the penitential system and the traditional interpretations of the scriptures, both Old and New. Cyprian illustrated his belief in apostolic succession in a letter to a fellow bishop concerning a rebellious deacon. Cyprian asserts that the deacon is jointly rebelling against God and his bishop, as it was God who made him bishop. Thus to Cyprian, the bishop assumes all his authority from his position within this hierarchy. Before the persecution Cyprian embodied the puritanical practice renowned in Carthage. In his Testimonies, Cyprian adopted the strict stance of no opportunity for forgiveness within the Church for those who sinned against God. His wording is specific, because he would not go as far to conclude that forgiveness could not be given by God in judgment. All of Cyprian’s writings whether personal

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75 Cyprian, Ep. 2.
76 Cyprian, Ep. 68. 3, 72.
77 Cyprian, Ep. 3. 3. 1.
78 Cyprian, Testimonies 3.28.
correspondence or ecclesiastical treatise were filled with scriptural references. 79 He was confident, as were those in opposing positions, that his actions were justified and supported by the revealed word.

After the persecution, when faced with the loss of thousands of lapsed Christians, Cyprian re-evaluated not only his duty as a bishop, but also the role of the Church on earth. The idea of re-admitting thousands of people who had apostatized, including those who had even denounced Christ and physically sacrificed, redefined the purpose of the Christian Church and her relationship with God. The purity of the Church was abrogated. If unwilling to condemn the souls of the lapsi, then the purity of the Church would no longer be reflected in each member.

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79 Concerning the duty of submissive clergy, Ep. 3. 1. 1.; concerning the duty of confessors, Ep. 6. 1. 2., 12. 1. 3; concerning repentance, De Lapsis 20-21; concerning obedience to the bishop, De Lapsis 15-16, Ep. 33.
CHAPTER 5

DECIAN PERSECUTION

The Roman Empire had changed drastically in the first several centuries of the early Church. Roman emperors were no longer prominent members of urban Rome, capable of tracing their family lineage centuries into the past; many were now usurping generals from far-flung regions of the empire. Trajan Decius was born in the Roman province of Illyricum. He had had a successful career as a senator and served as the urban prefect of Rome under Emperor Philip. Philip trusted Decius owing to his reassurance concerning an usurper, Marinus. Decius had comforted Philip by claiming that Marinus was incapable of ruling and that soon the same soldiers that declared him emperor would kill him. 80 After Decius’ prediction came to fruition, Philip requested he go to Moesia to punish the revolting legion. Decius initially attempted to refuse, but ultimately was convinced by the emperor to travel to the Balkans to restore loyalty. Upon his arrival, he was immediately hailed as emperor. When he did not immediately accept, he was forcibly persuaded. Decius then wrote to the emperor begging him to understand the situation. As emperor, with multiple military threats and a collapsing economy, Philip did not understand. Once Decius realized that Philip considered him an usurper and was marching with an army against him, he accepted the role. There are conflicting reports concerning the death of Philip. In the Christian sources, Philip is portrayed as being sympathetic to the Church, and Decius, hating the Christians, targeted him for this reason. 81 According to Zosimus, writing in the sixth century, Philip and his son were both killed at the battle of Verona. Aurelius Victor states that Philip was killed at the praetorian camp in Rome once the news of the loss in Verona

reached the city. Ultimately the outcome is the same. Philip was killed, and the once hesitant Decius became emperor.

Persecution began either in the last months of 249 or the first weeks of 250. The main sources are forty-four libelli issued in the midst of persecution, the letters of St. Cyprian, quotations of Dionysius preserved by Eusebius and the Passio Pionii. These different sources describe the persecution in separate areas, so a fuller picture can be drawn. Cyprian’s letters and treatises describes what occurred in Carthage, Rome and other areas where Churches lost prominent members of their clergy. Eusebius records the first-hand accounts of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, who described persecution, including his arrest and escape. The accuracy of the Passio Pionii has been questioned, but a majority of scholars have dated it to the time of the Decian persecution, therefore preserving a martyrdom in Smyrna. While all of these sources describe the effects of persecution and perceived intents, none preserved Decius’ decree verbatim.

However, what is historically known is that Decius issued an edictum within the first several months of his reign. An edictum differed from a mandata, in which his command would have been sent solely to government officials. His edictum was issued directly to the people; the only group who may have been excluded was the Jews. This was the first time that the Roman emperor had issued an edict of persecution. His edict initiated the first empire-wide

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persecution of Christians. To 250, persecutions involving the Church had been local affairs motivated by local circumstances.\textsuperscript{85}

The questions of legitimacy and retention of power plagued Decius. He was inspired by the past virtues and military prowess of Rome. He sought to recreate this version of the empire through establishing a universal religious identity. The imperial cult and the symbolism that surrounded it had been one of the few connections between the numerous peoples of the empire and their emperor. There was nominal precedent for Decius’ demand for individual proof of involvement, but from the remaining evidence, it is not clear that he was celebrating or commemorating any special event. Yet the manner in which he issued this edict went against the traditional method of Roman worship. This command of worship from the emperor went against the reality of local leaders controlling religious practice. The innovative aspect about the Decian persecution was not that he issued an edict to the entire population, or that citizens were responsible for providing evidence for an act. Decius’ decree was unique in that there was no precedent for imperial supervision of compliance. This duty had been left to provincial governors and civil officials.\textsuperscript{86} By demanding proof of individual compliance, through the mechanism of certification, Decius went beyond any previously established precedent.

A modern debate, which is now less divided than it was in previous years, is whether Decius sought to exclusively target the Christian Church.\textsuperscript{87} Strong evidence for this position was the immediate arrest and execution of Bishop Fabian of Rome and Bishop Babylas of Antioch.

\textsuperscript{86} Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” 147-149.
\textsuperscript{87} The overwhelming majority of scholars agree that the persecution was not directly targeting the Christian Church, although Christians perceived it as a persecution. However, Paul Keresztes still maintains that the Christian sources are factual, and that Decius’ decree was specifically targeting Christians for persecution. Keresztes, “The Decian Libelli and Contemporary Literature,” \textit{Latmos} 43.3 (1975), pp. 761-81.
Yet Decius did not order the confiscation of Church property nor did he forbid Christian prisoners from worshipping together while incarcerated.\(^88\) Previously, historians believed that the edicts of Decius and his reasons for persecuting the Church had foreshadowed those of Valerian and Diocletian. Valerian targeted members of the Church hierarchy and forbade congregating, while Diocletian issued several edicts that progressively restricted Christian assemblies and culminated in the arrest of all clergymen.\(^89\) There is no evidence that Decius issued more than one edict qualifying the terms of sacrifice.\(^90\) If the *libelli* had not been instituted from the beginning, there would have been unnecessary confusion about who had already preformed the sacrifice. Christian bishops were well-known figures within society. A separate order demanding their arrest and trial would have been unnecessary. They were known in their community as influential men of the Church; they easily would have been the first targets. Also, there is no conclusive evidence that Decius was overtly hostile towards the Church.\(^91\) Eusebius and Lactantius list him among the persecutors of the Church, but their allegiance to the Church suggests bias.\(^92\) The appropriate emphasis for this edict would be the demand for all to sacrifice as a way to unify the empire. Other groups apart from the Church were also targeted. The Roman jurist, Ulpian, writing a few decades before the reign of Decius, described the religious offenses that were punishable by the state. Specifically, he established

\(^{88}\) Cyprian, *Ep. 5. 2. 1.*


\(^{90}\) Frend disagrees and rather believes that there were several stages in the Decian persecution. The arrest and execution of prominent Church leaders was phase one, following in the path of Maximin fifteen years previous. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 319. However, Clarke and Rives are in agreement that there was more probably only one decree from Decius. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of the Empire,” 142, f.n. 39.

\(^{91}\) Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” 140.

\(^{92}\) Lactantius, *De mort. Persecute.* 6.
the legal standing of Christians, astrologers and magicians. Based on what we know of the
government of Decius’ edictum, these were the three groups that suffered persecution in 250 C.E.

What did Decius intend? Scholars can do little more than speculate concerning the
outcome the Decius hoped to achieve. Appealing to the gods to save Rome from impending
invasion is reasonable, considering Decius faced a barbarian threat early in his reign. Also,

traditional urban cults had lost participants to the Church and other personal cult affiliations. In his admiration for the Rome of the past, Decius may have been trying to revert the people’s
focus make to the religious traditions of a more successful age. Truly, Decius did not reign long

enough to witness any long-term goal come to fruition.

From the surviving evidence it does not appear that Decius wanted to implement an
orthodox Roman religion. Rather, Decius sought to achieve a level of Roman religious
orthopraxy. His edict that compelled people to sacrifice would not have been an uncommon act
for most Romans. In fact, the act of sacrifice may have been the closest thing to a universal
element in the various religious organizations. But by commanding everyone within the empire
to sacrifice, Decius created a visible sign of religious allegiance and connection to Rome. The
cult of the Capitoline triad and the worship of the emperor’s nomen were uniting acts for

Roman citizens, but there was no obligatory rule that made an individual participate in these
venerations. Through Decius’ edictum all citizens were unified in a defined religion of the

empire, to sacrifice and obey the emperor. There was now an established rule by which to
judge all those who chose not to participate. Decius through orthopraxy sought to accomplish

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93 Rives, Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage, 253.
the same goal the Christian Church sought to achieve through orthodoxy, the preservation of unity.

At the onset of the Decian persecution, 249-250, the Church was defined by a strict penitential system and a strong network of leadership. Although the Church had endured and triumphed over numerous persecutions, the Decian persecution came at a time when the Church was vulnerable. The weakness of the Church was in its numbers. Positions within the clergy attracted those seeking influence, and many young people were swayed by the arguments of the Christian apologetics. Amidst the growing laxity of the Church, bishops had taken on secular duties unbecoming of their station. Cyprian chastised bishops who became merchants and begun traveling to foreign markets, charged interest on loans and possessed lands through executing wills. The specific condemnation concerning secular business was that bishops took on duties to increase their personal wealth, not to the benefit of the people.96

Before the persecution, Cyprian was a strong defender of the purity of the Church, but with the circumstances that the persecution created, this prominent Church leader once so adamant against Christian laxity was forced to grant concession after concession to maintain some semblance of Christian unity. Through his correspondence and treatises concerning the lapsi and baptismal controversy, Cyprian clearly outlined and demonstrated his understanding of the authority of a Christian bishop. The end result of his redefining and expanding the reach of a bishop’s authority was a clearer understanding of an organic episcopal unity and the ultimate re-admission of those who lapsed.

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96 Cyprian, *De Lapsis 6*. 
In 250, from a concealed position, Cyprian continued to advise and lead his congregation and subordinate clergy, while also corresponding with the remaining clergy in Rome. The Roman presbyters welcomed the advice and guidance of Cyprian, as their own bishop had been the first martyr of the persecution.\textsuperscript{97} Quickly, the dominating concern in both Rome and Carthage was the growing number of lapsed Christians seeking restoration to Church fellowship. The interim decision developed in several letters between the Roman clergy and Cyprian determined that all who lapsed were in a state of sin beyond what even a bishop could affect. They were dead in their sin and were to remain outside of the Church. Initially no distinction was made between the \textit{libellatici}, those who had purchased a false certificate of sacrifice, and the \textit{sacrificati}, those who had physically sacrificed by either eating the idolatrous meat or pouring a libation to the emperor and his unnamed gods.\textsuperscript{98} In the midst of persecution Cyprian and his supporters wished for a complete separation physically from the \textit{lapsi}, while continuing to spiritually intercede on their behalf if reconciliation was indeed possible. The \textit{lapsi} were to be fully enveloped in penance, recognizing the full weight of their sin.\textsuperscript{99} In a letter to Cyprian, the Roman clergy remarks that there is “nothing more fitting” than adhering to the severity of gospel discipline. They praise Cyprian for his strength in this matter and warn that those rejecting his severe action are threatening the safety of the Church.\textsuperscript{100} “It is not to cure, but . . . to kill,” if the \textit{lapsi} were to be ushered into communion before they were truly healed. Cyprian calls himself and the other priests physicians. He warns that only an unskilled physician would seal up a festering wound; the corrupted flesh must be cut out before the remainder of

\textsuperscript{97} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 30. 1.
\textsuperscript{98} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 30. 1.2.
\textsuperscript{99} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 30. 5.3.
\textsuperscript{100} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 30. 1.2.
the body can heal. These remarks characterize Cyprian’s cautioning that a decision should not be made until the Church was at peace. The Roman presbyters agree and assert that all Christians who remained steadfast, whether bishop or laity, should be unified in the final decision. This correspondence is dated at the end of the summer of 250, when persecution is known to have reached all areas of the empire.

Around the same time, clergy in Carthage loyal to Cyprian wrote concerning Felicissimus and several presbyters who were acting against the precedent set by Cyprian. In his return address, Cyprian commends his faithful clergy for excluding from fellowship those not following his decision. Easter of the following year, when Cyprian was eagerly anticipating returning to Carthage, several men made known their actions of forgiving penitent apostates based on their newly perceived authority as confessors. In his appeal for support, Cyprian writes to other African bishops and finds that many have succumbed to the pressure from the vast number of lapsi within their communities.

The Church in Rome was also troubled with a dissenting cleric. Novatian had been an influential presbyter in the Roman Church at the start of the persecution. He was also a noted theologian and a believer in the puritanical veracity of the orthodox penitential system. After the death of Decius, Rome elected Cornelius as the true successor to the martyred Fabian. Cornelius was recognized by neighboring bishops, including Cyprian, as the legitimate bishop of Rome. Novatian was appalled at the appointment of Cornelius. Novatian believed that Cornelius’s approach to the penitential service of the lapsi was too lax. He established himself

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101 Cyprian, De Lapsis 14.
102 Cyprian, Ep. 30. 3. 3, 5. 3.
104 Cyprian, Ep. 34. 2.
105 Cyprian, Ep. 43, 35, 27.3.
as a rival bishop in Rome to protect the purity of the Church against the contaminating forces of Cornelius. For the first several months Novatian campaigned that Cornelius’ election was invalid, because one of the bishops present had supposedly lapsed in the recent persecution. His argument quickly evolved to one of defending the orthodox ideals of the Catholic Church. The old practices did not fit with the new Church that emerged after the persecution. Cyprian described Novatian as plundering and pillaging the Church. No man can claim the love of God when inflicting so much pain on His people.

In De Lapsis, a treatise written in the last months of persecution and therefore late enough to also address issues concerning Novatian, Cyprian distinguishes between those apostates who demand re-admittance to the Church and those contrite lapsi who are faithfully fulfilling the penitential duties outlined in catholic orthodoxy. Cyprian opens the treatise with an address to the confessors who had brought glory to the Church through their steadfast declarations. He also briefly addresses the situation of the errant confessors who have been granting pardons based on their own authority. Rather diplomatically, Cyprian warns against the guilt that they are assuming through this unlawful action, and instead of rejecting the authority they are claiming, Cyprian attempts to illustrate the irresponsibility of their actions. Simply stated, these confessors are acting contrary to the gospel. Thus, the faithful need to separate themselves from both arrogant apostates who were neglecting the teachings of the

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106 Cyprian, Ep. 44.
107 Cyprian, Ep. 46. 2. 1.
108 Cyprian, Ep. 52. 1.3.
109 Cyprian, De Lapsis, 15.
Church and scripture and the errant confessors who were taking away the safety of many souls through their hasty actions.  

Cyprian laments their deception, but he is also concerned with the lack of episcopal involvement in their proposed pardoning. Confessors are pardoning the sins of the apostates before they have confessed, performed the necessary penance and before they have been touched by the priest. Thus, apostates are claiming forgiveness based on a word from a confessor. Without detailing the action, Cyprian declares that their forgiveness could not possibly have been completed with mere words. Not only are they lacking the actions that repentance requires, but they are also neglecting the role of the bishop in this process. Even without a definite plan for the remission of these sins, Cyprian is placing the bishops in the seat of power not only to provide a solution but also to be an integral part whatever course of action is implemented. These confessors were not simply mistaken in their perception of their own authority, but they were also denying the authority of their bishop. They were not providing or protecting peace but inciting war, for “he is not joined to the Church who is separated from the Gospel.”  

In this instance Cyprian is deriving his authority from the scriptures and the bishop’s role as Christ’s priests on earth. Throughout the entire text of De Lapsis, Cyprian refers to himself and his fellow bishops as priests. The function of a priest is to intercede. At this point in the development of how to address the internal schism produced by the lapsi, the bishops have been instructed to continually intercede, although their petitions are not assured. Priests were to hear the confession of all sins, and in the efforts of the lapsed to seek pardon from the words of a confessor, the divinely appointed leaders were being disrespected.

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110 Cyprian, De Lapsis, 34.
111 Cyprian, De Lapsis, 15-16.
 Those rashly giving remission of sins were presuming the Lord’s power. Cyprian believed men were promising pardon before first receiving divine consent. The words of the martyrs and confessors will be of some avail on the Day of Judgment but not before.\textsuperscript{112} At the time when Cyprian wrote \textit{De Lapsis}, he considered the \textit{lapsi} to be \textit{mortuos}. They had committed one of the sins unto death and were thus dead, fully separated from the Church, for God is the God of the living not the dead.\textsuperscript{113} Bishops were to hear the penitent’s confession upon their deathbed, but God would be the ultimate judge. No hope apart from the love and forgiveness of God was given. The \textit{lapsi} could not be immediately rejoined to their congregations, because their sin would contaminate the remaining faithful within their Churches. This fear was the primary reason for the schism enacted by Novatian in the summer of 251.\textsuperscript{114} When \textit{De Lapsis} was written, the \textit{lapsi} had another way to achieve pardon. Most bluntly, Cyprian did not believe that the \textit{lapsi} needed another opportunity apart from recommitting themselves to the Church through confession or martyrdom. He even instructed his clergy to encourage those demanding re-admittance to assert that rigor in profession where they first had failed.\textsuperscript{115} However, once the persecution ended the \textit{lapsi} were no longer afforded such an opportunity.

Cyprian felt a genuine obligation to these people to accurately judge their situation while preserving the Church as a whole. Cyprian believed he acted out of necessity. There are three clear bases of authority from which Cyprian was operating. The first is his divinely appointed responsibility as the leader of the Church. He was Christ’s priest, meant to intercede

\begin{footnotes}
\item[113] Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 33. 1. 2.
\item[114] Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 44. 1.1.
\item[115] Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 55. 4. 2.
\end{footnotes}
for the fallen and petition for their re-admittance. He was their shepherd, and as such he was unwilling to leave them vulnerable. He was the helmsman who directed the prosperity of the Church, and the Church desperately needed direction as numerous imposters attempted to establish themselves in opposition. Cyprian’s authority as the institutional head provided him a platform to be heard and respected. He spoke not only as himself but also as the latest representative of a divinely ordained line of succession. Secondly, Cyprian utilized the scriptures to support his conclusions, both in his strict view expressed in De Lapsis and in the decision made later by the African Council in 251. Although his decisions concerning the lapsed changed, he always quoted the scriptures in defense of his actions.

Lastly, and most importantly for Cyprian’s ecclesiology, was the authority derived from episcopal consensus. When the long-awaited decision was made concerning the lapsed controversy, it was made in episcopal agreement. Cyprian’s declaration “ecclesia super episcopos constituatur” left no doubt concerning who would resolve this controversy and on whose word the lapsed were to depend.116 The bishops were the only ones invested with the authority to administer and regulate penitential discipline. Confessors did not have the authority to challenge the bishop’s decision or to create a separate avenue to repentance. If the bishops embodied the unity of the Church, then one could not be unified to the spiritual body without mediation of the bishop. Episcopocentric unity was not a new concept, but the aftermath of the persecution illuminated the necessity of its enforcement.

Decius died in June of the following year, in a campaign against the Goths. For the next two years under the reign of Hostillian, then Gallus and his son, the Church focused on survival.

116 Cyprian, Ep. 33. 1. 1.
The most immediate concerns were strengthening the Churches in defense of another persecution and guarding against new challenges to episcopal authority. These concerns were not exclusive of one another, and Cyprian recognized both as equally dangerous. The Novatianist schism introduced a new ecclesiastical controversy. The church that Novatian and his followers established maintained the orthodox views the Catholic Church held before persecution. They refused to admit any lapsi into fellowship regardless of penance served, yet they continued to practice the same sacraments and liturgical rituals as the Catholic Church. Controversy arose from these actions. Since Novatian and his presbyters were deemed heretical teachers, the Novatianist had neither the authority nor the ability to confer the gifts of the Spirit through baptism or any other sacrament. Cyprian refused to accept the baptism of repentant Novatianists as valid. He questioned, if separate from the True Church, how could they bestow the gifts of the Spirit contained within the Church?117

Bishops from across North Africa were summoned to meet in the spring of 251 after celebrating Easter with their own congregations. Cyprian, as the senior bishop of the region, sent out the call.118 The foremost issue to address was the pardoning of the apostates. Remorseful apostates had been performing penance with only the expectation of an in exitu absolution. For the past two years the consensus amongst the bishops had been that at the close of persecution all of the faithful would agree upon the treatment of the lapsi. When the time came, all were in attendance, but only the bishops debated. Cyprian describes their decision as a “healthy compromise.”119 In truth, Cyprian and his fellow African bishops did

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117 Cyprian, De Unitate 6.  
118 Cyprian, Ep. 56. 3.  
119 Cyprian, Ep. 55. 6. 1.
represent the moderate camp. Novatian had already secured a notable following in Rome, and his envoys were seeking recognition from other sees. He represented the strictest sect of Christianity, allowing for no reconciliation. At the Roman council the same year, Cornelius led the decision to excommunicate Novatian, now labeled the brother-hater for his heartlessness.\(^\text{120}\)

At this council, Cyprian’s language concerning the *lapsi* changes. He refers to them as unconscious or half-dead, *semianimus*, meaning they are capable of being revived.\(^\text{121}\) The *libellatici*, after individual examination, are to be restored to full fellowship. The *sacrificati* are only to be restored *in exitu*, directly before death. In the summer of 251, Cyprian still believed that idolatry and apostasy are sins that only God can forgive, and yet he made concessions to allow a large portion of the *lapsi* back into the Church. Cyprian recognized the importance of his decision. As the *sacerdotii sublime fastigium*, in accordance with Catholic orthodoxy, Cyprian’s decision would be upheld and imitated by his successors.\(^\text{122}\)

The council in 251 also addressed the usurping presbyter Felicissimus and his loyal supporters. They were officially excommunicated from the Carthaginian congregations, and letters were sent to the surrounding Churches to ensure the same exclusion. There was also the matter of lapsed leaders still leading Churches. In accordance with Cyprian’s ecclesiology, these *lapsi* would have provided the most dangerous threat. One contaminated individual could pollute the rest, but a fallen leader no longer possessed the necessary gifts of the Spirit to fulfill the duties of his position. Cyprian issued the first ruling against lapsed clerics at his council in

\(^{120}\) *Cyprian, Ep.* 55. 24. 1-4.

\(^{121}\) *Cyprian, Ep.* 55. 16-17.

\(^{122}\) *Cyprian, Ep.* 55. 8. 2.
251. Leaders, either sacrificati or libellatici, should have been immediately removed from their posts, without the opportunity to serve within the Church again. In his epistle to Antonianus, an African bishop unable to attend the council meeting in 251, Cyprian defends his changed position concerning the apostates. Cyprian’s interim decision was made for the good of the lapsed. Cyprian believed they had a better option than immediate entry into the Church. In the midst of persecution, they were still locked in battle, and as bishops, Cyprian and his brethren were meant to encourage their fight. Consideration was made to those penitent apostates on their deathbed in the hope that a bishop’s pardon might encourage God’s mercy. 123 Cyprian’s intent had always been for these measures to be temporary. Cyprian had repeatedly been praised for his dutiful protection of the strictness of gospel discipline, yet he recognized the need to shelter the lapsi currently outside of the grace and security of the Church. Truly these sins are for God alone to judge, but now upon His return, God will find these souls safety inside the Church. If they were to remain unsheltered, Cyprian argues, their only option would be to seek fellowship with heretics or convert to paganism. 124 He believes he is now able to offer hope without disregarding gospel discipline. Individual cases were to be reviewed with each special circumstance discussed. The council believed the decision was necessary because of the fragility of the Church and the current state of the empire. Cyprian was happy to include in his letter to Antonianus that the Roman council was in full agreement and reached the same conclusions. He also sent along his

123 Cyprian, Ep. 55. 5.
124 Cyprian, Ep. 55. 29. 2.
recommendation of Cornelius in an attempt to dispel any concerns Antonianus held concerning the new Roman bishop.¹²⁵

Throughout the next year Cyprian continued to embrace and teach the compromised stance concerning the *lapsi*. He was repeatedly contacted concerning penitential cases, and in the spring of 252, at the next convened council of North Africa, a ruling was passed concerning the independent authority of each bishop within their region. The council established that each bishop would be the primary authority to rule in penitential cases without interference from surrounding bishops.¹²⁶ This act supports Cyprian’s understanding of the monarchical episcopate. The authority of the bishop was dependent upon this hierarchy, and for each bishop to be the sovereign authority within his community, the larger sees being responsible for entire regions within the empire, there had to be an understanding of both preeminent and yet somehow equal authority. Also, in 252 several rebellions were challenging the authority of the Catholic Church. Novatian had been active for several years, and his influence had now spread beyond the Christian communities in Rome. Felicissimus, although excommunicated from his Carthaginian home Church, was spreading discontent throughout North Africa, and Privatus was still advocating for recognition. Privatus was a known heretical bishop in Numidia. Donatus and Fabian, Cyprian’s and Cornelius’ predecessors respectively, had previously excommunicated him from fellowship. At the Carthaginian council in 252 he presented himself in favor of the laxist view in the lapsed controversy. He was unceremoniously rejected, and Cyprian warned of any further contact with his negative influence. Privatus then established Fortunatus as a rival bishop in Carthage. Several lapsed bishops from the Numidian countryside

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supported him. The council also rejected these former Numidian bishops and their claim to episcopal authority and excommunicated them from further fellowship. 127 Yet, for a time, this laxist community succeeded in Carthage. Cyprian lamented their negative influence in convincing many lapsi, faithfully fulfilling penance, to join their fellowship instead. 128

Councils in the early Church were an integral part of disseminating information. After each meeting notices were sent to all the Churches in the empire to maintain harmonious doctrine. Independent episcopal power was manageable due to constant communication. In the primitive Church it was not uncommon for councils to be called to discuss issues concerning penitential discipline. 129 During his tenure as bishop, Cyprian presided over councils that ruled on cases from adulterers to rebaptism to more local circumstances of clerical abuse. 130 The persecution had interrupted the process of frequent episcopal meetings rather than initiated it.

In either late 252 or early 253, Cyprian was written by several presbyters in the town of Capsa concerning five apostates who had faithfully been fulfilling their penance for three years. This epistle was written after the council in 252 made the decision to consider each case individually. They explain their special circumstances in which they lapsed, to which Cyprian replies that he believes God will be merciful to them. 131 Although Cyprian’s language concerning the lapsi and his perception of their relationship to the Church has changed, he still believes God will be the final judge. His duty as their shepherd and overseer is to keep them within the bounds of grace only the catholic Church can offer. However, he cannot assure their eternal judgment, but he accepts the risk by possibly condemning himself. In an indignant letter

127 Cyprian, Ep. 59. 10.1.
128 Cyprian, Ep. 43. 6. 1.
129 Clarke, Letters V. III, 18.
130 Cyprian, Ep. 55. 21. 1., 70. 1. 2., 1. 2. 1.
131 Cyprian, Ep. 56. 2. 1.
to Cornelius concerning the schismatic leaders, Cyprian accepts responsibility for extreme offenses he pardons, and he confesses that his leniency extends even to heinous sins in order to restore a lost member.\textsuperscript{132} He explains his actions to emphasize how wayward all the schismatics truly are. Church leaders had so significantly lowered their standards for readmittance, yet some were still seeking alternate avenues.\textsuperscript{133} Cyprian views the sins of these heretics as committed more against himself and the other bishops rather than against God and the Church. For in his understanding, Cyprian is the Church. No man can claim God as his Father if he rejects the Church, and her bishop, as his mother.\textsuperscript{134} For the unity of the Church resides in the bishops, and thus no outside contender can compete for authority within the Church.

At the North African council of 253, the atmosphere in the empire had again turned hostile. Cyprian and his fellow bishops feared a resurgence of persecution. In lieu of this new environment, Cyprian advocated for a new policy concerning the penitent apostates. The truly contrite \textit{lapsi}, whether \textit{libellatici} or \textit{sacrificati}, who had been faithfully performing the very public and shaming penance outlined in pre-persecution orthodoxy were to be immediately readmitted. Cyprian thus determined that as a good shepherd he had to protect all within the community. His terminology concerning the \textit{lapsi} again changed. Now it appears that he considers them a part of the Christian community within Carthage, whereas in previous epistles, he stressed the necessity of their separation from the faithful. Cyprian states that those who have completed their penance should not be denied their reward.\textsuperscript{135} Yet previously, the duration of penance had not been established. In 253, plague and a threatened persecution

\textsuperscript{132} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 59. 16. 3.  \\
\textsuperscript{133} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 59. 16. 2.  \\
\textsuperscript{134} Cyprian, \textit{De Unitate} 6.  \\
\textsuperscript{135} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 57. 2.
had Church leaders worried. Again the circumstances had changed, and Cyprian feared for the possible threats to those still not rejoined to the Church.

In the seven years between the persecution of Decius and the persecution of Valerian, in which Cyprian was martyred, he conclusively affirmed that bishops had the ability to pardon apostasy on earth. A bishop had the authority and the responsibility to reconcile a penitent believer to fellowship with the Church catholic, but on the Day of Judgment the reception of a martyr would wholly differ from the reception of a penitent apostate.\(^\text{136}\) Even in the midst of persecution, Cyprian theorized that the lapsed could be forgiven, if only by Christ on the Day of Judgment. Only those lapsed who achieved martyrdom or were willing to confess Christ in a second trial could be assured of their forgiveness. Apart from baptism there was no act on behalf of the offender or word from a bishop that could cancel the sin of apostasy.\(^\text{137}\) Thus the efficacy of the Catholic Church’s reconciliation was indeed limited. The true effectiveness of the Church’s reconciliation was seen in their earthly protection of the penitent. Instead of remaining outside of the Church, a contrite apostate was able to receive shelter and encouragement from a loving congregation.\(^\text{138}\) The protection of the Church had become a man’s task rather than the Holy Spirit’s duty. The Church is described in juristic and political terms; each region divided and protected by a bishop.

The baptismal controversy threatened the amicable relationship between Christian bishops. In 256, the North African council determined that the only valid baptism was one administered within the Church. Cyprian writes a letter to Stephen, now bishop of Rome, to

\(^{136}\) Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 55. 20. 3.
\(^{137}\) Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 27. 3. 3.
\(^{138}\) Burns Jr., \textit{Cyprian the Bishop}, 63.
relay this decision. Cyprian’s letter appears to be merely updating his colleague on an episcopal matter, rightly his to make. However, Cyprian was aware that the Roman tradition concerning baptism differed from the decision just passed by his council. The Churches in Rome saw no need to re-baptize repentant heretics as long as the ritual had been performed correctly. In the process of baptism the bishop administering the sacrament would lay his hands on the recipient to confer the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Cyprian and his supportive Churches in North Africa argued that the Roman practice was theologically unsound. The two centers agreed that the bishop should be the one administering the sacrament, but there is no authority behind the title of a heretical bishop. The bishop is divinely appointed to lead the Church. Thus the heretical baptism has neither the authority of divine calling nor institutional support. The Holy Spirit only resides within the Catholic Church and her leaders.\textsuperscript{139} A heretical bishop has no gifts to confer. Cyprian believed in the functionality of the Church as much as he believed in the spiritual abilities he possessed. By the authority of the office that he holds, Cyprian acts. Simply claiming apostolic knowledge and Church tradition is not sufficient. It is through the consecration to the office and the power therein that bishops derive their authority.\textsuperscript{140} Even the Holy Spirit cannot penetrate this legal system, thus negating the claim of any charismatic personality. It was accepted tradition in the Church that if a lay member confessed Christ in a time of persecution he was automatically qualified to serve amongst the clergy. Yet, Cyprian would not agree to such terms unless the confessor was first legally ordained in an ecclesiastical ceremony.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{139} Cyprian, \textit{Ep. 72. 1. 1.}
\textsuperscript{140} Cyprian, \textit{Ep. 18. 2.}, \textit{Laps. 36.}
\textsuperscript{141} Campenhausen, \textit{Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power}, 269-271.
While Cyprian placed heavy emphasis on the legality of clerical election and through this the transfer of spiritual gifts, if one proved himself unworthy of the office, he would immediately lose those spiritual abilities.\textsuperscript{142} Thus for Cyprian, a lapsed bishop would lose his position, because he could no longer function in his position. In accordance, Cyprian’s emphasis on ritual purity precluded sacraments preformed outside the Church. The boundaries of his Church were clearly established. All who are with the bishop are with the Church. Those in opposition to the bishop were outside the fellowship of the Church.\textsuperscript{143} However, Cyprian did not explicitly state that all bishops were expected to possess a purity not expected of the rest of the congregation. Rather, the Church hierarchy was meant to function in a specific manner, and a lapsed bishop frustrated this process. Therefore, since all bishops possessed the same authority throughout Christendom, it was the responsibility of other bishops to remove a disruption in the system.\textsuperscript{144} The discontinuity of Cyprian’s ecclesiology concerning the authority of the episcopate, that at one time all bishops are sovereign yet the structure of the Church is based on the episcopate acting in complete unity, resolves itself in the belief that the Church is of divine organization. It is presumed that all bishops will act unanimously, because their office resides in the Spirit of God. Thus all bishops acting in unison cannot err.\textsuperscript{145}

Cyprian’s only letter to Stephen regarding the baptismal controversy appears to be a cordial letter between colleagues, but in another letter written to Lubianus immediately following, Cyprian staunchly condemns anyone holding the Roman viewpoint.\textsuperscript{146} Stephen responds, infuriated by Cyprian’s condemnation. Ardently disagreeing with Cyprian, Stephen

\textsuperscript{142} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 65. 2, 67. 3.
\textsuperscript{143} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 66. 8.
\textsuperscript{144} Campenhausen, \textit{Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power}, 275.
\textsuperscript{145} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 67. 8.
\textsuperscript{146} Cyprian, \textit{Ep.} 73. 11. 2.
attempts to infringe upon his authority as a fellow bishop. Stephen outlaws the re-baptism of any repentant parishioner from a heretical sect. Unlike Cyprian, Stephen meant for this demand to be observed throughout Christendom, not merely in the ecclesiastical entity in which he held jurisdiction.  

Stephen made further challenges to Cyprian’s ecclesiology when he supported the reinstatement of two Spanish bishops who had lapsed during the Decian persecution. The newly appointed orthodox bishops of these Churches and their loyal clergy sought Cyprian’s assistance. Although considerations had relaxed considerably for penitent laity, lapsed clergy were still unable to regain their positions. They were able to reenter communion with the Church but not able to lead her. Also, Stephen was not merely advising in a situation outside of his jurisdiction as Cyprian frequently did, he was displacing legally elected bishops in another region. Stephen’s arrogance was bemoaned by more than just Cyprian.  

Stephen never excommunicated Cyprian, and Cyprian never outright denied Stephen’s authority within his own jurisdiction, although Cyprian strongly believed he was misusing that authority. Cyprian’s relationship with Stephen remained strained. The primary essence of Cyprian’s ecclesiology was episcopal unity, yet Cyprian and Stephen disagreed on numerous points of doctrine. Poor relations between the two men persisted until Stephen’s martyrdom at the hands of the father and son emperors, Valerian and Gallienus. Cyprian would follow soon thereafter.

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147 Cyprian, *Ep.* 74. 2. 1.  
148 Cyprian, *Ep.* 67. 5. 3.  
149 Cyprian, *Ep.* 75. 17. 1.  
150 Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops,* 213.
The Valerianic persecution began in the summer of 257. The phrasing and intention of the emperor’s orders have been preserved through the records of the examinations of Dionysius and Cyprian during their trials. In his trial before the prefect of Egypt, Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, briefly relayed the Christian hesitation in obeying the emperor’s litterae. Christians faithfully prayed for the empire and her emperors, but they were morally incapable of praying to a god apart from the Christian God. Cyprian expressed a similar sentiment at his own trial. Initially the intensity of persecution was dependent upon the zeal of local officials, but in the summer of 258, orders from Valerian initiated the bloodiest persecution predating Diocletian. Civil officials were authorized to execute Church leadership and confiscate property owned by more affluent members.\(^{151}\)

Cyprian is the most celebrated martyr of the persecution of Valerian and Gallienus. In modern scholarship he is best remembered for his uncompromising fight for Christian unity despite the hindrances of tradition and schism. J. Patout Burns Jr. describes Cyprian as “finding a way” in the midst of schism and persecution to readmit the lapsed, bring unity once again to the Church. Each bishop had been charged by God to shepherd a portion of his flock, and through negotiation the bishops were able to achieve balance within their Churches and maintain the unity of the worldwide Church.\(^{152}\) Frend emphasizes Cyprian’s autocratic personality as the determining factor in his victory over the confessors. Frend writes that it was this victory that allowed Cyprian to reunite lost members of the Church and maintain episcopal

\(^{151}\) Clarke, Letters V. III, 12.
\(^{152}\) Burns Jr., Cyprian the Bishop, 151.
supremacy. He also claims that had Cyprian been less of an opposing force a form of Donatism could have arisen under Cyprian rather than under Caecilian sixty years later.  

Through examining Cyprian and his actions based primarily on the sources he provided, unity appears to be his dominating concern, episcopal unity above all. It was in episcopal unity that the Church continued; through the bishops sanctifying and intercessory powers, they reunited their congregations under the pretext of hopefully expectation that God would pardon all their sins. Cyprian’s personality, his practicality and confidence, unconditionally guided his decisions, but more than just his innate characteristics, Cyprian demonstrated an unwavering belief in his ability to lead and the decisions he made. He had full faith in the institution in which he operated and the boundaries and limits to which he could take it. Instead of unquestioningly adhering to previously defined orthodoxy, Cyprian acted on his authority as a leader and instituted new judgments that he expected to be upheld by his subordinate clergy and successors. By evaluating Cyprian’s actions based primarily on his word, one gains a perception of Cyprian that he intended to be his legacy. However in the century following his death, Cyprian’s legacy would influence two Christian groups in very different ways.

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CHAPTER 6

CYRPAIN’S LEGACY

Cyprian’s ecclesiology was multifaceted, with two primary points of emphasis. First, and most Cyprianic, unity is emphasized above universal Christian purity, a definable orthodox value. Second, the authority of the Christian clergy is foremost in Church doctrine. The clergy, with the bishop’s authority most highly considered, embodied the unity of the Church and the protection of the gifts of the Spirit. For Cyprian, these two ideas worked in unison to guide the Church through the first empire-wide persecution.

After the martyrdom of Cyprian on 14 September 258, the Church managed the persecution considerably well. Cyprian’s foresight and preparation allowed the Church to survive the numerous martyrdoms of Church leaders and maintain a strong footing. The Church would exist in quiet obscurity for the next four decades. Gallienus issued an edict of toleration in 260, allowing Christian congregations to reclaim confiscated property, and the succeeding emperors had little need to molest the Church. Lactantius suggests that Aurelian had intended to ignite another persecution against the Church but was conveniently murdered. Probus, Carus and his sons were mainly distracted with protecting the borders Aurelian had established; this allowed the Church to continue expanding into the countryside while the bishops gained more and more influence in society. Yet, with the ascent of Diocletian and his tetrarchy, the pax of Rome would again come at the expense of the Christians.

154 Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution, 324.
155 Frend dates numerous martyrdoms to the reign of Valerian, but they were localized events receiving no influence from imperial orders. Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution, 328.
In the time of peace provided by Gallienus the Church flourished. The ecclesiastical provinces detailed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 were beginning to take shape. This increased the authority of the bishop as each additional parish brought in new finances for the Church.\textsuperscript{156} Also, the authority of the bishop in Rome, as a superior amongst the brethren, continued to progress after the tenure of Stephen. The key for the bishop of Rome to gain more power was for his fellow bishops to yield it to him. Lay Christians also began advancing within Roman society in the late third century. Eusebius, in his account of peace before the Great Persecution, recalls how Christians prospered in civil posts and served within the imperial courts.\textsuperscript{157} In all, Christianity was expanding. The movement that had for three centuries been an urban phenomenon began to take hold in the countryside as the traditional gods and cults were no longer maintained. But these advances did little to unite the Church catholic. Different interests were being served in the large cities than in poor parishes in the country, and the tax revolution of the tetrarchy did as much to illuminate these differences as did the eventual persecution.\textsuperscript{158}

From all historical accounts, Diocletian’s decision to initiate a persecution on 23 February 303, was at a time of relative peace for the empire. He had been struggling for nearly two decades to secure finances and revitalize the army with no hint of persecution. Eusebius chose to present the persecution as divine judgment rather than attempt an explanation for Diocletian’s reasoning.\textsuperscript{159}

While the Decian persecution had been devastating for Christianity, threatening both the strength and influence of the Church, the Great Persecution, executed primarily by

\textsuperscript{156} Frend, \textit{Martyrdom and Persecution}, 330.
\textsuperscript{157} Euseb. \textit{H.E.} VIII. 11.
\textsuperscript{158} Frend, \textit{Martyrdom and Persecution}, 346.
\textsuperscript{159} Euseb. \textit{H.E.} VIII. 1.
Diocletian and Galerius, claimed the lives of thousands. Historians are not able to provide exact figures for those martyred in either persecution, but based on the evidence, both written and archeological, the pain caused under Decius was mostly in the number who defected or denied the Church. Under Diocletian, many Christians prevailed and confessed their beliefs. Reports from across the empire name hundreds of men and women that died in the four stages of persecution from 303-312. While the Church at the close of persecution appears to have won the battle, compared to 251 when the Church was crippled and sickly, they were far from rest. After 312, the Christian Church was never truly be at peace within itself or unified again. Again the issue of how to address the lapsed would be a cause for contention, and new schisms would now affect the empire as a whole, as a new leader brought Christian issues to the forefront of imperial concerns.

The “Church of the Martyrs,” as the Meletians and the Donatist called themselves, established a priesthood in opposition to orthodox bishops of the Church. To use orthodox as a descriptor in this instance is tricky, as all parties claim to be the True Church preserving orthodoxy. The Donatists in Numidia, as the Meletians in Egypt, split with the elected bishops of the Church because of differing views of the penitential duties required of the lapsi. Both parties argued that stricter measures should be taken concerning the readmittance of the lapsed and that clergy should not be afforded the opportunity to regain their posts regardless of their time spent in penance. The two sects appear to have much in common, but their outcomes were very different. The Meletians did not have a precedent of strict discipline to fall back on. The Novatianist schism never gained a foothold in Egypt. And while they appeared
successful for a time, their leaders were not able to prevail.\textsuperscript{160} The Donatists were historically much more successful. The persecution in North Africa had not been as deadly and bloody as it had been in Egypt. While the lapsed in Egypt had surely escaped death with their denunciations, the magistrates in North Africa had been satisfied with the surrender of the Holy Scriptures.

The Donatist movement persisted for nearly three centuries in North Africa. It outlasted the Arians and the Meletians, and it remained influential long after the Marconities and Valentinians had been forgotten. It was not until the Muslim invasions that Donatism ceased to be.

The Donatists were not theologically heretical. Their heresy lay in their acceptance and growth of schism. The controversy allegedly began with the denunciation of \textit{traditor} clergy by two Abitinian martyrs. Saturninus and Emeritus, a presbyter and lector respectively, continued to lead their congregation after their bishop, Fundanus of Abitina, surrendered Scriptures. At a home meeting in February 304, forty-seven members were arrested and carried to Carthage for trial. The account of their trial and torture focused on the two leaders. The document that survives to relay this story is the \textit{Acta Saturnini}. Before their death, in which they supposedly starved in prison, the two confessors condemned any \textit{traditores}, including their own bishop. It was from this condemnation and qualifications that later Donatist leaders would trace their justifications for rejecting bishops of the orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{161} As with the \textit{lapsi} controversy of Cyprian, confessors were the progenitors of the most strife.

\textsuperscript{160} Frend, \textit{Martyrdom and Persecution}, 399.
At the close of persecution, Numidia was pit against Carthage, and the disrespect shown by the Carthaginian clergy to Numidia after the death of their bishop Mensurius secured a long and spiteful competition. The presbyters in Carthage attempted to elect a successor before the Numidians arrived. Supposedly there was a profit to secure from a swift election. The vote ultimately fell on Caecilian, a trusted archdeacon of Mensurius, but a man disliked by the people. Caecilian was not a supporter of exalting martyrs, and with a bloody persecution fresh in the minds of the people, he was considered a cruel and dispassionate man.

One of the bishops present at his consecration was a suspected traditors. Regardless, the ambassadors sent to announce Caecilian’s appointment were well received in most areas. However, Secundus, Primate of Numidia and bishop of Tigisis, was unwilling to recognize his appointment. Since the tenure of Cyprian, the Primate of Numidia had been one of the fellow bishops customarily present to ordain a new bishop in Carthage.\textsuperscript{162} Yet the Carthaginian clergy often viewed the practice of neighboring bishops consecrating a bishop apart from their jurisdiction as a Roman tradition.

Thus Secundus of Tigisis and the namesake of the Donatist schism, Donatus of Casae Nigrae, quickly moved against Caecilian. Secundus succeeded in allying seventy bishops of Numidia and the lower class of Carthage against Caecilian. Even the clergymen who had elected Caecilian a year before appear to have changed their positions. The first charge against Caecilian was that his consecration was unconfirmed, because Felix of Apthungi was a traditor. Secundus convened a council in the fall of 312 that declared that any clergy who surrendered scriptures or lapsed in any other way was immediately outside the confines of the Church.

\textsuperscript{162} Frend, \textit{The Donatist Church}, 16.
According, these men had no authority to participate in any Church matter. Caecilian’s election was deemed invalidated.\(^{163}\) Majorinus was elected in his stead, and after his death a few months later Donatus was elected a rival bishop in Carthage.

The Donatists heralded Cyprian’s argument at the council in 256 concerning rebaptism as their justification for separating from Caecilian. The primary argument in favor of baptizing a penitent heretic was that the recipient was not being re-baptized.\(^{164}\) Their first experience with the sacrament had been to no effect, for one in opposition to the Church cannot confer the gifts of the Spirit. Yet, the Catholic side also invoked the ecclesiology of Cyprian to support their argument. Cyprian had successfully upheld gospel discipline while showing mercy and charity, but above all else, Cyprian had protected the unity of the Church. The Catholics quoted Cyprian’s teachings on maintaining unity, while the Donatists bristled with Cyprian’s arguments for purity amongst the clergy. All bishops are spiritual and juristic equals, but bishops must be pure in order for the Holy Spirit to work through them.\(^{165}\) Yet, from the beginning, Donatist leaders were haunted by rumors of *traditores*. Threats and persuasion buried any intrigue. Although Cyprian remained orthodox throughout his service as bishop, the Donatists, more than Caecilian and the Catholic Church, had a fuller picture of Cyprian’s ecclesiology. For though Cyprian is remembered as a moderate, apparently compromising for the betterment of the majority, he also managed to uphold the puritanical legacy of Carthage. Yet the Donatists took the argument of episcopal purity a step further than Cyprian. Whereas Cyprian advocated for

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\(^{163}\) Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 20.

\(^{164}\) Cyprian, *Ep.* 69. 9. 1.

\(^{165}\) Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 134.
the removal of a bishop unworthy of his station, he never demanded unequivocal innocence from the episcopate.

The Donatists believed that Caecilian was a contaminated bishop, spreading disease throughout the entire assembly of believers. A lapsed cleric was a danger to an unsuspecting laity, because none of his sacraments carried purpose. They also condemned those who recognized Caecilian as the legitimate bishop for being willing participants in his deception and perversion. The Donatists trusted that they were adhering to Cyprian’s understanding of episcopal equality. This idea worked with the Catholic perception of the hierarchy of the Church. The bishop appointed all the positions within the Church; thus, corrupt lay members could be tolerated without much concern.\(^{166}\) Yet, a lapsed bishop was a danger to all of Christendom.

Donatists had to reject the call for unity above all other concerns to maintain the purifying power of sanctification against apostasy.\(^{167}\) Lapsed clerics remained in their positions within the Catholic Church, against the protocol established in the council of Carthage in 251. Yet, the problems between the Donatists and the Catholics would not be resolved inside the Church, as Cyprian and his colleagues had previously done; a final arbitrator was ought. Both parties appealed to the emperor to resolve the conflict. In Cyprian’s ecclesiology there was no final arbitrator, apart from God at judgment. Thus when bishops could not agree on an issue, such as the baptismal controversy, no resolution was reached.

By 312, the Christian Church had a sympathetic emperor. Constantine’s personal beliefs and his progression to such a state is beyond the boundaries of this essay. What can be stated

\(^{166}\) Cyprian, *Ep.* 54. 3.

\(^{167}\) Burns Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop*, 169.
with certainty is that Constantine was at first sympathetic to the Christian Church and quickly became unarguably supportive. Initially, without much research, Constantine sided with the predominant Catholic opinion and Caecilian. He allotted Caecilian a sum of money with provisions to secure more if necessary. Also, any lands lost during the persecution were to be restored. Donatists blamed Constantine’s advisor Hosius of Cordova as being a negative influence against them.\textsuperscript{168} A few months later in the spring of 313, Constantine bestowed another sign of favor and support for Caecilian by exempting all bishops associated with the Catholic Church from municipal \textit{munera}.\textsuperscript{169} The Donatists were obviously the outcast. Realizing the need for greater representation they petitioned Constantine to review their position. Through a meeting with the Proconsul, five Donatists supporters officially brought charges against Caecilian. An unforeseen consequence of this act would be the alliance made between the Catholic Church and state.\textsuperscript{170} Instead of making another imperial decision, Constantine referred the case to Bishop Miltiades of Rome. Caecilian and his supporters were to appear in Rome along with an equal number of Donatists. Miltiades turned the case into a full-scale ecclesiastical council.

Majorinus, bishop of Carthage, died before the council meet in late September, and Donatus, perhaps not officially consecrated, went as his successor. Ultimately Miltiades sided with the group that deferred to him the most. Caecilian appeared to agree on the re-baptism

\textsuperscript{168} Frend, \textit{The Donatist Church}, 146.
\textsuperscript{169} Euseb. \textit{H.E.} 10. 7.
\textsuperscript{170} Frend, \textit{The Donatist Church}, 147.
issue, a strain between Rome and Carthage since the tenures of Stephen and Cyprian. Miliades sided with Caecilian, and Donatus was accused of igniting schism.\textsuperscript{171}

The Donatists rejected this ruling and petitioned the emperor for a new hearing. Though displeased, Constantine granted their request and scheduled another council in Arles beginning 1 August 314.\textsuperscript{172} The Donatists best chance of discrediting Caecilian was to provide evidence that Felix of Aptungi had lapsed in some way before taking part in the consecration of Caecilian. To ensure that there would be evidence proving such, the Donatists enlisted the assistance of Ingentius, town councilor from Zigga Ziqua. However, Ingentius was unable to acquire the information needed, so he forged it. The ruse worked in a City Council case in Carthage, but it did not hold up to scrutiny in Arles. The Donatists did not fair well at all in Arles. The assembled bishops stated that they could not prove any of their assertions and that they appeared to be dangerous men stirring trouble. The Donatists, again, rejected the rulings of the council, as did many of the laity in Carthage.\textsuperscript{173} For the next two years, both sides continued to petition the emperor, and neither of the council’s rulings were ever put into affect. Constantine debated how to resolve the issue for several months, while he was not fighting Licinius or the Franks. Finally, on 10 November 316, Constantine wrote the new *Vicarius Africae* stating that Caecilian was innocent of all charges and that the Donatist party should be regarded as ‘calumniators.’\textsuperscript{174} Even after two council rulings and an imperial decision, the Donatists still maintained that

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\textsuperscript{171} Augustine, *Ep. 43. 5. 16.*
\textsuperscript{172} Euseb. *H. E. 10. 5. 21-22.*
\textsuperscript{173} Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 151-153.
\textsuperscript{174} Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, 3. 71.82.
Catholic fellowship had been contaminated through Caecilian’s ordination. Nearly a century later, Augustine was attempting to clear the reputations of Caecilian and Felix.\(^{175}\)

In a short time the Catholic Church in Africa became the minority, yet they were in communion with the wider Church favored by the government.\(^ {176}\) In their compliance with the ruling from the Roman council under Miltiades, the African clergy had to submit to the Roman tradition of accepting penitent heretics. The Cyprianic belief held that any heretical baptism did not hold the Spirit and thus the participant was not truly initiated into communion. The Roman tradition taught that new initiates from some heretical sects must simply receive the imposition of hands.\(^ {177}\) This concession was a difficult one to make, because theologically it expanded the boundaries of the Church. Under Augustine, the Catholic Church furthered clarified this belief by stating that the Eucharistic fellowship, not baptism, represented the unity of all believers. Augustine completely derailed the Donatist position by defining the Church by intention rather than physical communion.\(^ {178}\)

Augustine maintained Cyprian’s emphasis on episcopal unity, and even extended it to Donatist leaders who joined Catholic fellowship. They were allowed to serve as presbyters or even bishops if the opportunity arose for them to succeed the Catholic appointed bishops. This was justified, because the Donatist Church enacted the same rituals, sacraments and hierarchy as the Church they abandoned; the rituals were effectual.\(^ {179}\)

Augustine taught that there would be a much larger visible Church than actual devote adherents. Therefore even a corrupt bishop could be tolerated visibly, because he was not of

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175 Augustine, Ep. 185. 2. 12.  
176 Burns Jr., Cyprian the Bishop, 169.  
177 Ecumenical councils have since distinguished between formal and material heresies.  
178 Burns Jr., Cyprian the Bishop, 172.  
179 Burns Jr., Cyprian the Bishop, 172.
the inner division. Cyprian would agree that the Church was comprised of some that would not be accepted in judgment, but as seen from the primary source evaluation of his thought, he would not have extended this possibility to the clergy. A corrupt cleric could not be tolerated in Cyprian’s ecclesiology, because while each bishop was independently sovereign, they were all unified in their goal of functionality within the Church. If one member of this consensus was not ably fulfilling his duties, it would be a detriment to the system as a whole.

It is difficult to distinguish what is uniquely Cyprianic in later Catholic theology. But like the first standards of orthodoxy in the second century, Church doctrine is comprised of the opus of a series of authors working with and often rejecting their predecessor’s designs. Yet the influence of Cyprian is unmistakable, even if the only measure is the use of his ecclesiology by both sides in the most successful schism of the next several centuries. While neither side could fully accept Cyprian’s ecclesiology, both venerated him as an influential Church father and martyr.

It was previously mentioned that Cyprian is a recognized saint of both the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches. Yet, portions of his ecclesiology are negated by some and accepted by others. Augustine is the father of Latin theology, and as has already been established, was influenced by Cyprian’s theology, though he did not strictly adhere to many of his points. Thus the Roman Catholic Church follows Augustine’s justification for the efficacy of sacraments performed outside the Church. In an article by Will Cohen entitled “Sacraments and the Visible Unity of the Church,” Cohen explains why Augustine’s position concerning the acceptance of baptism performed outside of the Church should be accepted in contrast to the

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180 Burns Jr., Cyprian the Bishop, 173.
Cyprianic view of purity. Cohen claims that Cyprian’s judgment in *De Unitate* was made under extreme pressure. Cyprian’s circumstances differ from the circumstances faced by the Church today; thus, such a harsh measure is unnecessary.\(^\text{181}\) He negates Cyprian’s emphasis on the purity of Christian sacraments without condemning him. Yet Cyprian did not qualify the circumstances in which this belief was to be upheld. By examining Cyprian’s writings, it is clear that he perceived himself as acting within his jurisdiction as a bishop not only in this one instance but also in creating a precedent for subsequent leaders to follow.

Cyprian is best known for his emphasis on episcopal authority and Church order. Scholars are in consensus concerning this evaluation of Cyprianic ecclesiology. Where this thesis differs from other scholarship is on whether Cyprian believed he was granting ultimate pardon to penitent apostates or acting as a shelter until God reigned in judgment. From careful study of Cyprian’s treatises and letters, it appears that his thought concerning the forgiveness of one of the unpardonable sins progresses. Johannes Quasten disagrees and writes that Cyprian never considered apostasy an unpardonable sin.\(^\text{182}\) He references Cyprian’s letter to Antonianus after the council in Carthage in 251. Quasten points to the section of the letter where Cyprian is encouraging Antonianus in his belief that there are some who have fallen away that can be revived.\(^\text{183}\) In *De Lapsis*, written before the council in 251, Cyprian referred to the lapsed as dead in sin; now, months later, the lapsed were, in Cyprian’s understanding, unconscious, capable of revitalization. Yet, the section to which Quasten refers was not speaking of the entire body of the lapsed. Cyprian, and his council, had made a strong distinction between


\(^{183}\) Cyprian, *Ep.* 55. 17. 1.
those who had sacrificed and those who had secured a certificate. A few months previous all
lapsi were considered to be guilty of the same sin, whereas after the council Cyprian was
making distinctions based on intent. In an earlier portion of his letter to Antonianus, Cyprian
chides those who would group the misled libellatici with those who voluntarily sacrificed. He
claims that many within the libellatici believed they were protecting their Christian purity
through their acts, believing that it was their only option apart from sacrificing. Therefore these
lapsi, who had faithfully been performing penance since discovering their mistake, were worthy
of readmission, because they had not apostatized. The ruling of the council was that each lapsi
case was to be reviewed individually to discover any other innocent mistakes.  

By assessing all the works of Cyprian, it is evident that his thought concerning the lapsi
changes. In the midst of the persecution, they still had the opportunity to achieve the
forgiveness of God through the baptism of blood. The circumstances of the time heavily
impacted Cyprian’s decisions, because during the persecution, the lapsed had a better option
than obtaining forgiveness through their bishop. A martyr’s reception in heaven is
unquestioned, whereas Cyprian would not promise the lapsed a happy reception on the day of
judgment. The distinction between the libellatici and the sacrificati did not arise until after
the council’s decision to review each case independently. He never retracted his statement in
De Lapsis that apostasy was a sin against God, and thus a sin only God could forgive. His
motivation for readmitting the lapsi was based on his perception of his duty as a Christian
bishop.

185 Refer to Clarke’s introduction in V. I. of Cyprian’s letters for controversy on the dating of some of Cyprian’s
letters.
187 Cyprian, De Lapsis, 17.
Thus by solely focusing on the words of Cyprian and taking at his word his justifications and beliefs, this thesis has attempted to understand the actions of the most influential bishop of the Decian persecution. Although his successors rejected and redefined his ecclesiology, Cyprian’s actions are still heralded as orthodox and just. In a situation without precedent, Cyprian maintained the unity of the Church while expanding Christian orthodoxy and redefining the purpose of a Christian bishop. For Cyprian, the purpose of the bishop is protection. In Ignatian ecclesiology, the bishop was the one who united the faithful through Eucharist communion to God. Irenaeus emphasized the duty of the bishop in furthering the apostolic message. To Tertullian and Hippolytus, the bishop was responsible for safeguarding the purity of the Church. Yet at the pinnacle of Cyprianic ecclesiology is the belief that the bishop, as the divine head of an ecclesiastical community, was to guard both the faithful and the damaged until the return of their Lord.

Through numerous ecclesiastical councils, Cyprian strengthened the episcopal authority through his emphasis on unity in Christendom achieved solely through obedience to the bishops. Also, he claimed the power of granting absolution in the context of forgiveness being mediated through the bishop. From these bases of authority, he outlined duties of his authority, both spiritual and temporal. He believed that he was the unifying force of the Christian community, the regulator of morality, primary legislator of Church discipline and sole interpreter of the scriptures. Yet not only he but all bishops were divinely authorized and culpable for these duties.

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188 Refer to f.n. 35.
189 Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 139.
190 Refer to f.n. 53; Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 346—347.
191 Cyprian, Ep. 55. 29. 2.
192 Rives, Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage, 297.
Cyprian expounded upon institutional authority to illustrate its functionality and purpose as God’s earthy domain. He took apostolic knowledge and tradition and legalized it to protect its dissemination in the Church. He protected and elevated the orthodox precepts to encourage unity; yet, he was unfettered when it became necessary for him to act without guiding precedent. In addition to the Holy Scriptures and divine visions, Cyprian encouraged episcopal consensus for directing the Church’s actions. Cyprian invokes the respect and admiration of subsequent leaders, even if they are unable to reconcile all facets of his ecclesiology.
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