

CYPRIAN THE CHRISTIAN

BY

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IT is a deplorable loss to Catholic reading that 'The Library of the Fathers', the classic series of translations edited by Pusey, Keble and Newman should have been allowed to remain unfinished and long out of print. Moreover, it is already more than a century since these vernacular versions first appeared, and they have never been surpassed: fine scholarship and loving care alike went to their making, and when we pray for England's return to the Faith, the re-availability in our language of that patristic literature whose study brought the greatest of English converts¹ into the Church should be covered by our intention.

Among the first members of the series, in 1839² to be exact, there appeared the 'Treatises of Saint Cyprian'³ the third-century bishop and martyr of Carthage, to be followed in due course by the companion volume of his Epistles.⁴ The researches of a later day would doubtless impose the alteration of a word here and there whose precise connotation has been established by experts on the Latin of the African Fathers, specialists such as E. W. Watson⁵ or Canon Bayard⁶ of Lille: upon the style of these two books as appropriate to their subject-matter it would be difficult to improve, and from them there emerges to full stature the living figure of the original author, essentially a man of action rather than of letters.

Newman's graceful Preface⁷ to Part I embodies the contemporary

1 See *Newman et les Pères* by Denys Gorce (Editions du Cerf, 1933), a charming contribution to the literature of Newman, written to commemorate the centenary of the Oxford Movement's starting-point, when the first of the 'Tracts for the Times' was launched on September 9, 1833.

2 In a letter from Newman to Mrs Mozley, dated Jan. 9, 1839, he writes: 'I think you will be much interested in parts of the forthcoming volume of St Cyprian. The Treatises on *Mortality*, on *Patience*, on *Envy*, to *Demetrius* and on *The Lord's Prayer* are especially touching' (Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 278).

3 'Library of the Fathers' Vol. III, Part I (Parker, Oxford, 1839).

4 *ibid.* Vol. III, Part II (1844).

5 *The Style and Language of St Cyprian*, by E. W. Watson of St John's College, Oxford. (*Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* Vol. IV. Clarendon Press, 1892).

6 *Le Latin de Saint Cyprien* (Paris, 1902).

7 Newman made himself responsible for the Preface and supposedly for the English version of Pontius: the rest of the translation was the work of the Rev. C. Thornton, of Christ Church, Oxford. To the *Epistles* Pusey contributed a longer introduction, containing some fine writing, the translation being due to the Rev. H. Carey, of Worcester College.

life of St Cyprian by Pontius, his deacon, as well as the *Acta* of his martyrdom⁸, but more interesting and more certain evidence is borne to his character and conversion by the first treatise, *Ad Donatum*,⁹ an autobiographical fragment addressed to an intimate friend to whom he is induced to open his mind by the lovely setting in which their talk took place: a peaceful vine-clad arbour in an autumn garden at the vintage time.

It is impossible not to be reminded of Augustine when Cyprian speaks of the tremendous mental conflict he had to break with his old life and ingrained habits, the infirmities that clung to him 'like slaves born in my house',¹⁰ then the miraculously sudden change of heart wrought by the *undae genetalis*, the life-giving water of baptism. St Cyprian was not a profound or original thinker, scarcely even a theologian *ex professo*, but *Ad Donatum* assures him of a place midway between St Paul and St Augustine as a Doctor of grace. Baptismal grace especially was to prove a constantly-recurring theme throughout his writings,¹¹ although he nowhere quite recaptures the candour and beauty of this first discourse.¹²

The treatise *De Dominica Oratione* (On the Lord's Prayer)¹³ seems to come naturally next in order. 'It is praying like friends and familiars to offer up to God of his own, to mount unto God's hearing with the petitioning of Christ. Let the Father recognise the Son's

⁸ Appended to the Life of St Cyprian by Donald Attwater in Butler's *Lives of the Saints* (New Edition) is a useful note by Fr Thurston, S.J.: 'The Letters of St Cyprian, a brief notice in the *De Viris Illustribus* of St Jerome, the 'Passion' of the Saint, and a brief biographical sketch ascribed to his deacon, Pontius, form the main sources of our information. Harnack in Vol. XXXIX of *Texte und Untersuchungen* has devoted a paper to *Das Leben Cyprianus von Pontius*, and describes it as the earliest Christian biography in existence. Reigenstein, on the other hand, in the *Heidelberg Sitzberichte*, Phil. Hist. Klasse, 1913, takes a less favourable view. For him it is unimportant as a historical source. See upon the whole matter Père Delehaye: *Les Passions des Martyres et les Genres littéraires* (1921) pp. 82-104. If Delehaye is right we cannot even describe the so-called 'Proconsular Acts' of St Cyprian as 'an unique record of the trials of a martyr in all its authenticity and purity' (Attwater). Trustworthy as the document may be, it is not an exact copy of the official record.

⁹ Entitled by Mr Thornton 'On the Grace of God'. Migne (t. IV, col. 206) places *Ad Donatum* with the Epistles, not with the Treatises.

¹⁰ See *Library of the Fathers*, Vol. III, Pt. i, p. 3 and *Confessions of St Augustine*, especially Bk. VIII, Ch. xi.

¹¹ Hartel's index to the Vienna Corpus edition of St Cyprian's writings contains upwards of a hundred and thirty references to Baptism.

¹² In *Tertullien et Saint Cyprien* (Textes et Commentaires—Gabalda, 1930), a valuable book of selections and his latest contribution to the literature of St Cyprian, Canon Bayard reproduces the *Ad Donatum in toto*.

¹³ pp. 177 ff. Quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from the *Library of the Fathers* edition. The Latin text used is Hartel, Vienna Corpus edition in 3 vols. I, Treatises, II, Letters, III, Index and spurious works.

words when we offer up our prayer' and 'address ourselves to God as a Father . . . a name which none of us in prayer would have dared to reach unto, had not he himself allowed us thus to pray'. 'Our Father' and 'Our Bread' Cyprian repeats, and 'when we stand praying . . . we ought to be alive and intent towards our prayers with the whole heart'.

This sermon of sermons on the *Pater Noster*, so justly esteemed by Hilary and Augustine¹⁴ in their day, follows Tertullian's treatment of the same theme pretty closely,¹⁵ but though entirely lacking Tertullian's brilliance and originality, Cyprian surpasses his acknowledged master¹⁶ on the moral plane; elsewhere, if not in this treatise, one is conscious in reading him that he is sounder and theologically more 'in the middle of the road'. *De Dominica Oratione* would be valuable could it be reprinted as a tract, with parallel Latin and English text, to Benedictine oblates and others seeking to draw from the wellsprings of the old spirituality for their *lectio divina*.

'Alive and intent' is exactly what his treatises, still more his letters, show St Cyprian to have been, from the first moment of his whole-hearted single-minded conversion, through the short crowded years of his troubled episcopate and on the eve of a martyrdom witnessed by almost the entire population of Carthage.¹⁷ He delights to speak of the glory of the Christian particularly of the Christian priest, standing erect amid the ruins of the fallen world of paganism (*Ad Demet.* pp. 209, 211ff.: *De Mortal.* p. 223): lifting up holy hands on the mountain-top (pp. 5, 10, 11, 247):¹⁸ expecting nothing

14 Migne has a note on this, in the course of which he quotes St Augustine (*Ep. ad Valerianum*): *Legimus eis etiam librum beatissimi martyris Cypriani de Orat. Dom., et ostendimus quemadmodum docuerit omnia quae ad mores nostros pertinent, quibus recte vivamus, a Patre nostro qui in coelis est exposcenda, ne de libero praesumentes arbitrio a divina gratia decidamus.*

15 d'Alès: *La Théologie de Saint Cyprien* (Paris, 1922) says in effect that obviously Cyprian had Tertullian before him in penning this treatise, but that his (1) insistence on the social character of Christian prayer, (2) on the filial attitude of the child of God, (3) the necessity of Grace for sanctification, (4) the teaching on the twofold purpose of temptation, and finally (5) the insistence on daily Communion, are peculiar to Cyprian.

16 Donald Attwater in the new Alban Butler (Vol. IX, p. 204) quotes St Jerome's well-known anecdote: 'He particularly delighted in the writings of his countryman Tertullian, scarce passed a day without reading something in them, and when he wanted them used to say: "Reach hither my Master".'

17 Pontius describes a tumultuous crowd gathered about a large open space and people climbing trees in order to see his execution by beheading.

18 See Mgr. Freppel: *Saint Cyprien* IV leçon, p. 81 for a striking passage concerning that mountain which in a sense Cyprian never left. Bossuet was an admirer of the panoramic image and made use of it especially in his sermon '*Sur la loi de Dieu*'.

of earth¹⁹: ever conscious of living under the eyes of God and listening to his heavenly admonitions²⁰: instant in prayer (pp. 115, 195, and *Ep.* 26, 27, 175) and the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (*Ep.* 63 and elsewhere)²¹: freed by his priesthood from every secular tie, every worldly care (*Ep.* p. 1, 2): fired with ardent longing for death (p. 218 ff.) Martyrdom (p. 300), Immortality (p. 230), the Imperishable Crown (p. 239 and *Ep.* 10, p. 23).²²

Disciplina and *Corona*: these are the operative words on every page of St Cyprian. While exhorting to the uphill climb (p. 128) along the narrow way (p. 223 and *Ep.* p. 32), it is to courage in a battle in which eternal life is once and for all lost or won (p. 215) by Christ's soldier (*miles Christi . . . non expavescit ad pugnam.* *Ep.* p. 150) that he would most of all persuade; his incessant pre-occupation is with the agonistic conception of human life²³ as an arena on which God and Christ and the Angels are looking down (*Deo et Christo spectante*), his most burning pages those in which, with all the imagery of the Roman amphitheatre and the athlete's race, he expands St Paul's great text in Corinthians IX. This is his moral atmosphere (and with him none but moral issues weigh one

¹⁹ See d'Alès, *op. cit.*, in which it is pointed that among all his prophetic visions (cf. following note) there was one thing of which St Cyprian never dreamt—a Christian Empire. He took the text 'My kingdom is not of this world' with entire literalness, his outlook on his own age was frankly pessimistic, his whole purpose to turn souls towards their eternal destiny.

²⁰ In many passages throughout his writings St Cyprian makes it seem quite natural that he should learn of God in dreams and visions, taking them for granted in himself and others with Scriptural simplicity and referring those who think *somnia ridicula et visiones ineptas* to the case of Joseph (*Ep.* 66. p. 207). See also Hartel 520, 6:309, 2:497, 10:498, 9, 19:582:651:734 and *Vita* 12 and 13.

²¹ On St Cyprian and the Eucharist read especially *Ep.* 65, pp. 81 ff. and see d'Alès, *op. cit.* p. 270: *Les textes eucharistiques de C. abondent en indications concrètes riches de sens et de doctrine*, and p. 249: *une doctrine non pas achevée mais cohérente*. On the morrow of his conversion he said to Donatus: *Penuria esse nulla jam poterit, cum semel pectus caelestis sagina saturaverit*; his allusions supply much valuable evidence to third-century Eucharistic practice, and while employing no technical term, not even the word Eucharist itself, his faith in the Real Presence is attested by the vivid expressions by which he refers to it: *Corpus Dni, Sctum Dni. Corpus, Corpus Xsti, Caro Xsti, Sctum Dni, Cibus Xsti, Cibus caelesti, Panis coelestis*, etc.

²² 'In peace He will give to the conquerors a white crown, according to our works, in persecution a purple crown once and again of our passion' (p. 249). 'Let them win a crown either white with good works or purple with suffering. In the heavenly army both peace and war have their garlands wherewith the soldier of Christ may be crowned for victory' (*Ep.* p. 23). Migne supplies in a footnote the following from St Jerome: *Non solum enim effusio sanguinis in confessione reputatur, sed devotae quoque mentis servitus immaculata quotidianum martyrium est. Illa corona de rosae et violis plectitur, ista de lilis* (Hieron. in *Epitaphio Paulae ad Eustochium*). *

²³ See d'Alès, *op. cit.* pp. 368-369.

jot), these are the thoughts with which he urges his flock to courage and perseverance, whether wilting under threat of persecution (p. 153 ff.), scared by plague (p. 216 ff.) or preparing for a violent death (p. 278 ff.) and transit into the immediate presence of the Lord, who, himself crowned with thorns will crown his martyrs with eternal flowers (p. 254).

In strong contrast to Tertullian and Augustine, and unlike the Fathers generally, Cyprian never sets out to propound a thesis and then seek support for it from Scripture.²⁴ In fact he employs quite the contrary method. Sacrificing all secular reading at his conversion in favour of 'the Bible and the Bible only', he makes its texts his starting-point and the *raison d'être* of all the rest, placing them at the beginning instead of at the end of his argument, after which he paraphrases the passages cited in his rhythmical Ciceronian periods²⁵ (so oddly different from any Biblical language), accepting their literal meaning with a straightforwardness that rarely allows him to expatiate in an allegorical sense.²⁶ Certain of his treatises, notably the lengthy *Testimonies against the Jews* and *To Fortunatus*, are scarcely more than collections of Scripture texts on given themes: he believes that the divine precepts 'must be handed like arms to the combatants' (p. 280) and that no raiment he could fashion for their spirits would suit them like that which each will make for himself from 'the very wool and purple of the Lamb' (p. 279).

Even a cursory survey of St Cyprian opens 'magic casements' for the student in many directions. It would be profitable²⁷ to trace his influence on Western theology through the ages: the terms he uses and the terms he does not use, either because they were as yet unknown, like *Incarnatio* or *Absolutio*, or objectionable as calling up pagan associations, deserve close attention. His popular cult has a

²⁴ Cf. Paul Monceaux: *Saint Cyprien* (third edition, 1927), especially chapters IV and V.

²⁵ See E. W. Watson: op. cit., in which Cyprian's 'highly-coloured rhetoric', his invariable use of two words in preference to one, his 'extraordinary abundance of adjectives', his alliterations, rhymes, rhythmical endings to periods, etc., meet with full if not favourable analysis. Ch. I concludes with the following cogent remark: 'It is recognised now that the older scholars were wrong in classing together all the Christian authors as writers of ecclesiastical Latin. No such Latin existed till the monasteries were established and the great Fathers had written. And there is no author to whose style the term can be less appropriately applied than Cyprian'.

²⁶ The exception proving the rule is his quaint application of Noah's drunkenness to the Eucharist (*Ep.* p. 183).

²⁷ 'L'empreinte mise par Cyprien sur la théologie occidentale, est si profonde qu'un volume ne serait pas trop pour la dégager' (d'Alès, op. cit. p. xii).

charm of its own; the sailors on the North African coast still invoke their great martyr and refer to the equinoctial gales in autumn as *Cypriana* because they blow about the anniversary of his martyrdom, September 14.²⁸ A more abstruse question concerns his inclusion in the select company of saints who are mentioned in the Canon of the Mass: his name occurs in the oldest lists at the *Communicantes*²⁹. For Benedictines it is naturally of special interest to recognise in Cyprian an important source of the Holy Rule. Besides the textual parallels,³⁰ such as *Dilectione Dei et Christi nihil praeponendum* (*Testimonies* 111, 18) and notwithstanding the obvious contrast between the man of action with his African effusiveness³¹ and St Benedict's Roman and contemplative sobriety, one feels they breathed the same air, ruled with the same exquisite blend of clemency and firmness (see especially *Ep.* 54 on the Tares and *Ep.* 55 on Pity for the Lapsed) and join hands particularly in the perfection of their sincerity. 'The holy man cannot possibly have taught otherwise than he lived'³² is very close to what St Augustine says in his panegyric of Cyprian³³: 'he taught in life what he did, and did in death what he taught'.

These and many other subjects would repay detailed development,³⁴ yet it is as a Christian moralist first and foremost that St Cyprian has a message for the distracted world of today. Never surely in the centuries between his life and ours, has there been a time when better application could be made of his great teaching on Death (p. 216 ff.) for instance, or concerning 'The Goodness of Patience' (p. 250 ff.): God's patience, our Blessed Lord's patience, the patience of his martyrs, and, last of all, the patience he looks for in us *donec veniat* as we 'offer to his coming an obedience full of waiting thoughts' (p. 265).

²⁸ See Monceaux, *op. cit.*

²⁹ See V. L. Kennedy: *The Saints of the Canon of the Mass* (Rome, 1938).

³⁰ Consult Butler's *Seti Benedicti Monasterium Regula* (Herder, 2nd ed. 1927).

³¹ Watson (*op. cit.*) considers the piling up of synonyms an African trait. (Yet Tertullian is most concise). Sometimes in reading Cyprian one is reminded of later spiritual writers whose redundancy, notably in the case of Barbanson and Fr Baker, is only rendered tolerable by skilful abridgment.

³² St Gregory. *Dialogues*. Bk. 2, Ch. 38

³³ See St Aug. Serm. 312. *In Nat. Cypr. M.*

³⁴ Protestant controversy has made and kept Cyprian's relations with the Holy See and his position on the Baptism of Heretics the most prominent subjects remembered about him. Their total omission from this short sketch may perhaps be excused by the following quotation from the treatise: *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate: Quae si quis consideret et examinet, tractatu longe atque argumentis opus non est. Probatio est ad fidem facilis compendio veritatis . . . tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam* (Hartel I, 212).