

A NEW HERMENEUTIC: PERSECUTIONS AS THE ENGINE OF EPISCOPAL TRIUMPH

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Chapter I--Introduction, Background and Interpretations

Introduction

In its infancy, the *Church* was but one of many “mystery cults” that spread throughout the Roman Empire. The *Church* is the gathering of faithful Christians who agreed to follow a certain core doctrine and organized under the tripartite ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Communion claim to be this Church. There were many mystery cults in the empire. The two most popular ones were the Egyptian goddess Isis, and the Persian god Mythra and for a long time they were more popular than Christianity in the Roman Empire. While they were far older than Christianity, these two cults did not become widespread throughout the Roman world until around 50 B.C. The Church was a small and scattered group in an unappealing region of the ancient world. Approximately in 30 AD, the author of the faith, Jesus, died a horrendous death reserved for slaves and other outcasts, yet nearly three hundred years later, the Emperor Constantine would permit the Church to practice its faith openly. This transformation is the greatest reversal of position in western history. As phenomenal as this conversion is, another story is far more perplexing. How did the episcopal system of governance assert its role of leadership? It is one of the greatest questions of early Church history.

The *persecutions* (from 33 to 312 AD) caused a consolidation of the leadership of the Church. The *persecutions* were Roman assaults upon all Christians either to destroy the faith or to bring the Christians into common practice with the rest of the empire. Imperial Rome under many emperors sought to eradicate the faith built on Jesus, a man from backwater Judea. Some

examples of the persecutions are: the crucifixion, Nero's garden, Domitian's atheism laws, Aurelian stocicism, Severian anti-conversion dogma, Mossomin anti-Serveian attitude, Decian reaction, Valerian continuation, and the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Nero's garden is a particularly gruesome example. According to Tacitus. Nero used the Christians soaked in pitch as lamps to light his gardens during the night. This sight inspired pity even from an old hardened Roman such as Tacitus.¹ Ultimately, Imperial Rome failed. Rome's strategy doomed it to failure. Apparently the only one who recognized this was Tertullian: "The oftener we are mowed down by you, the more we grow in numbers: the blood of the Christians is seed."² He recognized that the Church became a *hierarchical institution* in response to the persecutions. *Hierarchical Institution* is way of saying episcopal governance with the focus being that the bishops were the rulers of their faithful in clear lines of authority. The rival(s) to the *episcopal* system arose in an environment that demanded their destruction. Episcopal literally comes from the Greek meaning overseer, and the word is the ancestor of the English word bishop.

Tertullian articulated this belief and witnessed it, but the theory has remained virtually unexplored by historians. This thesis will address why the Church became a hierarchical institution and how the persecutions led to the rise of the episcopal system. The thesis will focus upon three men: Ignatius (?-115 A.D.), Irenaeus (130?-202 A.D.), and Cyprain (200 or 202-258A.D.) The persecutions created an environment that mandated acceptance of suffering and a

¹ Tacitus Annals 15.44-2-8. Both Pagels and Frennd make use of the same passage. This is but one specific example of the cruelty of the persecutions and it should not be dismissed as extreme, if unusual.

² Tertullian "Apology 50"

vigorous defense of episcopal government, manifested in Ignatius. Also, the persecutions created the backdrops to the development of the doctrines of the Church as the truth and refutation of *heresy*, advanced by Irenaeus. *Heresy* comes from the Greek meaning to choose, and that is what the Church leaders believed heretics did. They choose to separate themselves from the Church and imperil their own souls. This is a very partisan definition but it clarifies what the Church leaders thought. Finally, the persecutions created the *rebel confessors* whose ultimate defeat meant that the hierarchy had totally triumphed, completed by Cyprian. *Rebel confessors* were those members of the Church who suffered for their faith and believed that this gave them special powers. The use of rebel is from Cyprian and similar others' perspective. Again a partisan term that illuminates their beliefs, this is what they believed.

The three bishops were unlike many other early Church bishops. They were obsessed with both discipline and organization. Many others such as Clement of Alexandria, Oregin, and even Tertullian were concerned with theology. Three men, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, were great advocates of the episcopal system. One must examine them to understand the rise of the episcopal system. The other great authors in the era of the early Church did not focus upon the matters of discipline and organization, so one cannot give them any more attention. If one wants to examine theological concerns, then one should examine the other authors. They, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, are credible sources to examine in order to understand the early Church's point of view. They were the major architects of the *hierarchical institution*. Their labor was in a hostile climate that forced the Church to define what it was. The external pressure forced the definition to coalesce.

While it might seem paradoxical that the early Church was obsessed with heresy at the

time it came under assault but it is not. The early leaders were not trying to divide the Church, but to preserve its integrity. Unity of discipline and organization was the goal. Cyprian saw the Church as being at war with Rome, and during a war one cannot have traitors. For those who favored a hierarchical Church, heretics were traitors. The Church first had to endure assault from the persecutions, and then the results of the persecutions, various heretics. Using the doctrine of the Church as the guardian of the *truth*, the Church crushed the heretics and became fully hierarchical. A partisan term that means only the Church had the proper way to salvation and the term used to describe this belief. In the process of becoming hierarchical, the Church survived the persecutions.

The question of why have a tripartite hierarchy has never truly been settled. The question of leadership in the Church would continue to resurface throughout history. Many centuries, after its establishment, the hierarchy would need to reassert its existence against many opponents. Martin Luther is only one example. He broke with the Catholic Church and came under vigorous attacks. This would force him to define more clearly his own system of beliefs. Also, this caused the Catholic Church to redefine itself. The radicalization of both under pressure was a recurrence of what happened in the first few centuries. Some Christians, are constantly asking the question, even if it were answered for some Churches.

Background

After the time of the Acts of the Apostles, the Church grew and developed mostly unhindered. This had to do with the fact that the Church was an insignificant institution that posed no threat to Roman hegemony. Around the year 112 A.D., acting in his gubernatorial capacity, Pliny the Younger wrote to his friend the Emperor Trajan for advice on what to do

about the Christians in his province. Trajan's response set the tone of Christian-Roman relations until the time of the Emperor Decius:

"They [Christians] are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished--yet on this condition, that whoso denies himself to be a Christian, and makes plain the fact by his action, that is by worshipping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance, however suspicious his past conduct maybe."³

This policy was full of inconsistencies about innocence and guilt, and Christian apologists, such as Tertullian, would take great joy in punching holes in it. Despite the logical disjuncture in the policy, Rome upheld and enforced it throughout the empire for more than one hundred years. In fact, most governors were reluctant to harm Christians.⁴ Nevertheless, under the Trajan doctrine of "don't-ask-don't-tell" Ignatius, the greatest early advocate of episcopal authority, met his death. He was the first Christian author who clearly advocated the episcopal system as the only acceptable form of polity. He wrote a series of letters that explicitly stated that the bishops are the prime agents of God upon the earth and must be obeyed.⁵

Several decades later a new powerful bishop, Irenaeus, would assert his power in the Church. He was the first great heretic hunter for the Church. In this capacity, he wrote a massive work, Against Heresies, which would become the justification for all future opposition to heresies. In his work, Irenaeus further developed and advanced the doctrine of the Church as the

³ W.H.C. Frend, The Early Church. (Philadelphia, 1966), p 56.

⁴ Elaine Pagels. The Gnostic Gospels (New York, 1979). For further examples see pages 80-83, and all of Ramsey McMullen's book, Paganism and Christianity 100-425 C.E.: a sourcebook. (Minneapolis, 1992.)

⁵ Frend, 78. See also, Henry Chadwick. The Early Church. (New York, 1967) p. 40. In this section is stressed that the bishop effectively had life and death powers by having the power to permit or prohibit the administration of the sacraments.

sole repository and guardian of the truth. He thus further strengthened the episcopal system by making the bishops the guardians of the Church and the arbiters of the truth. Bishops became the source of truth as they were the Church's leaders and successors of the apostles.

With the rise of Decius to the purple, matters for the Church changed. Decius was a conservative, old-fashioned Roman soldier, who longed for the days of glory. In a sense he was a reactionary against anything that was not truly Roman, including the Church. The major difference between the *Decian Persecutions* and its precursors was one of intensity. The Decian Persecution was empire-wide. This brought to the forefront the greatest episcopal advocate of the third-century Church, Cyprian. He is not the best known, nor even the most eloquent author of the era that is known today, but Cyprian was the greatest advocate of episcopal governance. Unlike many of his contemporaries he was not obsessed with doctrine alone, but also with discipline and organization. From Cyprian's writings it is clear that for him only the episcopacy was the legitimate form of Church governance, and he set out to enforce episcopal control over his *diocese*, even if he had to be in hiding to do it.⁶ A *diocese* is the geographical area and the members of the Church in that area are under the authority of a particular bishop. Following him was the Valerian Persecution, and finally the Great Persecution under Diocletian. With the ultimate failure of these persecutions, pagan Rome was finished and the Church became the dominant force in both the western and eastern regions of the Empire.

Interpretations.

From the very beginning there were questions of leadership and authority. Who was in charge? Why? Slowly and steadily the hierarchical model of authority, which was vested in the

⁶ Chadwick, pp.118-121.

office of the bishop, asserted its dominance over the entire Church. The persecutions caused this development. Why these events occurred and were concurrent has caused considerable debate; no one theory has become dominant. One can divide the interpretations into a few fields. The first interpretation maintains that the Church was the passive recipient of the persecutions and was lucky to survive the assault, but has failed to address adequately the rise of the episcopal system.⁷ Another school has argued that internal disputes caused the rise of the episcopal system of authority, and this school of thought states that the persecutions had little or no role in the development of the Church.⁸ The final answer has argued that the persecutions indirectly drove the development of the hierarchical system because the attacks caused the separated segments of Christianity to be in constant contact. This system argues that contact caused consolidation, but ignores the rivals that arose from the persecutions. Instead focusing on one major heresy alone, *Gnosticism*.⁹ These are the major interpretations of how the episcopal system became the dominant form of Church governance.

For W.H.C. Frend, the Church was the rock upon which the persecutions broke. His

⁷ Frend, see pages 107-119 for an examination of his doctrine of post attack rebuilding of the Church, and for a more complete picture see pages 128-156.

⁸ Jaraslov Pelikan. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600) (Chicago 1971.) See pages 97-120 for a more complete examination of his theory of the development of the hierarchy, but note a total lack of the word persecution.

⁹ Pagels, see pages 28-48 and 70-102, for a more complete and thorough understanding of her theory, but note that Pagels main emphasis is upon understanding the Gnostics, and how they influenced the development of the early Church. Considering that the two were bitter rivals it would imperative for her to cover material from the early Church to understand the nature of the rivalry. She believes that the Gnostic heresy is the most important internal division in the Church and that it played a role in the development of the Church. Noticeably absent from her treat of heresy and persecution are the resultant heretics and rebels. She ignores this critical component of the equation of Church development.

examination of the Decian Persecution has revealed his assumptions. He examined why Decius pursued the Church in the first place, but he admits that much debate upon the subject exists, as does upon the role the persecutions played in the development of the Church.¹⁰ Decius ordered that the Christians make sacrifices to the gods. According to Frend, it appeared that many did so and in fact were eager to sacrifice. These are the *lapsed*, to whom Cyprian referred at great length. Unfortunately for the Imperial efforts, all the Christian had to do was sacrifice and then essentially lay low and ride out the storm. This is what many appeared to do.¹¹ In the most simplistic terms, Frend has advocated that the Church took a direct blow from Rome, hit the mat, stayed down, and got up to rebuild once the bully was gone.

Frend has argued that after the persecutions, time permitted the development of the hierarchical system. He has explained that the Christians between the Decian and Valerian Persecutions used the opportunity “. . . to lick their wounds and pick up the broken pieces of their organization.”¹² During this time, which one could best call the era of Cyprian, Cyprian sought to complete the power of the bishop. Frend has said that under Cyprian, the North African Church completed its unification of the Church of bishops with the Church of the spirit. What this meant was that in the North African Church the belief in the strict behavior of the believer was predominant. Essentially, the North Africans--Numidians, Carthagians, Lybians, and Berbers--believed that they could not reinstate a lapsed easily into the life of the Church because he or she

¹⁰ Frend, 109-111, Decius either wanted to destroy the Church or he wanted to recharge the old pagan faith, either interpretation is possible for the historical information available.

¹¹ Frend, 111.

¹² Frend. 111.

had sacrificed his or her faith. Any cleric who lapsed had sacrificed his clerical power. In other words to rejoin the Church did not require penance but rebaptism.¹³ During the time of truce, Cyprian exerted his authority (and by extension episcopal authority as a doctrine) over the *rigorists* (those who wanted strict penance and rebaptism of lapsed) and *rebel confessors* (they also issued certificates of readmission to the lapsed) in Carthage. Despite any difficulties that he had, by the time of his death in 258 A.D., Cyprian was the undisputed leader of the Church in North Africa.¹⁴ Frend's system essentially has divided the persecutions and the development of hierarchy into two distinct events. The persecutions were something that the Church had to endure, and the development of hierarchy occurred because of the rebuilding of the Church. Frend has developed a connection but not pushed it to its logical conclusion.

Jaroslav Pelikan has seen in the various heretical groups the grounds for the development of the institutional Church. This internalized view of development in the Church has focused upon the rise of doctrine and the related disputes over it. In his book, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), Pelikan made clear his belief about the rise of the episcopal system: the Church needed heresy to develop into the hierarchical system that it would become and still is.¹⁵ In his view, the office of the bishop arose in response to the heretics because the bishops were determined to assert their authority over the faithful no matter what the consequences were. The bishops were not going to permit their flocks to be led astray by heretical elements.

For Pelikan's interpretation to work, the early Church had to have been obsessed with

¹³ Frend, 112

¹⁴ Frend, 112-114.

¹⁵ Pelikan 119.

accuracy of doctrine. He has advocated the idea that the early Church sought loyalty to the teachings of the apostles because they had come from Christ, who had come from God.¹⁶ This was apostolic continuity, the belief that the Church was correct because it followed the teachings of the apostles. Also, Pelikan has explained that Irenaeus' definition of a heretic--anyone who emphasized one element of the apostolic traditions over another¹⁷--is acceptable to understand the early Church. Pelikan's theory is clear: the hierarchical Church developed in response to internal stresses placed upon it. Noticeably absent from Pelikan's theory is the role of the persecutions.

In contrast, Elaine Pagels has suggested “. . . that the persecutions gave the impetus to the formation of the organized church structure that developed by the end of the second century.”¹⁸ She has explained that the persecutions caused the scattered Christians to write to one another, to warn the dispersed elements of the Church about the perilous situations that they faced. The leaders of the Church wrote to each other to consolidate the groups into one collective force united in the college of bishops. This interpretation has ample ground for stressing the role that early Christian correspondence played because that was what Paul did in the early Church. This unified force would offer the orthodox Church the greatest method to oppose the might of Rome and the *Gnostic* heresy.¹⁹ *Gnostics* were a very diverse group of believers,

¹⁶ Pelikan, 109.

¹⁷ Pelikan, 112-113. Pelikan says that Irenaeus said heretics choose one element of the apostolic tradition and used it to the exclusion of others. They in effect limit what the Church is because of their a la carte Christianity and the selected element became more authoritative than any other element of the faith. This appears to be the best definition of heresy for the Church's point of view in its formative period.

¹⁸ Pagels, 98.

¹⁹ Pagels. 98-99, and 116-118

both Christian and other, that believed knowledge was imperative to salvation.

Also, Pagels has stressed another reason for the survival of the early Church. One can see the suffering of the martyrs as joining in the suffering of the “*human Jesus*”²⁰; the suffering of the faithful caused a wonderment in the eyes of the Romans. They sought to investigate and ultimately join because the Christians believed something so strongly that they were willing to die for it.²¹ This faith was very alien in the formalistic pagan world of antiquity. Pagels has offered a powerful explanation that ties together both an internal division and the persecutions, but still is incomplete because it represents the two more as parallel than as connected events.

All these theories for the rise of the hierarchy and the role of the persecutions in the early Church have many positive elements, but they lack something. Frend has the persecutions as an attack upon the Church. Then followed a rebuilding with the Church as lucky to survive because so many were willing to lapse. Pelikan has practically dismissed the persecutions as irrelevant because of his stress upon internal divisions. Pagels has the persecutions as the force behind internal communications that caused unification but in a secondary role to that of the Gnostic heresy. Essentially, I have taken the positive elements of these major theories but stress the basic role of the persecutions. The lapsed, the rigorists, and the rebel confessors arose from the persecutions, and while that might have appeared to be a calamity, their existence made the Church a hierarchical institution. These different groups were foils against which the hierarchy could successfully define itself. Frend has a point in that the Church had to reconstruct itself after the persecutions; however, the Church was also under construction during the persecutions. The

²⁰ Pagels, 101. Italics are hers.

²¹ Pagels. 100-101.

persecutions provided the internal divisions and response that Pelikan has discussed without existing in his vacuum. Pagels has come closest in advocating the persecutions built the Church. The persecutions united the Church and caused the leaders to be in constant contact, and this contact allowed the college of bishops to assert their oversight. Through communication the bishops went to war against the rebels born of the persecutions and not just the Gnostics. Those who grew from the persecutions, lapsed and rebel confessors, were the internal divisions that the bishops needed to address. Bishops saw them as traitors to the Church; that is why Cyprian sought their destruction. The empire-wide communication system was how the bishops solidified their control of the Church. The persecutions were the force that caused the hierarchy.

Three figures, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian are crucial for this thesis. Ignatius can be found the foundations of the Church as a continuation of the apostles. He wrote powerful epistles defining the bishop as the sacrosanct figure. The impressive thing is that Ignatius wrote while he was on his way to die in Rome. In fact the persecutions inspired him to create a clear defense of the episcopacy. Several decades later Irenaeus wrote a powerful refutation of a particular group of heretics, the Gnostics. This work became the logic for future heretic hunters. Irenaeus' work established the Church as the authoritative body on the truth. Bishops could claim they were true because they were from the Church. While he wrote in a period of relative calm, the persecutions remained a backdrop throughout his life. The final great figure was Cyprian, who combined both Ignatius' and Irenaeus' doctrines. The Decian Persecution had created a new type of Christian, the confessors, who began to act like heretics. Cyprian went after them because they were a threat to the Church and the truth. They criticized his episcopacy, so he used the logic of Ignatius' episcopal defense against them. He also used Irenaeus' refutation of heretics as rebels

from the truth. These three men show the clear link between persecutions and Church development. Ignatius the System Architect, Irenaeus the Refuter of Heresy, and Cyprian the Synthesizer were great builders of the hierarchical Church. The following chapters will show just how each accomplished his function.

Chapter II--Ignatius: The System Architect

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and Martyr, was the first important victim of the Roman Persecutions. He died around the year 115A.D, so he fell under indictment of the Trajan Policy. He was a powerful defender of the office of the bishop. Early in the second century, the Church was in a precarious position because of its small size, obscurity, and lack of protection. In that dangerous climate Ignatius was a leader of critical importance; however, his importance came not from his actual episcopal governance but from epistles that he wrote. While on his way to die in a Roman amphitheater, he wrote epistles to the Ephesians, to the Magnesians, to the Trallians, to the Romans, to the Philadelphians, to the Smyrneans, and to Polycarp. His own impending death inspired a forceful defense and proclamation of the episcopal system of leadership. As with many early Church authors, Ignatius left little room for misunderstanding of his theology. He maintained the sacred nature of the bishop, the danger of heresy, and the significance of the persecutions.

For Ignatius, the office of the bishop was a sacred institution of God's own creation. Repeatedly, he proclaimed that the bishop was the vicar of Christ upon the earth.²² In all of his epistles to the Churches in Asia Minor Ignatius commanded that the faithful obey their bishop: "He who pays the bishop has been honored by God. But he who acts without the bishop's knowledge is in the devil's service."²³ In a particular case he counseled the church not to make presumptions upon their bishop's youthful inexperience. The faithful still had to obey him as he

²² "Epistle to the Ephesians 6:1, 319" and "Epistle to the Trallians 2:2, 325-326" The New Testament and other Early Christian Writings. Ed. Bart D. Ehrman. (New York, 1998.)

²³ "Epistle to the Smyrneans 9:1. 336"

was a bishop and a divine agent of God's.²⁴ Despite his own troubles as a bishop, Ignatius remained explicitly clear concerning his belief in the sacredness of the episcopal office. Under absolutely no circumstances did he deem it appropriate to fail to maintain communion with one's bishop. Ignatius' belief in the bishop as the vicar of Christ upon the earth has explained why he could never permit a lawful separation from the bishop. Such a separation would have constituted a direct separation from Christ. This doctrine of apostolic succession remained a constant theme throughout all of Ignatius' epistles to the Asian Churches.

Ignatius did not stop with the claim that the episcopacy was the manifestation of Christ upon the earth but he also maintained that obedience to the bishop was imperative for being a good Christian. He proclaimed that to lead a good life and to have a good conscience, the faithful must submit to their bishop: "Inside the sanctuary a person is pure; outside he is impure. That means: whoever does anything without the bishop, presbytery, and deacons does not have a clear conscience."²⁵ Ignatius did not argue obedience for obedience's sake; one needed to be obedient to live properly. Through obedience to the bishop the Christian would lead a good life because the bishop would guide him or her to proper behavior. A belief of infallibility is implicitly found throughout this line of argumentation. No direct evidence can support such claims about Ignatius' belief; however, the conclusion remains entirely logical for he said that the bishop would guide the faithful to proper living. In this line of argument no hint that the bishop can or will err can be found. If to live a good life one must obey one's bishop, then the bishop cannot provide bad guidance, so he must be infallible.

²⁴ "Epistle tot the Magnesians 3:1, 323"

²⁵ "Epistle to the Trallians 7:2, 326"

Another element of critical importance was the solidarity of the episcopal office. Ignatius often praised his fellow bishops in the execution of their pastoral offices. He provided encouragement, guidance, and friendly advice that covered a range of topics and concerns. Polycarp was a young bishop that Ignatius encouraged to be diligent in his duty to control his flock but not too severely, to combat heresy and guard his flock and to preach against all of improper and presumption behavior.²⁶ Through these epistles he strongly encouraged the diocese of his brother bishops to obey. Furthermore, Ignatius called the bishops to protect their flocks. This protection was the bishops' response to the faithful's loyalty to him. Ignatius firmly believed in the familial nature of the episcopal office and practiced it through communicating his praises and advice to his brother bishops.²⁷ This familial concept had consequences for the Church as a whole. Ignatius was a bishop who commented upon other bishops' dioceses, not to assert control but to aid.²⁸ While he only offered advice, a logical step would be for future bishops to give orders, and this would occur. In these consultations one can see the development of ranks within the episcopal order itself. One must keep in mind that Ignatius' see, Antioch, was one of the original Patriarchal Sees of the Church. This was given to the main cities of the faith and initially were five, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome seemed to be roughly coequals with particular geographical spheres of dominance. Ignatius was the bishop of a great city and that gave him precedence over other bishops. He was the most senior prelate in the region, so he was someone who could speak authoritatively. He used his rank to build the Church

²⁶"Epistle to Polycarp 1-5, 337-338".

²⁷"Epistle to the Ephesians 6:1, 319" and "Epistle to the Magnesians 3:1, 323"

²⁸ See again, "Epistle to Polycarp"

as a hierarchical institution by calling for obedience to the bishop.²⁹ This activity would have long-term implications for the Church. What he advocated has remained throughout history, the Church. In the following century hierarchy would come not only to be normative but a sacrament by itself.

While on his way to Rome and death, Ignatius exercised an element of his office, the bishop as teacher. He condemned the heresies in the Church. During this time two heresies plagued the Church--*Judaizers* and *Docetics*. *Judaizers* were early Christians who believed that following Judaic practices were imperative to being good Christians, a common group of them was the Ebionites who also were *Adoptionists* in that they did not believe Christ was a divine being. *Docetics* believed the exact opposite in that Christ only seemed human.³⁰ The *Judaizers* received several blasts of contempt and ire from the Bishop of Antioch.³¹ He dismissed the notion that Christianity was built upon Judaism because for him the converse was true. The argument ran that all the heroes of the Jewish faith--in particular the prophets--were precursors of Christ. They had pointed to Christ and as such could be understood as preparing the way for the Incarnation of the Savior. Reduced to its most basic level Ignatius' doctrine was that the Jews had no claim to the prophets and any attempts to claim so would be supreme hubris. "How then, can we live without him [Jesus] when even the prophets, who were his disciples by the Spirit

²⁹ "Epistle to the Philadelphians 7:2b, 333" "Do nothing apart from the bishop. . . value unity; flee from schism; imitate Jesus Christ as he imitated his father."

³⁰ Bard D. Ehrman, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings. (New York, 1997). pp. 423 & 425.

³¹ See "Epistle to the Magnesians 8:1, 323 and 10:3, 324" and "Epistle to the Philadelphians 6:1, 335"

awaited him as their teacher?"³² Ignatius dismissed the Judaizers as misguided fools. In this capacity of attacking heresy, Ignatius sought to maintain the theological purity of the Church. This goal was typical of all the heretic hunters down through the ages. Also, the idea of the bishop as guardian meshed well with the doctrine of the bishop as the protector of the people. Ignatius' response to the Judaizers would strengthen the hierarchical system.

Another major heretical group of Ignatius' day were the *Docetics*. They maintained that Christ only seemed human. Many early Christians maintained that Christ neither suffered the pain of the crucifixion nor was human.³³ This heresy, Docetism, offered a powerful challenge to the Church and Ignatius was up to the challenge of refuting it. He attacked this heresy because it removed the human nature of the Savior. This fact was very important for the survival of the early Church during Roman opposition. His criticism of Docetism was powerful because he established the fact that Christ had suffered and that fact was imperative to accept as an element of the faith.

Ignatius' belief that to live a good life one must follow the bishop makes the reasons that he attacked the heresies clear. As the guardian of his flock he had to eradicate all corruption of the faith because he had to ensure that the truths be taught. These heresies presented challenges to the episcopal system and to the development of the Church's doctrinal stances. As a bishop, Ignatius' duty was to maintain the truth and lead the people into the truth, so he had to confront

³² "Epistle to the Magnesians 9:2a, 323"

³³ "Epistle to the Trallians 10:2. 326" Ignatius declared "And if, as some atheist (I mean unbelievers) say his suffering was a sham (it's really they who are a sham) . . ." He offered a powerful critic to the Docetics and profound reason to relish in the suffering of Christ.

heresy to remain loyal to the mission of a bishop.³⁴ Also, as a representative of God upon the earth, if he failed to protect the truth, the Church would face terrible consequences. He had to protect the truth because he derived all of his authority and power from God. If he did not do this, then he would have compromised his own position.

All these elements are important in understanding the Church in the early stages of the hierarchy's development. The key element was the persecutions. Ignatius did not write these epistles in a vacuum, but he wrote them on his way to martyrdom in Rome. In reality he rejoiced in the fact that he was about to suffer. He desired all manners of torment and told his visitors, who came to see him, not to interfere by trying to prevent his suffering. Under no circumstances was a reprieve from the pain that awaited him in the arena to be sought.

"I am corresponding with all the churches and bidding them realize that I am voluntarily dying for God--if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unreasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts--that is how I can get to God. I am God's wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beast to make a pure loaf for Christ. I would rather that you fawn on the beast so that they may be my tomb and no scrap of my body left. Thus, when I have fallen asleep, I shall be a burden to no one. Then I shall be a real disciple of Jesus Christ when the world sees my body no more. Pray Christ for me that by these means I may become God's sacrifice."³⁵

This fact may sound perverse to the ears of modern humanity, but Ignatius was not atypical among early Christians. One must remember that he was not typical either. Not every Christian wanted to endure or even submit to pain. For further discussion upon martyrdom see the Martyrdom of Polycarp and Pagels' book, The Gnostic Gospels. The reason he offered for a

³⁴ "Epistle to the Trallians 11:1-2, 326-327"

³⁵ "Epistle to the Romans 4:1-2, 329"

desire to suffer was that death would bring him to Christ sooner.³⁶ Only if one accepts the doctrine of eternal life and salvation can Ignatius' logic be understood. Ignatius earnestly believed that after a brief moment of pain he would be born into an eternal life of glory. This belief explained his willingness to suffer, and why so many others would endure similar treatments from the masters of the world. The end prize was eternity. Eternal life gave many Christians the courage to defy the persecutions, and this defiance catapulted the Church from survival to ultimate victory.

At the heart of the Christians' willingness to suffer was the belief that Christ had suffered. In suffering Ignatius would be joining with Christ.³⁷ This was the logic of martyrdom. The faithful's savior had suffered and by so doing they themselves would join with him. Also this faith in joining with Christ explained why Ignatius so vigorously attacked the Docetics, who maintained Christ's suffering was not real. They would have deprived the Church of a way to endure suffering. If Christ did not suffer, then many would have fallen away because the motivation to endure would not have been present. The suffering of the Savior became the model of obedience for it gave the faithful the model to emulate. Christ was the first martyr and all others followed in his footsteps. In the mind of the faithful no better role model could have been found.

All of Ignatius' themes were intricately connected to one another. They provided the foundation upon which the Church would build a system to endure the fury of Roman assault. Ignatius' model would remain the main method of survival until the Edict of Milan in 312 A.D.

³⁶ See "Epistles to the Romans 4:2, 329" and also "Epistle to the Trallians 10, 326"

³⁷ "Epistle to the Trallians 9:1, 326" Jesus ". . . was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died, in the sight of heaven and earth and the underworld."

While he did not create the concepts himself, Ignatius was the first to unite them into a coherent program. All of this great labor came about because of his own impending death. That in of itself remains a testimony to the role that the persecutions played in the development of the hierarchy. The quest to destroy one bishop accomplished his death alone; consequently, Rome's triumph was worse than any pyrrhic victory. What Ignatius gave the Church, which he served so faithfully, was ground upon which to build the ultimate triumph. His own defeat rallied the Church's troops for battle.

He gave the faithful and the Church the logic to endure assault--bishops and imitation of Christ. The Church would follow this until the end of the persecutions and beyond. Irenaeus and Cyprian would further develop Ignatius' powerful defense of the episcopal system. Both would continue the attacks upon heresies as arrogant corruptions of the faith. Cyprian did modify the idea of the suffering believer because many would claim it gave them, confessors, special privileges. He maintained, as did Ignatius, that only obedience would lead to true salvation. Cyprian modified Ignatius' view in that he strengthened the episcopacy into a diocesan barony. The bishops would come to have absolute control over their diocese in all matters dealing with faith and morals. .

Chapter III--Irenaeus: Refuter of Heresy

Irenaeus (130-202) was born in Smyrna in Asia Minor and was a pupil of Polycarp, whom many said was a pupil of John the Apostle.³⁸ Irenaeus represents a midway point between Ignatius and Cyprian. He served as the Bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon, France) where he had to confront heresy. Polycarp was also a close friend of Ignatius. Irenaeus would die in the same year that Cyprian was born, so he did not have a direct connection to Cyprian. The common denominator among all three, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, was that they were vigorous defenders of the Church against heretics. Irenaeus wrote a powerful tract Against Heresies (or Refutation and Overthrow of the "Knowledge" Falsely So Called). In this he attacked the various Gnostic doctrines--duality of God, a docetic Christ, and the evilness of the world.³⁹ Irenaeus' efforts proved strong in defending the Church and refuting Gnosticism.

To understand Irenaeus' work, understanding the Gnostics is imperative and the challenge they presented to the Church. In the second century the Gnostics, particularly in the region of Lyon, offered a greatest challenge to the Church. According to Gerard Valle, Irenaeus probably knew several Gnostics and had to defend the Church against them.⁴⁰ Still, why he wrote Against Heresies can be debated. Possible reasons range from a friend seeking advice to an insider seeking clarification. A friend of some sort seems to have inspired the work, but whatever the

³⁸ Hugh T. Kerr, Ed. Readings in Christian Thought, Second Addition (Nashville, 1990) p. 29.

³⁹ Kerr, 29.

⁴⁰ Gerard Valle A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics: Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius. (Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1981.) p.9.

inspiration Irenaeus did not write out of obligation.⁴¹ Many have argued that Irenaeus wrote as both bishop and as a teacher.⁴² The great tracts of the Church Fathers would follow Irenaeus' time. Suffering was the prime concern of the Church until the time of Irenaeus. Also, the Church's motivation was survival. He did not write epistles to correct a specific issue but wrote to refute a massive challenge to the Church, the Gnostics.

Gnostics maintained many different beliefs. They believed in the duality of the cosmos. The Gnostics believed that the God of Redemption and the God of Creation were two distinct entities. The difference was that the God Creator was an evil, monovalent being, and the true god was the Redeemer who was above the Creator.⁴³ In effect the Gnostics claimed that the Creator God was Satan, and the Redeemer was the true God. This point would open the Gnostics to many attacks with the charge being lead by Irenaeus.

The docetic nature of Christ and the way that salvation worked is what presented the greatest source of disagreement by Irenaeus and others. The Gnostics believed that Christ came to bring secret knowledge to redeem or set men free. Gnosis means knowledge in Greek. Only through secret knowledge could one escape the evilness of creation. For them the body was a vile and wicked thing as were all physical creations. Only the spirit was good as it came from the

⁴¹ Valle, 10.

⁴² Valle, 10. In his footnote he list many who have put forth a similar claim for Irenaeus as the first teacher-bishop--Bousset, and Danielou. Irenaeus spoke to correct and edify and as bishop, but he can hardly be called the originator of such episcopal practices. A close examination of works by Ignatius and Polycarp would show this. What Irenaeus was the probably originator of was the teaching-bishop who wrote massive works. These others wrote mainly short epistles to correct specific issues and not broad general trend.

⁴³ Jarolsav Pelikan. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600). (Chicago. 1971.) pp.86-87.

Creator. Christ came to liberate the spirit from the body through knowledge. Also, Christ as he came from, the Creator was not a corporeal being but only appeared to be one.⁴⁴ Those are just some basic points about the Gnostics' beliefs and their polar oppositeness to those of the Church.

Irenaeus wrote a detailed and long refutation to the Gnostic challenge facing the Church. His work Against Heresies, a five-volume tome, provided a vigorous challenge to the Gnostics on all fronts. Irenaeus' work against them is a prime source of our knowledge about Gnosticism; indeed until recently, we only knew them through negative witnesses. The reasons he wrote might be unclear but the significance of Irenaeus' efforts is abundantly clear. He was a bishop who was determined to protect the Church from heresy. Unlike the other two great episcopal advocates, Ignatius and Cyprian, Irenaeus did not live in an overtly hostile environment. During his tenure as a bishop, the Church had relative peace from the empire. The great assaults would come in the next century and provide the final catalyst for ultimate victory. What Irenaeus provided therefore was a link between the early persecutions and the later ones and clear logic of how to oppose heretics. Effectively, Irenaeus executed a blistering attack upon the Gnostics and vigorously defended the Church against their claims.

For Irenaeus, the Gnostics' denial of the Incarnation of Christ, belief in dual powers, denial of the value of martyrdom, and belief in their interpretation could not go unchallenged. The Gnostics maintained Christ was not a human; this was a supreme challenge to the interpretation that Irenaeus (and the Church) held to be divine truth. He denied that their belief

⁴⁴ Pelikan, pp. 88-92. The meanings of the terms docetic and gnosticism are important. Docetic comes from the Greek meaning to appear, so in being docetical the Gnostics said that Christ only appeared to be physical, but in truth was only a spirit. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word gnosis meaning knowledge. So, in effect their name said that they had the secret knowledge that would lead to salvation.

had any validity because they “. . . inveigh against the Scriptures.”⁴⁵ For Irenaeus, the scriptures were the main font of divine revelation. In scripture could be found the truth about Christ, God, Salvation, and many other great mysteries of the faith. His attitude demonstrated a clear belief that there was only one correct interpretation of the scriptures and that the Gnostics were wrong.

As with all of the ancient Christian authors Irenaeus was not merely content with showing that heretics were wrong but had to demonstrate that they were evil. “. . . we consider it requisite to allege the whole view of the Apostles touching our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . they went on to point out by the Holy Spirit the beginnings of such doctrine [a docetic Christ coming for sundry reasons], as being privily sent by Satan to overturn the faith of some, and withdraw them from life.”⁴⁶ This represents the trend throughout all of the writings of the early faithful. Heresy comes from Satan to corrupt and destroy; heretics are the minions of Satan. Believing that he had the complete truth, Irenaeus could not let the Gnostics go unchallenged. The Gnostics wanted a different interpretation and there had to be only one interpretation, from Irenaeus’ perspective.

For Irenaeus, another unacceptable element of Gnostics was its belief in multiple gods. Irenaeus refuted the idea of more than one god using a simple argument that many used against the pantheon of gods. He postulated that if there were two then there could be more. then the powers of the gods would be divided into spheres. Each would maintain his own sphere, but would be insignificant compared with the rest. Inferiority is not the mark of God because such a

⁴⁵ Five Books of Irenaeus: Bishop of Lyon, Against Heresies. Tr. Rev. John Keble. (Oxford, 1872). p.31..

⁴⁶ Five Books of Irenaeus. p.263.

system has to lead to atheism.⁴⁷ What Irenaeus did with this argument was very similar to how many argued against the pagan system of the empire. In effect Irenaeus told the Gnostics that they were no better than the pagans. He removed from them any claim to belong to the Christian faith.

Irenaeus' invective against the Gnostics knew no bound. He attacked them with unbridled wrath and sarcasm for their hubris in attempts to supersede the Apostles.

“Abandoned therefore by the Father’s Love, and puffed up by Satan, and having become converts to the teaching of Simon Magus, they have fallen away in their views from Him Who is God, and having imagined themselves to have discovered more than the Apostles, while they are devising another God. And the Apostles, they say, while they preached the Gospel, had yet the same ideas with the Jews; but they are more genuine and wiser than the Apostles. And hence Marcion and his party have set themselves to mutilate the Scriptures;. . .”⁴⁸

In this Irenaeus demonstrated that these heretics went beyond the scope of the apostles' teachings, and created their own god from their corrupted canon. Essentially, he saw them as inventing a new religion built upon the corruption of Satan and one that had no truth. Irenaeus' views concerning heretics represent a clear hardening of the battle lines between *orthodoxy* and heresy. *Orthodoxy*, another partisan term that means right belief. The Church used the term to describe its belief system as opposed to those of other belief systems; they were heretics.

Alongside the explicit attacks upon heresy in Irenaeus' works can be found his definition

⁴⁷ Five Books of Irenaeus p.96.

⁴⁸ Five Books of Irenaeus. p.250 Marcion was a key leader of the Gnostic faith. In fact he developed the first canon or “New Testament”. It included the Gospel of Luke, ten Pauline Epistles (Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Why he was accused them of mutilating the Scriptures had to do with the fact that Marcion eliminated the entire Old Testament as irrelevant to the faith. For further details see Pelikan's The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), pp.76-80.

of what the Church was. For Irenaeus, the definition was *apostolic*. The apostles had built/founded the Church and grounded its teachings upon scripture and themselves as Christ's representatives. Also, the apostles said that Christ came to fulfill the scriptures and save all. The apostles spoke the truth and showed their power by surviving in an overtly hostile world. In that time the Church was pure and no corruptors like Marcion nor Valentinus were around;⁴⁹ the Church's birth was in a hostile age but survived because it spoke the truth. Irenaeus maintained that the Church was true over the Gnostics because she survived and predated them, in that the apostles were not Gnostics.

The apostolic origin of the Church would also guarantee that the Church was the only font of truth and knowledge. "The proofs therefore being so abundant, we ought no more to look for the Truth elsewhere, which it is easy to obtain from the Church, the Apostles having therein most abundantly deposited, as in a rich storehouse, whatsoever appertains to the truth"⁵⁰ Irenaeus advocated that the Church was the only ground of the truth because the apostles and scripture were the only sources of truth. One can see this as an elevation of the Church as an institution. The Church was beginning to be seen as authoritative and not merely as an aggregate of teaching. Irenaeus' advancement of the Church would set the stage for his successors to develop the Church further. Considering that they believed the Church was the only repository of the truth, then Irenaeus' and Cyprian's opposition to heresy becomes more understandable. Heretics went against the Church and as such went against the truth. This doctrine would continue to develop

⁴⁹ Five Books of Irenaeus. pp. 241-242.

⁵⁰ Five Books of Irenaeus. p.209. Following ". . . wherefore we ought, shunning them, with all diligence to love what belongs to the Church, and to lay hold of the Traditions of the truth."

and progress throughout the years leading to the triumph of the episcopal system. The belief of Church as truth would allow the Church to survive, but it would also not permit the Church to tolerate any that disagreed with it.

Continuing in this line, Irenaeus saw the Church as having a unity in membership and government. The Church was one and only one; any who were not inside the Church were outside; therefore, they were the spawn of Satan. While Irenaeus did not make much explicit mention of the episcopal office, he did make a few unambiguous statements. “. . . the Bishops to whom the Apostles delivered the churches; . . .”⁵¹ were the foundations of the Church and that “True knowledge, is the teaching of the Apostles, and the original system of the Church . . . and the mark of Christ’s Body in the several successions of the Bishops. to whom they committed the Church, . . .”⁵² Such statements demonstrate what Irenaeus believed was appropriate for Church government and discipline. This belief was in a direct line with that of Ignatius and Cyprian. Irenaeus deemed episcopacy not only normative but the only acceptable model for the Church. Irenaeus stressed that the Church was the location of truth because the apostles built the Church. Irenaeus had left no other option for Church governance. He provided a vigorous defense of both the legitimacy and polity of the Church. Unlike the other two great episcopal advocates, Ignatius and Cyprian, Irenaeus was not so clear because his fight was of a more doctrinal than disciplinary nature.

⁵¹ Five Books of Irenaeus, p.495. The context of the quote is that the heretics had made many statements/claims that originate from times after the initial transfer of power to bishops from the Apostles, and therefore, those claims cannot claim any apostolicity. Irenaeus said that such claims were blatantly false because they failed to obey the traditions of the truth of the Church.

⁵² Five Books of Irenaeus, p.408.

In his work, Against Heresies, Irenaeus emphasized the Church as the source of truth. While his work does not demonstrate as clearly as others' works, the role of the persecutions, it does show the mindset that would permit the orthodox leaders to challenge heretics. He lived and presided over a period of relative tolerance. That is not to say that sporadic persecutions did not occur, but the direct attacks upon the Church were not a concern of the empire. Irenaeus lived in the calm before the storm. Shortly after his death the direct persecutions by the state would occur. His significance remains that he provided a clear logic of antiheresy.

Irenaeus' created one of the first detailed apologetic works of the Church, a defense not directed outward to the pagan empire, but toward dissenters. This external direction was the one that in which most of the early apologists wrote. The empire did not really accept nor read these works, but the apologists wrote to them. For examples of such works see Justin Martyr, and later Tertullian. The calm of the time allowed Irenaeus the chance to write such a massive work. He was not pressed with issues of survival as were Ignatius and Polycarp. The size and stability of the Church allowed it to address internal debates. His view of the Church stressed that it was the source of truth because it was founded upon the apostles and scripture. Those were the only two sources of truth. Gnostics were wrong because they went against the twin sources of truth. Internal divisions were an aid in development of the episcopal polity. The Church became radicalized to survive the persecutions, so the internal divisions had to be crushed and Irenaeus wrote the logic to destroy the internal divisions.

Irenaeus developed the doctrine that the Church was the exclusive repository of the truth. This would have many consequences for the future. Many of Irenaeus' successors took up this doctrine. Cyprian also believed that the Church was the only truth and he opposed the heretics

because of it. This doctrine gave the Church the base to oppose the heretics that were and would arise. Also, this gave the Church the ability to endure the persecutions because they alone had the truth. Irenaeus firmly established this doctrine that would bolster the Church throughout the many storms that would come.

Chapter IV--Cyprian: The Synthesizer

Theological Justification

Cyprian, both Bishop of Carthage and a Martyr, throughout his crusades against both heresy and the persecutions left little room for doubt about his beliefs. He strongly attacked heretics and those who assumed superscriptual authority. While it might appear, he was jealous of his own power as a bishop, that misses the fundamental point: Cyprian's environment. The time of the Decian (and subsequent Valerian) Persecutions were some of the darkest hours in Church history. The persecutions virtually shook the Church to its foundations. Only through strong leadership, such as Cyprian's, did the Church survive, and in fact without this terrible calamity, the Church might not have come out in the manner it did. Only through great struggles did the hierarchy fully assert its dominance as the normative form of Church polity. In Cyprian's writings can be found the process of development. His treatise, "On the Unity of the Church" was the foundation of his doctrine of episcopal control. Cyprian wrote it in the time of great struggle when the outcome was unknown, and Cyprian would not live to see the final triumph that he strove his entire life to achieve. In short Cyprian was the one of the most powerful Church leaders of his time not because of deep profound theological works, but because created a clear and concise vision of what the Church was and should be. His obsession with discipline has meant that he has not received the attention others have, but he has offered a window onto what the third century was like. This fact makes him more important than figures like Clement of Alexandria or other of the great theological/apologetic writers. While they were obsessed with theology, Cyprian was building a Church to endure to this day: the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Communion.

Cyprian put Ignatius' doctrine of episcopal authority into practice, and he was one of the greatest advocates of episcopal control in the Church. In the time of the Decian Persecution, Cyprian faced the greatest trial that had assailed the Church to date. The storm that battered the Church came not exclusively from the external pagan Roman Empire, but also from internal divisions that arose out of the Imperial assault. A new class of Christians was born, the confessors. The older class of *martyr* was still around, but there was a clear difference between the two. A martyr died for his or her faith, whereas a confessor only suffered for his or her faith. Rome might have tortured or imprisoned the confessor but usually achieved release. All that is not to say that the Decian Persecution lacked martyrs, but that a new class of Christians arose from the war with Rome. Cyprian defined the persecutions as a rebuke from heaven because so many had departed from the way of the apostles.⁵³ In his mind all of the troubles arose from the persecutions and the heresies that accompanied them, and in this spirit he aggressively sought to defend and proclaim his episcopal authority.

The confessors were a trial for the Bishop of Carthage. They stressed that their suffering gave them a special role to play in the Church. Cyprian saw this as an extension of power that went beyond the established doctrine of authority founded upon *Apostolic Succession*. The belief that bishops were the successors of the apostles and each bishop could trace back those who had ordained him to a particular apostle. His faith in the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, forcefully

⁵³ "On the Lapsed" Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol.1). (Edinburgh, 1869.) P. 354. See also Acts 9:31 New Oxford Annotated Bible. (New York, 1991). This explains that the Church grew because it feared the Lord and lived a life inspired and filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the typical clause for the understanding how the church grew, and why later it was persecuted--it departed from the teachings and practices of the Apostolic Age.

proclaimed by Ignatius, compelled him to defend the Church against the development of these “extra offices.” which did not come from Christ. The class of confessors arose out of the persecutions. At the root of the problem was that the confessors were issuing certificates to let the lapsed back into the Church.⁵⁴ For Cyprian, this stepped beyond good Christian behavior and into heretical action because it was an abrogation of his authority as bishop: only the bishop had the power to reinstate.

In his treatise “On the Unity of the Church,” Cyprian advocated his belief in the Doctrine of Apostolic Succession, and by extension absolute episcopal control over the Church.⁵⁵ As with all of Cyprian’s writings there is very little room for doubt of where he stood. In this treatise, he established what the unity of the Church was and that any who deviated from it were great sinners. “God is one, Christ is one, His Church is one, the faith is one, and the people, is joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of Concord.”⁵⁶ He clearly defined what a heretic was, what the proper role of the bishop was, and what the proper roles/functions of both martyrs and confessors were. This document is Cyprian in his most theological and most eloquent state, but one must remember that even here he was a practical man obsessed with discipline. Also, the voice and tone of the treatise are very caustic and outright condemning of those who opposed the Doctrine of Apostolic Succession. He believed that he had every right to defend the Church in

⁵⁴ Lapsed “those guilty of apostasy during the persecutions” Jaroslav Pelikan. The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600). Pelikan’s definition is the simplest, and the one that gets at the heart of the matter.

⁵⁵ “On the Unity of the Church” Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol 1). Eds. Rev. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. (Edinburgh, 1868). Pp. 377-398.

⁵⁶ “On the Unity of the Church”, p. 396. Cyprian clearly expresses what unity is. The necessity is also established because there is only one God and Church that leads to salvation.

the manner he did.⁵⁷ In many ways Cyprian was the first line of defense in the North African Church. He had to lead his people through dark times, and as such, it was not the time to dispute the Church's leadership.

Cyprian believed that to become a heretic one had to make a voluntary decision. The heretic separated from the fold of the Church and in the process led others away from the Church. Cyprian condemned heretics with full vigor as those who “. . . appoint themselves prelates without any law of ordination, who assume to themselves the name of bishop, although no one gives them the episcopate”;⁵⁸ This reaches to the heart of his belief in the office of the bishop as sacrosanct. The point is that he saw the heretics claiming the office of bishop on their own without the standard method of becoming a bishop--ordination. A heretic was a thief of the sacred office and a destroyer of the holy followers of Christ.

As for the nature and source of heresy Cyprian was explicitly clear. The author of corruption of the faith is the Serpent “. . . [the creeping stealing thing]. That is always his subtlety; that is his dark and stealthy artifice for circumventing man. Thus from the very beginning of the world he deceived;”⁵⁹ This serpent, code for Satan, is the true enemy of the

⁵⁷ “Epistle IX” Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol. 1). P. 42. He saw it as imperative that he use his power of admonishment to both strengthen his case and defend the Church.

⁵⁸ “On the Unity of the Church”, p. 385. “whom the Holy Spirit points out in the Psalms as sitting in the seat of pestilence, plagues, and spots of the faith, deceiving with serpent's tongue, and artful in corrupting the truth, vomiting forth deadly poisons from pestilential tongues; whose speech doth creep like a cancer, whose discourse forms a deadly poison in the heart and breast of every one.” Cyprian does not pull any punches when it comes to his belief. He saw the heretic as a great blight upon the Church that he had to expunge.

⁵⁹ “On the Unity of the Church”, p. 378.

Church, who works his will through the heresies. He linked the heresies with the persecutions as great dangers that assaulted the Church; in fact he proclaimed that the heretic was a greater enemy. "For it is not the persecutions alone that is to be feared; . . . The enemy is more to be feared and to be guarded against, when creeps on us secretly;"⁶⁰ If there remained any doubt to the authorship of heresy, then Cyprian summed up his point in an economical sentence: "He has invented heresies and schisms, whereby he might subvert the faith, might corrupt the truth, might divide the unity."⁶¹ Cyprian saw the heretic as one who attempted to defeat the unity of the Church. This role of unity was of critical importance to him, and he was determined to defend it at all costs and from all assailants--both internal and external.

For Cyprian, heresy had a value for the Church and faithful. Heresy provided a means to strengthen the faithful because it removed the corrupt from the Church, thus protecting the Church, a body of pure believers. The heretic cannot be in Christ if he or she is not in communion with Christ's priests.⁶² He or she pulled asunder his or her faith to the point that separation from God was the only remaining option. According to Cyprian, those who remained in the Church remained pure and grew stronger which led to both great faith and acts. The faithful also obeyed the commands of the bishop(s). Cyprian praised the faithful for their constancy and attacked the heretics with unbridled calumny.

⁶⁰ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 378. In this section it is interesting that Cyprian has the serpent as author of both heresy and persecutions.

⁶¹ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 379. There can be absolutely no doubt of the authorship of the heresies from the point of view of Cyprian--Satan. His argumentation might seem incredibly harsh but was fairly typical for the time.

⁶² "On the Unity of the Church", 391.

Cyprian saw in the two classes, lapsed and heretic, two different types of separation from the Church, both reprehensible, though he could restore one through proper efforts while the other was the very definition of hubris. Heretics were worse than the lapsed because the heretic sought to divide the Church through human invention (encouraged by Satan) that destroyed the truth and resisted God--Christ and Gospel. The lapsed only imperiled their own souls; however, the heretic put a multiplicity of souls in jeopardy through enticements to join in folly.⁶³ If penitent, then the lapsed could return to the Church through the proper method of penance established by the Church.⁶⁴ Those who separated themselves from the Church due to heresy carry many to the serpent. That is not to say that Cyprian was gentle with the lapsed for he brought his considerable wrath upon them as well.⁶⁵

For Cyprian, one can state the root of unity in one word--episcopacy. He defined the episcopacy as one, just as the Church is one; the bishop's job was to defend the unity, and make the Church one and undivided.⁶⁶ He further developed this doctrine of unity by stating that the Church was the bride of Christ; he who lacked the Church as Mother lacked God as Father.⁶⁷ The bishop was he who was responsible for the defense of the Church. Cyprian proclaimed that the Church was the necessary method toward salvation, yet even she was under assault both internally

⁶³ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 393.

⁶⁴ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 393

⁶⁵ "On the Lapse" Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol 1.). Pp. 357-358. In this section he accused the lapsed of inconsistency in faith for their willingness to sacrifice, and in fact they sacrificed themselves upon the alters to the serpent.

⁶⁶ "On the Unity of the Church" p.381.

⁶⁷ "On the Unity of the Church". p, 382

and externally. The trouble in which Mother Church found herself was the reason he was such a vigorous defender of her.

Cyprian defined the episcopacy as a sacrament. In this sense Cyprian compared the Church with the garment of Christ at the crucifixion because the guards could not divide the garment, so no one can divide the Church.⁶⁸ If division were impossible, then a very perplexing question arises: how to account for the fact that heretics were separated from the Church? Cyprian answered the question straightforwardly. Heretics chose to separate themselves from the Church.⁶⁹ He announced that the unity of the Church is eternal and perpetual; in simplistic terms the faithful will not separate and only the heretic full of hubris separates of his or her own volition. In Cyprian's eyes they had done it to themselves; therefore, they were responsible for their own actions.

Cyprian argued that unity does not divide or destroy or "profane the sacrament."⁷⁰ With this he further built a doctrine of unity. The heretics often used the idea of two or three gathered to pray as grounds for division from the Church because it does not mention the necessity for a hierarchy in prayer. Cyprian stressed that this idea of prayer has unity as a prerequisite to be effective. He stated that one cannot gather in Christ's name if one is separated from the Church because Christ "made and ordained" the Church, and few united in it can accomplish more than the multiplicity in disunity.⁷¹ His straightforward proclamations upon the doctrine of unity

⁶⁸ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 382-383.

⁶⁹ "On the Unity of the Church", p. 385

⁷⁰ "On the Unity of the Church" p. 390.

⁷¹ "On the Unity of the Church" p. 387-388

concerned the value of prayer. In it people are to forgive and seek forgiveness before coming to Church and attendance at Church was utterly useless unless one was in union with the priests.⁷² Through simple logic one has to conclude that unity with the priest also meant unity with the bishop and the entire Church. Here, Cyprian fleshed out the doctrine that the Church was indivisible and in the office of the bishop. He had established a practical disciplinarian doctrine of unity.

The greatest hindrances to the doctrine of unity were the confessors, who arose out of the persecutions. Essentially, the confessors gave writs to the lapsed to be readmitted into the life of the Church. Despite the torture and suffering they had undergone, Cyprian did not spare the confessors any ire if they behaved contrary to Christ's ordinances. He stated "Confession is the beginning of Glory, and not the full dessert of the Crown."⁷³ In this he reminded the confessors that they were still subject to the Church, for only the true martyr achieves the Crown. Also, he reminded them that the value of turning a confessor was great in the eyes of the serpent. Confessors were highly valued prizes who would undergo terrible assault.⁷⁴ He had issued a stern warning to the confessors. They had achieved glory and a share of the Crown because of their suffering, but as bishop, he retained the real authority. While he never explicitly said it in this way, he implicitly stressed that the persecutions made the confessors, but Christ authored the

⁷² "On the Unity of the Church" p. 388. The idea that forgiveness is needed to participate in the mass is what essentially develops out of this. Later practices are already present in the very early Church. In such language of unity with the priest, the priest has become elevated away from the laity and in effect superior.

⁷³ "On the Unity of the Church" p. 394.

⁷⁴ "On the Unity of the Church" p. 394.

hierarchy of the College of Bishops.

For Cyprian, blood could not expunge separation. The martyr, and the confessor must be in the Church to win the Crown of Glory. Brotherly love was needed, for no one could join with Christ who broke “. . . the love of Christ by faithless dissension.”⁷⁵ The confessors, who had separated themselves and issued writs broke the bonds of love and unity, and must return to the struggle to be with Christ. They were implicitly heretical and deserving of the greatest chastisement.⁷⁶ He further elaborated his point by using Judas as an example. Cyprian stated that Judas lost his status as an apostle because of his betrayal of Christ; a true confessor does not depart from the Church because his or her strength comes from unity with the Church.⁷⁷ This served as a very strong rebuke to those who wrote writs of readmission because they had departed from the model of repentance.⁷⁸ He wanted the confessors to understand that their status gave them value and prestige but that did not give them the capacity to supersede the hierarchy. In other words the confessors were a type of Christian but not an order of Christians, so being a confessor was merely concurrent with one of the four orders--lay, deacon, priest, and bishop.

⁷⁵ “On the Unity of the Church” p. 389-390

⁷⁶ “On the Unity of the Church” p. 395.

⁷⁷ “On the Unity of the Church” p. 395

⁷⁸ “Epistle IX, The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol.1) p.39. In this epistle Cyprian further strengthened his claim against the readmission of the lapsed because he alone had the power to readmit. He said they were claiming this power and abrogating his power to determine who was in good standing.

Theology in Practice

Cyprian's letters show that he conducted his episcopal office according to his theology. He wrote his epistles to many people and groups in a climate that was particularly hostile for the Church. The mid third century was the time of the Decian Persecution, which was the first empire wide program against the Church. In this desperate time for the Church, Cyprian provided a powerful voice to keep the Church unified and determined. One cannot underestimate the tremendous impact and role the persecutions had upon the development of the Church. Rising out of those fires like a phoenix, a galvanized, strong and energetic Church with an equally vigorous hierarchy was born. In many ways Cyprian was the foremost architect of the Church that arose.

In the epistles of Cyprian can be found common themes. Clearly he saw the persecution first as a punishment handed down by God and second as having an important role to play for the Church. Another main theme of his epistles was that all must maintain and obey ecclesiastical discipline. Understanding both themes is imperative to understanding Cyprian. His entire epistolary library is replete with these themes. Cyprian might seem guilty of single-mindedness at times, but that would be a misunderstanding of this forceful man. He was determined to protect the Church from all who he perceived to be enemies. Cyprian was determined to preserve the Church before any other consideration.

The first way he saw the persecutions was as a direct punishment from God⁷⁹. In so many ways, Cyprian saw that Christians had departed from the apostolic traditions; therefore, God

⁷⁹ "Epistle VII" Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Writings of Cyprian (Vol 1). (Edinburgh, 1869.) p.27.

compelled them to endure terrible suffering and hardships. Repeatedly throughout his letters, Cyprian advised, counseled, and warned his audiences of the nature of the persecutions.⁸⁰ As with all of his writings, Cyprian attacked some for their faithlessness to the apostolic teachings and praised others for their faithfulness to the apostolic teachings.⁸¹ His writings are expressively clear that Cyprian believed that the persecutions were a divine chastisement. In accepting this belief his entire logic is revealed because it clarifies why he would not tolerate any abandonment of tradition. If one believes that the Church was being punished for infidelity to the apostles, then one must do everything in one's power to root out and destroy the faithless ones.

Other elements of critical importance to Cyprian were the roles of the confessors and them as individuals. In the early stages of the Decian Persecution, Cyprian lauded their constancy to the faith.⁸² He had to praise them because so many had abandoned their faith upon fear of torture and/or death. The Decian Persecution was not obsessed with killing Christians. Rather its goal was to shake the faithful and to discredit the Church through its leaders' sacrificing to pagan gods to save their own lives.⁸³ Cyprian praised the confessors but only while the confessors maintained loyalty to Christ and the Church. His praise was in direct proportion to the level of their loyalty.

Many of the same confessors upon whom Cyprian laid praise would also suffer his full calumny. Several would break with what Cyprian considered the most holy of holies, the unity of

⁸⁰ "Epistle V" and "Epistle VII" pp. 31

⁸¹ "Epistle VI" p.26.

⁸² "Epistle VIII" pp. 33-34, & 37.

⁸³ Frend, pp.109-110.

the Church.⁸⁴ Many confessors had become rebels in his eyes. They issued certificates to reinstate the lapsed into communion and the life of the Church.⁸⁵ For Cyprian, they defiled his sacredness as a bishop because penance was his prerogative. He maintained that they, the confessors, had no right to forgive the lapsed because it was his right alone (in Carthage).⁸⁶ Their suffering for Christ was the beginning of their glory and not the culmination of it; death was. He warned them not to lose their crowns by breaking the sacrament of the unity of the Church. These confessors were a particular trial for the Bishop of Carthage, and he spared no effort to admonish, to chastise and to urge their repentance. Despite the fierceness of his criticisms, Cyprian earnestly wanted the rebel confessors to return to the true fold. When he heard of the return of any of the rebels (or heretics for that matter) he rejoiced and praised God⁸⁷. This demonstrated his goal, not to humiliate or destroy those who fell away, but to ensure the unity of the Church; nevertheless, he wanted to humiliate and to destroy the rebellion as an event.

The persecutions gave birth to another class of “Christians,” the lapsed. They were Christians whose faith had faltered and who sacrificed upon pagan altars or obtained imperial certificates that said they had sacrificed. Cyprian also had problems with this group. Many wanted easy reinstatements into the Church, but Cyprian remained defiant. He maintained that he could not give them peace until God had granted the Church peace.⁸⁸ In his eyes, early and easy

⁸⁴ “Epistle VII” p.28

⁸⁵ “Epistle X” p.43

⁸⁶ “Epistle IX” p. 38, “Epistle X” p. 41 and “Epistle XI” p. 44.

⁸⁷ “Epistle L” p.130 and “Epistle XLVI” p.124.

⁸⁸ “Epistle XXVI” pp. 77-78 and “Epistle IX” p. 39 and “Epistle XIII” p. 48.

forgiveness was anathema and for them so to desire was arrogant presumption. Cyprian determined to have no such occurrences in his diocese.⁸⁹ He praised those lapsed who waited eagerly to be brought back into the Church when the time was right, but he still rebuked them for their original fall. They had what he would consider the proper manner of behavior for penitents. Cyprian made one exception for early forgiveness. If a lapsed who desired forgiveness was on his or her death bed, then he could restore that person to the fold of the Church, but that was the only exception that he would tolerate.⁹⁰

Cyprian did not oppose outright forgiveness of the lapsed but wanted the Church to have peace first⁹¹ Once they would achieve that, he wanted a great council of bishops, presbyters, deacons and laity to decide upon the proper method to restore lapsed Christians to the Church. In this council he and others would fully represent the Church in the divinely ordained structure. He did not include confessors because they were a class of Christian and not a particular order of Christians. Presumably there were confessors at the council but only as part of an order. He stated that only the structure designed by God could solve such a weighty problem. He deemed this a proper response to the unusual problems that arose from the persecutions, both lapsed and renegade confessors.⁹² In all that he did, Cyprian affirmed the hierarchy of the Church. The lapsed were a problem, and only the hierarchy gathered could solve it.

Cyprian admired the true confessors and held them to be the example for the faithful to

⁸⁹ "Epistle XXVIII" p. 81.

⁹⁰ "Epistle XII" p.46.

⁹¹ "Epistle XI" p.44.

⁹² "Epistle XI" p. 47 and "Epistle XXXI" pp. 92-93.

follow. He used every method at his disposal to attack and to defeat the rebels seeking to eradicate the sacredness of unity and discipline.⁹³ In doing so he did much but especially he added true confessors to the clerical orders. These men maintained complete loyalty and he rewarded them without seeking advice, which was uncharacteristic behavior for a bishop; he believed they deserved to be in the orders because of their fealty to Christ and Church.⁹⁴ The message was clear. If one remained completely faithful to the Church in the dark hours, then the Church would reward one in the Church.

Cyprian also felt compelled to defend himself and his behavior during the persecutions. He had gone into hiding early during the persecutions; however, he maintained that he had neither wanted to go, nor wanted to run from pain. What Cyprian maintained was that others convinced him that he could better serve alive, though in retirement from Carthage, so must go.⁹⁵ He repeatedly stressed that he wanted to be in Carthage and to help the people. An entire epistle instructed the clergy to aid the poor and he sent money to help in helping the poor.⁹⁶ He remained distressed over his retirement and all of the mayhem that occurred because of it.⁹⁷ He constantly lamented the chaos the persecutions caused and being forced into hiding.

⁹³ "Epistle IX" p. 40 and "Epistle XIV" p. 50.

⁹⁴ "Epistles XXXII-XXXIV" pp. 93-99. In these very similar epistles, Cyprian explained his reasons for the elevations of these confessors. His idea was that those who confessed God so faithfully could best serve the Church as mouths and leaders.

⁹⁵ "Epistle XXIII" pp. 67-68.

⁹⁶ "Epistle XXV" pp. 70-76. This epistle is entirely devoted to the care of others, and is a powerful testimony to the fact that the mission of the Church would continue in spite of all the calamities that befell the Church.

⁹⁷ "Epistle XIV" p. 49.

In spite of the fact Cyprian retired from Carthage, he did not abrogate his episcopal authority. He made that point abundantly clear. Cyprian wrote most of his epistles to the clergy of Carthage instructing them on matters or giving them orders to follow.⁹⁸ He maintained control to the best of his abilities in the dark times. He tried to exercise his episcopal capacity from afar but he had many problems, which caused him distress and anguish. Carthage was an unruly diocese having many zealous confessors and similar clerics. Cyprian's strong belief in the sacredness of the episcopal office would not permit him to be lax in administration. His behavior in the face of the persecutions made a powerful argument for the role that they played in Church development. The leadership survived such a direct challenge and in fact was made stronger because of the direct challenge.

To say that all of the clerics were rebels would be an exaggeration. Cyprian condemned those who broke the bond of loyalty and pleaded for them to return to the Church. Although he wanted them to return, he was not afraid to sever their connection with the Church. He had the right and power of excommunication and if required, he would use it.⁹⁹ Cyprian would tolerate no one disobeying his power in his diocese. He saw that as a violation of the unity of the Church and as a rejection of Christ himself.¹⁰⁰ This was the case because the hierarchy was ordained through Christ's choosing of the apostles.

The discipline of the Church was the other major concern of Cyprian. He constantly

⁹⁸ See "Epistles VII, IX, XII, XIII, XIV, XVII, XXIII, XXVII, XXVIII, and XXXI-XXXVI" to name a few. Despite his great distance Cyprian still kept in contact with his clergy and constantly informed them and ordered them on what to do.

⁹⁹ "Epistle XXXVII" pp.103-104.

¹⁰⁰ "Epistle X" p.40.

looked at how the Church was conducting itself and into the behavior of the various members of the Church. In his view the Church was a hierarchical institution that God ordained and built upon the apostles, whose successors were the bishops.¹⁰¹ This faith that Christ divinely instituted the hierarchy would not permit him to tolerate any challenges to his own episcopacy. Throughout all of his epistles he stressed that he was the bishop and that all non-bishops must obey him as the very embodiment of the Church itself.¹⁰² Another common point that he raised was how one could claim to follow Christ and be a rebel from Christ's institution. For Cyprian, loyalty to the divine order and obedience to the bishops were essential to being a Christian.¹⁰³ All of his writings have left little doubt of where he stood on any issue that he addressed. Especially obvious has to be the fact that Cyprian believed in no salvation outside the Church. With his belief in that doctrine he could not tolerate any rebellion within the Church. His jealousy for discipline left him an implacable foe of all who violated discipline.

Cyprian's language betrayed his love for the Church. He did not call the Church a neutral object or institution but usually as Mother.¹⁰⁴ He saw the Christians as the children of the Church with God as the Father. His very descriptions of the Church constantly confirmed this belief. He always spoke that their Mother must receive peace before her wayward children can, that their Mother was under constant attack, and the children must do all in their power to protect her, and

¹⁰¹ "Epistle XXVI" p. 77.

¹⁰² "Epistle IV" p. 18. The entire epistle covers this point with only some other minor details.

¹⁰³ "Epistle X" p. 41 and "Epistle XXIV" p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ "Epistle XLII" p. 117.

that their Mother was the most sacred of institutions because of the divine nature of her origin.¹⁰⁵ All of this taken in total can be helpful in explaining his attitude. Cyprian saw himself not merely as a child of Mother Church, but also as the main guardian of her in Carthage. Cyprian was the good son who wanted the best for his Mother and set out to achieve it for her.

Another critical element of this doctrine of ecclesiastical discipline was that of the prayer life of the Church. One would be tempted to believe that with the issue of survival at stake, such a mundane act as prayer would have been relegated to low priority, but prayer received no such ill treatment. In fact prayer was a critically important element of the life of the Church during the persecutions.¹⁰⁶ Prayer kept many faithful going in the dark hours, and Cyprian did not miss this fact. In prayer all elements of Church joined as one. Mystically through prayer Cyprian could be with his diocese if they prayed simultaneously. He praised the prayers of the confessors and the faithful and encouraged everyone to whom he wrote to pray ever more because prayer was imperative to the faith.¹⁰⁷ He maintained that even Christ had time to pray before his own passion, so all the faithful must follow his example. For Cyprian, prayer was critical to the survival of the Church during the persecution and he advocated that all should do it as constantly as possible. This has helped to explain the rigidity of his nature upon discipline because the Church was the locus of all prayer in the sense that the Church constantly prayed.

For Cyprian, the very embodiment of the discipline of the Church was the office of the

¹⁰⁵ “Epistle IX” p. 39 and “Epistle X” p. 42.

¹⁰⁶ “Epistle XV” p. 52 and “Epistle VII” p. 32.

¹⁰⁷ “Epistle VII” p. 27.

bishop.¹⁰⁸ Repeatedly, he sought to prove the point. In fact one could accuse him of overkill because he stressed his argument so much and to the point that few probably wanted to hear it. One has to remember the time and context of the saint--the Decian Persecution with death and humiliation looming constantly. By remembering this fact one can understand Cyprian's attitude more clearly. He perceived the episcopal office as the hinge that held the Church together; therefore, anyone who went against the bishop went against the Church itself.¹⁰⁹ Cyprian argued that in the dark hours that were the persecutions only the bishops could maintain the unity of the Church and that the unity of the Church was essential for survival; therefore, survival mandated the bishops. This logic remained at the heart of Cyprian's doctrine and life until his own death in a later persecution. He did not pursue such a policy for his own benefit but for the benefit of Mother Church.

Cyprian never maintained that he was supreme over all the Church. He saw the bishops as functioning in collegiality; they had to work together. His method for dealing with the lapsed has proved the point because he wanted a council of all in North Africa and not just he as the only bishop.¹¹⁰ This collegiality has come out particularly clearly in his writings to his brother

¹⁰⁸ "Epistle VI" pp. 23-27. In which Cyprian claimed that the glory of the Church and the bishop were one in the same. This dual linkage demonstrates the depth to which his belief in episcopal supremacy went.

¹⁰⁹ "Epistle V", pp. 19-23. The epistle encouraged all to obey and follow Cyprian's clerics because of his exile. They need to follow the surrogates to maintain their faithful obedience to God and the Gospels.

¹¹⁰ "Epistle XXXIX" p.111.

bishops.¹¹¹ He claimed no power over them and respected all of them, although he was the preeminent prelate in all of North Africa. His correspondences with the bishops of Rome show the same deference. He did have some conflicts with Stephen, but Cyprian never broke the brotherhood of the episcopacy with Stephen.¹¹² All of his actions with his brother bishops were full of respect and admiration, and he told his clergy to obey any visiting bishops in Carthage as if they were he. This collegiality was essential for the survival of the Church. The bishops of the third century were in constant contact and communication to support each other. This played a powerful role in consolidating the hierarchy and the passage of information, but their bonds were most clearly strengthened because of the danger in which they were placed. This was how the consolidation occurred. They sidelined personal disputes when survival was at stake, and they fused into a collective body that could maintain the faith in the face of a determined assault from the masters of warfare.

Cyprian's epistles have offered a powerful glimpse into the mind of a leader of the early Church. In his many correspondences can be found a range of ideas and methods of argumentation, but two major themes are paramount: the role of the persecutions with all of their consequences and maintenance of ecclesiastical discipline. If one fails to comprehend them, then Cyprian appears to be a rambling fanatic whom one could dismiss as unorganized and full of fury signaling little. That interpretation would fail to understand the nature of the early Church. Cyprian believed that the persecutions had a powerful influence upon the Church and his epistles

¹¹¹ "Epistles XVIII to XXI", pp. 56-64. These form a series of letters exchanged between Cyprian, Caldonius and others another bishop in North Africa who sought advice and opinion on the matter of the lapsed.

¹¹² "Epistles XL to XLVIII", pp. 111-130.

have demonstrated this belief.

Chapter V--The Conclusion

The conclusion is that the persecutions drove the development of the Church into a hierarchical institution. The persecutions created the challenges that either had to be endured, the persecutions, or had to be eradicated, the heretics. Frend has ignored the role of the internal divisions, and Pelikan has ignored the role of the persecutions. Pagels has come close, but she has the persecutions and internal divisions working parallel to develop the hierarchy. The truth is that persecutions caused the defeat of the internal divisions in the Church. Those divisions were intolerable to the bishops who sought to eliminate all divisions and create order. The Church became a hierarchical institution in response to the persecutions and the renegades that the persecutions caused.

During the height of the *Pax Romana*, the Church was an insignificant collection of low-class people and slaves. Those in power often scoffed at the Church because of its urban, hence poor, base. As the Church grew, Rome's loathing also grew. Rome had a hatred of most mystery cults because of their secret nature. Romans believed all sorts of horror stories about the cults. They believed that Christians were cannibals (Christians do speak of eating a body and drinking blood), promiscuity (constant references to love), and atheists because Christians refused to participate in the religious life of the empire. This final charge was the most damning because if one did not sacrifice, then one was deliberately trying to anger the gods¹¹³. Many sacrificers did not believe what they practiced; however, that did not matter to Rome if people practiced the religion. In practicing the people assured continuity and unity. Rome was willing to let anyone

¹¹³ Stephen G. Wilson. Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70-170 C.E. (Minneapolis 1995) p. 28. See this section pp.27-33 for a more complete examination of the relationship between Rome and the Christians.

worship who or whatever they wanted if they also worshiped Roman deities. For most pantheistic faiths this was not a problem. The Church had a problem because of its monotheistic nature. Worshiping a multiplicity of gods was anathema to the faith of the Church, and this is what sparked the war with Rome.

In this war Rome held all of the advantages, as Rome often did in war. Rome controlled the judicial system, Rome used torture, Rome was everywhere and Rome got its way. In theory the Church held no advantages except that the faithful were willing to die. This was something that went against conventional wisdom. The only other real case of people willing to die for their faith was Judaism. Judaism tried to fight conventional wars with Rome and utterly lost, while the Church did not fight in the same way. The Church fought by refusing to capitulate before Rome. This stubbornness is how it fought and ultimately would defeat the masters of warfare. True, not all Christians died for their belief and many did sacrifice, but there were enough like Ignatius, Polycarp, Cyprian, Fabian, Perpetua, and Cornelius who did die. These faithful would never yield and they became an inspiration to others and eventually the entire empire. Church tenacity during the persecutions held and led the conversion of the empire.

During the Persecutions the Church rose to the challenge and triumphed. Ignatius molded a system that would let the Church survive. He showed the faithful members of the Church that pain and death were not to be avoided because the Savior himself had suffered both. In effect Christians were trying to imitate their Savior. While wanting to suffer may seem defeatist, the converse was true for it was the source of phenomenal strength. They honestly believed that the moments of pain would purchase an eternity of glory. After all Christ had suffered for a day and then was raised to glory, so they could endure a few hours on the rack. Ignatius reminded the

Church of this fact and this enabled the Church to survive the assault from Rome.

Ignatius also stressed the importance of the episcopal office of the Church. The bishop would lead the people through the troubling times to glory. His actions demonstrated this fact. This stress on the episcopacy might seem unconnected to the persecutions, but his episcopal duty inspired Ignatius to write his epistles and to explain the value of suffering. He willingly went to his death and actively looked forward to it. He provided an example to many of the value of suffering, for if even a prince of the Church would die, so then all must be prepared to die.

Ignatius never stopped being a bishop. On the road to Rome he wrote to the churches in Asia Minor attacking heresies that had arisen. He showed that he still had a duty to educate the faithful. Ignatius might have been a condemned man, but as a leader of the Church he had to eliminate the threat of heresy. His journey gave him the opportunity to combat heresy. All of Ignatius' works come from his journey to martyrdom; persecution propelled him to write. The persecutions were his inspirations to create a system to endure and affirm the hierarchy in the Church.

The persecutions were not a major factor during the episcopal reign of Irenaeus, during which the Church had to deal with a major heresy. What Irenaeus' response did was set the precedent for future generations of bishops. He wrote a long refutation of the Gnostics. Which asserts that the Gnostics were not true because they did not follow the teachings of the apostles or scripture. Only the Church was true because it was based upon those twin pillars. From this time forward many would see the Church as an authoritative body in its own right. This is what Irenaeus contributed to the Church. Also, his work provided the theological justification that would allow other bishops to attack heresy.

His work greatly influenced future bishops. They saw themselves not only as the successors of the apostles but as the guardians of the truth. This became fully proclaimed through Irenaeus. He advanced the infallibility of the Church. Belief that the Church was the source of truth would spur bishops to oppose heresy. The heretic denied the Church was true; the bishops believed that they had the truth, so that created an impasse. Irenaeus' work destroyed the lines of communication between the Church and heretics. Later persecutions would make communications impossible because of a new type of heretic.

Cyprian implemented what Irenaeus had created. During Cyprian's time Rome brought down the most terrible persecution to date. The Decian Persecution was not a localized event but an empire-spanning program to defeat the Church. During this persecution the confessors were born. Many of them took liberties and began to function as ecclesiastical authorities. To Cyprian this was immoral and evil because only the bishop could act in such a capacity. He reminded the confessors that their pain was noble and honorable; nevertheless, that belief yielded them no power. The logic was that Ignatius could rule on matters not because he was going to be martyred but because he was a bishop. In the eyes of Cyprian the power of the episcopacy transcended the class of confessor or even of martyr.

The true significance of the renegade confessors was their existence. They were the enemy against which Cyprian could turn and assert his authority. In the climate of the Decian Persecution internal conflicts were dangerous because they could weaken the Church. This was the fact that lurked behind Cyprian throughout his episcopal career. To ensure the unity and cohesive nature of the Church, he sought to destroy internal opposition. Throughout all of his works can be found his loathing of heresy and division. He called the rebels from episcopal

authority the sons of Satan. He sought nothing less than purity of unity founded upon the college of bishops.

Cyprian had modified the value of suffering to be not just an emulation of Christ, but obedience to authority. Christ suffered in submission to the will of the Father, so the faithful should suffer in submission to the bishop. Ignatius had stressed both suffering and episcopacy as coequal, but Cyprian stressed the primacy of the episcopacy over any other possibilities. This would give the Church the ability to survive and maintain the truth. For Cyprian, nothing had greater value than the sacrament of unity founded upon the successors of the apostles. This mind set became the dominant one that would lead the Church into the fourth century and beyond. In the fourth century the Church finally triumphed and became the dominant faith of the empire.

By the time of the Edict of Milan, the Church was a hierarchical institution. The hierarchy would remain virtually unchallenged for centuries. The battles that would occur at the Ecumenical Councils were over great theological and/or Christological issues. The debates were between bishops; organization was not an issue there or for centuries. Only in the Great Schism would organization arise as an issue but it was over totally centralized or more collegiality among bishops. The High Middle Ages would bring back the debate, Catholic Church against the Cathars and the Spiritual Franciscans. Only with the onset of the Reformation did the issue of organization and governance reoccur. Luther was the classic example. This debate over hierarchy would remain until this day. The Church that Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Cyprian built still commands the loyalty of most Christians in the world. They belong to either the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Communion.

The persecutions were the engines that drove the development of the Church into the

hierarchical system that would rule the Middle Ages. In the hostile climate of the second and third centuries the Church fought for survival because it had to fight. Rome's desire to eradicate a particular cult had the exact opposite effect. Rome failed to win the war. The assault gave the Church the opportunity to survive and assert its hierarchical nature. Without the persecutions it would have been entirely possible for the Church either have faded away or have developed into several different churches. The persecutions forced the Church to become a unified hierarchical system that one can still see today in the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Communion.

Glossary: All these definitions are partisan in one form or another. They are defined from the perspective of the Church leaders of the era.

Adoptionists--those Christians that believed that Christ was not the divine son of God, and only became the Son of God by being adopted at his baptism.

Apostolic--continuation in the teachings of the apostles. The Church believed that it was the sole group doing this. Also, closely related to Apostolic Succession, which is the belief that each bishop is ordained by some who was ordained by some all the way back to an apostle as an original ordainer.

Church--an institution of Christian believers who follow the tripartite ministerial system of deacon, priest, and bishop. The Church maintained that it was the sole source of the truth. This Church is the antecedent of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Communion.

Decian Persecution--the persecution started by Decius to restore Rome to glory and pagan faith, but not interested in killing Christians only making them lapsed.

Diocese--a geographical area and the faithful that dwelt in the area under the leadership and authority of a particular bishop.

Docetics--a group considered heretical by the Church. They maintained that Christ was not a real human but only seemed human.

Episcopal/Bishop--the rule of a diocese by a episcopos, bishop. The highest of the ecclesiastical orders that claimed power as the successors of the apostles.

Gnostics--a group that defies an easy definition. They were not all Christians but many were who believed in the duality of the cosmos. Christ was not truly human, and a secret knowledge was needed for salvation. They were a major rival to the Church in the second century.

Heresy--deviation from the doctrines of the Church. The Church believed that they were sources of evil that was out to defeat the truth of the Church.

Hierarchical Institution--description of the four orders arranged in an ascending order of lay to deacon to priest to bishop. This was the strict model of Church governance that arose from the time of the persecutions.

Judaizers--a group of Christians considered heretical by the Church. They believed that Jewish practices were essential for salvation, and most were Adoptionists.

Lapsed--those Christians whom either sacrificed open on pagan altars or obtained certificates that said they did. Then out of remorse many tried to reenter the Church and this was a problem that constantly plagued the Church.

Martyr--those Christians who died for their faith during one of the persecutions. Venerated by the Church throughout the ages.

Orthodoxy--the doctrines of the Church and maintained as the truth. Belief in them was considered a prerequisite for salvation.

Persecutions--Legal Roman attacks upon Christians of various beliefs, from 33-312 AD. They were ordinarily sporadic and localized phenomena that later became empire wide programs either to destroy or to eradicate the faith.

Rebel Confessors--those who suffered for the faith but were not killed. This group of confessors believed that this gave them special powers that placed them in conflict with the established Church government of the day, particularly Cyprian in North Africa.

Rigorists--those Christians in the Church that believed that the lapsed needed to be rebaptized to reenter the Church. They were also very strict on many other aspects of Church practice and discipline.

Trajan Policy--the don't-ask'-don't-tell, policy directed to Christians and the Church until the time of the Decian Persecution. Trajan maintained that Christians should not be sought out, but prosecuted with the full power of the law if found.

Truth--the belief that the Church is the sole source of information that leads to salvation.

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