

Communion only at death, whereas those who had only bought certificates saying they had sacrificed could be admitted after a more or less lengthy period of penance. Even this was relaxed during a new persecution.

During a plague in Carthage, Cyprian urged Christians to help everyone, including their enemies and persecutors.

A friend of Pope Cornelius, he opposed the following pope, Stephen. He and the other African bishops would not recognize the validity of Baptism conferred by heretics and schismatics. This was not the universal view of the Church, but Cyprian was not intimidated even by Stephen's threat of excommunication.

He was exiled by the emperor and then recalled for trial. He refused to leave the city, insisting that his people should have the witness of his martyrdom.

Cyprian was a mixture of kindness and courage, vigor and steadiness. He was cheerful and serious, so that people did not know whether to love or respect him more. He waxed warm during the baptismal controversy; his feelings must have concerned him. For it was at this time that he wrote his treatise on patience. St. Augustine remarks that Cyprian atoned for his anger by his glorious martyrdom.

**COMMENT:** The controversies about Baptism and Penance in the third century remind us that the early Church had no ready-made solutions from the Holy Spirit. The leaders and members of the Church of that day had to move painfully through the best series of judgments they could make, in an attempt to follow the entire teaching of Christ and not be diverted by exaggerations to right or left.

\* (excerpted from: saintoftheday)

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## ***Saints Cornelius and Cyprian***

***Pope and Martyr***

***Bishop and Martyr***

***Memorial: September 16th***



***"There is one God and one Christ and but one episcopal chair, originally founded on Peter, by the Lord's authority. There cannot, therefore, be set up another altar or another priesthood..."*** (Saint Cornelius, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*).

***..."if we are the heirs of Christ, let us abide in the peace of Christ; if we are the sons of God, let us be lovers of peace."***  
(Saint Cyprian, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*).

## ***Saint Cornelius Pope and Martyr***

**\*Cornelius (d. 253).** There was no pope for 14 months after the martyrdom of St. Fabian because of the intensity of the persecution of the Church. During the interval, the Church was governed by a college of priests. St. Cyprian, a friend of Cornelius, writes that Cornelius was elected pope "by the judgment of God and of Christ, by the testimony of most of the clergy, by the vote of the people, with the consent of aged priests and of good men."

The greatest problem of Cornelius's two-year term as pope involved the Sacrament of Penance and centered on the readmission of Christians who had apostatized during the time of persecution. Two extremes were finally both condemned. Cyprian, primate of Africa, appealed to the pope to confirm his stand that the relapsed could be reconciled only by the decision of the bishop (against the very indulgent practice of Novatus).

In Rome, however, Cornelius met with the opposite view. After his election, a priest named Novatian (one of those who had governed the Church) had himself consecrated a rival bishop of Rome—the first antipope. He denied that the Church had any power to reconcile not only the apostates, but also those guilty of murder, adultery, fornication or second marriage! Cornelius had the support of most of the Church (especially of Cyprian of Africa) in condemning Novatianism, though the sect persisted for several centuries. Cornelius held a synod at Rome in 251 and ordered the "relapsed" to be restored to the Church with the usual "medicines of repentance."

The friendship of Cornelius and Cyprian was strained for a time when one of Cyprian's rivals made accusations about him. But the problem was cleared up.

A document from Cornelius shows the extent of organization in the church of Rome in the mid-third century: forty-six priests, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons. It is estimated that the number of Christians totaled about 50,000. Cornelius died as a result of the

hardships of his exile in what is now Civitavecchia (near Rome).

**Comment:** It seems fairly true to say that almost every possible false doctrine has been proposed at some time or other in the history of the Church. The third century saw the resolution of a problem we scarcely consider—the penance to be done before reconciliation with the Church after mortal sin. Men like Cornelius and Cyprian were God's instruments in helping the Church find a prudent path between extremes of rigorism and laxity. They are part of the Church's ever-living stream of tradition, ensuring the continuance of what was begun by Christ, and evaluating new experiences through the wisdom and experience of those who have gone before (Rolinier).

**Cyprian (d. 258).** Cyprian is important in the development of Christian thought and practice in the third century, especially in northern Africa.

Highly educated, a famous orator, he was converted to Christianity as an adult. He distributed his goods to the poor, and amazed his fellow citizens by making a vow of chastity before his Baptism. Within two years he had been ordained priest and was chosen, against his will, as bishop of Carthage (near modern Tunis).

Cyprian complained that the peace which the Church enjoyed had weakened the spirit of many Christians and had opened the door to converts who did not have the true spirit of faith. When the Decian persecution began, many Christians easily abandoned the Church. It was their reinstatement that caused the great controversies of the third century, and helped the Church progress in its understanding of the Sacrament of Penance. Novatus, a priest who had opposed Cyprian's election, set himself up in Cyprian's absence (he had fled to a hiding place from which to direct the Church bringing criticism on himself) and received back all apostates, without imposing any canonical penance. Ultimately he was condemned. Cyprian held a middle course, holding that those who had actually sacrificed to idols could receive Holy