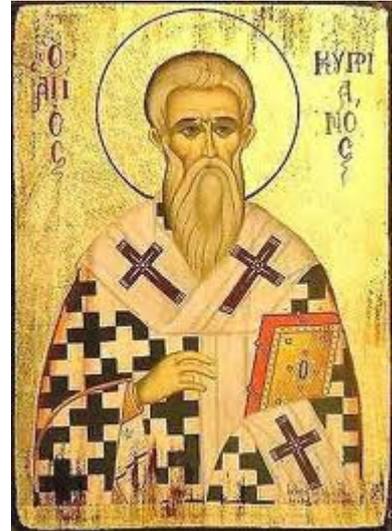


Prayer of the Month • September 2012

Good God, may we confess your name to the end. May we emerge unsullied and glorious from the traps and dark powers of this world. As you have bound us together in love and peace, and as, together, we have persevered through times of hardship, may we also rejoice together in our heavenly kingdom.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, c.200-258



Is it easy to be a Christian in our society? It is perhaps easy to say we are Christian but always hard to live up to the example set by Jesus Christ. In some countries and cultures, though, to identify oneself with the Christian faith can be a risk even to life itself. Cyprian writes from a culture which knows only too well the challenges of such a situation. The word ‘confess’ has a sense of bravery about it; it is not a defensive or apologetic sort of confession. The temptations for us to compromise our faith are much more subtle. For example, to see faith as simply a personal preference, rather than as the path to salvation, or the temptation to give people ‘what they want’ rather than profess a message which might be unpalatable to some. While Cyprian is very aware of the powers of darkness, he is also encouraged by the fellowship he experiences in the Church – a strength of unity to keep him clear of the traps and carries him through in faith and hope to the everlasting kingdom of joy.

Cyprian was born sometime in the early third century to pagan parents. Before becoming a Christian he was an orator and a teacher of rhetoric. When he was baptised around 246–248 he gave away a portion of his wealth to the poor of Carthage. He was chosen as bishop for Carthage in 248-249, a popular choice. However, in 250 the Decian persecution began, including a demand that bishops and other church officials should sacrifice to the emperor. Many Christians fell away; Cyprian fled into exile, returning in 251. After the persecution passed there was disagreement about whether the ‘lapsed’ should be allowed back into membership of the Church, with Cyprian among those insisting on a period of penance. A further persecution occurred in 256 under Emperor Valerian I. Cyprian resolutely refused to worship pagan deities, and publicly confessed his adherence to Christ. For a time he was imprisoned, then sentenced to death on 14 September. His only reply was, ‘Thanks be to God’. He was executed the same day. A number of his treatises and letters survive. His most important work is his *De unitate ecclesiae*, in which he writes: ‘He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother; . . . he who gathers elsewhere than in the Church scatters the Church of Christ’ (vi). His feast day is 15 September.

Colin Lunt