

# The Theology of St. Cyprian of Carthage: The Unity of the Church and the Role of the Bishop

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## *Preliminaries*

“I believe in One God...and in One Lord Jesus Christ... and in One...Church, I confess One baptism...”

This is the essence of the Christian faith based on the Gospel's revelation, identical with what Paul said in Ephesians 4: 5-6: “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all of us,” developed and taught faithfully in the whole Christian tradition until today. This specific kind of faith is the solid spiritual framework of the Christian Church and it gives to the Church one of its main characteristics, unity and unicity.

It is appropriate to say here that the problem of the unity of the Church was a main preoccupation for its theologians especially in times when the Church passed through difficult crises threatening its very existence with annihilation, distortion, or corruption. This was the case in the time of Cyprian when the Church had to face heresies, schisms, and persecutions that threatened both the being and the visible unity of the Christian community. That is why, according to the specific circumstances in which he wrote, Cyprian had his own approach to the problem of the unity of the Church, which proves the validity of one important principle in the life of this institution, enduring throughout the whole of Church history and through all generations: *unitas in diversitas*, its character of unity in diversity.

## *St. Cyprian of Carthage*

St. Cyprian was born in approximately 200 A.D. There is little extant information about his early life. It is known that he was baptized in 246, that he was an admirer and reader of Tertullian, that he was educated to be a rhetorician and that in 248 he became bishop of Carthage.

During his time the Roman emperors intensively and extensively persecuted the Christian people so that Cyprian himself went into hiding

on several occasions and conducted his pastoral activity through letters from a distance. Numerous heresies, schisms, and persecutions were a direct attack on the unity of the Church. This is the reason why this topic is present in most of his letters. Considered a pioneer of the unity of the Church, Cyprian wrote his treatise, *De unitate ecclesiae*, in the context of Novatian's schism and of other troubles related to the exercise of authority in the Church. The treatise was read at one of the Councils held in Carthage which contributed to the rising of Cyprian's reputation among contemporary Christians in particular in the context of the persecution of 258 A.D. As it was rightly said, "Cyprian was a leader with evident influence on the other bishops around his jurisdiction, in particular in doctrinal matters."<sup>1</sup>

In the time of the dramatic tension of this persecution Cyprian wrote: "O, blessed Church of ours, which the honor of the divine condescension illuminates, which in our own times the glorious blood of martyrs renders illustrious! She was white before in the work of the brethren, now she has become purple in the blood of the martyrs."<sup>2</sup> The tragedy of the persecution was magnified by intra-church disputes related to authority and its nature in the Church, as well as organizational problems in provincial Christian life. For this reason, Cyprian in his writings insisted greatly on the visible aspect of the unity of the Church, starting with the congregation or, more specifically, the diocese. He insisted also, for the same reason, on the nature of the bishop's authority, his role and place in the Church, and on the importance of discipline in the Christian community in order to maintain the unity of the Church, which, at that time, was a vital issue.

Against this backdrop, Cyprian developed his powerful doctrine of the organic relationship between Church and bishop, which was well expressed in his famous axiom: *Ecclesia in Episcopo, Episcopus in Ecclesia*, or *Ubi Ecclesia ibi Episcopus, Ubi Episcopus ibi Ecclesia*. He also developed doctrine regarding the salvific role of the visible unity of the Church against schismatic tendencies, a concept expressed in the equally famous axiom: *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.<sup>3</sup> This teaching was not new in the theology of the Church, because Irenaeus, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Braun, F. Chapot, S. Deléani, F. Dolbeau, J. Fredouille, P. Petitmengin, eds., *Chronica Tertulliana et Cypriana, 1975-1994, Bibliographie critique de la première littérature latine chrétienne* (Paris : Institut d'Etudes Augustiniennes, 1999), 250.

<sup>2</sup> A. Roberts and Y. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 289. (For further references to this book, for both the treatises and the letters of St. Cyprian, I will use the abbreviation *ANF V*.)

<sup>3</sup> "Outside the church there is no salvation/safety."

wrote along similar lines,<sup>4</sup> but it was Cyprian who developed and consecrated the expression as such.

*De unitate Ecclesiae* is the most important of Cyprian's works. The same vision of the unity of the Church and divine solidarity in the Church expressed here appears in most of his other treatises and letters, applied to different contexts and situations. In his argumentation Cyprian is very biblical, drawing from significant texts from the Old and New Testaments: Exodus 12:46; Joshua 2:19; Jeremiah 2:13; 23:16-21; Psalm 118:6; Matthew 18:29; John 2:19; I Corinthians 1:10; I Corinthians 11:19; and Ephesians 4:3, among others. He also uses and interprets significant images, like the ark of Noah, the Paschal lamb from Exodus, Rahab, and the dove as symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Although the treatise exists in different versions, with and without specific interpolations, some scholars believe that Cyprian wanted to support the idea of Rome's international primacy over other Churches. In fact, Cyprian speaks about Peter's primacy, but not about that of Rome as an episcopal See with jurisdiction over other episcopates. On the contrary, Cyprian insists extensively on the equality, unity, and collegiality of the whole body of bishops in the Church. As Allen Brent wrote, the bishop of Carthage actually stressed the need for unity through the doctrinal and disciplinary consensus of all bishops of the Church.<sup>5</sup> Richard Seagraves observes that because of his strong belief in the equality of all bishops, Cyprian applies the terms *collegia*, *coepiscopus*, and *consacerdos*, to all of them.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Church and its Unity*

St. Cyprian is not philosophical in his definitions or descriptions of the Church. He speaks from the heart to people who know that they may pay with their lives for their faith. Whereas Irenaeus of Lyon applied the image of Paradise to the Church by saying that the Church is Paradise on earth,<sup>7</sup> Cyprian applied the image of the Mother in his description of the Church. He became well known for the expression: "Whoever does not have the Church as a Mother cannot have God for

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<sup>4</sup> Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les Hérésies IV*, 2, Sources Chrétiennes, ed. critique par A. Rousseau (Paris : Ed. Du Cerf, 1965), Ch. 33, 7.

<sup>5</sup> St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Treatises*, Translation, Introduction, and Commentary by Allen Brent (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>6</sup> R. Seagraves, *Pascentes cum Disciplina: A Logical Study of the Clergy in the Cyprianic Correspondence*, (Fribourg, Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1993), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les Hérésies V*, 2, Sources Chrétiennes, ed. critique par A. Rousseau, (Paris : Ed. du Cerf, 1969), Ch. 20, 2.

Father.”<sup>8</sup> The image is extensively used<sup>9</sup> and at times it alternates with that of Matrix.<sup>10</sup> The image of the Mother used by Cyprian for the Church helps the bishop of Carthage emphasize the risk assumed by those leaving the Church. They die spiritually. Anyone who separates from the maternal womb will not be able to breathe and live. The nourishment of salvation is lost, he writes.<sup>11</sup> The Church, Cyprian says, is the Mother of the people who live in agreement,<sup>12</sup> it is a divine institution,<sup>13</sup> it is essentially a fraternity living in peace and charity,<sup>14</sup> in unity. The unity of the Church is a sacrament:<sup>15</sup>

The unity of the Church comes from the divine strength and coheres in celestial sacraments, that is why, whoever does not hold this unity, does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and of the Son, does not hold life and salvation.”<sup>16</sup>

That is why, he says, “to break the peace and the concord of Christ (in the Church) is to try to break the unity of the divine Trinity itself.”<sup>17</sup> The Church is dispersed all over the world, but this dispersion does not affect its unity because it is like members living in the unity of one body. The bishops live in many dioceses, but constitute one and the same episcopate.<sup>18</sup> And again, the Church is one, even if it has many communities spread in the world, like the sun which has many rays but one light, like a tree with many branches but one strong and tenacious root, like a spring with many streams but one source. “Separate a ray of the sun from its body of light: its unity does not allow a division of light; cut off the stream from its source and that which is cut off dries up.”<sup>19</sup> The Church shines forth the light of the Son of God and this light is the

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<sup>8</sup> St. Cyprian, *ANF V.*, 423,-6.

<sup>9</sup> St. Cyprian, “Treatise on the Lapsed” in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 55-88. See also: *ANF V.*, 287, 290, 320, 321, 385.

<sup>10</sup> *ANF V.*, 322.

<sup>11</sup> Cyprien de Carthage, *Unité de l'Eglise*. “Sources Chrétiennes”, vol. 500 (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 2006), 241.

<sup>12</sup> *ANF V.*, 428, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Selected Epistles of St. Cyprian treating of the Episcopate*. trans. Nathaniel Marshall, ed. T. A. Lacey. (New York: Macmillan Co.), 27.

<sup>14</sup> J. Colson, *L'Évêque, lien d'unité et de la charité chez St. Cyprien de Carthage*. (Paris: SOS, 1961)9. See also: *ANF V.* p. 327.

<sup>15</sup> *ANF V.*, 423,7.

<sup>16</sup> *ANF V.*, 423,6.

<sup>17</sup> A. d' Alès. *La Théologie de St. Cyprien* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1922), 100.

<sup>18</sup> *ANF V.*, 333, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *ANF V.*, 423, 5.

same anywhere on the earth, because the Lord is one for the whole Church. “The Church broadly expands her rivers, yet her head is one, her source, one; she is one mother, from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished.”<sup>20</sup> Even in tribulations and persecution, by the grace of God, the universal Church has proved “to be one and to be able neither to be cut nor divided.”<sup>21</sup>

In order to underline the concept of the unity of the Church, Cyprian relates this unity to that of God, of the Lord, of baptism. He quotes Paul's text in Ephesians 4:4 and says that “there is one body, one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.”<sup>22</sup> And again: “Since baptism is one, and Holy Spirit is one, the Church founded by Christ upon Peter, by a source and principle of unity, is one also.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus Christ, the Lord, is the bridegroom of the Church and there is only one bridegroom of the Church like the one from the Song of Solomon (Song VI, 8).<sup>24</sup> The Catholic Church is not divided in any way, it is connected and bound together by the cement of bishops and priests who cohere with one another.<sup>25</sup>

Harmony is a fundamental characteristic of the Church. This is harmony, concord, and simplicity between flock and shepherd,<sup>26</sup> and also between the people of God, who dwell in one mind and one heart in the house of God.<sup>27</sup> One of the important means of the unity of the Church is charity. Charity, according to St. Cyprian, is solidarity and recapitulation of the divine mystery of the Holy Trinity.<sup>28</sup>

### *One Church of God in Jesus Christ*

The real basis of the Church's unity, in St. Cyprian's thought, is the unity and oneness of God revealed and culminating in His unique Son who founded one Church in the One Holy Spirit. God, Christ, Church, faith-- each of them is one. This is the paradigm he uses to understand the people of God joined into a substantial unity of Body through the link, the bond of mutual concord.<sup>29</sup> In the Church, there is

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<sup>20</sup> ANF V., 423, 5.

<sup>21</sup> ANF V., 324.

<sup>22</sup> ANF V., 422, 4.

<sup>23</sup> ANF V., 376, 382.

<sup>24</sup> d' Alès, *La Théologie*, 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> ANF V., 375.

<sup>26</sup> ANF V., 423, 8.

<sup>27</sup> ANF V., 424, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Colson, *L'Évêque*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> ANF V., 429, 23.

also one episcopal chair, originally founded by Jesus' authority on Peter's witness and confession of faith. "There cannot be erected another altar or another priesthood constituted besides this one altar and one priesthood already constituted and erected."<sup>30</sup>

The Church is profoundly Christological: one Christ, one Church,<sup>31</sup> one divine unity under the authority of the One Lord.<sup>32</sup> Nobody and nothing can separate the Church, the people who faithfully believed in what they received from Christ.<sup>33</sup> If the unity of the Church is the unity of Christ, to break the Church's unity is to violate Christ's love for His Church.<sup>34</sup> Jesus is bound with indestructible links to His Church, therefore, because of the mystery of the relationship Christ-Church, one cannot be in Christ if one is not in the Church.<sup>35</sup> The unity of the Church is symbolized by the coat of Jesus which at the time of the crucifixion was not divided but taken in its entirety. This is a sign in which Jesus declared the sacramental unity of the Church.<sup>36</sup>

Cyprian says that in the Church we need to hear the commandment of Christ, "to stand fast on His words, to learn and to do whatever He taught and did."<sup>37</sup> To obey the great commandment of Jesus, the love for God and for neighbor, means to be in the unity of the body of Christ. There is no unity without mutual obedience in love. The love of neighbor commended to us by Jesus is a basis for the unity of the Church.<sup>38</sup> Division in the Church comes when people do not seek the source of truth, the Head, the Christ, the Heavenly Master.<sup>39</sup> Even when someone departs from the Church, the Church does not depart from Christ,<sup>40</sup> and it is not going to be diminished for as long as the bishop is there.<sup>41</sup> And not only if one person leaves the Church, but even in the case when "a whole host of proud and presumptuous people may refuse to listen and go away, the Church herself does not go away from Christ,"<sup>42</sup> Cyprian writes in his letter to Puppianus:

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<sup>30</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> *ANF V.*, 382.

<sup>32</sup> *ANF V.*, 422, 4.

<sup>33</sup> *ANF V.*, 362.

<sup>34</sup> *ANF V.*, 426, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *ANF V.*, 325.

<sup>36</sup> *ANF V.*, 423, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *ANF V.*, 422, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *ANF V.*, 427, 15.

<sup>39</sup> *ANF V.*, 422, 3.

<sup>40</sup> *ANF V.*, 374.

<sup>41</sup> Seagraves, *Pascentes cum Disciplina*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Seagraves, *Pascentes cum Disciplina*, 48.

Christ founded the fellowship and the unity of the apostles and on that unity and unanimity<sup>43</sup> the Church develops its whole life. The bishop in the Church stands also on the harmony of the apostolic unity. The bishop emphasizes the apostolic character of the Church, but he governs the Church in subordination to Christ, his Master.<sup>44</sup>

*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*

As mentioned above, St. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote that outside the Church there is no salvation/safety, and used this teaching against gnostic heresies: He said that Christ judges all those who are outside the truth, by which he means those who are outside the Church.<sup>45</sup> However, it is Cyprian who constructed a developed doctrine out of this idea.<sup>46</sup> Cyprian is very clear and categorical concerning the vital importance and necessity for the people of God to stay in the traditional apostolic Church. He quotes Matthew 12:30 where Jesus said: “Whoever is not with Me is against Me and whoever does not gather with Me, scatters.” In order to emphasize the duty of people to work for unity, Cyprian also paraphrases Matthew: “He who gathers elsewhere than in the Church of Christ, scatters the Church of Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

Having in mind those who live in fear of persecution and with tendencies for schism and division, Cyprian says that those who depart from the Church rebel against the peace of Jesus and against the appointment and the unity of God.<sup>48</sup> “Can anyone draw water from the Church's fountains who is not within the Church?”<sup>49</sup> Cyprian asks, as if he wanted to indicate that he who would do so would be just a thief.

He speaks syllogistically that the Church has its foundation on its beginning which is God. Therefore whoever does not remain in the unity of the Church cannot pretend to hold the right faith in God.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, only one who is not planted in the commandments of God and His warning can depart from the Church.<sup>51</sup> But to be out of the

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<sup>43</sup> ANF V., 429, 25.

<sup>44</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 89, 109.

<sup>45</sup> *Judicabit autem et omnes eos qui sunt extra veritatem, hoc est qui sunt extra ecclesiam.* Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les Hérésies* IV, 2, Ch. 33, 7.

<sup>46</sup> ANF V., 384.

<sup>47</sup> ANF V., 423, 6.

<sup>48</sup> ANF V., 366.

<sup>49</sup> ANF V., 382.

<sup>50</sup> ANF V., 422-4.

<sup>51</sup> ANF V., 326.

Church is to be dead because only in the Church does Jesus Christ give the grace of eternal life<sup>52</sup> and because outside of the Church there is no remission of sins.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, salvation is only in the Church. She is life in Christ, the wisdom and the truth. To be in the unity of the Church is to be in the divine unity. He says that nothing is lawful which is outside the Church and the one who is baptized in the Church maintains in one's life this truth of the divine unity.<sup>54</sup> Cyprian encourages his people: "We who are true to our principle and foundation of one Church (*Ecclesiae unius caput et radicem tenemus*), know and are assured that nothing is lawful out of it."<sup>55</sup> Cyprian does not speak only for the people as a flock, but for bishops, too. He warns that there is no bishop who is not in the Church<sup>56</sup> and no episcopate outside of the unity of the body of Christ.<sup>57</sup> For Cyprian rank, dignity, or social position do not matter. The word "Christian" cannot be applied to anyone who is not in the Church.<sup>58</sup> He specifies that the prayers and sacrifice, even a martyrdom which is not made in the unity of the Church are of no use.<sup>59</sup> The quality of the Christian is given by the communion with the whole body of Christ, it is not given by the personal qualities outside of this communion.<sup>60</sup>

### *Ubi Episcopus ibi Ecclesia*

This is another famous Cyprianic axiom. For him it seems that bishop and Church are two interchangeable realities: the bishop is in the Church and the Church is in the bishop.<sup>61</sup> *Ecclesia in episcopo, episcopus in Ecclesia*. The bishops are bishops of God,<sup>62</sup> the guardians of the unity of the Church as they are one in a single undivided episcopate.<sup>63</sup> That is why those devoid of bishops are not in the Church.<sup>64</sup>

However, in the particular situation of the Church in his time,

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<sup>52</sup> ANF V., 377.

<sup>53</sup> ANF V., 385.

<sup>54</sup> ANF V., 380.

<sup>55</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 155.

<sup>56</sup> ANF V., 375.

<sup>57</sup> ANF V., 334.

<sup>58</sup> ANF V., 333; *Selected Epistles*, 64.

<sup>59</sup> ANF V., 425-14.

<sup>60</sup> G.W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage III*. (New York: Newman Press, 1986), 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Select Epistles*, 109.

<sup>62</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 122.

<sup>63</sup> ANF V., 423-5.

<sup>64</sup> *Select Epistles*, 109.



confronted with heresies, schism and persecutions, as mentioned above, it is obvious that here, even if Cyprian refers also to the sacramental position of the bishop in the Church and to the apostolic and Christological dimension of the episcopacy, he surely refers more particularly to the visible role of the bishop in his Church as a diocese, at the jurisdictional level. The bishop is a source of unity for his diocese<sup>65</sup> and through that and actively preserving the unity with all the body of bishops, he is a factor of unity for the universal Church.<sup>66</sup>

Addressing the lapsed who had abandoned their faith for fear of persecution, Cyprian stresses the unity between bishop and his people who encourage and help each other to stand right in the apostolic faith. He says that “the Church is made up of a people united to their bishop, a flock adhering to their shepherd.”<sup>67</sup> Because the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop, those who want to come to the Church must come to and be with the bishop.<sup>68</sup> The bishop is the link of the unity and the harmony of the heart of God's people<sup>69</sup> and in this sense, Cyprian says, the Church is founded upon the bishop and established upon the clergy and all those who stand fast in the faith.<sup>70</sup> In his attempt to strengthen the position of the bishops in the Church as a factor of unity, Cyprian will relate the presence of the Holy Spirit even to the organizational level of the Church life, saying that this is the Church of the Holy Spirit in which the bishop presides and ministers to his people.<sup>71</sup> Even as the communion of the bishops makes the unity of the universal Church,<sup>72</sup> so also the bishop is in the Church and vice-versa, until the point that even the glory of the Church is the glory of the bishop!<sup>73</sup>

However, the power and authority of the bishop derives not only from God but from the people too. The people have a chief part in the election of the bishops<sup>74</sup> and this is another way in which the unity of the people is expressed in the bishop and the *concordia* between bishops comprises the real unity of *Ecclesia catholica*.<sup>75</sup>

Cyprian strongly promotes parity between the bishops found in

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<sup>65</sup> P.Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage and the Unity of the Christian Church*. Geoffrey Chapman (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.,1974), 100; ANF V., 374-375.

<sup>66</sup> *The Fathers of the Church*. 36, 91-92.

<sup>67</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 109.

<sup>68</sup> Seagraves, *Pascentes cum Disciplina*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> Colson, *L'Évêque*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> ANF V., 305.

<sup>71</sup> Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage*, 102-103.

<sup>72</sup> *Select Epistles*, 109.

<sup>73</sup> ANF V., 284.

<sup>74</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 114.

<sup>75</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 114.

agreement and communion with each other.<sup>76</sup> This parity strengthens international Christian unity and does not exclude diversity.<sup>77</sup> Rome, he pleads, as chair of St. Peter, is a Church of principal account<sup>78</sup> and a factor of unity but not of supremacy. Since the episcopate is one and each bishop participates in it indivisibly,<sup>79</sup> being in an equal fellowship, the whole body of bishops are in communion when they teach and initiate actions in the Church of Christ and this is the way in which they remain firmly in “the unity and charity of the Catholic Church.”<sup>80</sup> The bishops are so strongly cemented together in the same life and teaching that if one of them would be inclined to heretical teaching or to do whatever would divide the flock of Christ, all other bishops would step in to help him to stay in the communion of the Church.<sup>81</sup>

It is evident from the presentation of the role and the position of the bishop in the Church, how important the discipline of the Church is in the view of St. Cyprian. This discipline is not only for the people but for bishops and all clergy too. It is another factor of unity and the bishop guard it.<sup>82</sup> Again, unequivocally, Cyprian states that those who do not respect the divine and ecclesiastical discipline cannot abide in the Church.<sup>83</sup> However, discipline does not annihilate personal freedom.<sup>84</sup> Both of them go together harmoniously and the people of God, because of the discipline, are not prevented from having a major role and bringing their essential contribution to the life of the Church.

As Joseph T. Lienhard writes, real authority is not an arbitrary exercise of power since it is generated by truth; that is why it is not an end in itself but a means to achieve freedom.<sup>85</sup> The primal truth in the Christian Church is Jesus Christ who brings about liberation and who is the source of all ecclesial authority. This doctrine is at the center of Cyprian’s understanding of discipline and of the bishop’s role in relation to it in the Church.

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<sup>76</sup> ANF V., 263.

<sup>77</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 89.

<sup>78</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 88.

<sup>79</sup> Cyprien de Carthage. *Unité de l’Eglise*, 185.

<sup>80</sup> *Select Epistles*, 38.

<sup>81</sup> *Selected Epistles*, 122.

<sup>82</sup> Colson, *L’Évêque*, 14.

<sup>83</sup> ANF V., 325.

<sup>84</sup> ANF V., 424,10.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph T. Lienhard. *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 75.

## Conclusions

It is true that St. Cyprian insists on the bishop's particular role in the life of the Church, but this is not to say that he had clericalistic and legalistic tendencies, because all his teaching about the importance and role of the bishops in the Church is not to its detriment. Rather Cyprian's teaching in this matter must be seen, as I argued above, in the special context of tensions in which the Church lived; at that time the Church was still growing and spreading among the nations and among non-Christian people and in that situation, for a successful mission, the unity of the Church was a major issue, and even more so as heretical doctrines were still threatening the Church seriously. That is why, for Cyprian, the problem of the Church's unity was a responsibility and a duty for everybody, shepherds and flock.

As has been rightly said, "Of all the Christian Fathers, Cyprian is the most clear and comprehensive in his conception of the body of Christ as an organic whole."<sup>86</sup> In other words, with a Pauline view regarding the nature of the Church and consequently believing that it is the corporate body of Christ, Cyprian expects that all its members be organically connected to each other, each submitting to the whole and each contributing to it.<sup>87</sup>

In his doctrine of the relationship between bishop and the Church, Cyprian does not ignore the sacramental dimension of the episcopacy and does not place in lesser importance the position of Christ in the Church. He does give a Christological foundation to his ecclesiology and emphasizes the apostolic character of the Church.

Cyprian's theology on the Church is also extensively established on biblical foundations. The quotation and interpretation of biblical texts and images abounds concerning his definition of the being of the Church, its source, and the reason for its unity. Cyprian is theocentric and definitely Christocentric in the elaboration of his doctrine on this important topic. The pattern of One God, One Lord Jesus Christ, One Holy Spirit, One baptism, one work of reconciliation appears again and again in his writings. He stresses in different ways the theandric nature of the Church and develops extensively its anthropological aspect, especially when he deals with the problem and crises the Church has to face in the world generally, or in his time and situation specifically.

As a solution to overcome divisions which might appear in the Church of Christ at different levels and in different ways, St. Cyprian

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<sup>86</sup> ANF V., 263.

<sup>87</sup> St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Treatises*, 29.

proposes and insists on the mutual recognition of any one local community in the other local communities without any exclusive, intolerant, claim that one local Church would be the only, true Church. The idea of collegiality and unanimity of bishops and the rejection by Cyprian of any tendency towards jurisdictional supremacy or ecclesiastical hegemony in the relationship between the communities of faith is consistent with his teaching on mutual tolerance and with his idea that only Christ can claim the exclusivity of oneness and unity as He is the center and the source of the unity of the whole Church.

Cyprian became famous for the accent he put on salvation received within the Church and on the necessity of remaining in the Church and of working in love and obedience for its unity. From all his teaching and activity, Cyprian has been recognized as an outstanding personality who led, taught and influenced the people of his time as well as posterity. Through the courage of his Christian witness until martyrdom and through the dedication of his entire life to the service of the people of God, Cyprian gained a place of great and lasting honor in the life and tradition of the Christian Church.