

Session 5

The Apologists II (197CE to c.325CE)

The persecution of Christians was something sporadic and, often, localised; there were times of peace, and in those decades the Church was able to grow not just in numbers but in faith and understanding.

Responding to one such persecution, **Tertullian** had argued in 197CE that true religion could not be forced:

For see that you do not give further ground for the charge of irreligion by taking away religious liberty and forbidding free choice of deity, so that I may no longer worship according to my inclination but am compelled to worship against it. Not even a human being would care to have unwilling homage rendered him.¹

The blood of the martyrs, he argued, only encouraged more people to enquire into the Faith and become Christians:

This community will be undying for, be assured that, just in the time of its seeming overthrow it is built up into greater power. For all who witness the noble patience of its martyrs... are inflamed with desire to examine into the matter in question; and, as soon as they come to know the truth, they straightway enrol themselves its disciples.²

Little is known of Tertullian's life, but he was certainly a convert to Christianity who was articulate and passionate about the importance of true faith and true teaching. Among his many writings are some of the earliest descriptions of Christian sacramental rites, as well as many texts in defence of true Christianity against the heretics of his time³, but it is his writings on the Trinity which offer his most precious contribution to Christian understanding.

Christ and the Trinity

The texts which had come down from the time of the apostles told unequivocally that God is **One**; yet they also acknowledged the Father, his Son Jesus, and also the Holy Spirit sent upon the disciples at Pentecost. How could God be One and Three?

Tertullian came up with a whole new language in which to speak of God - a series of terms which would be relied upon over a century later when the Church needed to state its teaching clearly. He coined the term *trinitas* (trinity), and also the key terms *persona*

¹ Apology 24, 6-10

² Apology 50,13

³ Among them Against Praxeas, written c.213CE

(person) and *substantia* (substance), to argue against those who claimed that the Father, Son and Spirit were simply three 'modes', or ways in which, the One God appeared to humanity:

These three are one substance, not one person; and it is said, 'I and my Father are one' in respect not of the singularity of number but the unity of the substance.⁴

The Father, the Son and the Spirit are 'inseparable from each other'; 'the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and they are distinct from each other not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by distribution... not by division... They differ from one another in the mode of their being.'⁵

Here we start to see the language that would come to be used in the creeds which we recite at Mass today.

Tertullian developed his teaching further: he argued that Jesus possessed the natures of both God and man 'so that the property of each nature is preserved'⁶, so that it can be said that God died and that man was raised from the dead.⁷

The Faith was growing even in persecution: major centres, like Alexandria, had catechetical schools where great thinkers taught - **Clement** and **Origen** were among them, examining the scriptures more deeply than ever before and developing the first genuinely Christian theology. Many of their writings are still in existence.

But, in 249CE, a persecution began - ordered by the Roman Emperor, Decius - which reached across the empire. The aim was to finally eliminate the Christians, who were seen as outsiders refusing to conform to Roman ways. Everyone was required to carry documents proving that they had burned incense to the gods and the emperor; those who refused were executed, imprisoned or tortured.

That persecution only last three years, but it was a sign of greater determination at the heart of the empire to root out those who refused to conform.

Could *all* sins be forgiven?

Many Christians died for their faith in the persecution ordered by Decius. But what of those who had apostatised and afterwards wanted to come back, be forgiven, and return to the life of the Church? Was that possible?

This was a difficult time for the Church: the Pope had been executed during the persecution and there were arguments about who was his rightful successor. Arguments about forgiveness just added to the problems.

⁴ Against Praxeas 25

⁵ Against Praxeas 9

⁶ Against Praxeas 27

⁷ Here he anticipated the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451CE), over 250 years later

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage was a true pastor of the Church: he saw that - first - the question of authority had to be addressed. He wrote a treatise, *On the Unity of the Church*⁸, which he presented to a conference of the African bishops, sending a copy to Rome. He stood by the duly elected successor to the martyred Pope Fabian, and argued that anyone who split off from true authority was not *splitting the Church* but **breaking away from the Church** - the Church itself could never be divided⁹. This set the ground for an authoritative teaching on forgiveness of sins¹⁰.

Cyprian proposed a *middle way*: clearly the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is the work of the Church, so those who had sinned - nomatter how deeply - must have the opportunity to repent and be forgiven; but - also - this could not be done lightly. Those who had apostatised must do penance - not as a punishment, but as a spiritual therapy to strengthen their faith - and, whilst some continued in their objections, Cyprian's fellow bishops were moved by his argument and approved his conclusion.¹¹

Although the persecution of Decius had lasted only three years, it was not the last, and Cyprian was beheaded in 258CE in a subsequent persecution ordered by the Emperor Valerian.

A Cultural and Political Divide

We look at the Church today and see it divided into East and West. How could the 'undivided garment' described by Cyprian have separated into (Roman) Catholic and Orthodox traditions?

The answer is complicated, but has its roots in cultural changes taking place in the Roman world: the empire of the Caesars had begun to fracture long ago, too large to be held together by one man, and things had changed: the east had become more Greek and the west more Latin (both in culture and in language): they no longer fully understood one another.

In 293CE the emperor Diocletian took decisive action: he divided the empire into East and West under the authority of himself (in the East) and Maximian in the West.¹² In an effort to pull his empire together, Diocletian allowed yet another wave of persecution to sweep over the Christians under his rule¹³. Up to this point they had enjoyed over forty years of peace and prosperity, with churches opening and the possibility even of holding public

⁸ c.250CE

⁹ Sadly, the schism was not resolved: those who objected to Cyprian's arguments sided against him with the schismatic 'pope' Novatian

¹⁰ On the Fallen

¹¹ The question of forgiveness of sins remained in the centuries that followed, finally being fully addressed some two centuries later in the writings of St Augustine

¹² Maximian had already become co-emperor with Diocletian in 285CE

¹³ This persecution was not evenly enacted across eastern and western territories, but it lasted longer than many earlier persecutions

office. But all that ended: Christians holding office in the military or in government were forced to resign; clergy were imprisoned. When Diocletian resigned as emperor, due to his health, the persecution intensified under his successor Galerius: once again Christians were put to the sword.

Relief finally came from the West.

In 306CE, Constantine became ruler of the western territories of Gaul and Britain and, step-by-step, seized full control of the western empire including Italy and north Africa. He had been brought up a pagan, a worshipper of *Sol Invictus*¹⁴, but it seems that there were Christian influences in his family¹⁵ and he immediately decreed religious freedom across the lands under his rule. In 311CE this was formally accepted also in the eastern empire, to be followed in 313CE by the Edict of Milan which declared that those Christians who had lost land and property during the persecution should be compensated at government expense, and religious texts, sacred vessels and churches should all be replaced. Constantine went on to take direct control of the eastern empire in 324CE and so, once again, the whole empire was united under one ruler.

But the East had suffered eleven long years of persecution and there was deep division among Christians: many had apostatised and were seeking forgiveness; some Christians refused to accept them. And divergent teachings had arisen amongst the divided groups: these threatened the very understanding of who Jesus was and his relationship to the Father. Already the church in Alexandria, one of the oldest and most venerated churches, had become impossibly divided and the threat was now a real one for the whole Church.

The Texts

Woman has the same spiritual dignity as man. Both of them have the same God, the same Teacher, the same Church. They breathe, see, hear, know, hope and love in the same way. Beings who have the same life, grace and salvation are called... to the same manner of being.

Clement of Alexandria, Tutor 1,4

If you try to reduce the divine meaning to the external signification of the words, the Word will have no reason to come down to you. It will return to its secret dwelling, which is contemplation that is worthy of it. For it has wings, this divine meaning, given to it by the Holy Spirit who is its guide... But to be unwilling ever to rise above the letter, never to give up feeding on the literal sense, is the mark of a life of falsehood.

Origen, Commentary on Proverbs 2,3

¹⁴ the 'invincible sun'

¹⁵ His half-sister was named 'Anastasia', meaning 'resurrection'

For your part, then, apply all your zeal to the reading of Scripture, with faith and the good will that are pleasing to God. It is not enough for you to knock and seek. What is needed above all in order to obtain the understanding of divine matters is prayer.

Origen, Letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus 3

He prays unceasingly who combines prayer with necessary duties and duties with prayer. Only in this way can we find it practicable to fulfil the commandment to pray always. It consists in regarding the whole of Christian existence as a single great prayer. What we are accustomed to call prayer is only a part of it.

Origen, On Prayer 12

God did not create death; he did not create evil; but he left to human beings, as to angels, freedom in everything. Thus through their freedom some rise to the highest good, others rush headlong into the depths of evil. But you, man, why do you reject your freedom? Why this reluctance to have to make an effort, to toil, to fight, to become the artificer of your own salvation? 'My Father is working still,' it is written, 'and I am working' (John 5:17).

Are you then reluctant to work, you who were created in order to create positively?

Origen, First Homily on Ezekiel 3

Reflection

When you read the Bible, how do you try to listen?

What does prayer mean for you? What helps you in your prayer?

How do you try to 'create positively' in your life?