

Convent 2016

Perhaps the best definition of a saint is a "forgiven sinner". And this is why it is such a blessing to celebrate, remember, venerate, and honour the saints from every age of the Church. They were filled with faith, but suffered doubt. They acted nobly, though sometimes shamefully. They displayed courage in the face of death, but sometimes had to overcome cowardice in order to preserve their lives.

If the saints were perfect, they would need no saviour and would not be Christians. And yet, these imperfect people, "poor miserable sinners" the lot of them, have risen above their doubts and fears, their sins and foibles, all by grace alone, through the mercy of God. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, they have lived victorious lives in securing the "unfading crown of glory", while leaving us holy examples to follow as fellow followers of Christ Jesus.

Bishop Cyprian served the Carthaginian Christians in the third century. Carthage was in Northern Africa, and was under the domination of the Roman Empire. And at this time, the emperors were persecuting the Christians. In one persecution, under the wicked emperor Decius, Cyprian fled the persecution - not unlike St. Peter, who abandoned the side of Jesus in order to save his own skin. Bishop Cyprian did not behave as Saint Cyprian at this point in his life. For our Lord condemns the pastor who "sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them." "He flees," says our Blessed Lord, "because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."

This is a harsh rebuke from the Lord, the Good Shepherd who “lays down His life for the sheep” - the Shepherd in whose service Bishop Cyprian was called to serve as a pastor.

But once again, saints are not perfect, just forgiven.

Following the persecutions, Cyprian returned to Carthage, and had to help settle the question of what to do with Christians who, in fear of persecution, had denied their Lord. The Church concluded that such lapsed Christians could indeed be forgiven and restored, but were required to repent, undergo a time of penance, and be absolved.

Bishop Cyprian himself was a sinner who fled persecution and was likewise a sheep in need of a Shepherd to forgive him. Like St. Peter before him, Cyprian was to receive a second chance.

The Lord’s holy flock was again persecuted under the cruel Emperor Valerian. Bishop Cyprian once again fled. But this time, he understood that his duty was to be a good shepherd, not a hireling. He was obliged to “lay down his life for the sheep” even as his Lord did for the sake of sinners.

The bishop returned to his church, to his beloved sheep who needed a good shepherd to protect them from the coming wolf. Bishop Cyprian bravely faced the sword of the wolf, and was beheaded in 258 AD, in the city of Carthage, among his faithful parishioners.

St. Cyprian became a martyr to the faith, knowing that the Lord would confess him before His Father even as Cyprian

confessed Jesus before the fathers of the Empire. Bishop St. Cyprian died defending his flock, confessing the faith, inspiring a courageous faith and a faithful courage for Christians of every time and place.

This faithful shepherd took comfort in the fact that the Lord is his Shepherd, and that he would never be in “want.” But rather was to be led beside the “still waters” of baptism, his soul was restored - even after a humiliating lapse and fall from grace motivated by fear. And in submitting to martyrdom, St. Cyprian displayed what that earlier forgiven sinner and martyr, St. Peter called the exercising of “oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have him.”

Dear friends, though we are not suffering persecution for the faith, we must not forget our brothers and sisters in Christ who have, who are, and who will be, put to the sword for the sake of Christ and His holy Church. Some were pastors cut down for being preachers of the Word, but thousands more were faithful lay people whose veins were opened for making the confession of the Good Shepherd. We love and venerate them all, known and unknown, ancient and modern, clergy and lay, men and women, children and the aged, of every time, place, people, and tongue - that great cloud of witnesses, those who cry out from beneath the altar for the Lord to vindicate them.

They are our heroes, our guides, and our brothers and sisters, separated from us by the thinnest veil of space, time, and the grave. They have triumphed because He has triumphed. They died as He died, and yet they live because He lives!

Hear again the Word of the Lord:

“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.