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## Introduction

The great martyr Cyprian of Carthage is one of the shining examples of repentance in the Church. Having led a dissolute life as a youth, he was converted to Christ in adulthood and was quickly elevated to the rank of bishop. During his tenure, he distinguished himself by his humility, charity, and great courage in defence of the faith. He guided his flock through many schisms and strengthened them in the trial of martyrdom. His famous letters, full of pious learning and Christian zeal, stand as eternal monuments to the Church. In the end, Cyprian answered the same summons he had encouraged so many others to follow before him: on the fourteenth day of September 258, he sealed his faith with his blood, being beheaded by the pagans during the persecution of Valerian. Since then, his fame has spread throughout both East and West, and today he is revered as one of the great Fathers of the Church.

Although Saint Cyprian's career as a cleric and martyr is remarkable in itself, and his theology and teachings are abundantly on display for all to see, it was another aspect of his life that seemed to captivate the minds and imaginations of the faithful in Antiquity, namely the story of his conversion. This account has come down to us in Greek in two<sup>1</sup> main versions, a

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<sup>1</sup> Translated respectively as Books I and II below. In the manuscript tradition, they are variously titled the "Acts," "Conversion," or "Repentance" of Saint Cyprian. Book II (the longer account) is also referred to as the "Confession" by modern editors. There is also a text known as the "Martyrdom" of Saint Cyprian which we have not translated here as it seems to have been written later and contains apocryphal elements. For instance, while Saint Cyprian was martyred under Valerian in Carthage, the "Martyrdom" places his death under Diocletian in Nicomedia; yet at the same time, it states that

shorter summary, and a longer narrative written in the first person.<sup>2</sup> One curious feature of these texts is that while everyone acknowledges that Saint Cyprian lived in Carthage, in Roman North Africa, the tale of his conversion is set in Antioch, in the far East of the Empire. Over the centuries, scholars have come up with a variety of solutions to try and explain this discrepancy. Some claim that there were in fact two Saint Cyprians—one from Carthage, commemorated in September by the Western Church, and another from Antioch, commemorated by the Greeks on October 2<sup>nd</sup>—and that the two were subsequently confused. Others, more cynically, have dismissed the entire conversion story as a literary invention. Both of these solutions, however, happen to be problematic.

Firstly, as regards the first thesis, there is simply no record in the annals of the See of Antioch of any bishop named Cyprian, and the ecclesiastical tradition has never distinguished between two saints of this name. For example, the great luminary of the faith Saint Gregory of Nazianzus delivered an oration in A.D. 379 in honour of Saint Cyprian's feastday.<sup>3</sup> In it, Saint Gregory accurately recounts many of the details of Saint Cyprian's life—his Carthaginian origin, his letters, his exile under Emperor Decius, and his beheading—but he also includes episodes (such as his practice of sorcery, his attempt to

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Cyprian was executed under the authority of Count Eutolmius, who lived over seventy years *after* Diocletian. The "Martyrdom" also states that Cyprian's relics were secretly taken to Rome after his death, whereas the historical record indicates that his relics were immediately interred in Carthage at a place known as the *Mensa Cypriani*, which became a famous pilgrimage site.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, in the fifth century, Empress Eudocia recast the whole story in Homeric verse, of which 578 lines survive.

<sup>3</sup> *Oration 24* (Patrologia graeca 35, col. 1169-1194)

seduce a Christian woman, his wrestling with the devil, and the burning of his magical books) which belong to the tradition of the “Antiochian” Cyprian. It is highly unlikely that a man of the intellectual calibre of Saint Gregory simply “confused” two different saints because they shared the same name, especially given the fact that little more than a century had elapsed from the time of Saint Cyprian’s martyrdom, and so his life would have still been fresh in the mind of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the story of Saint Cyprian’s conversion seems to have enjoyed widespread, grass-roots popularity: this refutes the second theory which makes of it a simple literary invention. For in addition to Saint Gregory, who speaks of the faithful diligently celebrating Saint Cyprian’s feastday every year and says that his life was very familiar to them,<sup>5</sup> we also have the testimony of the Latin poet Prudentius (d. 413). In a poem the latter composed about Saint Cyprian’s life and passion, Prudentius says that as a youth, Cyprian engaged in “wicked arts” which he used to seduce women; that he lived a wanton

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<sup>4</sup> Embarrassed by this witness, some have sought altogether to dismiss Saint Gregory’s oration as spurious, but modern scholarship unquestionably accepts it as authentic. The respected hagiographer Saint Symeon the Metaphrast (10<sup>th</sup> century) also fails to distinguish between a Carthaginian and Antiochian Cyprian (see *Patrologia graeca* 115, col. 847-882), as does the hymnology of the Orthodox Church. See the following hymns for Saint Cyprian’s feast day: “O most honorable Cyprian, thou glory of athletes and crown of martyrs, **by thy discourses thou didst persuade the divinely-wise to maintain their courage most valiantly** when faced with imprisonment, bondage and divers tortures, the stripping of their bodies, binding and most brutal cold, and finally wounding and death” (*Second Sticheron for Vespers*, October 2<sup>nd</sup>); “**Having before avidly encouraged the athletes**, O most lauded Cyprian, thou wast later also a witness to the Truth” (*Ode III for Matins*, October 2<sup>nd</sup>), both of which directly recall Saint Cyprian’s letters to the Christians of Carthage, a detail not found in the *Conversion*.

<sup>5</sup> *Oration* 24.1, 24.6

from the biblical canon.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the *Conversion* quotes this specific work is good evidence that it originated at an early date, possibly contemporaneously with Saint Cyprian himself. What's more, the detailed references to pagan rituals and religion in the *Conversion*—some of which are very sophisticated—suggest that they came from the pen of someone who had intimate knowledge of these things.<sup>42</sup> Even if we assume that the text as we have it today was augmented with additional details and literary devices, the kernel strikes one as authentic.

## 5- The Antiochian Connection

There remains but one question: What do we make of the *Conversion's* claim that Saint Cyprian lived in Antioch? This riddle is perhaps not so difficult to solve either. In his lifetime, Saint Cyprian was involved in a controversy over baptism: at the time, the practice in Rome was to admit heretics by chrismation, but Saint Cyprian strongly insisted on rebaptism, since he considered that heretics were deprived of all grace and that their baptism was ineffectual. This more rigorist stance was also the one followed by the traditional churches of Cappadocia, and Saint Cyprian in fact exchanged letters with the bishops there condemning the Roman practice. Cyprian was also involved in resolving the Novatian schism in Rome, during which a priest called Novatian set up a rival episcopate. At that time, Pope Cornelius sent letters to Patriarch Fabian of Antioch,

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<sup>41</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.2; *Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate 1.1. The same verse is quoted in Saint Athanasius' Eleventh Festal Epistle of A.D. 339, but contrary to Irenaeus, Athanasius prefaces the quote with a note of caution about the work.

<sup>42</sup> As one can appreciate by taking a cursory glance at the footnotes we have added to our translation.

informing him of what had transpired and of Novatian's condemnation, and the historian Eusebius says that Saint Cyprian's letters regarding this matter were also in circulation.<sup>43</sup> Given this historical context, it is not at all difficult to see why Cyprian's name would have been well-known in the Christian East and even held in particular reverence there.

Moreover, the city of Antioch, being the largest metropolis in the region, had a very large pagan population and was commonly associated with magical practices. For instance, in the 370s, the Emperor Valens conducted mass burnings of magical books in Antioch.<sup>44</sup> As such, it is quite natural that a sorcerer like Cyprian eventually came to be associated with that city in the mind of believers. Thus, what appears at first glance to be so unusual is really just proof of Cyprian's overwhelming popular devotion: so beloved was the Saint by the East that believers came to think he had actually lived there.<sup>45</sup> With these prefatory remarks, then, we offer the reader our translation of Saint Cyprian's most edifying *Conversion*.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* IV.43. Cyprian's epistles, or at least a portion of them, seem to have been translated into Greek in the fourth century. See Bailey (2017), pp. 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> See John Chrysostom, *Patrologia graeca* 60, col. 274

<sup>45</sup> It is interesting that a more careful writer like Saint Gregory does not say anything about Cyprian being in Antioch, which always seems to have been more of a folk belief. In any case, whether one places Cyprian's conversion in Carthage or Antioch, the story loses nothing of its power.



## The Conversion of Saint Cyprian

### Book I

1. After the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven to earth and the fulfilment of the prophecies, the whole universe was enlightened by the word, and those who believed in one Father Almighty and in our Lord Jesus Christ were baptized in the Holy Spirit. Now, in the city of Antioch by Daphne,<sup>46</sup> there was a certain virgin named Justa,<sup>47</sup> whose father was Aedesius and whose mother was Cledonia. From the nearest window she would hear a deacon named Praylius speaking of the mighty works of God, the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the preaching of the Prophets, the birth from Mary, the adoration of the shepherds and the manifestation of the star, the performance of signs and wonders, the power of the Cross, the resurrection of the dead, the appearance to the disciples and the testament given to them, the ascent into the heavens and the sitting at the right hand and His incomprehensible kingdom. Hearing these things—or rather, seeing them through faith—the holy virgin could no longer bear the burning of the Holy Spirit. She desired to meet the deacon face to face; and not being able to do so, she said to her mother: “Mother, listen to your daughter: the idols that we worship daily, being fashioned by the hands of men of stones and wood and gold and silver, are

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<sup>46</sup> Daphne was a wealthy suburb located approximately five miles south of Antioch.

<sup>47</sup> Justa means “righteous” in Latin.

nothing; and if one of the Galileans<sup>48</sup> should approach, he will turn them all to flight without laying a hand on them by word and prayer." But her mother, wholly captivated by the boast of foolish wisdom, said: "My child, may your father not learn of this desire of yours." But Justa answered: "Be it known to you, mother, and to my father, that I seek Christ, of Whom I learned through Praylius, having listened for many days to the things pertaining to Him. And there is no other god in whom we can be saved." And saying this, she withdrew privately, rendering prayers to Christ.

2. Her mother shared these matters in bed with her husband Aedesius. But a deep and pleasant sleep came upon them, and they beheld in a vision an angelic host with more than a hundred torch-bearers in a fortress; and in the midst of them was Christ, who was telling them: "Come to me and I will grant you the kingdom of heaven." Seeing these things and marvelling greatly at them, Aedesius arose in the early morning and gathered his wife and the virgin and went to the church in the presence of Praylius, bidding that the latter take them to the bishop Optatus, which the deacon did after being persuaded. Falling at the bishop's feet, Aedesius asked to receive the seal in Christ,<sup>49</sup> but Optatus would not allow this until he was told of their vision of Christ and the desire of the virgin. Then Aedesius shaved the hair of his head and beard (for he had been a priest of the idols), and falling down before the feet of the bishop, all three received the seal in Christ. Aedesius was deemed worthy of the priestly rank, and after a year and six months, he departed unto Christ in peace.

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<sup>48</sup> That is, the Christians.

<sup>49</sup> That is, holy baptism.



## Book II

1. "All of you who take offence at the mysteries of Christ, look upon my tears and know the accuracy of the words contained therein. All of you who turn to the ways of the demons, learn from me the vanity of their deceptions. For none of you could manage to be more superstitious than I was or interpret matters pertaining to the so-called gods, explaining the essence of their activity. I am Cyprian, who was consecrated at a tender age as an offering to Apollo and initiated while still a babe into the ceremony of the dragon. I was not yet seven years of age when I came to the mysteries of Mithras,<sup>66</sup> being initially a foreigner to Athens but eventually a citizen through the zeal of my parents; when I was yet ten years old, I carried the torch for Demeter and bore the white grief of Core<sup>67</sup> and served the dragon of Pallas<sup>68</sup> on the Acropolis, having been promoted to the rank of temple-warden. I also came to Olympus, the mount of the gods, as they say. I was initiated into the conversation of the echo and the interpretation of noises. There I beheld dream-inducing trees and herbs that seem to operate by the gods' intervention. There I saw the succession of seasons at the change of the winds and the difference of days brought about by certain opposing forces. There I beheld the choruses of demons, some chanting, others fighting, others still lying in wait, deceiving, confounding; there I gazed upon the battalion of each god and goddess, having remained at that place for

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<sup>66</sup> An eastern mystery religion that originated in Persia and was very popular in the Roman world in the first centuries.

<sup>67</sup> Core was another name for Persephone, the goddess of the underworld. The mysteries of Demeter and Core were performed yearly in the town of Eleusis, northwest of Athens. The "white grief" is a reference to the white robes worn by worshippers during the procession.

<sup>68</sup> An epithet of the goddess Athena.