

**THE EARLY CATHOLIC  
CHURCH  
IN NORTH AFRICA**

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## PREFACE

This work was written when I was based in Our Lady's friary in Livingstone, Zambia, in 1983-84. At the time I was director of Capuchin students in Zambia.

I became aware of how little the students, and, even more so, Zambian laypeople knew of the origins of the Christian faith in Africa. Most, I felt, assumed that the Christian faith came in the nineteenth century, and was European in origin.

The early Christian church in Africa was its heart and soul. It has a great tradition, something for Africans to be proud of. It was great in its achievements, its hopes, and its mistakes. Some of these latter are being repeated in the church today, and readers of the pages that follow will notice that.

It would be an understatement to say that when I presented these pages as lectures to Capuchin students and laypeople they were surprised and pleased. It gave them, I think, some pride and confidence in the African church. I undertook some very slight revision in 2014.

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# THE BIBLE

## Old Testament

Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, went to Egypt in time of famine to find food for his people. (Genesis 12.10-13.1)

Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, with their wives and families, lived in Egypt. (Genesis 46-50)

Moses was born in Egypt but led the Hebrew people from there to the Promised Land. (Exodus 2-12)

During the persecution described in 1 and 2 Maccabees many Jews left Palestine and set up new communities in other Mediterranean lands. At Alexandria in Egypt, Jews in the first century BC numbered about a quarter of this city of 500,000 people. After the defeat of the Jews in the war against Rome, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, there was a second Diaspora. The first Christians were nearly all Jewish converts, so that those centres with large Jewish populations such as Antioch, Rome and Alexandria, became prominent Christian centres.

Alexandria was the greatest centre of the Greek intellectual world with its great libraries and assemblies

of scholars. Here the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the *Septuagint*, and here also Jewish scholars such as Philo tried to fuse Greek and Hebrew wisdom. According to an unsubstantiated tradition, Mark the evangelist was the founder of the church in Alexandria.

Carthage, near present-day Tunis, was the other great city of North Africa and a centre of Christian learning. Saint Cyril and Tertullian are its more outstanding leaders. It was the venue for more than twenty regional councils of bishops, the first of which, in 198 AD, was attended by some seventy bishops.

## **New Testament**

According to Matthew 2.13-21, Jesus spent the first years of his life in Egypt. Nothing reliable is known about his life there.

Simon of Cyrene (in present-day Libya) helped Jesus carry his cross to Calvary. (Mark 15.21) His sons, Alexander and Rufus, seem to have been known to Mark. (Romans 16.13)

Simeon called Niger (Latin, *niger*: black), and Lucius, who, like Simon above, was from Cyrene, were prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. (Acts 13.1; 11.20)

The apostle Philip baptized the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia. (Acts 8.26-39) At that time, the term "Ethiopia" was usually applied to Nubia or the Southern Sudan.

As early as the day of Pentecost there were Christians from 'Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene' (Acts 2.10) in Jerusalem.

The inhabitants of North Africa at that time were not Arabs; these did not come until the sixth and seventh centuries. They were mostly the original inhabitants, such as Berbers, with the addition of some Jews, Greeks and Romans.

The great evangelizers of the first century were traders, sailors, and soldiers of the Roman army. They were especially active in spreading the faith among the Gentiles.



# **THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN NORTH AFRICA**

## **Numidia**

This area, now known as Tunisia and eastern Algeria, had the largest Christian population in North Africa. The faith seems to have come to it from Egypt and Rome. Latin was the language in use in the church, and the first translations of parts of the Bible into Latin were made here. Tertullian, Saints Cyprian and Augustine, were the great leaders of the church in this area, and their contribution is felt to the present day.

Each town, and many villages, had a bishop. When Saint Cyprian called a provincial council at Carthage it was attended by eighty bishops. The sixteenth council of Carthage, held in 418, was attended by two hundred bishops.

There were serious problems in the church's life. Latin was the language of the wealthy and the educated and also the language of the church. Punic and Berber were the principal languages of the people, but were neglected in the church's life.

Furthermore, most of the Christians were wealthy, urbanized and Romanized. To use modern terms, they

were the *apamwamba*, the *waBenzi*. The original people were relatively untouched by the church's presence. The church never became truly localized and this had substantial consequences for its life. Firstly, when the Donatist heresy developed in the fourth century it very quickly became a source of division not only on a matter of doctrine but also about race and language. This controversy greatly weakened the church in Numidia. Then, when Moslems came in the sixth and seventh centuries, they were able to sweep all before them, meeting with little resistance as the great mass of the people was alienated from the church.

## **Mauritania**

Almost nothing is known about the growth or origin of the church in Mauritania. What is known is that it was there in the second century. Tertullian wrote of the church in North Africa, including Mauritania, 'We are but of yesterday and we have filled all you have - cities, islands, forts, assembly halls, even military camps, tribes, town councils, the palace, senate and forum. We have left you nothing but the temples.' (1)

## **Nubia**

It appears that the faith was introduced into this part of southern Sudan from Byzantium (Constantinople)

some time between the fourth and sixth centuries. Recent excavations have uncovered the remains of some sixty Christian churches from that period. The country seems to have been substantially Christian from the seventh century and to have resisted the encroachments of Islam until the sixteenth century. During its Christian period the country was stable and prosperous.

The Bible was translated into Nubian.

## **The Coptic Church**

The history of the growth of the church in Egypt is unknown, but it seems clear that it must have been substantial as Saint Clement of Alexandria (150-220) describes the faith as being spread over the whole country.

In the second century, Alexandria was the intellectual centre of the Christian world. Here Saints Clement, Athanasius and Cyril, and great scholars such as Origen were the leading men in the church of their time. The language of the liturgy and of intellectual discussion was Greek.

By the middle of the third century the Bible had been translated into Coptic and into some of its related

languages such as Sahidic, Bohairic, Ethiopic and Nubian.

However, there were large cultural differences between the highly-educated Greek-speaking elite in Alexandria and the largely illiterate Coptic-speaking peasants of the Nile valley. When Dioscoros succeeded Saint Cyril as patriarch of Alexandria he promoted monophysitism, a heresy about the nature of Jesus Christ. This doctrine became the focal point of feelings of resentment and hostility about language, culture and class between the two sections of the Christian community. The result was the separation of the Coptic church from Rome in 451 AD. The Greek-speaking Christians retained the orthodox doctrine and became known as Melchites.

As in the case of Carthage, this division greatly weakened the Christian community. When Alexandria was captured by the Moslems in 641, Islam quickly became the predominant religion, although the Coptic church is active to this day, comprising about ten per cent of Egypt's population, though constantly in a difficult position.

The Catholic faith began to be preached in Ethiopia in the early fourth century by Saint Frumentius, a bishop consecrated by Saint Athanasius. In 333, the king, Ezana of Axum, became a Christian. Rufinus, a Roman

historian of the time, says that a Roman ship was attacked in the Red Sea. Only two boys survived and they were brought to Axum as servants in the royal court. One of them, Frumentius, became regent. He visited Alexandria about 330, and was consecrated bishop by Athanasius. Returning to Ethiopia he converted Ezana and the country. The faith spread rapidly and became the religion of the people to a much greater extent than in other parts of North Africa. The Bible was translated into Ge'ez, the language of the people, in the fourth or fifth centuries. When the Coptic church in Egypt became monophysite and broke with Rome in 451, the church in Ethiopia did likewise as it had been led by Alexandria from its foundation. It is only in recent years that Ethiopia has established its own hierarchy independent of Alexandria.

Islam made repeated attempts to penetrate Ethiopia but without significant results. The success of Ethiopia in resisting Islam is probably due to the fact that the church in that country was truly a church of the people.

(Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* of 25 May 1995, stated, 'Today... we [Catholics and the Ethiopian Church] can affirm that we have the one faith in Christ.' n.62)

## **Monasticism**

‘Egypt was the motherland of Christian monasticism.’ (2) Saint Anthony of Egypt (250-356) is regarded as the founder of the monastic life. Together with other men such as Saints Hilarion and Epiphanius, Palladius, Pachomius and Cassian, he exercised a lasting influence on the monastic and other religious life throughout the church. Saint Benedict, the father of monasticism in the West, was formed substantially in their tradition.

Initially, the monastic movement sprang from a reaction by some Christians against the worldliness and compromising spirit of the church in Alexandria. They went to live in the desert as solitaries, although, as their numbers grew, they began to meet for prayer from time to time. They supported themselves by farm-work and, in some cases, copying manuscripts. Later on, they began to organize themselves in a regular community life with an abbot at their head. Their work extended to the painting of icons, sculpture, metal work, writing and teaching the young members. Whatever the style of life, the ideal remained the same: to live the Christian life to the full, with a particular accent on prayer.

## THE BIBLE IN NORTH AFRICA

The bible, or parts of it, were translated into many of the languages of North Africa, such as Coptic, Nubian, Ge'ez, Bohairic, Sahidic and Ethiopic. The translation of the Old Testament was largely done in Egypt, while the first translations into Latin were also done in North Africa.

The oldest New Testament manuscripts, those of the second and third centuries, are nearly all Egyptian in origin. These were written on papyrus, a writing material from the pith of reeds, which grew in the Nile delta. (The word "paper" comes from "papyrus".)

The first division of the Bible into chapters was made in Alexandria in the famous *Codex Alexandrinus*, a parchment manuscript of almost the whole New Testament dating from the early fifth century. (Its division differs from the one in use today which was devised by Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury, in the twelfth century.)

A regional council of bishops held at Carthage in 397 adopted as the canon of the Old Testament the *Septuagint* with the deuterocanonical books.

## **SAINTS AND SCHOLARS IN NORTH AFRICA**

### **Saint Clement of Alexandria**

Clement was born about the middle of the second century and was educated in Athens. He became a Christian in his middle years.

He wrote at a time when doctrine was beginning to be written down rather than passed on in oral tradition, and when the Christian church was beginning to look outwards at the Greek world around it, and to see how the faith related to the philosophical ideas of the day. Clement's views on this were very different from those of Tertullian. He wrote, 'God is the source of all good, either directly, as in the Old and New Testaments, or indirectly, as in the case of philosophy. But it may be that philosophy was given to the Greeks directly, for it was a "schoolmaster" to bring Hellenism to Christ, as the Law was for the Hebrews. Thus philosophy was a preparation, paving the way for the man who is brought to perfection by Christ.' (3)

Clement was also the author of the phrase 'The ancient Catholic church is the only church.' (4)



During the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Severus in 203, Clement left Alexandria permanently. There is an unconfirmed tradition that he suffered martyrdom in Asia, and he has been venerated as a saint from earliest times.

## **Origen**

Origen was born at Alexandria in 185. His father Leonides was martyred for the faith when Origen was seventeen years old. The young man then worked to support his mother and six young brothers by becoming a teacher. Among his pupils was Plutarch. He was ordained priest by the bishop of Jerusalem while on a visit there, but this led to his expulsion from Alexandria by the bishop of that city. Origen spent most of his life in Caesarea; he died in 253 or 254.

Origen produced a great many writings, the best known of which is the *Contra Celsum*, a book written to defend the Christian faith against Celsus, a pagan critic. He also produced the *Hexapla*, a text which gave, in six parallel columns, the text of the bible from different manuscripts.

His influence on the church has been substantial, not only because of his writings but because of the respect he earned by his courageous endurance during his

imprisonment and torture under the Emperor Decius about the year 250.

Origen has been described as the first great scholar of the church, the first great preacher, the first great devotional writer, the first great commentator and the first great dogmatist. His particular contribution was in the field of biblical theology, of which he can be called the founder.

He is popularly known in the church as the origin of the phrase, 'Outside the Church there is no salvation' (5), and for the fact that he castrated himself following his exegesis of Matthew 19.12. If nothing else, this illustrates the risks attendant upon private interpretation of scripture!

## **Tertullian**

Tertullian was born at Carthage about 160 AD. As a young man he practised law. He became a Christian about 197 AD and a priest just three years later. Among his many writings, the best-known are the *Apologetic* and *To the Nations*, both of them setting out the Christian faith in opposition to pagan charges.

Unfortunately, Tertullian fell into heresy, becoming for a time a Montanist, and then leaving them to form his own group, the Tertullianists. These latter were

eventually reconciled to the church by Saint Augustine. After his separation from the church about 212, he became increasingly bitter, attacking it even more fiercely than he had previously attacked paganism.

One significant piece of information coming to us from Tertullian is that there was a Latin Bible in existence in Carthage before 200 AD. He helped greatly to develop sacramental terminology, giving us words such as sacrament, substance, resurrection, person, penitence etc. (6) He died in 220.

Some phrases from the writings of Tertullian have come into popular usage in the church, for example, 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.' (7) It is he who quoted the pagans of his time as saying of the Christians, 'These Christians - see how they love one another.' (8) His attitude towards philosophy was very different from that of Saint Clement of Alexandria. He wrote, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What harmony can there be between the Academy and the Church?' (9) This last quotation suggests an uncompromising and perhaps aggressive character.

## **Saint Cyprian of Carthage**

Little is known about his early life except that he was born in Carthage about 210 AD. He became a Christian in his middle years while practising law at Carthage.

Only three years later, in 249, he was made bishop. In 250, the Emperor Decius began a vigorous persecution of the church. Pope Fabian was executed. Cyprian went into hiding, and more than half the Christians of Carthage abandoned the faith in order to preserve their lives. Cyprian was severely criticized for his conduct. He seems to have taken the criticism to heart as his later conduct shows. After about one year, the persecution was relaxed because two rivals arose to challenge Decius for the office of emperor and he could not afford to have more enemies.

Some years later a serious controversy arose between Cyprian and Pope Stephen about the "re-baptism" of those who had fallen into heresy. Cyprian and his fellow African bishops felt that such people should be baptized again. The pope directed that if the first baptism was genuine then there could and should be no second baptism. If the first "baptism" was not genuine, then those people could be baptized. Both Stephen and Cyprian seem to have regarded the matter merely as a point of discipline rather than of doctrine. However, they made the problem more serious by the violence of their language to each other. Pope Stephen died in 257, and the problem was resolved by his successor, Sixtus II, who approached the matter with greater tact.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire, under the Emperor Valerian, was coming under serious attack on several fronts. It was considered politically expedient to blame the Christians for this; it was argued that the empire was suffering defeat because the old Roman gods were angry since the new religion of Christians had displaced them. Cyprian was arrested in 257, while in 258, Pope Sixtus was executed. Cyprian was first sent into exile, with the promise that he would be spared if he renounced the Christian faith. However, he strongly asserted his belief and, on 14 September 258, he was executed.

His feast is celebrated with that of another martyr, Cornelius, on 16 September. The *Office of Readings* for that day gives an extract from one of his letters, and also an account of his martyrdom. (10)

Cyprian was the first popular Latin Christian writer. One of his best-known works is called *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*. It has special significance in view of his quarrel with Pope Stephen. Cyprian wrote, 'He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother' (11), and, 'If a man does not hold this unity of Peter, does he believe himself to hold the faith? If a man deserts the throne of Peter, on whom the church is founded, is he confident that he is in the church?' (12)

Cyprian's greatest contribution to the church, apart from his martyrdom, was his development of ideas about the church and its ministry exercised through the bishops.

## **Saint Anthony of Egypt**

Most of the information we have about Saint Anthony comes from a life written by Saint Athanasius. Anthony, a Copt, was born near El Fayum about 250 AD. When his parents died, he inherited their wealth, which was very substantial. When he was about twenty years of age, he heard the words of the Gospel, 'If you will be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me.' (Mark 10.21) He followed this call and gave his property to the poor and then, for fifteen years, lived the life of an ascetic near his home town.

When he was about thirty-five, Anthony began a new phase in his life. He lived a solitary life of prayer in an abandoned fort east of the Nile. There he remained for about twenty years while a group of followers gathered around him. About the year 305, he came out of his place of seclusion and for five years instructed his followers in the Christian life. He then withdrew again to a monastery which still stands today, Der Mar Antonios, and he lived there for the remaining forty five years of his life. He was a hundred and five when he

died. On his instructions, his body was buried secretly as he did not wish it to become an object of popular veneration.

The various writings attributed to Saint Anthony are probably spurious, with the exception, perhaps, of a rule of life, which is followed today by about sixty Maronite monasteries in Syria and the Lebanon.

Saint Anthony is universally recognized as the founder of Christian monasticism. Though neither an organizer nor a legislator, his personal spiritual qualities were an outstanding inspiration to others. The type of life his followers led was like that of Carthusians today, in which each person lives in a separate room, but comes together with others to pray. Pachomius, a younger man who was inspired by Saint Anthony, and who became a great organizer of the monastic life, led his followers in a more conventual style of life. In each case, however, the purpose was the same - a complete self-dedication to God.

A life of Saint Anthony was written by Saint Athanasius; a short extract from it may be found in *The Divine Office*. (13)

## **Saint Augustine of Hippo**

Augustine was born on 13 November 354 in the town of Tagaste (now Souk Ahras), about 100 km from the present Algerian coastal town of Annaba. A Berber by tribe (14), he was given a good education by his parents, Patricius and Monica, in the schools at Tagaste and Madaura. Monica was a Christian, Patricius was not.

When only sixteen years of age, he was sent to Carthage to further his education. There he began to live an immoral life, becoming the father of a child at the age of eighteen. He called the boy Adeodatus, meaning "given by God." He tried to break away from this way of life but found himself unable to do so as the attraction of sexual sin was too great for him. He used to say, 'Give me chastity, Lord - but not yet.' (15)

In 373, he fell into Manicheism, a peculiar Persian religion which taught, among other things, that matter was evil. After some nine years as a Manichee, Augustine's doubts about it came to a head when Faustus, a celebrated Manichean leader, was quite unable to answer his questions or resolve his doubts. In 382, Augustine ceased to regard himself as a Manichee, but still continued his pursuit of a philosophy of life. In 385, he went to Milan, where he became a professor of rhetoric. There he came under the influence of Ambrose, the bishop of that city. During these years, his



mother prayed constantly for his conversion. (His father had died earlier.) She tried to persuade him to marry, even nudging him into getting engaged, but it did not last. Ambrose told Monica, 'It is impossible that the child of your tears should be lost.' (16) In September 386, Augustine experienced a conversion, and in Easter 387 he was baptized by Ambrose.

Augustine became as enthusiastic a Christian as he had earlier been a Manichee. He returned to North Africa where he made such an impression that, by popular acclaim, he was ordained priest in 391. Five years later, on the death of the Bishop of Hippo, he was chosen as his successor.

For the remaining thirty-four years of his life, Augustine served his people as their bishop. In addition, he continued his writings, which were on an enormous scale. They fill twenty-nine volumes of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. The best known are his autobiography, *The Confessions*, and the *City of God*, a work written to refute the charge that the weakness of the Roman Empire was due to its abandoning the old Roman gods in favour of Christ. In addition, he attended six regional councils of bishops.

He died on 28 August 430, while Hippo was being besieged by the Vandals. His feast is celebrated on that day and his mother, Monica's, on the day before. The

*Office of Readings* in the *Breviary* gives an extract from his *Confessions*.

He has been described as ‘a philosophical and theological genius of the first order, dominating, like a pyramid, antiquity and the succeeding ages.... Compared with the great philosophers of past centuries and modern times, he is the equal of them all; among theologians, he is undeniably the first, and such has been his influence that none of the Fathers, the Scholastics or Reformers has surpassed it.’ (18)

Augustine wrote, ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will know no rest until they rest in you.’ (19) ‘God became man that man might become God.’ (20)

## **Saint Athanasius**

Athanasius was born in Alexandria in 295 or 296. As a young man he was ordained deacon by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria and became his secretary. He attended the first Council of Nicea with Bishop Alexander in 325. On the bishop's death in 328, Athanasius was chosen in his place.

At this time the church was troubled by the teachings of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, who held that Christ was not really a man and not really God. What began as a

question of doctrine quickly became a political issue as Arius, and Eusebius a supporter of his, appealed to the emperor. Questions of status and prestige, and other matters such as language and culture, soon made the matter immensely complicated. Athanasius had played a prominent part at Nicea in ensuring that orthodox doctrine was upheld by the council. Arianists rightly saw him as the principal obstacle to their victory as they won the support of the emperor in the years after Nicea. This was the beginning of a series of problems which lasted for the greater part of Athanasius's life.

Emperor Constantine, acting on the advice of Arianists, ordered Athanasius into exile at Trèves, in France, in 335. Two years later he was restored by Constans, the Western Roman Emperor. However, the Eastern Emperor, Constantius, had placed another bishop, an Arian called George of Cappadocia, in Alexandria, so, once again, Athanasius was sent into exile. He went to Rome where he was received with honour by Constans who persuaded his brother, Constantius, to allow Athanasius to return to Alexandria in 346. However, Constans was murdered in 350 and Athanasius was exiled yet again, this time for seven years. He spent some of his time in hiding in Alexandria, but the greater part of it in the desert with orthodox monks. It was during this period that he became known as "the invisible patriarch". However, Athanasius used his time

in the desert to good effect, spending it in writing books in defence of orthodox teaching, especially on the nature of Christ.

Constantius died in 361, being replaced by Emperor Julian. Athanasius was restored to his see, and George of Cappadocia was lynched by a mob. In 362, Athanasius held a synod at Alexandria which succeeded in reconciling the different groups, but, as before, political factors intervened and Athanasius was exiled for the fourth time. This exile lasted only one year, until he was recalled by the Emperor Jovian. In 365, for the fifth and last time, he was exiled until, because of public insistence, he was brought back in 366. He spent the last years of his life in peace, dying in Alexandria in 373.

Athanasius was an outstanding writer. His greatest work, *On the Incarnation*, he wrote when only about twenty years old. (He is not the author of the "Athanasian" Creed.) A short quotation from his writings illustrates his position on the central doctrinal question of his time, the nature of Christ: 'It is proper to the Son to have all that the Father has, and to be such that the Father is beheld in him, and that through him all things were made, and that in him the salvation of all is brought about and is established.' (21)

It has been said of him that 'The final triumph of the Nicene faith, and its ratification at the council of Constantinople in 381, is due to Athanasius more than to any other man' (22), and 'By his tenacity and vision in preaching one God and Saviour he had preserved from dissolution the unity and integrity of the Christian faith.' (23)

His feast is celebrated annually on 2 May. The *Office of Readings* for that day has an extract from his *On the Incarnation*. (24)

## **Saint Cyril of Alexandria**

Cyril was born at Alexandria in 370. As a young man he entered a monastery and then became a priest. In 412, he succeeded his uncle, Theophilus, as bishop of Alexandria. The circumstances of his becoming bishop were not very Christian: a mob hired by Cyril defeated one hired by his rival, Timothy, in a riot. One of his first acts as bishop was to drive the Jews out of Alexandria, where they had lived for some six centuries.

Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, began preaching a doctrine which created confusion about the nature of Christ. As in other cases, new elements, very different from the doctrinal issue, became involved. There was rivalry between the sees of Alexandria and Constantinople; there was also rivalry between the

theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch, where Nestorius had been educated. There were clashes of authority in which Cyril claimed, probably incorrectly, to be acting with the authority of the pope. Cyril was accused of having bribed bishops to take his part in the Council of Ephesus which met in 431 to discuss the matter. A Catholic historian says of this accusation that it 'was probably as true as it was usual.' (25)

The conduct of the council itself left a great deal to be desired. Nestorius was not present, and Cyril opened the council without either the legates sent by the pope or the bishops from Antioch, who could have been helpful mediators. The condemnation and excommunication of Nestorius was decreed without discussion at one sitting of the council. When the papal legates arrived, they approved of Cyril's actions. The most lasting effect of this manner of proceeding was to alienate permanently the followers of Nestorius, who broke away from the church altogether. There were Nestorian Christians in China in the sixth century and they still exist today as a separate church.

Cyril returned in triumph to Alexandria where he remained until his death in 444. His writings, which fill seven volumes, do not have the accuracy of later theologians. In fact, the ambiguity of his expression was a contributing factor in the clash with Nestorius, since

the latter could argue that Cyril's position was unclear. Only a few years after Cyril's death, the church in Alexandria fell into monophysitism, and, from there, into separation from Rome. This situation, which still persists today, derived from uncertainty created by a phrase in Cyril's writings, where he wrote of 'One nature incarnate of God the Word.' (26)

In view of all this, it is surprising that he was declared a saint, that is, an example of the Christian life for others to follow, and even more surprising that he was declared (by Pope Leo XIII in 1883) a doctor of the church, that is, someone whose teaching has been of outstanding benefit to the church. His feast is celebrated annually on 27 June.

## **Saint Optatus of Milevi**

He was bishop of Milevi in Numidia during the fourth century. He wrote about the theological controversies between Catholics and Donatists. A characteristic note of his writings is his gentleness, referring to the Donatists as his "brothers". This was in contrast to many other Catholic writers. Another subject of his concern was apostolic succession, which he and many others saw as a key element, perhaps *the* key element, along with the formulation of creeds, in passing the faith intact to later generations.

## **Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe**

He lived from 468 to 533. As a young man he surrendered the property he inherited from his father and joined a monastery. Because of his outstanding qualities he was made abbot, even though he did not wish it. Then, in 508, he was chosen as bishop of Ruspe. He lived during a period when Christians were persecuted by the Vandal conquerors of North Africa. He had to spend much of his time in hiding and was twice in exile. During these periods in exile he spent his time in writing. Apart from sermons and letters, he wrote principally against the Arians. These were really no less against the Vandals, as they were Arians. Not all of Saint Fulgentius' writing can be considered orthodox, but there is no doubt about his personal holiness.

Extracts from his writings are to be found in the *Office of Readings* for the feast of Saint Stephen. (28)

## **Minucius Felix**

Little is known about him except that he was born in Africa and lived some time between 160 and 300. He wrote what might be called an introduction to Christianity for pagans.



## **Lactantius**

Lactantius was born a pagan in Numidia during the fourth century. He studied under Arnobius and later became a teacher of rhetoric. On becoming a Christian he set out to write books presenting and defending the faith. His principal work is *The Divine Institutions*. It has been described as 'the first attempt at a systematic exposition of Christian theology in Latin.' It suffers from severe limitations, owing to Lactantius's almost total ignorance of scripture and ignorance of basic Christian principles. Called the Christian Cicero, his style was polished rather than profound, but at least he made a beginning where others could follow and do better. Lactantius spent much of his life in Nicomedia and later at the imperial residence at Trier in Germany.

## **Arnobius**

Arnobius, the teacher of Lactantius, lived in the second half of the third century. Like his pupil, he was a rhetorician and an apologist for the Christian faith. He has been described as more earnest than correct, but allowance must be made for both his pagan background and the fact that he was a pioneer with no precedents to follow. Some very short extracts from his writings are used in the breviary as introductions to the psalms. (29)

## **OTHER ASPECTS OF CHURCH LIFE IN NORTH AFRICA**

### **Christian literature**

Africa is the most important centre of early Latin religious literature. A substantial number of writings in Greek was also produced. Nothing has come down to us in Punic or Berber. Apart from well-known writers already referred to, such as Augustine, Athanasius, Cyril, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement and Anthony, there are others who are less well known, men like Optatus of Milevi, Fulgentius of Ruspe, Minucius Felix, Lactantius, Arnobius, Theogenes of Hippo, Maximus of Madaura, Victorinus, Victor Vitensis, Pachomius, St. Frumentius, Abba Salama and others. In the case of these writers, only a little of what they produced has come down to us.

### **African Synods**

By the end of the fourth century, the church in North Africa was organized into six ecclesiastical provinces, of which Carthage was the chief. Synods were a regular feature of the church's life, to a greater extent than elsewhere. Apart from small regional gatherings of bishops, which were very frequent, full synods were

ordinarily held every year. The largest known synod was held in 418, when two hundred and twenty-three bishops attended. Two of the more significant synods were those at Hippo in 393 and at Carthage in 397 where the canon of scripture was agreed upon; it is the same as that in use today in the Catholic Church.

Most synods were concerned with routine matters, particularly disciplinary questions, such as the reconciliation of those who had lapsed from the faith in times of persecution. Some synods were attended by priests and laypeople as well as bishops, although only the latter had a vote.

## **African Liturgy**

This may be considered in two stages, the first during, and the second after the persecutions under the Roman Empire.

**Before 313:** The oldest Latin liturgy in the church is from Africa. In Rome, Greek was used in the early centuries. Though some Greek and a little Punic was used in the liturgy in Africa, Latin was predominant. African liturgy strongly influenced later Gallican and Mozarabic rites. Although no original texts survive, a substantial number of fragments have come down to us in other writings. These give a fairly comprehensive picture. The Eucharist was very substantially as it is

now; it was held on Sunday to recall the resurrection of Jesus, communion was received under both kinds, and Mass was sometimes celebrated for the dead. The *agapé*, or love-feast, was occasionally held, although it was later abandoned because, as elsewhere, it was commonly abused. Sometimes a non-eucharistic service was held.

Holy Communion and confirmation were given to adult converts immediately after their baptism. Confession took place in public before the Christian assembly on Sundays. Marriages were celebrated in the church with the Eucharist. Holy orders were as they are now, except that the office of porter did not exist and that of exorcist was regularly used. People were buried in Christian cemeteries which usually had a chapel attached where Mass was celebrated. The martyrs achieved great popularity. There was no liturgical calendar or annual cycle of celebrations of such feasts as Christmas and Easter.

***After 313:*** By the Edict of Milan, published on 3 February, the Roman Empire tolerated Christianity. Persecution ceased and a more stable life became possible. Christians built new churches, and, in some cases, took over pagan temples and converted them to use. A liturgical calendar was developed with the present major feasts such as Christmas, the Epiphany,

Holy Week, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost. The Mass was clearly divided into the Mass of Catechumens (corresponding to the liturgy of the word) and the Mass of the Faithful (corresponding to the liturgy of the eucharist). Daily communion became more common and was normally received on the hand. The Eucharistic Prayer developed into a form very similar to that of the present Roman canon. The early stages in the development of what we now call *The Divine Office* began after Nicea.

After 425, the Vandal persecution of the church in North Africa began and lasted for about a hundred years. From the sixth to the eighth centuries the church enjoyed relative calm, permitting a normal liturgical life. Then, in the eighth century, came the Moslem invasions which swept away almost everything.

## **African Popes**

### **Saint Victor I (189-199)**

He was born in Africa, though the place and date of his birth are not known. During his pontificate the controversy about the date of Easter developed into a major issue. At one point, Victor threatened to excommunicate the entire Eastern Church because of their position on the question. Fortunately, he was dissuaded by Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons. He also

convened the first council of Italian bishops, and undertook work to settle the canon of scripture. He strongly opposed Gnosticism and Monarchianism.

### **Saint Melchiades I (311-314)**

Also known as Miltiades, his date and place of birth in Africa are uncertain. Shortly after he became bishop of Rome, the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire ended, with the signing by the Emperors Constantine, Licinius and Galerius of a decree of toleration. Melchiades used the opportunity created by this development to reorganize the church in Rome and the surrounding areas on a proper basis. He also acquired the building subsequently known as the Lateran Palace which was the residence of the popes until its destruction by fire in the fourteenth century. On his death on 11 January 314, he was buried in the catacomb of Saint Callistus.

### **African Martyrs**

The earliest record of Christian martyrs in Africa comes from Scillium in Numidia. An early Carthaginian calendar refers to the martyrdom of six Christians there on 17 July 180. There is also a record in the writings of Saint Augustine of the martyrdom of a hundred and fifty-three Christians at Utica near Carthage. This took

place on 24 August 258. Another record of the same event gives a figure of almost three hundred people.

One of the most personal accounts is that of the martyrdom of Saint Perpetua and Felicity. These were two new converts who had died with three others on 7 March 203, during the persecution by the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. They were first scourged and then thrown to wild animals in the amphitheatre. These two saints are remembered in the first Eucharistic Prayer at Mass. Their feast is celebrated on 7 March, and the *Office of Readings* for that day gives an account of their martyrdom. (30)

## **SOME QUESTIONS**

### **Why did God choose Palestine?**

Palestine, or Israel, was the homeland of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham to their dispersal after the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 AD. Why did God choose a people from that particular place? A look at a map may provide an answer. Palestine is at the cross-roads of three continents, Africa, Asia and Europe. From the earliest times, there was extensive trade and travel on land and sea in the eastern Mediterranean; land travel, of necessity, went through Palestine. When the Christian faith, with its message of universal salvation, came to be founded in Palestine, it was possible for it to spread rapidly to many different countries and cultures on already established routes. Palestine, the meeting-point of three continents, was in a uniquely central position.

### **Why did the faith not spread throughout the rest of Africa from its early beginnings in the north?**

Within the first five centuries, all the countries of North Africa, together with Ethiopia and Sudan, had substantial Christian populations. Many had the Bible in



their own language. So why did the faith not spread to the south? There are probably several reasons. One is that the church experienced persecution from the Roman Empire until the end of the third century and again at the hands of the Vandals from the middle of the fifth until the middle of the sixth centuries. Another reason - perhaps more significant - was the relative weakness of the church because of the doctrinal, racial, cultural, class and linguistic differences already referred to. A divided church can only with great difficulty be a missionary church. A third reason was geographical. The Sahara was, and is, a formidable land barrier, although there was trade across it. In addition, the construction and navigation of ships had not yet reached the point where there could be sea-travel along the west coast of Africa. It was nearly another thousand years before that became possible.

Where travel to the south was possible by other means, they were adopted. For example, Saint Frumentius and the other early Christian missionaries in Ethiopia reached that country by means of the Red Sea, while others reached Nubia through the Nile Valley.

## **Why did the faith not spread south from the Sudan and Ethiopia?**

One factor would be the weakness that overtakes a church when it is cut off from communion with the rest of the faithful. The temptation to become inward-looking then becomes strong and the missionary impulse grows weak. The church in Ethiopia broke from communion with the rest of the church in the mid-fifth century when it was still at an early stage of development. In later centuries it spent all its energies simply resisting the encroachments of Islam. It also saw itself as a national church, as do many of the other Orthodox churches today.

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For example, in the *Psalter*, Week 4, Wednesday, Morning Prayer, Psalm 146 (146) and Week 4, Thursday, Midday Prayer, Ps. 127 (128).

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