

Chapter XVI: Conduct Towards The Christians, From Nero To
Constantine.--Part IV.

When Valerian was consul for the third, and Gallienus for the fourth time, Paternus, proconsul of Africa, summoned Cyprian to appear in his private council-chamber. He there acquainted him with the Imperial mandate which he had just received, [81] that those who had abandoned the Roman religion should immediately return to the practice of the ceremonies of their ancestors. Cyprian replied without hesitation, that he was a Christian and a bishop, devoted to the worship of the true and only Deity, to whom he offered up his daily supplications for the safety and prosperity of the two emperors, his lawful sovereigns.

With modest confidence he pleaded the privilege of a citizen, in refusing to give any answer to some invidious and indeed illegal questions which the proconsul had proposed. A sentence of banishment was pronounced as the penalty of Cyprian's disobedience; and he was conducted without delay to Curubis, a free and maritime city of Zeugitania, in a pleasant situation, a fertile territory, and at the distance of about forty miles from Carthage. [82] The exiled bishop enjoyed the conveniences of life and the consciousness of virtue. His reputation was diffused over Africa and Italy; an account of his behavior was published for the edification of the Christian world; [83] and his solitude was frequently interrupted by the letters, the visits, and the congratulations of the faithful. On the arrival of a new proconsul in the province the fortune of Cyprian appeared for some time

to wear a still more favorable aspect. He was recalled from banishment; and though not yet permitted to return to Carthage, his own gardens in the neighborhood of the capital were assigned for the place of his residence. [84]

[Footnote 81: It should seem that these were circular orders, sent at the same time to all the governors. Dionysius (ap. Euseb. 1. vii. c. 11) relates the history of his own banishment from Alexandria almost in the same manner. But as he escaped and survived the persecution, we must account him either more or less fortunate than Cyprian.]

[Footnote 82: See Plin. Hist. Natur. v. 3. Cellarius, Geograph. Antiq. part iii. p. 96. Shaw's Travels, p. 90; and for the adjacent country, (which is terminated by Cape Bona, or the promontory of Mercury,) l'Afrique de Marmol. tom. ii. p. 494. There are the remains of an aqueduct near Curubis, or Curbis, at present altered into Gurbes; and Dr. Shaw read an inscription, which styles that city Colonia Fulvia. The deacon Pontius (in Vit. Cyprian. c. 12) calls it "Apricum et competentem locum, hospitium pro voluntate secretum, et quicquid apponi eis ante promissum est, qui regnum et justitiam Dei quaerunt."]

[Footnote 83: See Cyprian. Epistol. 77, edit. Fell.]

[Footnote 84: Upon his conversion, he had sold those gardens for the benefit of the poor. The indulgence of God (most probably the liberality of some Christian friend) restored them to Cyprian. See Pontius, c. 15.]

At length, exactly one year [85] after Cyprian was first apprehended, Galerius Maximus, proconsul of Africa, received the Imperial warrant for the execution of the Christian teachers. The bishop of Carthage was sensible that he should be singled out for one of the first victims; and the frailty of nature tempted him to withdraw himself, by a secret flight, from the danger and the honor of martyrdom; [85a] but soon recovering that fortitude which his character required, he returned to his gardens, and patiently expected the ministers of death. Two officers of rank, who were intrusted with that commission, placed Cyprian between them in a chariot, and as the proconsul was not then at leisure, they conducted him, not to a prison, but to a private house in Carthage, which belonged to one of them. An elegant supper was provided for the entertainment of the bishop, and his Christian friends were permitted for the last time to enjoy his society, whilst the streets were filled with a multitude of the faithful, anxious and alarmed at the approaching fate of their spiritual father. [86] In the morning he appeared before the tribunal of the proconsul, who, after informing himself of the name and situation of Cyprian, commanded him to offer sacrifice, and pressed him to reflect on the consequences of his disobedience. The refusal of Cyprian was firm and decisive; and the magistrate, when he had taken the opinion of his council, pronounced with some reluctance the sentence of death. It was conceived in the following terms: "That Thascius Cyprianus should be immediately beheaded, as the enemy of the gods of Rome, and as the chief and ringleader of a criminal association, which he had seduced into an impious resistance against the laws of the most holy emperors,

Valerian and Gallienus." [87] The manner of his execution was the mildest and least painful that could be inflicted on a person convicted of any capital offence; nor was the use of torture admitted to obtain from the bishop of Carthage either the recantation of his principles or the discovery of his accomplices.

[Footnote 85: When Cyprian; a twelvemonth before, was sent into exile, he dreamt that he should be put to death the next day. The event made it necessary to explain that word, as signifying a year. Pontius, c. 12.]

[Footnote 85a: This was not, as it appears, the motive which induced St. Cyprian to conceal himself for a short time; he was threatened to be carried to Utica; he preferred remaining at Carthage, in order to suffer martyrdom in the midst of his flock, and in order that his death might conduce to the edification of those whom he had guided during life. Such, at least, is his own explanation of his conduct in one of his letters: Cum perlatum ad nos fuisset, fratres carissimi, frumentarios esse missos qui me Uticam per ducerent, consilioque carissimorum persuasum est, ut de hortis interim recederemus, justa interveniente causa, consensi; eo quod congruat episcopum in ea civitate, in qua Ecclesiae dominicae praeest, illie. Dominum confiteri et plebem universam praepositi praesentis confessione clarificari Ep. 83.--G]

[Footnote 86: Pontius (c. 15) acknowledges that Cyprian, with whom he supped, passed the night custodia delicata. The bishop exercised a last and very proper act of jurisdiction, by directing that the younger

females, who watched in the streets, should be removed from the dangers and temptations of a nocturnal crowd. Act. Preconsularia, c. 2.]

[Footnote 87: See the original sentence in the Acts, c. 4; and in Pontius, c. 17 The latter expresses it in a more rhetorical manner.]

As soon as the sentence was proclaimed, a general cry of "We will die with him," arose at once among the listening multitude of Christians who waited before the palace gates. The generous effusions of their zeal and their affection were neither serviceable to Cyprian nor dangerous to themselves. He was led away under a guard of tribunes and centurions, without resistance and without insult, to the place of his execution, a spacious and level plain near the city, which was already filled with great numbers of spectators. His faithful presbyters and deacons were permitted to accompany their holy bishop. [87a] They assisted him in laying aside his upper garment, spread linen on the ground to catch the precious relics of his blood, and received his orders to bestow five-and-twenty pieces of gold on the executioner. The martyr then covered his face with his hands, and at one blow his head was separated from his body. His corpse remained during some hours exposed to the curiosity of the Gentiles: but in the night it was removed, and transported in a triumphal procession, and with a splendid illumination, to the burial-place of the Christians. The funeral of Cyprian was publicly celebrated without receiving any interruption from the Roman magistrates; and those among the faithful, who had performed the last offices to his person and his memory, were secure from the danger of

inquiry or of punishment. It is remarkable, that of so great a multitude of bishops in the province of Africa, Cyprian was the first who was esteemed worthy to obtain the crown of martyrdom. [88]

[Footnote 87a: There is nothing in the life of St. Cyprian, by Pontius, nor in the ancient manuscripts, which can make us suppose that the presbyters and deacons in their clerical character, and known to be such, had the permission to attend their holy bishop. Setting aside all religious considerations, it is impossible not to be surprised at the kind of complaisance with which the historian here insists, in favor of the persecutors, on some mitigating circumstances allowed at the death of a man whose only crime was maintaining his own opinions with frankness and courage.--G.]

[Footnote 88: Pontius, c. 19. M. de Tillemont (Memoires, tom. iv. part i. p. 450, note 50) is not pleased with so positive an exclusion of any former martyr of the episcopal rank. * Note: M. de Tillemont, as an honest writer, explains the difficulties which he felt about the text of Pontius, and concludes by distinctly stating, that without doubt there is some mistake, and that Pontius must have meant only Africa Minor or Carthage; for St. Cyprian, in his 58th (69th) letter addressed to Pupianus, speaks expressly of many bishops his colleagues, qui proscripti sunt, vel apprehensi in carcere et catenis fuerunt; aut qui in exilium relegati, illustri itinere ad Dominum profecti sunt; aut qui quibusdam locis animadversi, coelestes coronas de Domini clarificatione sumpserunt.--G.]

It was in the choice of Cyprian, either to die a martyr, or to live an apostate; but on the choice depended the alternative of honor or infamy. Could we suppose that the bishop of Carthage had employed the profession of the Christian faith only as the instrument of his avarice or ambition, it was still incumbent on him to support the character he had assumed; [89] and if he possessed the smallest degree of manly fortitude, rather to expose himself to the most cruel tortures, than by a single act to exchange the reputation of a whole life, for the abhorrence of his Christian brethren, and the contempt of the Gentile world. But if the zeal of Cyprian was supported by the sincere conviction of the truth of those doctrines which he preached, the crown of martyrdom must have appeared to him as an object of desire rather than of terror. It is not easy to extract any distinct ideas from the vague though eloquent declamations of the Fathers, or to ascertain the degree of immortal glory and happiness which they confidently promised to those who were so fortunate as to shed their blood in the cause of religion. [90] They inculcated with becoming diligence, that the fire of martyrdom supplied every defect and expiated every sin; that while the souls of ordinary Christians were obliged to pass through a slow and painful purification, the triumphant sufferers entered into the immediate fruition of eternal bliss, where, in the society of the patriarchs, the apostles, and the prophets, they reigned with Christ, and acted as his assessors in the universal judgment of mankind. The assurance of a lasting reputation upon earth, a motive so congenial to the vanity of human nature, often served to animate the courage of the

martyrs.

The honors which Rome or Athens bestowed on those citizens who had fallen in the cause of their country, were cold and unmeaning demonstrations of respect, when compared with the ardent gratitude and devotion which the primitive church expressed towards the victorious champions of the faith. The annual commemoration of their virtues and sufferings was observed as a sacred ceremony, and at length terminated in religious worship. Among the Christians who had publicly confessed their religious principles, those who (as it very frequently happened) had been dismissed from the tribunal or the prisons of the Pagan magistrates, obtained such honors as were justly due to their imperfect martyrdom and their generous resolution. The most pious females courted the permission of imprinting kisses on the fetters which they had worn, and on the wounds which they had received. Their persons were esteemed holy, their decisions were admitted with deference, and they too often abused, by their spiritual pride and licentious manners, the preeminence which their zeal and intrepidity had acquired. [91] Distinctions like these, whilst they display the exalted merit, betray the inconsiderable number of those who suffered, and of those who died, for the profession of Christianity.

[Footnote 89: Whatever opinion we may entertain of the character or principles of Thomas Becket, we must acknowledge that he suffered death with a constancy not unworthy of the primitive martyrs. See Lord Lyttleton's History of Henry II. vol. ii. p. 592, &c.]

[Footnote 90: See in particular the treatise of Cyprian de Lapsis, p. 87-98, edit. Fell. The learning of Dodwell (Dissertat. Cyprianic. xii. xiii.) and the ingenuity of Middleton, (Free Inquiry, p. 162, &c.) have left scarcely any thing to add concerning the merit, the honors, and the motives of the martyrs.]

[Footnote 91: Cyprian. Epistol. 5, 6, 7, 22, 24; and de Unitat. Ecclesiae. The number of pretended martyrs has been very much multiplied, by the custom which was introduced of bestowing that honorable name on confessors. Note: M. Guizot denies that the letters of Cyprian, to which he refers, bear out the statement in the text. I cannot scruple to admit the accuracy of Gibbon's quotation. To take only the fifth letter, we find this passage: *Doleo enim quando audio quosdam improbe et insolenter discurrere, et ad ineptian vel ad discordias vacare, Christi membra et jam Christum confessa per concubitus illicitos inquinari, nec a diaconis aut presbyteris regi posse, sed id agere ut per paucorum pravos et malos mores, multorum et bonorum confessorum gloria honesta maculetur.* Gibbon's misrepresentation lies in the ambiguous expression "too often." Were the epistles arranged in a different manner in the edition consulted by M. Guizot?--M.]

The sober discretion of the present age will more readily censure than admire, but can more easily admire than imitate, the fervor of the first Christians, who, according to the lively expressions of Sulpicius Severus, desired martyrdom with more eagerness than his own

contemporaries solicited a bishopric. [92] The epistles which Ignatius composed as he was carried in chains through the cities of Asia, breathe sentiments the most repugnant to the ordinary feelings of human nature. He earnestly beseeches the Romans, that when he should be exposed in the amphitheatre, they would not, by their kind but unseasonable intercession, deprive him of the crown of glory; and he declares his resolution to provoke and irritate the wild beasts which might be employed as the instruments of his death. [93] Some stories are related of the courage of martyrs, who actually performed what Ignatius had intended; who exasperated the fury of the lions, pressed the executioner to hasten his office, cheerfully leaped into the fires which were kindled to consume them, and discovered a sensation of joy and pleasure in the midst of the most exquisite tortures. Several examples have been preserved of a zeal impatient of those restraints which the emperors had provided for the security of the church. The Christians sometimes supplied by their voluntary declaration the want of an accuser, rudely disturbed the public service of paganism, [94] and rushing in crowds round the tribunal of the magistrates, called upon them to pronounce and to inflict the sentence of the law. The behavior of the Christians was too remarkable to escape the notice of the ancient philosophers; but they seem to have considered it with much less admiration than astonishment. Incapable of conceiving the motives which sometimes transported the fortitude of believers beyond the bounds of prudence or reason, they treated such an eagerness to die as the strange result of obstinate despair, of stupid insensibility, or of superstitious frenzy. [95] "Unhappy men!" exclaimed the proconsul Antoninus to the Christians

of Asia; "unhappy men! if you are thus weary of your lives, is it so difficult for you to find ropes and precipices?" [96] He was extremely cautious (as it is observed by a learned and pious historian) of punishing men who had found no accusers but themselves, the Imperial laws not having made any provision for so unexpected a case: condemning therefore a few as a warning to their brethren, he dismissed the multitude with indignation and contempt. [97] Notwithstanding this real or affected disdain, the intrepid constancy of the faithful was productive of more salutary effects on those minds which nature or grace had disposed for the easy reception of religious truth. On these melancholy occasions, there were many among the Gentiles who pitied, who admired, and who were converted. The generous enthusiasm was communicated from the sufferer to the spectators; and the blood of martyrs, according to a well-known observation, became the seed of the church.

[Footnote 92: *Certatim gloriosa in certamina ruebatur; multique avidius tum martyria gloriosis mortibus quaerebantur, quam nunc Episcopatus pravis ambitionibus appetuntur.* Sulpicius Severus, l. ii. He might have omitted the word *nunc*.]

[Footnote 93: See *Epist. ad Roman.* c. 4, 5, ap. *Patres Apostol.* tom. ii. p. 27. It suited the purpose of Bishop Pearson (see *Vindiciae Ignatianae*, part ii. c. 9) to justify, by a profusion of examples and authorities, the sentiments of Ignatius.]

[Footnote 94: The story of Polyeuctes, on which Corneille has founded a very beautiful tragedy, is one of the most celebrated, though not perhaps the most authentic, instances of this excessive zeal. We should observe, that the 60th canon of the council of Illiberis refuses the title of martyrs to those who exposed themselves to death, by publicly destroying the idols.]

[Footnote 95: See Epictetus, l. iv. c. 7, (though there is some doubt whether he alludes to the Christians.) Marcus Antoninus de Rebus suis, l. xi. c. 3 Lucian in Peregrin.]

[Footnote 96: Tertullian ad Scapul. c. 5. The learned are divided between three persons of the same name, who were all proconsuls of Asia. I am inclined to ascribe this story to Antoninus Pius, who was afterwards emperor; and who may have governed Asia under the reign of Trajan.]

[Footnote 97: Mosheim, de Rebus Christ, ante Constantin. p. 235.]

But although devotion had raised, and eloquence continued to inflame, this fever of the mind, it insensibly gave way to the more natural hopes and fears of the human heart, to the love of life, the apprehension of pain, and the horror of dissolution. The more prudent rulers of the church found themselves obliged to restrain the indiscreet ardor of their followers, and to distrust a constancy which too often abandoned them in the hour of trial. [98] As the lives of the faithful became less

mortified and austere, they were every day less ambitious of the honors of martyrdom; and the soldiers of Christ, instead of distinguishing themselves by voluntary deeds of heroism, frequently deserted their post, and fled in confusion before the enemy whom it was their duty to resist. There were three methods, however, of escaping the flames of persecution, which were not attended with an equal degree of guilt: first, indeed, was generally allowed to be innocent; the second was of a doubtful, or at least of a venial, nature; but the third implied a direct and criminal apostasy from the Christian faith.

[Footnote 98: See the Epistle of the Church of Smyrna, ap. Euseb. Hist. Eccles. Liv. c. 15 * Note: The 15th chapter of the 10th book of the Eccles. History of Eusebius treats principally of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, and mentions some other martyrs. A single example of weakness is related; it is that of a Phrygian named Quintus, who, appalled at the sight of the wild beasts and the tortures, renounced his faith. This example proves little against the mass of Christians, and this chapter of Eusebius furnished much stronger evidence of their courage than of their timidity.--G----This Quintus had, however, rashly and of his own accord appeared before the tribunal; and the church of Smyrna condemn "his indiscreet ardor," coupled as it was with weakness in the hour of trial.--M.]

I. A modern inquisitor would hear with surprise, that whenever an information was given to a Roman magistrate of any person within his jurisdiction who had embraced the sect of the Christians, the charge

was communicated to the party accused, and that a convenient time was allowed him to settle his domestic concerns, and to prepare an answer to the crime which was imputed to him. [99] If he entertained any doubt of his own constancy, such a delay afforded him the opportunity of preserving his life and honor by flight, of withdrawing himself into some obscure retirement or some distant province, and of patiently expecting the return of peace and security. A measure so consonant to reason was soon authorized by the advice and example of the most holy prelates; and seems to have been censured by few except by the Montanists, who deviated into heresy by their strict and obstinate adherence to the rigor of ancient discipline. [100]

II. The provincial governors, whose zeal was less prevalent than their avarice, had countenanced the practice of selling certificates, (or libels, as they were called,) which attested, that the persons therein mentioned had complied with the laws, and sacrificed to the Roman deities. By producing these false declarations, the opulent and timid Christians were enabled to silence the malice of an informer, and to reconcile in some measure their safety with their religion. A slight penance atoned for this profane dissimulation. [101] [101a]

III. In every persecution there were great numbers of unworthy Christians who publicly disowned or renounced the faith which they had professed; and who confirmed the sincerity of their abjuration, by the legal acts of burning incense or of offering sacrifices. Some of these apostates had yielded on the first menace or exhortation of the

magistrate; whilst the patience of others had been subdued by the length and repetition of tortures. The affrighted countenances of some betrayed their inward remorse, while others advanced with confidence and alacrity to the altars of the gods. [102] But the disguise which fear had imposed, subsisted no longer than the present danger. As soon as the severity of the persecution was abated, the doors of the churches were assailed by the returning multitude of penitents who detested their idolatrous submission, and who solicited with equal ardor, but with various success, their readmission into the society of Christians. [103] [103a]

[Footnote 99: In the second apology of Justin, there is a particular and very curious instance of this legal delay. The same indulgence was granted to accused Christians, in the persecution of Decius: and Cyprian (de Lapsis) expressly mentions the "Dies negantibus praestitutus." *

Note: The examples drawn by the historian from Justin Martyr and Cyprian relate altogether to particular cases, and prove nothing as to the general practice adopted towards the accused; it is evident, on the contrary, from the same apology of St. Justin, that they hardly ever obtained delay. "A man named Lucius, himself a Christian, present at an unjust sentence passed against a Christian by the judge Urbicus, asked him why he thus punished a man who was neither adulterer nor robber, nor guilty of any other crime but that of avowing himself a Christian." Urbicus answered only in these words: "Thou also hast the appearance of being a Christian." "Yes, without doubt," replied Lucius. The judge ordered that he should be put to death on the instant. A third, who came

up, was condemned to be beaten with rods. Here, then, are three examples where no delay was granted.----[Surely these acts of a single passionate and irritated judge prove the general practice as little as those quoted by Gibbon.--M.] There exist a multitude of others, such as those of Ptolemy, Marcellus, &c. Justin expressly charges the judges with ordering the accused to be executed without hearing the cause. The words of St. Cyprian are as particular, and simply say, that he had appointed a day by which the Christians must have renounced their faith; those who had not done it by that time were condemned.--G. This confirms the statement in the text.--M.]

[Footnote 100: Tertullian considers flight from persecution as an imperfect, but very criminal, apostasy, as an impious attempt to elude the will of God, &c., &c. He has written a treatise on this subject, (see p. 536--544, edit. Rigalt.,) which is filled with the wildest fanaticism and the most incoherent declamation. It is, however, somewhat remarkable, that Tertullian did not suffer martyrdom himself.]

[Footnote 101: The libellatici, who are chiefly known by the writings of Cyprian, are described with the utmost precision, in the copious commentary of Mosheim, p. 483--489.]

[Footnote 101a: The penance was not so slight, for it was exactly the same with that of apostates who had sacrificed to idols; it lasted several years. See Fleun Hist. Ecc. v. ii. p. 171.--G.]

[Footnote 102: Plin. Epist. x. 97. Dionysius Alexandrin. ap. Euseb. l. vi. c. 41. Ad prima statim verba minantis inimici maximus fratrum numerus fidem suam prodidit: nec prostratus est persecutionis impetu, sed voluntario lapsu seipsum prostravit. Cyprian. Opera, p. 89. Among these deserters were many priests, and even bishops.]

[Footnote 103: It was on this occasion that Cyprian wrote his treatise De Lapsis, and many of his epistles. The controversy concerning the treatment of penitent apostates, does not occur among the Christians of the preceding century. Shall we ascribe this to the superiority of their faith and courage, or to our less intimate knowledge of their history!]

[Footnote 103a: Pliny says, that the greater part of the Christians persisted in avowing themselves to be so; the reason for his consulting Trajan was the periclitantium numerus. Eusebius (l. vi. c. 41) does not permit us to doubt that the number of those who renounced their faith was infinitely below the number of those who boldly confessed it. The prefect, he says and his assessors present at the council, were alarmed at seeing the crowd of Christians; the judges themselves trembled. Lastly, St. Cyprian informs us, that the greater part of those who had appeared weak brethren in the persecution of Decius, signalized their courage in that of Gallius. Steterunt fortes, et ipso dolore poenitentiae facti ad praelium fortiores Epist. lx. p. 142.--G.]

IV. Notwithstanding the general rules established for the conviction and punishment of the Christians, the fate of those sectaries, in an

extensive and arbitrary government, must still in a great measure, have depended on their own behavior, the circumstances of the times, and the temper of their supreme as well as subordinate rulers. Zeal might sometimes provoke, and prudence might sometimes avert or assuage, the superstitious fury of the Pagans. A variety of motives might dispose the provincial governors either to enforce or to relax the execution of the laws; and of these motives the most forcible was their regard not only for the public edicts, but for the secret intentions of the emperor, a glance from whose eye was sufficient to kindle or to extinguish the flames of persecution. As often as any occasional severities were exercised in the different parts of the empire, the primitive Christians lamented and perhaps magnified their own sufferings; but the celebrated number of ten persecutions has been determined by the ecclesiastical writers of the fifth century, who possessed a more distinct view of the prosperous or adverse fortunes of the church, from the age of Nero to that of Diocletian. The ingenious parallels of the ten plagues of Egypt, and of the ten horns of the Apocalypse, first suggested this calculation to their minds; and in their application of the faith of prophecy to the truth of history, they were careful to select those reigns which were indeed the most hostile to the Christian cause. [104] But these transient persecutions served only to revive the zeal and to restore the discipline of the faithful; and the moments of extraordinary rigor were compensated by much longer intervals of peace and security. The indifference of some princes, and the indulgence of others, permitted the Christians to enjoy, though not perhaps a legal, yet an actual and public, toleration of their religion.

[Footnote 104: See Mosheim, p. 97. Sulpicius Severus was the first author of this computation; though he seemed desirous of reserving the tenth and greatest persecution for the coming of the Antichrist.]