

Epistle 67: To the Clergy and People Abiding in Spain, Concerning Basilides and Martial

Cyprian of Carthage

Patristic · Ante-Nicene · Letter

STROMATA 177

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INTRODUCTION

Writing with a council of fellow North African bishops, Cyprian addresses the churches of Spain on a delicate question: what to do about two bishops, Basilides and Martial, who had lapsed into idolatry under persecution and were later restored to office through political maneuvering in Rome. Cyprian's answer is a firm defense of congregational involvement in choosing its clergy, grounded in a close reading of Old Testament precedent for priestly conduct. It is a window into the early Church wrestling with sin, authority, and restoration in the aftermath of persecution, and into how bishops actually corresponded and governed across a scattered Mediterranean church.

To the Clergy and People Abiding in Spain, Concerning Basilides and Martial. Argument.— Basilides and Martial, Bishops, Having Lapsed and Become Contaminated by the Certificates of Idolatry, Cyprian with His Fellow-Bishops Praises the Clergy and People of Spain that They Had Substituted in Their Place by a Legitimate Election, Sabinus and Felix; Especially As, According to the Decision of Cornelius and His Colleagues, Lapsed Bishops Might Indeed Be Received to Repentance, But Were Prohibited from the Priestly Honour. Moreover, He Alludes by the Way to Certain Matters About the Ancient Rite of Episcopal Election. The Context Indicates that This Was Written During the Episcopate of Stephen.

- Cyprian, Caecilius, Primus, Polycarp, Nicomedes, Lucilianus, Successus, Sedatus, Fortunatus, Januarius, Secundinus, Pomponius, Honoratus, Victor, Aurelius, Sattius, Petrus, another Januarius, Saturninus, another Aurelius, Venantius, Quietus, Rogatianus, Tenax, Felix, Faustinus, Quintus, another Saturninus, Lucius, Vincentius, Libosus, Geminius, Marcellus, Iambus, Adelphius, Victorius, and Paulus, to Felix the presbyter, and to the peoples abiding at Legio and Asturica, also to Laelius the deacon, and the people abiding at Emerita, brethren in the Lord, greeting. When we had come together, dearly beloved brethren, we read your letters, which according to the integrity of your faith and your fear of God you wrote to us by Felix and Sabinus our fellow bishops, signifying that Basilides and Martial, being stained with the certificates of idolatry, and bound with the consciousness of wicked crimes, ought not to hold the episcopate and administer the priesthood of God; and you desired an answer to be written to you again concerning these

things, and your solicitude, no less just than needful, to be relieved either by the comfort or by the help of our judgment. Nevertheless to this your desire not so much our counsels as the divine precepts reply, in which it is long since bidden by the voice of Heaven and prescribed by the law of God, who and what sort of persons ought to serve the altar and to celebrate the divine sacrifices. For in Exodus God speaks to Moses, and warns him, saying, Let the priests which come near to the Lord God sanctify themselves, lest the Lord forsake them. Exodus 19:22 And again: And when they come near to the altar of the Holy One to minister they shall not bring sin upon them, lest they die. Exodus 28:43 Also in Leviticus the Lord commands and says, Whosoever has any spot or blemish upon him, shall not approach to offer gifts to God. Leviticus 21:17

- Since these things are announced and are made plain to us, it is necessary that our obedience should wait upon the divine precepts; nor in matters of this kind can human indulgence accept any man's person, or yield anything to any one, when the divine prescription has interfered, and establishes a law. For we ought not to be forgetful what the Lord spoke to the Jews by Isaiah the prophet, rebuking, and indignant that they had despised the divine precepts and followed human doctrines. This people, he says, honours me with their lips, but their heart is widely removed from me; but in vain do they worship me, teaching the doctrines and commandments of men. Isaiah 29:13 This also the Lord repeats in the Gospel, and says, You reject the commandment of God, that you may establish your own tradition. Mark 7:13 Having which things before our eyes, and solicitously and religiously considering them, we ought in the ordinations of priests to choose none but unstained and upright ministers, who, holily and worthily offering sacrifices to God, may be heard in the prayers which they make for the safety of the Lord's people, since it is written, God hears not a sinner; but if any man be a worshipper of God, and does His will, him He hears. John 9:31 On which account it is fitting, that with full diligence and sincere investigation those should be chosen for God's priesthood whom it is manifest God will hear.
- Nor let the people flatter themselves that they can be free from the contagion of sin, while communicating with a priest who is a sinner, and yielding their consent to the unjust and unlawful episcopacy of their overseer, when the divine reproof by Hosea the prophet threatens, and says, Their sacrifices shall be as the bread of mourning; all that eat thereof shall be polluted; Hosea 9:4 teaching manifestly and showing that all are absolutely bound to the sin who have been contaminated by the sacrifice of a profane and unrighteous priest. Which, moreover, we find to be manifested also in Numbers, when Korah, and Dathan, and Abiram Claimed for themselves the power of sacrificing in opposition to Aaron the priest. There also the Lord commanded by Moses that the people should be separated from them, lest, being associated with the wicked, themselves also should be bound closely in the same wickedness. Separate yourselves, said He, from the tents of these wicked and hardened men, and touch not those things which belong to them, lest you perish together in their sins. Numbers 16:26 On which account a people obedient to the Lord's precepts, and fearing God, ought to separate themselves from a sinful prelate, and not to associate themselves with the sacrifices of a sacrilegious priest, especially since they themselves have the power either of choosing worthy priests, or of rejecting unworthy ones.

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Which very thing, too, we observe to come from divine authority, that the priest should be chosen in the presence of the people under the eyes of all, and should be approved worthy and suitable by public judgment and testimony; as in the book of Numbers the Lord commanded Moses, saying, Take Aaron your brother, and Eleazar his son, and place them in the mount, in the presence of all the assembly, and strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and let Aaron die there, and be added to his people. Numbers 20:25-26 God commands a priest to be appointed in the presence of all the assembly; that is, He instructs and shows that the ordination of priests ought not to be solemnized except with the knowledge of the people standing near, that in the presence of the people either the crimes of the wicked may be disclosed, or the merits of the good may be declared, and the ordination, which shall have been examined by the suffrage and judgment of all, may be just and legitimate. And this is subsequently observed, according to divine instruction, in the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter speaks to the people of ordaining an apostle in the place of Judas. Peter, it says, stood up in the midst of the disciples, and the multitude were in one place. Neither do we observe that this was regarded by the apostles only in the ordinations of bishops and priests, but also in those of deacons, of which matter itself also it is written in their Acts: And they twelve called together, it says, the whole congregation of the disciples, and said to them; Acts 4:2 which was done so diligently and carefully, with the calling together of the whole of the people, surely for this reason, that no unworthy person might creep into the ministry of the altar, or to the office of a priest. For that unworthy persons are sometimes ordained, not according to the will of God, but according to human presumption, and that those things which do not come of a legitimate and righteous ordination are displeasing to God, God Himself manifests by Hosea the prophet, saying, They have set up for themselves a king, but not by me. Hosea 8:4.

- For which reason you must diligently observe and keep the practice delivered from divine tradition and apostolic observance, which is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces; that for the proper celebration of ordinations all the neighbouring bishops of the same province should assemble with that people for which a prelate is ordained. And the bishop should be chosen in the presence of the people, who have most fully known the life of each one, and have looked into the doings of each one as respects his habitual conduct. And this also, we see, was done by you in the ordination of our colleague Sabinus; so that, by the suffrage of the whole brotherhood, and by the sentence of the bishops who had assembled in their presence, and who had written letters to you concerning him, the episcopate was conferred upon him, and hands were imposed on him in the place of Basilides. Neither can it rescind an ordination rightly perfected, that Basilides, after the detection of his crimes, and the baring of his conscience even by his own confession, went to Rome and deceived Stephen our colleague, placed at a distance, and ignorant of what had been done, and of the truth, to canvass that he might be replaced unjustly in the episcopate from which he had been righteously deposed. The result of this is, that the sins of Basilides are not so much abolished as enhanced, inasmuch as to his former sins he has also added the crime of deceit and circumvention. For he is not so much to be blamed who has been through heedlessness surprised by fraud, as he is to be execrated who has fraudulently taken him by surprise. But if Basilides could deceive men, he cannot deceive God, since it is written, God is not mocked. But neither can deceit advantage Martialis, in such a way as that he who also

is involved in great crimes should hold his bishopric, since the apostle also warns, and says, A bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God. Titus 1:7.

- Wherefore, since as you have written, dearly beloved brethren, and as Felix and Sabinus our colleagues affirm, and as another Felix of Caesar Augusta, a maintainer of the faith and a defender of the truth, signifies in his letter, Basilides and Martialis have been contaminated by the abominable certificate of idolatry; and Basilides, moreover, besides the stain of the certificate, when he was prostrate in sickness, blasphemed against God, and confessed that he blasphemed; and because of the wound to his own conscience, voluntarily laying down his episcopate, turned himself to repentance, entreating God, and considering himself sufficiently happy if it might be permitted him to communicate even as a layman: Martialis also, besides the long frequenting of the disgraceful and filthy banquets of the Gentiles in their college, and placing his sons in the same college, after the manner of foreign nations, among profane sepulchres, and burying them together with strangers, has also affirmed, by acts which are publicly taken before a ducenarian procurator, that he had yielded himself to idolatry, and had denied Christ; and as there are many other and grave crimes in which Basilides and Martialis are held to be implicated; such persons attempt to claim for themselves the episcopate in vain; since it is evident that men of that kind may neither rule over the Church of Christ, nor ought to offer sacrifices to God, especially since Cornelius also, our colleague, a peaceable and righteous priest, and moreover honoured by the condescension of the Lord with martyrdom, has long ago decreed with us, and with all the bishops appointed throughout the whole world, that men of, this sort might indeed be admitted to repentance, but were prohibited from the ordination of the clergy, and from the priestly honour.
- Nor let it disturb you, dearest brethren, if with some, in these last times, either an uncertain faith is wavering, or a fear of God without religion is vacillating, or a peaceable concord does not continue. These things have been foretold as about to happen in the end of the world; and it was predicted by the voice of the Lord, and by the testimony of the apostles, that now that the world is failing, and the Antichrist is drawing near, everything good shall fail, but evil and adverse things shall prosper.
- Yet although, in these last times, evangelic rigour has not so failed in the Church of God, nor the strength of Christian virtue or faith so languished, that there is not left a portion of the priests which in no respect gives way under these ruins of things and wrecks of faith; but, bold and steadfast, they maintain the honour of the divine majesty and the priestly dignity, with full observance of fear. We remember and keep in view that, although others succumbed and yielded, Mattathias boldly vindicated God's law; that Elias, when the Jews gave way and departed from the divine religion, stood and nobly contended; that Daniel, deterred neither by the loneliness of a foreign country nor by the harassment of continual persecution, frequently and gloriously suffered martyrdoms; also that the three youths, subdued neither by their tender years nor by threats, stood up faithfully against the Babylonian fires, and conquered the victor king even in their very captivity itself. Let the number either of prevaricators or of traitors see to it, who have now begun to rise in the Church against the Church, and to corrupt as well the faith as the truth. Among very many there still remains a sincere mind and a substantial religion, and a spirit devoted to nothing but the Lord and its God. Nor does the perfidy of others press down the Christian faith into ruin, but rather stimulates and exalts it to glory, according to what the blessed Apostle Paul exhorts, and says: For what if some of these have fallen from their faith: has their unbelief made

the faith of God of none effect? God forbid. For God is true, but every man a liar. Romans 3:3-4 But if every man is a liar, and God only true, what else ought we, the servants, and especially the priests, of God, to do, than forsake human errors and lies, and continue in the truth of God, keeping the Lord's precepts?

- Wherefore, although there have been found: some among our colleagues, dearest brethren, who think that the godly discipline may be neglected, and who rashly hold communion with Basilides and Martialis, such a thing as this ought not to trouble our faith, since the Holy Spirit threatens such in the Psalms, saying, But you hate instruction, and cast my words behind you: when you saw a thief, you consented unto him, and hast been partaker with adulterers. He shows that they become sharers and partakers of other men's sins who are associated with the delinquents. And besides, Paul the apostle writes, and says the same thing: Whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, injurious, proud, boasters of themselves, inventors of evil things, who, although they knew the judgment of God, did not understand that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only they which commit those things, but they also which consent unto those who do these things. Romans 1:30-32 Since they, says he, who do such things are worthy of death, he makes manifest and proves that not only they are worthy of death, and come into punishment who do evil things, but also those who consent unto those who do such things — who, while they are mingled in unlawful communion with the evil and sinners, and the unrepenting, are polluted by the contact of the guilty, and, being joined in the fault, are thus not separated in its penalty. For which reason we not only approve, but applaud, dearly beloved brethren, the religious solicitude of your integrity and faith, and exhort you as much as we can by our letters, not to mingle in sacrilegious communion with profane and polluted priests, but maintain the sound and sincere constancy of your faith with religious fear. I bid you, dearest brethren, ever heartily farewell.

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