

VOICES FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

A Sudden and Rapid Divestment

Cyprian's (c. 200-258) New Birth Experience

While I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night, wavering hither and thither, tossed about on the foam of this boastful age, and uncertain of my wandering steps, knowing nothing of my real life, and remote from truth and light, I used to regard it as a difficult matter (and especially difficult in respect of my character at that time) that a man should be capable of being born again.

This was a truth that the divine mercy had announced for my salvation—that a man quickened to a new life in the laver of saving water should be able to put off what he had previously been; and, although retaining all his bodily structure, should be himself changed in heart and soul. “How,” said I, “is such a conversion possible, that there should be a sudden and rapid divestment of everything, both that which is natural in us and has hardened in the corruption of our physical nature, and that which has been acquired by us and has become deep-seated by long accustomed use?”

These things have become deeply and radically engrained within us. When does he learn thrift who has been used to large banquets and sumptuous feasts? And he who has been glittering in gold and purple, and has been celebrated for his expensive dress, when does he reduce himself to plain and simple clothes? One who has felt the charm of having authority and of civic honors shrinks from becoming a mere private and inglorious citizen. The man who is attended by crowds of clients and dignified by the numerous associations of politicians regards it as a punishment when he is alone.

I thought it was inevitable, as it has always been, that the love of wine should entice, pride should inflate, anger should inflame, covetousness should disquiet, cruelty should stimulate, ambition should delight, and lust should hasten to ruin, with allurements that will not let go their hold.

These were my frequent thoughts. For as I myself was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life (from which I did not believe that I could possibly be delivered), so I was disposed to go along with my clinging vices. And because I despaired of better things, I used

to indulge my sins as if they were actually part of me, and native to me. But after (by the help of the water of new birth) that the stain of former years had been washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, had been infused into my reconciled heart—after that, by the action of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth had restored me to a new man—then, in a wondrous manner, doubtful things at once began to assure themselves to me, hidden things to be revealed, and dark things to be enlightened. What before had seemed difficult began to suggest a way of accomplishing it, and what had been thought impossible, to be capable of being achieved. I was enabled to acknowledge that what previously, being born of the flesh, had been living in the practice of sins, was of the earth, earthly, but had now begun to be of God, and was full of life by the Spirit of holiness.

You yourself assuredly know and recollect as well as I do what was taken away from us by that vicious death, and what was given to us by that virtuous life. You yourself know this without my telling you. Anything like boasting in one's own praise is detestable. But we really cannot boast—but only be grateful—since we do not ascribe it to man's virtue, but declare it to be the gift of God. That we do not sin now is the beginning of the work of faith, whereas that we sinned before was the result of human wandering.

All our power is of God; I say, of God. From Him we have life and from Him we have strength, by power derived and conceived from Him we do, while yet in this world, have an indication of things to come. Let the fear of God keep you innocent, that the Lord, who of His mercy has poured into our hearts heavenly grace, may be kept lodged in a grateful mind by righteous submissiveness. May the assurance we have gained not lead to carelessness, and so the old enemy creep upon us again.

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But if you keep the way of innocence, the way of righteousness, if you walk with a firm and steady step, if—trusting in God with your whole strength and with your whole heart—you only be what you have begun to be, liberty and power to actually carry it out will be given you in proportion to the increase of your spiritual grace. For there is not, as is the case with earthly benefits, any limit or restriction in the giving out of the heavenly gift. The Spirit freely flowing forth is restrained by no limits, nor is it limited by any closed barriers within certain bounded

spaces. It flows perpetually; it is exuberant in its affluence. Let our heart only be athirst, and be ready to receive: in the degree in which we bring to it a voluminous faith, in that same measure we draw from it an overflowing grace.

Thence is given power, with modest chastity, with a sound mind, with a simple voice, with unblemished virtue, that is able to quench the virus of poisons for the healing of the sick, to purge out the stains of foolish souls by restored health, to bid peace to those that are at enmity, restfulness to the violent, and gentleness to the unruly. ~

